

1994

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Recommended Citation

Maclean, Betsy, "'A Theory in the Flesh': The Art-full Politics of African-American Women's Autobiographies" (1994). *Senior Scholar Papers*. Paper 161.
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"A Theory in the Flesh":
The Art-full Politics of African-American Women's
Autobiographies

by

Betsy Maclean

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the
Senior Scholars' Program

Colby College
1994

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"A theory in the flesh": the Art-full Politics of African-American Women's Autobiographies is a kind of amalgam of philosophy and literary criticism. Through the autobiographies of Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, Maya Angelou, and Itabari Njeri and the theoretical discourse of insurgent black intellectuals Cornel West and bell hooks, I interrogate the intersection of philosophical discourse and literature, art and theory.

My project is an attempt to show that African-American women autobiographers, situated in a contemporary condition of racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia, engage in, with their work, a highly contextualized, profoundly historicized personal and political dialogic discourse. Battling the racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism of the white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy black women combat the imposition of external self-definitions, self-division, and self-erasure.

The art-full politics of African-American women's autobiographies is a mixture of politics and art, philosophy and literature, love of self and intolerance of injustice. The object—to create a continually re-formed, re-visioned social and political philosophy. This new philosophy, Cornel West's cultural politics of difference, of which black women's autobiographies are both part and parcel, emphasizes radical historicity, moral continuity, contemporary contextualization, and interdependence.

My project has allowed, has actually demanded of me my own autobiography. As a white woman studying black women's autobiographies, my work has incorporated my own struggle with injustice, as well as the negotiation of my privilege and corresponding responsibilities. I have attempted to author myself in relation to my work. Both my academic self and my psycho-spiritual Selves were engaged in this project. There is no doubt in my mind that this will be an ongoing work, a kind of life-work in-progress.

Then they had grown. Edging into life from the back door. Becoming. Everybody in the world was in a position to give them orders. White women said, 'Do this.' White children said, 'Give me that.' White men said, 'Come here.' Black men said, 'Lay down.' The only people they need not take orders from were black children and each other. But they took all of that and re-created it in their own image.

– Toni Morrison
The Bluest Eye

'Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another.'

– Toni Morrison
Beloved

For African American women authors, autobiography becomes a kind of all-purpose vehicle for a wide variety of journeys. Memory and re-memory provide its fuel, self-actualization its destination. The autobiographical statement is the necessary conveyance on the road to the past, one which allows the author control of both route and objective. Ensnared in a socio-political environment in which selves are divided, stifled, and ignored, autobiographies provide the necessary opportunity to re-member, re-form, and re-create one's Self in the *re-visiting* of the past.

As the past lays itself out before the author, which remembered place and time does she choose to re-visit? Sitting firmly in the driver's seat, the autobiographer has complete control of her brand new destiny. It is she who chooses what, how, and who she exhumes from the catacombs of her memory. The author selects which past site of contestation is important for her to re-vision, stamping the journey undeniably *hers*. In this way, the autobiographical statement allows autonomy of authorial choice and incontrovertible ownership of its product.

Claiming ownership is one of, if not the, first steps toward self-definition and re-definition. Autobiographies provide, among other things, this fundament of self discovery and recovery, for, implicit in the genre, it is the author telling her own story. Black feminist critic Barbara Christian writes:

A persistent and major theme throughout Afro-American women's literature (is) our attempts to define and express our totality rather than being defined by others...for Afro-American women, this natural desire (of self-definition and discovery) has been powerfully opposed, repressed, distorted by this society's restrictions. For in defining ourselves, Afro-American women writers have necessarily had to confront the interaction between restrictions of racism, sexism, and class that characterize our existence, whatever our individual personalities, backgrounds, talents. Our words, in different shadings, call into question the pervasive mythology of democracy, justice, and freedom that America projects itself to be. (Christian 1985, 159 - 60)

"If you don't know your past, you don't know your future," asserts Chuck D of the rap group Public Enemy. As one re-visits the past, memory and re-memory act as catalysts, vehicles for renewed and revised Self consciousness. For the autobiography, memory is both form and construct. It, as a construct itself, constructs how, where, and why the author returns to the past. Simultaneously, it forms the documentation of her return. While attempting to dig through the various layers of social construction, memory comes up as a complex construction, a vehicle, an aesthetic. It is the autobiographer's multi-purpose tool. If memory is a kind of tool then is it merely a means to an end, to what end is it headed? Why go back? Why re-visit/ re-form/ re-construct? And why with us, the reader? By what is memory informed?

While exploring memory as a construct, it is important also to notice those places, people, and things the author chooses to leave forgotten while she occupies her literary pole position. As much as is said about her chosen site of return can be at least questioned about those gaps and spaces left uninvestigated by her selective memory.

It is precisely these "indeterminancies" which construct both the author's and readers' roles within the literary triad—author-text-reader. The author's absences lead the reader to take pause, to fill in her/his own gaps, to make the text, in a sense, hers/his. Those same silences, however, insure the sovereignty of the author. While we, as readers, may be able to point to a hole in the text, the author alone is privy to the secreted information. Novelist, essayist, insurgent black intellectual and Nobel Prize for Literature winner Toni Morrison in her recent monograph, Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination, maintains that

Writing and reading are not all that distinct for a writer. Both exercises require being alert and ready for unaccountable beauty, for the intricateness or simple elegance of the writer's imagination, for the world that imagination evokes. Both require being mindful of the places where imagination sabotages itself, locks its own gates, pollutes its vision. Writing and reading mean being aware of the writer's notions of risk and safety, the serene achievement of, or sweaty fight for, meaning and response-ability. (Morrison 1992, xi)

Inextricably tied in this dance of meaning, the writer and reader become the parts of the whole that is the text. Traditional notions of ownership and authorship are challenged by Morrison's "places where imagination sabotages itself" and both the writer's and reader's awareness of the "writer's notions of risk and safety." The two—the writer and reader—are engaged improvisationally as meaning is filtered through disparate identities and contexts. While meaning, to a certain extent, becomes fluid, malleable, respect for and of authorial autonomy is a heavy load which lands squarely on the reader's shoulders.

As the definition of Self vacillates between past, present, and re-created selves, an autobiographical "I" by whom the various selves are being explicated is constructed by both the author and the reader. It is impossible and unreasonable to expect that the "I" be simply made up of equal parts of each different self, as the selves are many, varied, and, in most cases, irreconcilable. It is therefore provocative to investigate *how* the "I" is constructed, by whom, and of what. I

would posit that within the mix of the "I" go a variety of social, political, and cultural, as well as personal ingredients. As integral components of the author's "I", these kinds of "public" conditions affect what and how she remembers. To what degree then, do the social, political, and cultural constituents of the "I" inform the re-formation of the author's self? How do those extra-personal components affect the story as it is told by her, the author, and to us, the readers?

In her essay, "My Statue, My Self: Autobiographical Writings of Afro-American Women," Elizabeth Fox-Genovese writes:

The coherence of black women's autobiographical discourse does incontrovertibly derive from black women's experience, although less from experience than from condition—the condition or interlocking structures of gender, class, and race. But it derives more from the tension between condition and discourse, from the changing ways in which black women writers have attempted to represent a personal experience of condition through available discourses and in interaction with imagined readers. (Fox-Genovese, 178)

It is precisely this tension which makes African-American women's autobiographies not only coherent, but unique, in both their abundance and urgent importance.

The personal is never political when it is one's very identity which is the site of political contestation. Cornel West, the great radical democratic philosopher states that

We live in the midst of a pervasive and profound crisis of North Atlantic civilization whose symptoms include the threat of nuclear annihilation, extensive class inequality, brutal state repression, subtle bureaucratic surveillance, widespread homophobia, technological abuse of nature and rampant racism and patriarchy. (West 1993, 251)

It is in and against this socio-political reality that one's personal reality is shaped and re-shaped. African-American women, in direct confrontation with the majority of these societal offenses battle a complex condition as they face complex oppression—more complex than, say, African American men or white women who may face

racism and classism or sexism and classism, but never a simultaneous combination of the three. Black feminist thinker Mary Helen Washington reminds us that

What we have to recognize is that the creation of the fiction of tradition is a matter of power, not justice, and that that power has always been in the hands of men—mostly white but some black. Women are the disinherited. Our “ritual journeys,” our “articulate voices,” our “symbolic spaces” are rarely the same as men’s. Those differences and the assumption that those differences make women inherently inferior, plus the appropriation by men of power to define tradition accounts for women’s absence from our records. (Washington, 32)

The tension, then, for black women writers is born of exclusion, of the seemingly hopeless incompatibility of dominant discourse and socio-political reality. The product of that tension between condition and discourse is an entirely new discourse, a kind of politics of experiences, a continual definition and re-definition of Self, located in a context of struggle.

Black women, in their autobiographies, endeavor to reconcile their experiences, knowledges, their very conditions with the available literary discourse. Traditionally a rich straight white male-centered discourse, it is a poor fit for black women. Every time, then, a black woman writes her life story not only is she re-discovering and *re-creating* her Self, but she is also constantly *creating* a brand new literary discourse that serves *her* needs. Alice Walker recounts a story told of Toni Morrison:

It has been said that someone asked Toni Morrison why she writes the kind of books she writes, and that she replied: Because they are the kind of books I want to read...When Toni Morrison said she writes the kind of books she wants to read, she was acknowledging the fact that in a society in which “accepted literature” is so often sexist and racist and otherwise irrelevant or offensive to so many lives, she must do the work of two. She must be her own model as well as the artist attending, creating, learning from, realizing the model, which is to say, herself. (Walker 1983, 7-8)

The creation of an entirely new discourse provokes questions as to both the motivation behind its generation and to its consequences. Are black women autobiographers, in fact, merely following the only path offered them by dominant society's commodity culture? Are the constraints of painfully restrictive stereotypes, low expectations, and intellectual segregation, too great to allow an honest reconstruction of the past(s)? If so, what good are those re-visions? Are they a means to an end—an end of self-definition, an end of revolution? Or are they ends in themselves—just a story, an exercise in re-membering the past? Does the ultimately personal pursuit of life-story telling, as one of the few seemingly viable options for black women writers, relegate black women to the world of the private, the home, where they have been historically relegated by whites and black men? Or are their writings, as subversive writings, revolutionary statements, re-forming, re-defining even this, the realm of the private/personal, into that of the public/political?

Audre Lorde, in her collection of essays, Sister Outsider, argues that the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house: "What does it mean when the tools of racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable" (Lorde, 111). African American women autobiographers have created an entirely different form of writing than that of their white and black male counterparts. Thus, by seemingly using the master's tools to dismantle his house, black women autobiographers subversively create and re-create new definitions, new contexts, entirely new readings of the past and their selves. Their newly created fluidity in definition and context allows recognition of the familiar feminist cry, the personal is political. As revolutionary political writings, African American women's autobiographies turn the hammers and saws handed them by the dominant culture (read – rich, white, heterosexual, male) into jackhammers and

wrecking balls of resistance. They turn their predictable self-exploration on its head and utilize it as a subversive political weapon.

Autobiography as a contemporary art form has historically been black women writers' genre of choice. Selwyn Cudjoe states in his critical essay on Maya Angelou's autobiographical series, "Maya Angelou and the Autobiographical Statement":

The Afro-American autobiographical statement is the most Afro-American of all Afro-American literary pursuits...The practice of the autobiographical statement, up until the contemporary era, remains the quintessential literary genre for capturing the cadences of the Afro-American being, revealing its deepest aspirations and tracing the evolution of the Afro-American psyche under the impact of slavery and modern U.S. imperialism. (Cudjoe, 6)

This abundance is born of a particularly urgent need for self-definition as black women combat not only sexist, racist and classist repression, but, added to that, African-American women face the push and pull of their multiple, inseparable identities (black, woman, artist, revolutionary, etc.). Yet another tug on the skirts of black women, various divisive forces, from white feminists to black nationalists, all claim their particular share of the black woman's identity. Audre Lorde remembers:

Over and over again in the 60s I was asked to justify my existence and my work, because I was a woman, because I was a Lesbian, because I was not a separatist, because some piece of me was not acceptable. Not because of my work but because of my identity. I had to learn to hold on to all the parts of me that served me, in spite of the pressure to express only one to the exclusion of all others. (Lorde, 143)

This division of self, mandated by various political and social communities, is one which is ardently resisted by black women. Personhood partitioning stultifies holistic self-actualization by offering only arbitrarily "acceptable" bits and pieces of the Self to actualize. The autobiographical statement then, as a reunion, a re-creation of Self becomes a necessary response to, a survival tactic in, a world which

demands from black women either separation or silence. Autobiographies are a courageous uncompromising alliance with Self.

Looking specifically at political autobiographers, i.e. Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Alice Walker, etc., how do those authors handle the demand of divide or be conquered? Political involvement for black women has historically been a battle against the segmentation of their various identities. Itabari Njeri, in her autobiography, Every Good-Bye Ain't Gone, reflects on her problematic involvement in the black nationalist movement of the 60s and early 70s: "In time I would come to see that black nationalism almost inevitably leads to a kind of cultural chauvinism indistinguishable from racism, the very thing I thought I was fighting" (Njeri, 19). For African-American women, a polarized identity is the prerequisite for most political involvement. Cherríe Moraga, Chicana feminist and co-editor of This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color, speaks of her alienation from the women's movement of the same era:

What drew me to politics was my love of women, the agony I felt in observing the straight-jackets of poverty and repression I saw people in my own family in. But the deepest political tragedy I have experienced is how with such grace, such blind faith, this commitment to women in the feminist movement grew to be exclusive and reactionary. *I call my white sisters on this.* (Anzaldúa & Moraga, xiv)

Whether it is a racist anti-sexism that is promoted or a sexist anti-racism, black women are left in limbo, asked to make an impossible choice. As the close affiliation with political struggle is identified as a means of self-definition, flying in the face of the dominant culture's imposed definition, to what extent is the self separated or silenced for the sake of "the cause?" To what extent is every autobiography written by a black woman inherently political by virtue of our contemporary socio-political reality?

While all autobiographies have a particular intentionality, what is the political/personal intention of the black woman artist/revolutionary? If the

autobiography is a political one, does its end (political expedience) compromise its means? In other words, as a political figure, does the author compromise the integrity of her reconstruction of self for the sake of the struggle? Is the cost of political involvement for black women, in fact, her voice(s), her self-definition(s)? Annette Kolodny cautions:

Be wary of reading literature as though it were polemic...If when using literary materials to make what is essentially a political point, we find ourselves virtually rewriting a text, ignoring certain aspects of plot or characterization, or oversimplifying the action to fit our 'political' thesis, then we are neither practicing an honest criticism nor saying anything useful about the nature of art (or about the art of political persuasion, for that matter). (McDowell, 190)

Barbara Christian, on the other hand, points to Jordan's compilation of autobiographical essays, Civil Wars, as a particularly effective example of the balance and overlap of her personal and political struggles. Says Christian:

Jordan...relates her personal growth as a writer to the national and international political movements in her life. The way she transforms the rhetoric of politics into a personal voice is a powerful example of the feminist concept that the personal and political cannot be separated. (Christian 1985, 162)

Jordan, herself, points to the dangers of de-politicizing a work deeply contextualized in a frame of oppression with both political and personal consequences. Both Kolodny and Jordan caution against reading black women's literature single-mindedly and short-sightedly. They identify two opposing malestream efforts to simplify, and so stultify, the creative work of black women and men for that matter. Both over-politicization and under-politicization are unsuccessful attempts to cram the complexity of black women's identities in a two-part, either/or socio-political construction. June Jordan characterizes the inability of black art to be so balkanized in her discussion of Phyllis Wheatley:

The miracle of Black poetry in America, the *difficult* miracle of Black poetry in America, is that we have been rejected and we are frequently

dismissed as "political" or "topical" or "sloganeering" and "crude" and "insignificant" because, like Phyllis Wheatley, we have persisted for freedom...And as long as we study white literature, as long as we assimilate the English language and its implicit English values,...as long as we, Black poets in America, remain the children of slavery, as long as we do not come of age and attempt, then to speak the truth of our difficult maturity in an alien place, then we will be beloved, and sheltered, and published. But not otherwise. And yet we persist. (Jordan 1985, 97)

African-American women's autobiographies refuse to be reduced to a bi-polar discussion of opposition. African-American women writers refuse to be only superficially "beloved" or "beloved" in part and not in their entirety. Theirs is a project of synthesis not simplification. Life stories tell the stories of lives in a particular socio-political context. Lives are not well-fitted to constrictive notions of politics without persons or persons without politics. In Playing in the Dark, Morrison discusses the particular dangers of the extraction of political forms and consequences from the personal:

Excising the political from the life of the mind is a sacrifice that has proven costly. I think of this erasure as a kind of trembling hypochondria always curing itself with unnecessary surgery. A criticism that needs to insist that literature is not only 'universal' but also 'race-free' risks lobotomizing that literature, and diminishes both the art and the artist. (Morrison 1992, 12)

Deeply rooted in a sense of history, both common and unique, African American women's autobiography is an unavoidably contextualized genre. Its contextualization, however, extends beyond history to also encompass, as mentioned before, the author's contemporary condition. To ignore where the author is coming from, where she is going, and where she sits currently, is to miss both the personal and political points of the work. It is the author's context which largely shapes the text as personal, firmly locating it within a time, a place, a mental and emotional space. That same context inspires its role as a political tool, taking

into account the socio-political past and current conditions which affect the author's remembering as well as her documentation of the past.

Amid multiple books and authors, contextualization allows a more coherent inter-textual dialogue. It serves as both a bridge between texts with common contexts, and as a barrier against the dismissal of unique texts with disparate contexts as one and the same. Deborah McDowell adds "The contextual approach to Black women's literature exposes the conditions under which literature is produced, published, and reviewed. This approach is not only useful but necessary to Black feminist critics" (McDowell, 192).

Autobiographies are a particularly effective self-examination and exhortation. To make this ultimately personal journey public is to expose one's most tender of vulnerabilities; to invite criticism of that which simply can not be criticized. The only thing left for the reader and/or critic to say is that which is left unsaid; to point out the gaps and spaces, the indeterminacies left by a justifiably selective memory.

Black feminist criticism, as a postmodern discourse, makes room for the recognition of multiple realities based on multiple experiences positioned within multiple contexts. McDowell quotes Barbara Smith, a pioneer Black feminist critic, when she states that "A Black feminist approach to literature that embodies the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers is an absolute necessity" (McDowell, 188).

Black women's autobiographies, in such a theoretical framework, can then stand apart from and in opposition to the rich white heterosexual male literary tradition as a distinct and significant discourse. The standards by which they are judged as well as the very definitions by which they are interpreted, are different, changeable, and cognizant of the various experiences of black women. Barbara Christian describes her job as a black feminist critic like this:

I try to hear a writer's voice, or more precisely the one she's gotten on the page in comparison to the one she might have in her head. Then I try to situate that in a tradition that has evolved some approximate ways of how that gets written down best. (Christian 1985, xv)

Black feminist criticism allows for an unavoidably political reading of the writings of African American women. Contained within and alongside black feminist criticism is black feminist thought: a political discourse focused upon black women, the contemporary condition of racist, sexist and classist oppression, and the interaction of the two. It is, as defined by Patricia Hill Collins, "a process of self-conscious struggles that empowers women and men to actualize a humanist vision of community" (Collins, 39).

It takes its place as a viable alternative to feminism, traditionally dominated by rich white heterosexual educated women who attempt to speak for all women often at the cost of African American women. As a political movement, black feminist thought primarily contributes the inclusion of black women within contemporary discourse. Further, as a theoretical discourse, it allows a new perspective, a new way of looking at, as well as talking about, black women's various experiences.

This relatively new discourse acts as both a mirror and a point of departure for black women's autobiographies. Black feminist thought, as defined by Sherley Anne Williams, allows an entirely different reading of black women's experiences because it "challenges the fundamental theoretical assumptions of literary history and criticism by demanding a radical rethinking and revisioning of the conceptual grounds of literary study that have been based almost entirely on male literary experiences" (Williams, 69). It is this challenge, in the guise of the autobiographical genre, which establishes black women's autobiographies as unique, ultimately provocative, and urgently important. African-American women's autobiographies, viewed through the lens of Black feminist thought, are a vehicle for self-realization,

self-definition, and self-actualization. The autobiographical genre is a conduit for political and social change via the personal "transformation of silence into language and action" (Lorde 1984, 40).

The construction of the sovereign, autonomous, autobiographical "I" as well as its collective counterpart—that "I" which speaks of shared experiences, the voice of a collective conscious of Black women—is made up, in part, of the various political realities confronted by Black women. Collins quotes author Sonia Sanchez when she says "'we must move past always focusing on the 'personal self' because there is a larger self. There's a 'self' of black people'" (Collins, 105). Speaking from and of a "self of black people" Black women's personal herstories transcend objectification, move past the particular to speak for and of an inescapably public and political existence. This further cements African-American women's autobiographies as an integral component of vital social change.

Author and playwright Ntozake Shange comments;

All my work is just an exploration of people's lives. So there isn't any point. There are just some people who are interesting. There's something there to make you feel intensely. Black writers have a right to do this...Black and Latin writers have to start demanding that the fact we're alive is point enough! (Tate, 171)

It is, in fact, precisely the point that indeed there is no point, that there need be no ulterior motives, no political agenda for the justification of the writing of Black women's lives. Black women stand at the intersection of racism and sexism, and oftentimes classism and heterosexism, or any combination of the injustices. Political conclusions are inherent in a life story which is the product of multiple oppressions, be they violent or subtle.

The politics of autobiographies is based then on persons, on lives, and thus, decidedly, on love. It is the love of mothers (Audre Lorde's Zami), grandfathers (Itabari Njeri's Every Good-Bye Ain't Gone), of sons (Maya Angelou's Singin' and

Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas), and daughters (Alice Walker's In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens), which provokes the writing. It is the love of the self which sustains it. Paulo Freire, in his Pedagogy of the Oppressed states:

I am more and more convinced that true revolutionaries must perceive the revolution, because of its creative and liberating nature, as an act of love. For me, the revolution,...is not irreconcilable with love...The distortion imposed on the word "love" by the capitalist world cannot prevent the revolution from being essentially loving in character, nor can it prevent the revolutionaries from affirming their love of life. (Freire, 35)

The re-evaluation of the personal as political, the singular as, in some sense, collective, is truly revolutionary. Giving voice to the previously silenced and ignored lives of African-American women is an autonomous step toward self-definition, and an aggregated pie in the face of the straight rich whiteboys' patriarchal network.

Autobiography is primarily a struggle towards self-honesty, to be able to look unflinchingly at your past, present and future, to be able to say, without hesitation, "this is me." It is a kind of progression of humanity, of abandoning the unexamined life and choosing integrity. It is a reification, a transformation of abstract feelings and ideas into concrete realities, new realities. It is the authoring of one's Self.

In thinking about all of this stuff I feel absolutely overwhelmed, paralyzed by the amount of information, its importance, its depth, struggling to find a small niche for myself within it all. A place I may carve out for me, my thoughts, ideas, insights, trying to find a way to author my self in relation to my work.

Torn between my academic self and my emotional self, the easier, lower-risk path seems to be that of theoretical hypothesizing, detached, removed, distanced analysis and critique. Very little of me is invested in such a pursuit, and thus, when

it is criticized, it will be my grammar, my less than profound insights that will be found at fault, not me, my heart, my very real struggle with issues of injustice.

I find myself slamming my head against the wall before I even begin to write. I anticipate the criticisms before they come. I predict reactions to my work, to my almighty presumption in undertaking such work, to liken that of one professor's: whitegirl, what is it that you think you're doing? You don't know what you're getting yourself into, and it isn't even yours to get into in the first place.

And I think about bell hooks' essay, "Eating the Other," and look around my room, at my bookcase, my music, the pictures on my wall, the clothes in my drawers. I listen to Ice Cube and YoYo with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on my wall and Alice Walker in my bookcase and I walk around my school, around my hometown, with very little contact with anyone that looks very different from my white me.

And I wonder....is it voyeuristic? Is it cannibalistic? I'm not sure I believe in any behavior without social influence, motive, and certainly consequence, so it is impossible for me to let myself off the hook with the plea of innocent, naïve interest. As Collins says, "No standpoint is neutral because no individual or group exists unembedded in the world. Knowledge is gained not by solitary individuals but...as socially constituted members of a group" (Collins, 33).

Malcolm X talks about white so-called "liberals" joining progressive black organizations as a kind of salve for their own guilty consciences, that's probably part of it.

Another part is my belief in social, political, and personal responsibility, which, in my view, intensifies exponentially with privilege.

Some of it too, I'm sure, is because all of a sudden, black is cool, hip, phat, fresh. Jump on that multicultural, black culture mass popularization / exploitation bandwagon with everyone else, I don't want to miss out.

Some of it springs from my personal struggle with gender issues, and the way they have affected and continue to affect my life, my behavior, my me. My maybe militant, certainly angry stance against the straight rich white male-dominated hierarchical patriarchy springs from my experiences with fathers, brothers, friends, boyfriends, professors, administrators, bus drivers and institutions, and have been informed by my readings of white, black, asian, hispanic, and international feminist theoreticians, writers, and other artists and educators.

All of it leads me to a place of both knowing and not knowing. I know that I love what I am doing, what I am reading, that I learn more, am touched more deeply by Angela Davis' autobiography or Gloria Naylor's Mama Day, than most anything else in my academic / intellectual environment. I know that one step toward understanding "the Other" or anOther or anyone that is not me, is an aggressive pursuit of knowledge about that/whom which I don't know.

I also know that I am white, presently heterosexual, upper middle-class, and college-educated—putting me in a place of enormous privilege, of not knowing race oppression or class oppression or oppression because of my sexuality, or any combination of oppressions. I have and do experience weird and often painful confrontations and realizations because I am a woman and it sucks and I hate it and I am often angry, yelling, crying, losing friends, beliefs, support, and general comfortability. But I have otherwise surrounded myself in comfort, with a supportive family, a couple of incredible friends, plus all the other stuff money can buy, including growing up in a safe small town, and attending college in a similarly safe small town.

I recently read the autobiography of Malcolm X, a man whose reality couldn't be farther from my own. In his book, he relates the story of Icarus. It is the story of a boy, Icarus, whose father fashions for him a pair of wings, made of feathers fastened with wax. The boy's father cautions him to remember the wax, and to never fly too

close to the sun. Icarus, after flying around town for a couple of days, was so enamored by his newfound ability, he began to believe that it was under his own steam that he was able to defy gravity. And so up and up he went, puffed up with pride, until, inevitably, the sun's heat melted the wings' adhesive, and Icarus went tumbling to the ground.

Malcolm X recounts the story as he remembers his previous lot in the Harlem ghetto, as a hustler, drug-addict, and convict. Only through his conversion to Islam was he able to rise above the depths of addiction and abuse to become the prophet that he was and is.

The story of Icarus, in a similar way for me, is a story about the dangers of too much presumption. It was presumptuous of Icarus to believe that with only his father's homemade wings he could join the ranks of the eagles, the hawks, and the doves. That much presumption was necessary, necessary for him to take the first step, his first giant leap on the road to information and knowledge of a world different from that of his own. It is presumptuous of me to believe that I could have anything provocative to say about African-American women's autobiographies.

Icarus, however, intoxicated by his new knowledge, by that which truly was not his own, failed to remember where it was he came from, what it was that fueled his journey, and gave credit to himself for its discovery, until the sun took its due, literally taking the wind out of his wings, or, more accurately, his wings out of the wind.

The moral of the story for me and my project is that a little presumption is okay, even necessary, to take the first step on a journey of discovery. However, to forget one's particular, personal context, to assume too much and question too little, is to insure a trip out of the sky of new worlds and information and back down to the world of racist myopia.

White lesbian feminist author Minnie Bruce Pratt, in her autobiographical essays, Rebellion: Essays 1980-1991, writes "I gain truth when I expand my constricted eye, an eye that has only let in what I have been taught to see" (Pratt, 35). I envision my work as an expansion of my own constricted eyes. In the following sections I will discuss the issues of memory, autobiographical intentionality, and personal and political contextualization through the lens of black feminist thought.

I have fought and kicked and fasted and prayed and cursed and cried myself to the point of existing...Part of what existence means to me is knowing the difference between what I am now and what I was then. It is being capable of looking after myself intellectually as well as financially. It is being able to tell when I am being wronged and by whom. It means being awake to protect myself and the ones I love. It means being a part of the world community, and being *alert* to which part it is that I have joined, and knowing how to change another part if that part does not suit me. To know is to exist: to exist is to be involved, to move about, *to see the world with my own eyes* [emphasis mine].

– Alice Walker
In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens

I am speaking out of the pain of having to live a difference that has no name; speaking out of the growing power self-scrutiny has forged from that difference.

– Audre Lorde
A Burst of Light

Feminist theoretician bell hooks states, "autobiography is a very personal story telling—a unique recounting of events not so much as they have happened but as we remember and invent them" (hooks 1989, 157). Audre Lorde recognizes the amount of invention and re-creation thrown into the mix of her re-remembered past in the very definition of her project, Zami: A New Spelling of My Name. She calls it a biomythography: a combination of myth and biography, of fact and fiction, of actual events and invented truths.

An invented truth is that which comes with the perspective of time and distance via memory. In reconstructing one's past it is necessary to scale the walls of years passed in search of faded memories. Added to that climb, are present realities and the politics of memory—what you remember and why—formulate a rich and colorful mix of past and present, actual and emotional which constitute one's re-remembered past. It is not a frivolous invention of truth but one which provides

substance, encompassing both past and present realities as well as the knowledge gained by years of living forward, and that too from traveling back. Lorde is "speaking out of the pain of having to live a difference that has no name; speaking out of the growing power self-scrutiny has forged from that difference" (Lorde 1988, 57).

Lorde's journey, like most autobiographical travels, is primarily guided to the end of self-definition. The process of creating and re-visioning one's self-definition is not purely for self-gratification and growth. Although, fundamentally, it is primarily and most importantly *for* and *of* the self. To make a place for oneself in this "fucked-up whiteboys' world," to stand up to be heard if only by one's self, is to challenge the whiteboy culture that did the dirty deed of silencing in the first place. Re-definition subsequently calls into question not only the definition itself but the definer. Self-definition is thus both personal and political. Black feminist critic Barbara Christian offers:

In every society where there is the denigrated Other whether that is designated by sex, race, class, or ethnic background, the Other struggles to declare the truth and therefore create the truth in forms that exist for her or him. The creation of that truth also changes the perception of all those who believe they are the norm. (Christian 1985, 160)

As in many black women's lives, as in a lot of lives, Lorde's relationship with her mother occupies center stage in her journey to and through her past. It is a relationship filled with love as well as adversity. It is a pivotal relationship whose presence need not be justified in her reconstruction of her self and of the past.

Black feminist thinker Collins states "the mother / daughter relationship is one fundamental relationship among Black women. Countless Black mothers have empowered their daughters by passing on the everyday knowledge essential to survival as African-American women" (Collins, 96). In the constant struggle for definition, a sovereign self-definition, it is necessary to "bear witness" to those from

whose self-definition one expands. Lorde's mother is one of those by whose example she lives. Lorde remembers:

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* equaled something else quite different from ordinary woman, from simply "woman." It certainly did not, on the other hand, equal "man." (Lorde 1982, 15)

Her mother made a place for herself as not woman, and not man, but some other third category, a category all her own. It was this kind of radical re-definition, of sovereign *self*-definition that served as Lorde's example, her precedent for the definition of her Self.

Lorde's particular experience with her mother fuels her later universal and political claim in her collection of essays, Sister Outsider: "for Black women as well as Black men, it is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others—for their use and to our detriment" (Lorde 1984, 45). Self-definition is not, then, an unfettered act of personal discovery, but instead, or in addition, it is a political obligation. Collins similarly describes self-definition as a choice *for herself against* domination:

Over the years I have tried to replace the external definitions of my life forwarded by dominant groups with my own self-defined standpoint...The voice that I now seek is both individual and collective, personal and political, one reflecting the intersection of my unique biography with the larger meaning of my historical times. (Collins, xi-xii)

Lorde reports her high school years as an ongoing battle with her mother. This was due in part to the variety of issues Lorde was dealing with throughout adolescence: questions of her sexuality, the suicide of her best friend, and the transformation of her previous silence into language and understanding. These are struggles which she can't, or at least doesn't, share with her mother.

Difference, for Lorde, is thicker than blood. Differences exist and therefore must be respected, not glossed over in hopes of a kind of silent sisterhood, a requirement exacted at times by both black nationalists and white feminists. Lorde refuses to pass over the conflicts in her relationship with her mother, even in her re-visioning of her mother's strength and importance in her own life. It is a "true" relationship upon which the reader eavesdrops, one that makes no claims of false harmony and unity. Lorde's allegiance lies with her Self, she airs her so-called dirty laundry with integrity.

Being women together was not enough. We were different. Being gay-girls together was not enough. We were different. Being Black together was not enough. We were different. Being Black women together was not enough. We were different. Being Black dykes together was not enough. We were different. (Lorde 1982, 226)

It is important also to point to that which Lorde leaves unsaid, to those gaps and spaces in her relationship with her mother that may say as much in their very absence as do her verbalized insights. What, indeed, is Lorde's desired end of the investigation into their relationship? Is it to give her mother substance, history, a context as a West Indian immigrant? Is it to come full circle with issues of her sexuality, "bearing witness" to her woman-identified-woman background—her mother and her other female relatives? Why does Lorde omit descriptions of seemingly pivotal points in their relationship—i.e., upon her father's death, the first time she returns home after leaving abruptly a year and a half earlier?

The conspicuously absent discussion of her relationship with her father is perhaps the most interesting gap Lorde leaves in the wake of her self-discovery. In her journey to and through her past, Lorde's father occupies an implied role as "man of the house." He does the traditional dad thing: comes home after work, eats the dinner his wife prepares, reads the newspaper, and, along with his wife,

makes the important decisions. His "traditional" role is somewhat eclipsed by his "powerful" wife, as is his relationship with Lorde due to his physical absence.

However, it is her father's emotional absence which leads to Lorde's absence of words by which to speak of him. She recalls a special time alone with her father at his office:

If no one came in, I sat quietly in the back room and watched (my father) eat. He was meticulously neat,...Sometimes my father looked up and saw me watching him, and he reached out and gave me a morsel of meat or a taste of rice and gravy from his plate...these tastes of my father's food from his plate in the back room of his office had an enchantment to them that was delicious and magical, and precious. They form the fondest and closest memories I have of warm moments shared with my father. There were not many. (Lorde 1982, 67)

Her reminiscence of her father's closeness sounds like something akin to that between a master and his dog, not that of a father and his daughter. The imbalance between the two is obvious, the distance implied. Without naming it outright, Lorde gives voice to her rather painful struggle for paternal approval. The reader must wonder, then, if Lorde has indeed dealt with this gap in her childhood, or if her "fondest and closest" memories of her father are a rationalization of a persistent and hurtful space in her adulthood.

Alice Walker, in her compilation of autobiographical essays, In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens, relates her experience with a similarly distanced dad. Walker resolves a tension Fox-Genovese omits, the tension inherent in a politically contextualized personal experience. She does so by filling in the hurtful space left by her relationship with her father with a political explanation, placing his behavior in a broader, universal context—validating her frustration and pain while at the same time allowing her room to forgive her dad.

It was not until I became a student of women's liberation ideology that I could understand and forgive my father. I needed an ideology that would define his behavior in context. The black movement had given me an ideology that helped explain his colorism... Feminism helped

explain his sexism. I was relieved to know his sexist behavior was not something uniquely his own, but, rather, an imitation of the behavior of the society around us. (Walker 1983, 330)

The tension between condition and discourse that Fox-Genovese speaks about is played out, in In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens, as a constant cycle of remembering the past, re-visiting the past, and re-creating the present as it is informed by her past, or by her travels to her past. While jumping over, around and through time can be somewhat disorienting, Walker's focus on home, on continuity of place, allows the reader to be grounded in the South, and if not the South, then at least in his/her relation to their own sense of home.

Walker addresses the idea of time travel—of visiting and re-visiting the past, particular moments in the past, or the past as a block of time, an actual *place*. Walker travels as herself to herself, and then as herself to another, and often as another to herself and to others. An incredible fluidity of time, space, place, and even persona is conveyed. She is constantly involved in definition and re-definition of both herself and her reality/s. The reader is left with a sense of instability, of exciting constant change. Definition, most especially *self*-definition becomes an ongoing process. It is a lyrical, whimsical dance of sorts—of jumping from present to past to future, from body to body, space to space.

Walker visits and re-visits the past through Martin Luther King, Jr. and Coretta Scott King. A kind of vicarious re-membrance, it is a way of validating the past as well as supplementing her own past. She fills in personal gaps and spaces in a political way with collective concern, shared struggles, the Civil Rights Movement. Walker's writing becomes, through the relatively common language of history, even more accessible and interactive. As Pecola's mother, in Toni Morrison's first novel, The Bluest Eye, says "So much for memory. Public fact becomes private reality" (Morrison 1970, 146). The three-way interaction between

author, reader, and text becomes, then, an intimate discussion of shared memories and sympathetic struggles: Walker remembers:

He was The One, The Hero, The One Fearless Person for whom we had waited. I hadn't even realized before that we *had* been waiting for Martin Luther King, Jr., but we had. And I knew it for sure when my mother added his name to the list of people she prayed for every night. He gave us continuity of place, without which community is ephemeral. He gave us home. (Walker 1983, 144-5)

In this way King's struggle is decidedly personal, and Walker's incontrovertibly political. The two become not only inextricably linked but actually interchangeable as the lines between personal and political become fuzzy.

Intimately connected to Walker's shared re-memory is her focus on place, on home, the South, as an intensely important location: a location of choice (the choice to stay or go, and the consequences of that choice), as a location for the formation of a geo-political context, and as a location of resistance.

I was an exile in my own town, and grew to despise its white citizens almost as much as I loved the Georgia countryside where I fished and swam and walked through fields of black-eyed Susans, or sat in contemplation beside the giant pine tree my father "owned,"...This was my father's tree, and from it I had a view of fields his people had worked (and briefly owned) for generations, and could walk—in an afternoon—to the house where my mother was born; a leaning, weather-beaten ruin, it was true, but as essential to her sense of existence as one assumes Nixon's birthplace in California is to him. Probably more so, since my mother has always been careful to stay on good terms with the earth she occupies. But I would have to leave all of this. Take my memories and run north. For I would not be a maid, and could not be a "girl," or a frightened half-citizen, or any of the things my brothers and sisters had already refused to be. (Walker 1983, 162)

Home, in African-American women's autobiographies, serves as a physical location for nostalgic convergence. A site rich in association, significance, and remembrance, its tangible reality holds a cache of emotional and spiritual responses. Home stretches the boundaries of the merely palpable and becomes something

entirely transcendental in its very physicality. Sethe, the main character in Toni Morrison's Beloved, speaks on the lasting significance of place:

I was talking about time. It's so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened. (Morrison 1987, 44)

Beyond its immediate, physical capacity as a catalyst for re-memory, home / place also serves as a metaphor for Self. Home speaks of connections, of continuity; it is an emotionally charged site of enormous growth and change. It serves as a ruler against which one measures personal growth and change. Home signifies what you were, what you weren't, what you are, and what you aren't. It is no wonder Lorde's biomythography both starts and ends with home.

Once *home* was a far way off, a place I had never been to but knew well out of my mother's mouth...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*. (Lorde 1982, 13)

Collins points out that generally, the location of economic and political subordination—i.e., slavery, ghettoization, black women's position in the political economy, etc.—creates the conditions, and thus, forms the parameters for black women's resistance (Collins, 11-12). In other words, even when marginalized to the point of virtual invisibility—as victims/survivors of racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism—African-American women mold the master's tools into their own implements of resistance. Home, for Lorde and Walker, becomes a location of

resistance, it is a Cornel Westian space of "freedom, safety, and self-determination" (West 1993, xv).

Just as autobiography is the vehicle and memory the conduit for the re-visioning of Self, anger is a similar conveyance for the transformation of silence into language and action. Anger itself is transformative. It is an agent for change, empowerment, and elucidation. It can be used as a means to a constructive end. Anger may be seen as a kind of sensor, a radar blip at a location of unresolved pain and conflict. Once sensed, one may re-visit the location of the conflict and re-create, metamorphose one's fate. Adding anger to one's cache of emotions provides potent re-constructive, re-creative power. Lorde maintains:

Every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. Focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change. And when I speak of change, I do not mean a simple switch of positions or a temporary lessening of tensions, nor the ability to smile or feel good. I am speaking of a basic and radical alteration in those assumptions underlining our lives. (Lorde 1984, 127)

Anger is oftentimes an emotion deferred, kicking in upon the re-vision of an injured past. Emotions are protracted generally for reasons of either ignorance or survival. It may be ignorance enforced by social norms—it might feel wrong, but everybody else seems to be okay about it—or ignorance of definitions—if you don't know its name, it is hard to give voice to the cause of your frustration. On the other hand, anger may be tardy for the very sake of survival. Anger is a high-maintenance, demanding emotion. To feel it completely might very well take away from the precious stock of energy one employs merely to survive the abuse. As Maya Angelou rather poetically puts it in the first of her autobiographical series, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings: "If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat. It is an unnecessary insult" (Angelou 1970, 3).

Specific substantial injustices (i.e., Itabari Njeri tells of her grandfather's unavenged murder and Alice Walker of her lost eye in their respective autobiographies) and in our society governed by the straight rich white patriarchy—the silence, self-hate, and painful repression and oppression of all non-straight, non-rich, non-white penisless people, lie at the root of present anger regarding past wrongs. From universal to particular abuses—which are oftentimes symptomatic of a more comprehensive social ill-hatred and exclusion inspire righteous anger, be it immediate or delayed. It is anger which requires a voice to name it. Once voiced, it is anger which requires a response.

Women responding to racism means women responding to anger; the anger of exclusion, of unquestioned privilege, of racial distortions, of silence, ill-use, stereotyping, defensiveness, misnaming, betrayal, and co-optation. (Lorde 1984, 124)

It is interesting then to ask, located in our contemporary context, is it indeed possible for one to tell the truth of her life without employing some amount of anger? The literary critic Carolyn Heilbrun in her book Writing a Woman's Life quotes Jane McCabe when she says: "Through anger, the truth looks simple" (Heilbrun, 71). The truth, while it is subjective, is no less a truth. A truth in the sense, however, of being fully realized and confronted unflinchingly. Lorde remembers:

For Flee and me, the forces of social evil were not theoretical, not long distance nor solely bureaucratic. We met them every day, even in our straight clothes. Pain was always right around the corner. Difference had taught me that, out of the mouth of my mother. And knowing that, I fancied myself on guard, safe. I still had to learn that knowing was not enough. (Lorde 1982, 205)

Knowing one's oppression, even naming one's oppression does not end one's oppression. Naming one's oppression is not aimed at the destruction of oppression. Anger is. Without anger, one lacks an appropriate means to the end of exploring unresolved conflict and pain. If it just hurts, if it is a relatively dull pain, it may be

easily overlooked. However, if one is angry about the source of the pain, or its means of contraction, then the pain becomes more acute. She is then much more likely to re-visit the source of the pain in hopes of its resolve. When anger is seen as such a vehicle for truth (and as so often truth = power), it is no wonder that it becomes such a coveted commodity, one that is ardently kept from women.

Above all other prohibitions, what has been forbidden to women is anger, together with the open admission of the desire for power and control over one's life (which inevitably means accepting some degree of power and control over other lives). (Heilbrun, 13)

Therein lies the patriarchal rub. The struggle of the straight rich white patriarchy to relegate women to that world opposite of men—the world of the private, the personal, the passive from that of the public, the political, the active. With King Truth in their corner, guarded by his henchman hatred, it is their separation to make. This is not to say that women are not responsible for recognizing the importance of anger, of their own struggle(s) for Truth. However, it is to put the recognition and transformation of anger into a context of opposition.

Oppression and repression are products of both ignorance and hatred, or, as I would like to believe, ignorance *as* hatred. Hatred and anger come from and are directed to contrary objectives. The mark of a progressive cultural critic is their effective utilization of both anger and hatred. Walker speaks of her own manipulation of hatred and anger as a kind of creative tool of negotiation:

I've found, in my own writing, that a little hatred, keenly directed, is a useful thing. Once spread about, however, it becomes a web in which I would sit caught and paralyzed like the fly who stepped into the parlor. The strength of the artist is his courage to look at every old thing with fresh eyes and his ability to re-create, as true to life as possible, that great middle ground of people between Medgar Evers's murderer, Byron de la Beckwith, and the fine old gentleman John Brown. (Walker 1983, 137)

Walker not only manages her anger and hatred by putting them to work *for* her, she also navigates the gray area created by a world-concept that is self-

consciously both/and. She moves away from the universal pronouncements on ethics and morality symptomatic of the dominant super-structure of binary opposition. Walker improvises. She makes room for interpretation, for black *and* white, as well as their accompanying grays.

Itabari Njeri, in her autobiography, Every Good-Bye Ain't Gone also struggles improvisationally. She does so, in West's words, "with intellectual rigor, existential dignity, moral vision, political courage and soulful style," the marks of a New World cultural critic (West 1993, 32). She recounts a story of betrayal in which a man she had been intimately involved with for some years, a man who had deceived her throughout those years, and his, for her, final betrayal. In response, she slits the tires of his car—all four of them.

While vengeance isn't necessarily a course of action to which I subscribe, Njeri's action can be seen as a healthy and creative conversion of justifiable rage into action, and so, release. "*You write the script, you direct the play, you star in the show*" (Njeri, 199). Thinking back over the various boys and men that have hurt me throughout my heterosexual dating career, I think the process of healing would have been greatly accelerated if only I would have slashed a few tires or egged a few houses. Anger, then, becomes a fundamental component of agency, especially for women who are institutionally subjected (some more than others) to the "tyranny of nice and kind."*

Carolyn Heilbrun, in her book, Writing a Woman's Life, argues that it is precisely the absence of anger in white women's autobiographies which obstructs the honest and provocative portrayal of their lives. The absence of anger mirrors, and, as Heilbrun suggests, *causes* the absence of agency. She explains:

* Mary Field Belenky, et al. Women's Ways of Knowing: the Development of Self, Voice, and Mind. New York: Basic Books. c. 1986.

The expression of anger has always been a terrible hurdle in women's personal progress. Above all, the public and private lives cannot be linked, as in male narratives...These women are therefore unable to write exemplary lives: they do not dare offer themselves as models, but only as exceptions chosen by destiny or chance. (Heilbrun, 25)

It is important to point out that Heilbrun is speaking of white women, more specifically, she is speaking of straight, upper and middle class white women (i.e., Margaret Sanger, Jane Addams, Eudora Welty, etc.). Jill Ker Conway in her book, Written by Herself: Autobiographies of American Women, points to a similar lack of autobiographical agency that not only hampers the telling of white women's life stories, but actually results in the bastardized versions of truths told.* Heilbrun takes a similar view in her discussion of May Sarton's autobiography:

(Sarton) had not intentionally concealed her pain: she had written in the old genre of female autobiography, which tends to find beauty even in pain and to transform rage into spiritual acceptance. Later, reading her idealized life in the hopeful eyes of those who saw her as exemplar, she realized that, in ignoring her rage and pain, she had unintentionally been less than honest. (Heilbrun, 12)

While Heilbrun brings up interesting issues of audience and responsibility, she fails to spell out the causal link between anger and agency. Her hypothesis concerning the reason behind the difference between the writing of black and white women is also noticeably absent. One is left to wonder if Heilbrun thinks that black women have some natural proclivity for and talent in writing autobiographically? Not satisfied with such an essentialist notion of black womanhood or white womanhood for that matter, I am led back to anger. Is the link between anger and agency more complex than a direct causal connection? For example, can the relationship be cashed out in terms of anger as an effect of racist and sexist repression which therefore causes, or more appropriately, incites agency? In this set-up, oppression is the primary cause of effective autobiographical agency.

* Jill Ker Conway - Colby College, Waterville, Maine, 7 April, 1994.

With the primary focus on the oppression itself, black women remain trapped by their victimization, they merely act out the logical consequences of their repression (as if there were such a thing). African-American women, in the oppression-as-cause-of-agency structure, retain their status of white-supremacist patriarchal victim, albeit a successful victim status. The argument strips black women of the very agency for which their autobiographies are heralded.

Audre Lorde takes oppression as the fundament of righteous anger, but attributes the positive transformation of that potentially consuming anger to the women of color who creatively manipulate it:

Women of Color in america have grown up within a symphony of anger, at being silenced, at being unchosen, at knowing that when we survive, it is in spite of a world that takes for granted our lack of humanness, and which hates our very existence outside of its service. And I say symphony rather than cacophony because we have had to learn to orchestrate those furies so that they do not tear us apart. We have had to learn to move through them and use them for strength and force and insight within our daily lives. (Lorde 1984, 129)

Anger, of course and unfortunately, is not immune to the patriarchal axe that is co-optation. Black women's anger becomes acceptable to the mainstream only when it comes in the form of some means to the end of their all-mighty enlightenment. In other words, when it is educational anger—anger that inspires / requires the education of the majority. Lorde indicates:

Oppressed peoples are always being asked to stretch a little more, to bridge the gap between blindness and humanity. Black women are expected to use our anger only in the service of other people's salvation or learning. (Lorde 1984, 132)

Both the directed anger (anger *at* the instigator of the rage) of black women and their re-definition of anger as a survival mechanism, to the dominant white patriarchy, are unacceptably self-indulgent. Both types of Self-serving anger rightfully re-direct the focus of oppression away from the oppressed and onto the guilty shoulders of the oppressors. Anger requires that the wrong is righted, that justice must be done.

The uncomfortable limelight of accountability makes the masters squirm as African-American women re-fashion anger into a tool of resistance.

'There's so much that is ours that we've lost, and we don't even know we're missing it...And yet there's no general sense that the spirit can be amputated, that a part of the soul can be cut off because of ignorance of its past development.'

– Alice Walker
Black Women Writers at Work

What is the moral content of one's cultural identity? And what are the political consequences of this moral content and cultural identity?

– Cornel West
Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America

Itabari Njeri, in her autobiography, Every Good-Bye Ain't Gone, both figuratively and literally travels to her past in an attempt to allow parts of herSelf to live, and parts of her past to finally die. She takes her title from her grandmother Ruby's caution: "Every shut eye ain't sleep. Every good-bye ain't gone." Part of her struggle, however, is to insure that some good-byes are, in fact, gone for good. To insure that the past both becomes and remains a fully realized past. To insure that the past enters the present in a predictable and constructive way.

Toni Morrison, in Playing in the Dark, declares "one way to benefit from the lessons of earlier mistakes and past misfortune is to record them so as to prevent their repetition through exposure and inoculation" (Morrison 1992, 36). In this way, the autobiographical journey, becomes a kind of reparation, a pilgrimage to the past in order to *fix* the past. The author thus becomes the architect of an aggregated present—made up of past visions, present re-visions of the past, and present visions of her particular reality.

The art, in this instance, both initiates and imitates the theory as the autobiographical rectification mirrors the black feminist redemptive challenge to dominant literary discourse. Black feminist critic Deborah E. McDowell asserts that

Feminist criticism is a corrective, unmasking the omissions and distortions of the past—the errors of a literary critical tradition that arise from and reflect a culture created, perpetuated and dominated by men. (McDowell, 191)

In much the same way contemporary feminist criticism exhumes a pluralistic literary past, the autobiographical journey unearths incomplete pasts for fulfillment. A farewell can hardly be sincere when said in vain. The past is difficult to release when it is full of McDowell's "omissions and distortions...created, perpetuated and dominated by men," and empty of self-respect and realization.

Njeri describes her journey to, through, and around her past as a chaotic stumble through a muffled darkness, ending, as Lorde does in her own autobiography, with a kind of transformation of silence into voice and action. She says "(I) tumbled into the long silence, fell through the space of years when questions went unasked, when answers were forbidden. When I'd circled time and returned, I sought my voice" (Njeri, 118).

She envisions her present physical travels to locations thick with significant her/histories as a direct confrontation with the past. Her crusade is of the Perry Mason / Clint Eastwood sort. Her object: to get to the bottom of her grandfather's twenty-three year old unsolved murder. She physically travels through metaphorical time and actual space to deal with some unfinished emotional business, business which transcends time and space.

She uncovers, in her physical travels, white and black friends and enemies of her grandfather, the well-kept secret behind his murder, even the culprit himself. Her psychic travels yield the discovery of her grandfather's arrogance, her

grandmother's peculiar wisdom, and her own sense of continuity as well as a new sense of closure.

Njeri heads south under the steam of an express purpose and a distinct goal. Her journey is reified—not as a journey for the sake of travel, but as a trip with clarity of purpose, vision, and end. Justice must be served, and to that end, no stone will go un-turned, no question will remain unanswered in her struggle for this traditional sense of closure. At the onset of her journey the idea of completion, of closure serves as a catharsis for Njeri. It is her desired sense of resolution, a sense of unfinished business ultimately finished, of her granddaddy's soul finally put to rest that she seeks to fulfill.

However, as her re-visitation progresses, she is met not with answers, but with more questions. She is greeted not with a clear picture of right and wrong, good and evil, black and white, but instead, with the inevitable shades of gray.

And yet I felt like screaming. Because nothing was resolved, nothing was settled. Absolutely nothing. I came to Bainbridge, Georgia, hoping to find and expose a killer who had been protected by a white racist society for twenty-three years. . . That, or something else: to discover that the man who killed Granddaddy had been punished, and that he and the people of his town, whites and blacks, had mourned the loss of a man such as E.A.R. Lord. But I found neither thing. I found no clear-cut guilt or innocence, nor did I find my grandfather warmly remembered. (Njeri, 31)

These discoveries, the scratches for all of her dutiful granddaughter 20th century-activist itches, lead not to her coveted closure, but, instead, to the veritable poison ivy that is metaphysical inquiry. It is to a different sense of closure that she arrives, a kind of open-ended closure, of continual questioning, re-visiting and re-visioning.

There is a sense, for both the reader and Njeri, that this particular journey to the site of her grandfather's death, the romantic location of her childhood salvation, is itself not over, not completed in any concrete, tangible way. To be sure, the reader is left with the knowledge that this is only one chapter in an ongoing series of

Njeri's pilgrimages to the past. While traditional notions of closure, of finality and completion continue to elude Njeri, in the both/and tradition of African-American women's autobiographies, she resolves her past precisely by *not* resolving it.

Njeri comes, through her travels, to an active, *open* kind of closure. A resolution of continual and continuous questioning necessary in the process of identity formation and reformation. Black insurgent intellectuals Cornel West and bell hooks insist that identity is never monolithic, never ossified, but unmistakably fluid. West asserts that "self-criticism and self-correction as a central component of human enterprises...ensure that nothing blocks the road to inquiry" (West 1993, 113). There can be no static resolve for one's irresolute self. Selves are dynamic—by West's terms, "experimental," "improvisational" and "unapologetically moral" (West 1993, xiv). In traveling through space and time, Njeri not only re-visits and re-visions her granddad and his death, but, simultaneously, re-visions her Self through her re-definition of closure.

Eager to confirm her image of her grandfather, E.A.R. Lord, as martyr, as violent victim of clear-cut racist injustice, Njeri super-sleuths her way to the deep south. She travels through years of change weathered by memory and re-memory, over and around generations of racism's victims and victors, to bear witness to her romantic construction of her grandfather. A man she met only a handful of times, but a man whose image saved her from her abusive father: "As I grew older, my grandfather assumed mythic proportions in my imagination. Even in absence, he filled my room like music and watched over me when I was fearful. His fantasized presence diverted thoughts of my father's drunken rages" (Njeri, 12).

Njeri's return to the location of her grandfather's life and death, is motivated not only by gratitude, but also by a sense of retrospective righteous indignation. She offers:

In going to Bainbridge I felt I was tracking down a thousand anonymous bigots whose acts would never be known, whose guilt or innocence would never be judged. Men who killed a black man and laughed. Even men who, without malice, killed a black man and sighed, knowing it ultimately did not matter. (Njeri, 34)

Njeri is compelled to go to Georgia, to find her grandfather's grave site, to find his killer, to satisfy her desperate need for moral continuity. Moral continuity is a binding sense of ethical accountability across time and space, from generation to and through generation. Moral continuity is a kind of ethical system of checks and balances—no action may occur in a vacuum, not Audre Lorde's troubled childhood nor E.A.R. Lord's accidental death. It is a fully embodied ethics which employs moral continuity. It is a new way of being, of continuous being, an ontological challenge to traditional liberal notions of rugged individualism. Moral continuity inextricably connects our past and present selves as it also links us to each other. June Jordan asserts:

Morality is an existential undertaking. It is something each of us must evaluate moment by moment. I may have been dominated and oppressed by people different from me and stronger than I am but surely I may dominate and oppress people different from me and weaker than I am. No matter how powerless I may be there is always someone more powerless than I. (Jordan 1985, 115)

It is this very same moral continuity which brings Njeri to her painful and unanswerable existential queries regarding her grandfather's death.

Upon interviewing those Bainbridge citizens who knew Lord, Njeri discovers multiple and conflicting truths regarding both the man and his death: "No one agreed on anything" (Njeri, 24). By blacks and whites alike, he was remembered neither overwhelmingly positively or negatively: he was a nice man, a good doctor who lived in a big house. His political involvement with the NAACP together with his ardent support for educational integration and his own big time Howard education thickened the proverbial plot, leading to justifiable suspicions surrounding his "accidental" death. Lord's *clandestine*(unknown to Njeri) political

involvement, of course, fits perfectly into her image of E.A.R Lord as the romantic martyr / crusader for justice:

I had heard the tale all of my life: Drunken white boys drag racing through a small southern town in 1960 had killed my granddaddy. Nobody, I was told, knew their names. Nobody, I was told, knew what happened to them. Things were hushed up. (Njeri, 11)

Njeri's image of her granddaddy is functionally idealized, necessarily idealized, for survival's sake if nothing else—her fantastic image of her grandpa serves as a kind of lifeline, an escape from her abusive household. As she digs deeper into Lord's life and death, her image of the man and the man himself, begin to move closer together. bell hooks, speaking of her own autobiographical process states: "Remembering was part of a cycle of reunion, a joining of fragments, 'the bits and pieces of my heart' that the narrative made whole again" (hooks 1989, 159).

Alice Walker speaks of a similar reunion of her past and present Selves in In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens. She also returns to the deep South, her childhood home, now as a poet, novelist and activist, wife and mother to "tirelessly observe it. To kill the fear it engendered in my imagination as a place where black life was terrifyingly hard, pitifully cheap" (Walker 1983, 224). She, like Njeri, saw her physical re-location as an answer to her psychic dislocation. As she travels back, both physically and psychically, Walker transforms Mississippi—a location heavy with historical pain and injustice for her and multitudinous others, into a present location of resistance:

The first two years [in Mississippi] passed in a fever to get everything down—in poems, stories, the novel I was writing, essays—that I observed. It was a period of constant revelation, when mysteries not understood during my Southern childhood came naked to me to be embraced. I grew to adulthood in Mississippi. (Walker 1983, 224)

Njeri's journey, similarly resistant to injustice, leads her to the reunion and concomitant revision of her particular "truths," the "bits and pieces" of *her* heart. As her truths are re-connected and thus, reworked, so too is her concept of Truth.

What is this elusive Truth anyway? All the various Truths in the E.A.R. Lord mystery serve their respective purposes. Njeri's image of Lord is a buoy in the sea of her father's abuse. Step-Grandma Madelyn's construction of her husband is a truth secreted for sanity's sake. The perpetrator's, Harper's, representation of the accident and the victim is a truth constructed as a salve for his guilty conscience. He says, "It's so irrelevant now. You think there's some mystery here to be unwound. I was in a car. Another man was in a car. We met under a red light" (Njeri, 26). And still, trapped in a socio-political super-structure of moral discontinuity that was and is the south (and the north for that matter) of the 1960s (and of the 1990s for that matter), Njeri desperately clings to her notion of Savior Truth. She says "I came, tried to find blame, and I failed. I wanted to stay in Bainbridge longer. I wanted to go back once I returned to Miami. With more reporting, I argued, I could find an answer; the truth" (Njeri, 31).

The idea of Truth becomes progressively more complex as the notion of value, of valued and valuable truths, is introduced. The question asked of the past and the present interrogation of that past becomes the familiar Cornel Westian query—What is the good? Where is the value in excavating old pain, in "opening old wounds?" Njeri confronts Harper in front of his wife and teenage son. She bears witness to an accident that occurred nearly a lifetime ago. Truth and closure are inextricably bound in Njeri's passionate desire to see justice served, to see evidence of a continuous morality. In the pursuit of her traditional notion of closure, if not out and out vengeance, she gets the problematic pleasure of seeing him, of putting a face to the crime. However, it is not, and will never be, enough:

I had stood on a man's doorstep and humiliated him in front of his wife and child. For what? What had he done? The rumors had been wrong. There was no evidence of drag racing, none I could find. If there had been a cover-up, it had been pretty inept. Harper's name was front-page news in the local paper. If there had been an injustice,

hadn't it been mitigated by a six-thousand-dollar award by a white jury to a black woman? (Njeri, 30)

While exhuming past painful truths may be inherently problematic but it is a preferable predicament to that of silence. There is a difference, however, between silence as a presence and silence as an absence. Silence *can* be a self-protective mechanism, a kind of bastion of muted comfort as it seems to be for Njeri's grandmother and for both Maya Angelou and Alice Walker. For Angelou and Walker, their silence signals a presence of creative agency, of self-preservation—a stand against further victimization.

Njeri, on the other hand, butts her head against the wall of a silent absence. Her grandmother's silence, while it acts as a kind of survival mechanism for her, results in an absence of potentially cathartic information for Njeri and the rest of her family. Madelyn's silence perpetuated a painful gap in the family's history. Without voice, the familial wound festers as the cry for healing goes unheard. As voiced, past pain becomes a visible conflict which requires a value judgment. Silence in this frame, is not only golden, it is gender-neutral, race-neutral, class-neutral, value-neutral. As pain is greeted with silence, its infliction stands without judgment. It remains, then, unaccounted for and unaccountable. It is a pain that will surely linger unresolved. As Njeri suggests, it is a pain that will become "generational": "Despite the pain that induced it, hadn't my grandmother's silence for twenty-three years kept alive in my family a hurtful distortion" (Njeri, 31)?

Confrontation as a means to the end of blame is without corrupt, and therefore morally bankrupt. Still, confrontation is overwhelmingly preferable, mandated almost, against its antithesis, a silence of absence. There must, therefore be some auspicious end to which confrontation leads. Itabari Njeri chooses the intersection of trust and proof as her favored endpoint.

I feel the suspicion in me. I feel the hatred creeping up. Those feelings are so powerful, they cannot be extinguished by trustingly extending to the town, to the man, the benefit of a doubt. Trust requires more than a failure to prove guilt; it requires a belief in innocence...Against a backdrop of personal loss, against the evidence of history that fills me with a knowledge of the hateful behavior of whites toward blacks, I see the people of Bainbridge. And I cannot trust them. I cannot absolve them. (Njeri, 33)

Trust, after 400 years of oppression, repression, imposed silence, abuse and violence requires more than a kind heart, it demands substantiation. For all of those non-white, non-rich, non-straight, penis-less peoples, to trust the white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy is something akin to simple-minded suicide. It lacks reason, motive, and sense. The oppressor must prove to the oppressed that he is willing and able to change before the oppressed could or *should* invest their trust. It is a matter of survival.

Following the confrontation with Harper, Njeri seems to change the tenor of her questioning. She changes her focus from What is the good? to What is the right? Greeted by a face, by a family, Njeri's abstract crusade for justice is concretized. Her own struggle for self-realization and re-vision becomes an interrogation of utility versus morality. In her confrontation with Harper, very little utility was served: Harper was humiliated and Njeri frustrated as her questions remained unanswered. However, throughout her travels—both physical and metaphysical—Njeri cleaves to an abiding sense of moral continuity. The radical historicity of Njeri's autobiographical journey insures accountability as she champions moral continuity. While her original questions concerning her grandad's death remain unanswered, the query that fuels her travels is answered in the asking, not the answering. What is the right? The question is answered by her very journey.

When I returned home, my aunt Earlyne told me that if she met Harper today, she would shake his hand. "That's what Daddy would have wanted," she said. "Turn the other cheek. We can't live in this world with hate." I know no such charity. I want a thousand

anonymous bigots to know that somebody's grandchild might someday knock at their door, too. (Njeri, 34)

Traveling back through space and time, be it physically or psychically, guarantees that no action takes place in a kind of moral vacuum—that no action is without consequences and thus, no person without responsibility. Overwhelming ethical importance mandates this historical approach and the link between morality and accountability is its *modus operandi*. It is this connection which takes historiography / the autobiographical journey out of the private sphere and into the public. Njeri concludes:

I am weary of the collective amnesia of most white Americans. I am not responsible for what Daddy or Granddaddy did, they say; as long as they are innocent of perpetuating the evils of the past, they are right. I read history as a child, not fiction. I understand how insidious was the impersonal social system that had coldly denied opportunity to blacks, and seemingly left no one to blame, as if systems do not bear the marks of their creators. (Njeri, 33)

Alice Walker suggests that this sense of moral obligation might, in fact, not only be particular to the work of African-Americans, but also a location of interconnectedness:

Black writers seem always involved in a moral and/or physical struggle, the result of which is expected to be some kind of larger freedom. Perhaps this is because our literary tradition is based on the slave narratives, where escape for the body and freedom for the soul went together, or perhaps this is because black people have never felt themselves guilty of global, cosmic sins. (Walker 1983, 5)

Walker's suggestion offers a kind of moral community. The testimony of this constancy of struggle for freedom of both body and soul bears witness to an interdependence that creates a multi-voiced dialogue across time and space. Njeri's autobiography is, thus, an integral component of a continuous and continuing tradition. Her autobiographical journey is widened, then, from a narrow self-realization to a construction of an ethics of becoming, another chapter in a continuing African-American tradition, by her abiding sense of moral continuity.

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of "talking back," that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice.

– bell hooks

Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics

Njeri, Lorde and Walker clearly show that autobiographies are not the personal means to the politically limited end of self-realization. Autobiographies could be construed as limited in the sense of being stunted, an isolated growth, an insular personal politic. In fact, the autobiographical statement is the very stuff of which revolutionary politics is made.

A revolutionary politic, a progressive political philosophy calls into question our god Truth as it has been set before us by the all-mighty racist, sexist, classist, heterosexist patriarchy. It interrogates the institutions which govern us, the experiences which shape us. It challenges the very definitions by which we live.

African-American women's autobiographies lend such a philosophy a starting point as well as the fuel for its fire. Black women's autobiographies both inspire and exemplify the construction of an art-full politics, a mixture of politics and art, philosophy and literature, love of self and intolerance of injustice. The objective is to create a continually re-formed, re-visioned social and political philosophy—a kind of amalgam of an historical deconstructionism, a postmodern de-mystification, and a pluralistic neo-pragmatism.

Cornel West, in his latest book, Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America, speaks of the move from the right, from the *malestream*, from the world of the "fuckedup whiteboys," as one heavy with an historical consciousness. He states:

By becoming more "radically historical" I mean confronting more candidly the myriad effects and consequences (intended and unintended, conscious and unconscious) of power-laden and conflict-ridden social practices—for instance, the complex confluence of human bodies, traditions and institutions. (West 1993, 266)

He employs a genealogical materialist analysis of racism which incorporates three levels of analysis: genealogical, microinstitutional, and macroinstitutional.

The genealogical or "radically historical" level of inquiry scrutinizes the "emergence, development and sustenance" of the heterosexist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy as we know it in the contemporary West. Further microinstitutional analysis views the dominant patriarchy through a localized lens. It investigates the subjective affects of dominant racist, sexist, classist, and heterosexist logic on everyday people; "including the ways in which self-images and self-identities are shaped, and the impact of alien, degrading cultural styles, aesthetic ideals, psychosexual sensibilities and linguistic gestures upon peoples of color" (West 1993, 268). Lastly, there is the macrostructural examination of universal modes of oppression and domination, as well as the resistance to those modes.

Such an analysis of racism, and I would suggest similar analyses of sexism, classism, and heterosexism need to be incorporated in the production of a contextualized, *particular*, politics of liberation. It is a politics of which African-American women's autobiographies are both part and parcel. Author and poet June Jordan relates "my life seems to be an increasing revelation of the intimate face of universal struggle" (Christian 1985, 159). Autobiographies become, for their readers, the intimate faces of universal struggle, the revelation of which includes re-visioned self-definitions as challenges to the lockjaw of the dominant patriarchy. But most importantly, the revelation is of themselves. African-American women's art must be seen as art foremost, but from which unavoidably follows, art as theory.

An historical deconstruction starts from the ground up, or more appropriately, from the ground out and through. From epistemology to ontology,

how we know what we know becomes as important as what it is that we know. Similarly, the deconstructionist's question as to *how* we are who we are or who we are *supposed* to be contextualizes the metaphysical search for self. Patricia Hill Collins connects this metaphysical search with the political project of black feminist thought:

Traditional epistemological assumptions concerning how we arrive at "truth" simply are not sufficient to the task of furthering Black feminist thought. In the same way that concepts such as woman and intellectual must be deconstructed, the process by which we arrive at truth merits comparable scrutiny. (Collins, 17)

This is particularly significant in a society ruled by the supposed "truth" of binary oppositions. These pairs—i.e. civilized / primitive, white / black, male / female—establish a hierarchical superstructure in which the former is valued, and the latter is not only devalued but denigrated (West 1993, 20-21). It is this "truth" which dictates: to be competent, intelligent, hard-working, strong, courageous, resourceful, in short, to be *good*, you gotta be a whiteboy. White women and black men may receive some crumbs of quality due to their particular whiteness or maleness, but black women don't have a chance at goodness. They, in fact, embody all that is NOT white and NOT male and, therefore, NOT good, in this world of two colors, two values. It is a "truth" constructed and perpetuated by whiteboys with the best interest of whiteboys in mind.

The deconstruction of this so-called "truth" is a necessary first step in the uprooting of the pillars of the rich white male heteropatriarchy by awarding agency and the power of self-definition to their rightful owners. "By declaring the truth, you create the truth," says unflappable poet, author, and revolutionary Jordan. Further extended, by declaring your Self, you create your Self. Black feminist critic Michelle Wallace points out that "from the perspective of dominance, a woman of

color who insists on functioning as a speaking (writing) subject threatens the status of Truth itself" (Wallace, 65). Patricia Hill Collins goes on to add:

Over the years I have tried to replace the external definitions of my life forwarded by dominant groups with my own self-defined standpoint...The voice that I now seek is both individual and collective, personal and political, one reflecting the intersection of my unique biography with the larger meaning of my historical times. (Collins, xi-xii)

In the generation of this revolutionary politics of difference, it is not surprising that identity politics play an integral role. Within our context of deprecated identities and an arbitrarily imposed arbitrary value system, African-American women occupy a unique position within and without contemporary society.

West refers to DuBois' theory of double-consciousness: "[it is the feeling] of *being* deeply shaped by Euro-American modernity but not *feeling* fully a part of it" (West 1993, xii). The valuable perspective gained from this split reality—simultaneously living in two disparate worlds—is that of an outsider-within. Black feminist critic Patricia Hill Collins posits that "prevented from becoming full insiders in [feminism, Black social and political thought and mainstream scholarship], Black women remain outsiders within, individuals whose marginality provides a distinctive angle of vision on the theories put forth by such intellectual communities" (Collins, 12).

This outsider-within perspective offers unique distance and thus a valuable, subjectively objective critique of this societal system in which we are so deeply entrenched. It is also, I would imagine, a painful duality, a permanent transience, of being a part of and yet not belonging, of uncomfortable comfortability.

The struggle of living two lives, one for "them and one for ourselves" creates a peculiar tension to extract the definition of one's true self from the treatment afforded the denigrated categories in which all Black women are placed. (Collins, 94)

Black women autobiographers' sense of belonging and not belonging is further exacerbated by their particular choice of art-full expression and cultural critique. As mentioned previously, it is Fox-Genovese's tension between condition and discourse which produces "the coherence of black women's autobiographical discourse." It is the experience of simultaneously writing for and against the malestream. The result is the rather precarious balance between artistic integrity and economic necessity. West comments:

This strategy (of critiquing dominant operations of power), however, also puts (cultural critics) in an inescapable double bind—while linking their activities to the fundamental, structural overhaul of these institutions, they often remain financially dependent on them...for these critics of culture, theirs is a gesture that is simultaneously progressive and co-opted. (West 1993, 4)

Keeping this double bind in mind, it is important to ask for whom are these autobiographies written? How different is that from who, in fact, reads them? How different are the novels, essays, and collections issued by alternative publishers (i.e., Kitchen Table—Women of Color Press and South End Press) as contrasted with their more mainstream counterparts? Is there even an option for redress in such imbalanced power / control relations as that between publisher and publishee? West offers a not entirely satisfying answer:

It has to do with who has access to the legitimate and prestigious journals, who has access to the publishing houses, and so on. We have seen this phenomenon historically, and the best that we can do to fight against it is to either establish our own institutional networks that would give our texts visibility, or simply continue to bring critique to bear on the manipulation and the co-optation that goes on in the mainstream. (hooks & West 1991, 37)

The questions then become, how subversive can material condoned by the dominant superstructure, in fact, be? To what extent are the mainstream corporate publishing magnates dictating the demand for information emanating from women of color? In other words, are they just letting us know what they want us to hear?

bell hooks in her provocative essay, "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance," suggests that the appropriation of certain forms of black art and popular culture by the main/malestream is yet another form of exploitation, domination, and control. For example, in some circles (although they are few and far between), black is hip cool fresh phat. The circles are generally relegated to intellectual communities, the youth of today, and weird trends in hard-to-read feminist and philosophical literature. Thus, they aren't significant enough to warrant any kind of relief in the struggles against racism, against sexism, against homophobia. However, their existence and impact certainly calls for a discussion of their potential revolutionary nature and/or their simple re-assertion of straight rich white male power.

The trend towards the newly popular desire for black women's literature is revolutionary in that it signifies a change in focus. West contends that the shift of Cold War socio-political and economic emphasis from America and the former Soviet Union to that of a rapidly expanding global community *necessitates* such a shift in academic and canonical focus (hooks & West 1991, 31). I would add to West's geo-political analysis, an interrelated philosophical shift from modernism and traditional liberalism to poststructuralism, postmodernism and neo-pragmatism. These anti-foundationalist, anti-essentialist theoretical frameworks similarly necessitate a pluralism previously de-emphasized. And I guess I would hold out for a corresponding ethical shift in focus. The painfully slow and not so sure popular shift from the demand for art, music, and knowledge that is exclusively by and about white males to an increasing demand for art, music, and knowledge by and about African-Americans, Hispanics, Asian-Americans and women. It is an ethical shift as its impetus is purely moral. I would posit, that in some instances, different kinds of art, music and knowledge are being sought simply because it's the right thing to do.

This popular shift from an exclusive focus on all that is white to a growing interest in African-American art, music, and culture however, is certainly suspect. While the focus may be black, the control of that focus nevertheless remains white. (It is important to note here that while it seems recently that the work of black women writers floods the literary arena, it continues to be the work of a select group of African-American authors. The past and present absences of both the quantity of published black women writers as well as the scope of black women's writing are glaring. Thus, while the literary focus may be popularly shifting, it would be a huge mistake to mark the proliferation of black women's writing as a done deal. In this context, I am speaking only of those works published and lately popularized.) hooks offers:

Certainly from the standpoint of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, the hope is that desires for the "primitive" or fantasies about the Other can be continually exploited, and that such exploitation will occur in a manner that reinscribes and maintains the *status quo*. (hooks 1992, 22)

As it is generally white capitalists at the helm of at least the publication and circulation of black women's writings, it is vital to ask—are their motives genuine? Is it the availability of a multitude of voices speaking on a vast array of experiences that guides them in their seeking out of African-American women's work? Or is it, as hooks offers, further exploitation through the exoticization of the Other?

An analogous, and perhaps more dynamic illustration of the recent mass popularization of black culture is the contemporary fury over rap music and the advent of a bi-racial hip hop culture. Cheo Coker's recent interview with superstar rapper Ice Cube in *The Source: the Magazine of Hip-Hop Music, Culture & Politics*, describes his style as "Black rage on a platter, ready to come out at the twist of a knob or the push of a button, stylized and sanitized for mass consumption" (Coker, 60). A common assumption in the rap music industry is that once an album goes

platinum, over half of those records are playing on white stereos for white ears almost exclusively.

In her own interview with Cube, hooks asks him "to what extent do we compromise ourselves to reach a white audience? I want to sell my books to as many people as will buy them, right?" Ice Cube responds:

I do records for black kids, and white kids are basically eavesdropping. White kids need to hear what we got to say about them, and their forefathers, and uncles, and everybody that's done us wrong. And the only way they're goin' to hear it uncut and uncensored is rap music—I refuse to censor anything I have to say about anybody—the black community, Koreans, anybody who distracts our harmony. That's who needs to be—I won't say attacked—but checked. (hooks 1993, 31)

Cube brings up the heavy significance of a voice unfettered by the restraints of an oppressive social structure. He also emphasizes the urgent importance of taking those oppressors to task, exposing their injustices, their failure to hold up their end of a kind of Lockean social contract. Cube and his musical comrades point to this contractual break and take it one step further, as the justification of a kind of call to arms. This kind of declaration is reminiscent of Malcolm X's famous speech, "The Ballot or the Bullet." The rich white straight patriarchy is thus not only "checked" by rap artists, but also both directly and indirectly warned.

Ice Cube, as well as a wide variety of rap artists (i.e., Snoop Doggy Dog, Dr. Dre, N.W.A., and Ice T) tend to follow the example of their black male nationalist predecessors and exclude black women from this revolutionary system of checks and balances. They deepen the exclusion, responding in part to the myth of black women's empowerment as a cost to the freedom and power of black men, by blatantly and abusively degrading their female counterparts. Cube's response to this charge of misogyny is largely unsatisfactory. While he places the general lack of black self-love at the heart of racist and sexist domination and violence, he attributes his own public sexism to market mandates:

The evil of America outweighs the good, so people tend to hunger for the bad thing—the car wrecks, the sex scandals. People identify with “Don’t Trust ‘Em” (a misogynist rant about the evils of beguiling women) more than with the lady on “I’m Scared” (a woman speaking on her fears of the consequences of racism and sexism). But it’s startin’ to be socially correct to start identifyin’ with the lady. (hooks 1993, 32)

Ice Cube illustrates, somewhat by default, the push and pull of a commodity culture, the relationship of capitalistic supply and demand to artistic form and especially content. That it is a predominantly white and black male audience that supplies the demand provokes interesting questions of both motive and responsibility. To what extent are Ice Cube and other rappers accountable for their portrayal of black women? Fully cognizant of the racial and gendered make-up of his audience, how responsible is Cube for presenting a positive image of black women? If only for the sake of solidarity in the struggle against racism? Is that a similarly stultifying view of solidarity to that of black male nationalists of the 60’s, demanding black women’s silence regarding the dirty laundry that is sexism in the black community?

To what extent is the mass appeal of rap music, especially gangsta rap, dependent on misogyny? What message is sent to black women when the “Real Queens of Rap,” Salt N’ Pepa, are deemed so because they, unlike most female rappers, aren’t “dissing men, stealing them from others or trying to be them. Salt ‘N’ Pepa are trying to get men, love them, keep them, and most importantly *please* them” (Green, 38)? Is the only avenue for success available to female artists that which leads both to and from men? How is this phenomenon in the music industry intimately related to similar events in the critique of black women’s literature? In other words, as female musicians and music is defined in relation to male musicians and music, are female authors subject to a similar definitional dependence—i.e., Richard Wright’s critique and effective dismissal of Zora Neale

Hurston and the overwhelmingly hostile reaction of black male critics to Alice Walker's The Color Purple?

Contemporary rap divas Queen Latifah, Monie Love, YoYo and her IBWC (Intelligent Black Women's Coalition) provide powerful counter-examples of resistance to the dominant paradigm. Their presence, however, doesn't vindicate male artists or the predominantly male music industry, it, in fact, *adds* to the complexity of the issues surrounding women, responsibility and rap music. Who is listening to Queen Latifah's "Unity" in which she asserts: "You gotta let him know. You ain't a bitch or a ho"? What sense can be made of the union of feminism and overt (over?) sexuality (Salt n' Pepa's "Whatta Man") or feminism and violence (YoYo's "Girl's Got a Gun")? If there is a market for feminist rap—as the above mentioned performers undeniably have proved—is there, then, some kind of female responsibility to support and encourage it? While I would like to think that it is the responsibility of all people to support progressive art, is there some extra responsibility for those whom the art benefits? Can responsibility be gender-ized, racial-ized?

The issue of audience becomes paramount when it is one's own audience that serves as the conduit from the autobiographical "I" to the global community and thus socio-political actualization. When it is precisely the white kids with the baggy pants and sneakers, and those bourgeois white feminists and pseudo-intellectuals (myself included) who are hearing the message if not with the most clarity, then certainly with the most volume. The move from the particular, the personal, to the universal, the political, is extended, at least physically if not also psychically, by one's audience. In other words, the audience serves as the escape route from a kind of Cartesian "prison of the mind," or, more appropriately, the confines of the autobiography's particulars.

The connection between product and consumer, supply and demand, becomes particularly suspicious when the product is both ethically problematic and, at the same time, wildly popular. In the instance of rap music—some of which is riddled with depictions of black on black violence and unbridled misogyny—is it popular precisely *because* it reaffirms white-supremacist notions of one-dimensional barbarous black manhood? hooks posits:

We are collectively asked to show our solidarity with the white supremacist *status quo* by over-valuing whiteness, by seeing blackness solely as a marker of powerlessness and victimization. To the degree that black folks embody by our actions and behavior familiar racist stereotypes, we will find greater support and/or affirmation in the culture. A prime example of this is white consumer support of misogynist rap which reproduces the idea that black males are violent beasts and brutes. (hooks 1992, 18)

Is the misogynist rap of Ice Cube and N.W.A, among others, in such high demand because it corroborates the stereotype, left over from slavery, of black men as rapists? Are the lyrics—i.e. N.W.A.'s "You think I give a shit about a bitch? I ain't a sucka"—merely playing into the dominant white culture's fantasy of black men's animalistic sexual prowess, black women as matriarchs who desperately need to be put in their subordinated place, white women as representative of pure sexuality, and white men as the overseers and enforcers of the whole weird sexual segmentation? As June Jordan suggests in her essay, "Requiem for the Champ," in regards to former heavyweight boxing champion of the world Mike Tyson and his recent rape conviction:

I do not excuse or condone or forget or minimize or forgive the crime of his violation of the young black woman he raped. But did anybody ever tell Mike Tyson that you talk differently to a girl? Where would he learn that? (Jordan 1992, 225)

While Jordan adheres to the basic principle of personal responsibility for one's actions, the larger onus of accountability is on the forces that create and perpetuate the contextual *conditions* of dehumanization.

West situates black cultural productions such as rap and reggae music in the scheme of practical struggle and opposition as a kind of first transgressive step. He does so by making a distinction between thin and thick opposition. Thin opposition poses a socio-political critique without directly addressing the distressingly unequal distribution of wealth, resources, and power. The addition of such an address is the critique's thickening agent. Of rap and reggae music West contends:

Cultural productions by Black people, like rap, are, in some instances, subversive, but at the same time they do not speak to the more fundamental issue of the maldistribution of power, wealth, and resources in this society...there is no translation of reggae or rap into a political movement. (hooks & West 1991, 39)

In his interview with hooks, Ice Cube fails to address issues of production control and information dissemination when self-determination (i.e., revolutionary-friendly record producers and publishers) is not insured. Undeniably, the market and its producers effect one another, and the call for black writing and black music fuels and is fueled by the mass popularization of black culture. In this way publishers and record producers are merely supplying a demand. It might then be more appropriate to question the demand. Ice Cube, in a later interview with Cheo Coker of *The Source: The Magazine of Hip-Hop Music, Culture & Politics*, more effectively speaks of the complex relationship between white production control and the exploitation of black people and culture. Cube asserts that "They have no use for us anymore but to get us to play basketball, entertain them on sitcoms, think of new dance steps or new fuckin' fashion, so we end up becoming walking marketing tools 'cause we so open with our shit" (Coker, 64).

Is it interest or appropriation that white readers of black literature, white listeners of rap music seek? Do we appropriate to understand, appropriate to become, or appropriate to erase? Who's appropriating who? And to what end? In the continuing shift away from binary oppositions toward a malleable both/and

situation, I would posit that it is indeed, both/and. White readers of black literature read to satisfy both an interest in and a hunger for the "Other." White kids listen to rap music both to enjoy and to exploit black culture. In our complex and rapidly changing world—as interests shift, and, more importantly, as ethics shift—it is hard to determine what is White as Right and what is merely Right.

This shift in the dominant paradigm of desire (from white to black) is especially exciting and threatening as it is carried out predominantly by the amerikkan youth. The shift is exciting in that it offers a renewed sense of hope amidst increased and incessant sexual and racial tension and violence. The shift is also threatening in that it is potentially an offer of friendship and understanding under the all too familiar guise of appropriation. And so, not only is the shit gonna keep going on, but now it'll be harder to differentiate one's allies from one's predators. hooks explains the phenomenon this way:

Masses of young people dissatisfied by U.S. imperialism, unemployment, lack of economic opportunity, afflicted by the postmodern malaise of alienation, no sense of grounding, no redemptive identity, can be manipulated by cultural strategies that offer Otherness as appeasement, particularly through commodification. The contemporary crises of identity in the west, especially as experienced by white youth are eased when the "primitive" is recouped *via* a focus on diversity and pluralism which suggests the Other can provide life-sustaining alternatives. (hooks 1992, 25)

In this, our capitalist society, consumerism has transcended the realm of products, of production, and has entered that of relationships. As is the case with products and production, the rich, the powerful, (the white, the male), control what is bought and sold, who is allied, who is isolated, and why. Relationships, then, are no longer relationships for relationships' sake (in the purest sense of human agency, the Kantian notion of people as ends in themselves), but become relationships for the sake of their political and economic expedience. White lesbian feminist Diana Fuss calls it white culture's will to power, the feast that is black

culture precisely as it sustains / feeds the dominant (read white, straight, rich, male) culture and, overtly and/or covertly, destroys the marginalized culture (read black, female).^{*} Hooks cites Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen's book, Channels of Desire: Mass Images and the Shaping of American Consciousness, in which they state:

Consumption is a social relationship, the dominant relationship in our society—one that makes it harder and harder for people to hold together to create community. At a time when for many of us the possibility of meaningful change seems to elude our grasp, it is a question of immense social and political proportions. (hooks 1992, 33-4)

When black women and their writing, black musicians and their music, African-Americans and their culture, are viewed as a means to the end of some kind of political, spiritual, or cultural enlightenment, both the author and her/his work are stripped of their agency, their sovereignty, their existence as ends in themselves. Our capitalist society, well-used to the commodification of sex and bodies (especially women's bodies), expands on the theme of the commodity culture by placing race on the market. "Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture," says hooks (hooks 1992). The relative popularization of African American women's writing and rap music can be seen as *both* a revolutionary shift in focus away from the oppressive status quo and as another exercise of domination and control via the thinly veiled guise of rich straight white patriarchy. hooks concludes:

The message that acknowledgment and exploration of racial difference can be pleasurable represents a breakthrough, a challenge to white supremacy, to various systems of domination. The over-riding fear is that cultural, ethnic and racial differences will be continually commodified and offered up as new dishes to enhance the white palate—that the Other will be eaten, consumed and forgotten. (hooks 1992, 39)

So, is it cultural appreciation or appropriation? Is it communalism or cannibalism? Is it a revolutionary shift in priority or is it another straight rich white

^{*} Diana Fuss - Colby College, Waterville, Maine, 10 March, 1994.

male wolf in a progressive liberal sheep's clothing? A partial solution to this impossible dilemma is located in a discussion of privilege and responsibility. In a discussion of accessibility and audience it is important to determine just who has access, to what audience, and how much control they have over that access. In a struggle for change, access to an audience, any audience, insures voice. Implied within the concept of audience is a transformative fundamental vision of thoughts being listened *to*. Access comes then, as a privilege, an audience of affirmation is guaranteed to very few within the struggle.

In other words, it is seemingly futile to speak subversive thoughts when it is unclear whether one might be heard. It becomes a relationship of supply and demand. When listeners are guaranteed, voice is not only possible, but necessary. Access to an audience facilitates the fortitude of one's voice as it insures that the message will be, if nothing else, at least heard.

Adhering to a theory of a directly proportional relationship between privilege and responsibility—i.e., the more privilege one has, the more responsibility with which one is charged—hooks and West have a particularly pressing responsibility to “give back to the ‘hood.” Being black intellectuals in a predominantly white academia, I imagine that the going isn't easy or particularly comfortable and that often they are isolated and excluded by their peers. However, as intellectuals, with privilege to the minds (if not the souls) of the powers-that-be as they participate directly in the dominant discourse of the educated elite, theirs is a unique double bind. West asks “How can we use what power we do have to be sure more resources are available to those who are disadvantaged? How do we use our responsibility and privilege? Because, after all, Black privilege is a result of Black struggle” (hooks & West 1991, 14).

Cultural critics who occupy that validated, “heard” space are thus charged with the *responsibility* of voice. It is a responsibility based on privileged access, a

responsibility to fill the gaps of imposed silence with speech. Not any speech, however, is necessarily acceptable. Transgressive speech, a multivalent voice for change is West's demand. Battling the selective hearing of the white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy for an audience is not enough. The content of one's message must be as multi-dimensional as the content of the innumerable characters of one's diverse community. West asserts:

Following the model of black diasporan traditions of music, athletics and rhetoric, black cultural workers must constitute and sustain discursive and institutional networks that deconstruct earlier modern black strategies for identity-formation, demystify power relations that incorporate class, patriarchal and homophobic biases, and construct more multivalent and multidimensional responses that articulate the complexity and diversity of black practices in the modern and postmodern world. (West 1993, 20)

Michelle Wallace answers with a similar charge for African-American women authors:

Black women writers not only make it possible to understand how a convergence of racism, sexism, and class antagonism marks the Third World woman's peculiar position in discourse, but their work calls into question the truth value of any unitary or dualistic apprehension of the world. Not only is it necessary that we focus on difference rather than sameness or universality, but also, at every conceivable moment, *we must choose and take responsibility for what we will emphasize in ourselves and others* [emphasis mine]. (Wallace, 65-6)

And if you are not an academic, not an author? West's advice is clear in regards to the relationship between privilege and responsibility—as the responsibility of those most privileged (rich white heterosexual men) is continually shirked, the responsibility of those with marginalized privilege (black intellectuals, authors, artists, white women) increases in urgency. However, if one is marginalized and without access to academia or popular culture, the bridge between subversive thought and political action is hard to locate.

hooks posits that black women "must develop strategies to gain critical assessment of our worth and value that do not compel us to look for critical evaluation and affirmation from the very structures, institutions, and individuals who do not believe in our capacity to learn," and, I would suggest, the capacity to produce (hooks & West 1981, 160). What are those strategies? While I think an emphasis on economic self-determination—i.e., black owned and operated publishing houses, record companies, etc.—plays a vital role in this re-assessment of public assessment, in the quest for control over one's destiny / identity, it addresses only one side of the producer / production relationship. Manning Marable in his book, How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America, posits that the black nationalist entreaty to "buy black" is "rooted in the often unchallenged assumption that U.S. capitalism is not structurally racist, and that the devastated condition of most Blacks throughout history could be alleviated through the acceleration of capital accumulation in the hands of a small number of Blacks" (Marable, 139). Black economic determinism, forwarded alone, is symptomatic of our quick-fix culture—to seek short-term and superficial solutions to profound, long-lasting problems.

The shift needs to be towards a symbiotic relationship of immediate, short-term solutions and radical challenges to fundamental definitions, beliefs, and ways of being. An independent critical re-assessment of one's worth and value is understood best as the decolonization of the mind and the ongoing project of self-love. In a television interview with Bill Moyers, Toni Morrison loosely quotes James Baldwin when he says to black men and women "You've already been bought and paid for, that business is done. You can now go about the business of loving yourself."*

* "A Writer's Work with Toni Morrison, parts I & II." A World of Ideas with Bill Moyers. Alexandria, Va: PBS Video. c. 1990.

In our contemporary situation of balkanization—separation from each other, our bodies, our Selves—we are so far removed psychically, spiritually, and emotionally that we are numbed to the daily proliferation of physical, moral and ethical violence. To reconnect in even this most basic way—to actually love all that constitutes one's Self—is a politically radical challenge to the oppressive superstructure which demands of Others (everyone *except* straight rich white boys) self-abnegation. Cornel West quotes Audre Lorde, from her collection of essays, Sister Outsider, in which she maintains:

'The institutionalized rejection of *difference* is an absolute necessity in a profit economy which needs outsiders as surplus people. As members of such an economy, we have *all* been programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing and to handle that difference in one of three ways: ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate. But we have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals. As a result, those differences have been misnamed and misused in the service of separation and confusion.'

(West 1993, 63)

In her essay, "Loving Blackness as Political Resistance," bell hooks shifts the focus of discussions of politically radical self-love as defined *in relation to* black self-hate, to a discussion of the love of blackness as wholly independent of white and black hate.

Collectively, black people and our allies in struggle are empowered when we practice self-love as a revolutionary intervention that undermines practices of domination. Loving blackness as political resistance transforms our ways of looking and being, and thus creates the conditions necessary for us to move against the forces of domination and death and reclaim black life. (hooks 1992, 20)

No longer, then, is blackness defined primarily as Not-white. It signifies an essential epistemological shift in which blackness is removed from under the oppressive wing of whiteness with a positive definition of self, making room for

internal assessment, vindication and critique and, less importantly, for non-black allies of blackness.

In his discussion of Horace Pippin's paintings, Sterling Brown's poetry and Bessie Smith's music, West points to the overwhelming importance of proper contextual situation and valuation. In other words, the viewing, valuation, and critique of one's art on its own terms, *not* in relation to an un-connected other:

All three artists (Pippin, Brown and Smith) reject the two dominant models of black art in the *white* world at the time: black art as expressive of the 'new Negro' and black art as protest. Instead they build on the major paradigm of black art in the *black* world: black art as healing, soothing yet humorously unsettling illuminations of what it means to be human in black skin in America. (West 1993, 62)

The power of positive definition—of black art instead of not white art—provides African-American artists with a discourse that is collectively self-determined. Black art can then be critiqued on its own terms. Black feminist criticism is paradigmatic of such a properly contextualized critique. Thus the checks and balances, the critiques and revisions, for African-American artistic discourse are provided by a community that at least speaks the same language, instead of by an outsider not only wholly unrelated, but concomitantly bent on its destruction.

In order for African American women's autobiographies to serve as an integral component of a revolutionary politics of difference it is necessary to herald the popular feminist cry "the personal is political" as fundamental. Historically, men have occupied the sphere deemed public, the sphere of government, of economics, of science. As the realm of the public movers and shakers, it has also been considered political and therefore valid, relevant, and universally pressing. Conversely, it is women that have *been relegated to* that sphere deemed private, the domestic province of particular homes and hearths, and therefore universal insignificance.

This public / private division is reminiscent of Descartes and his rather dangerous duality of minds and bodies. Continuing on the path of gest,binary oppositional truths, minds precede bodies in their positive valuation. Men, as exclusive occupants of the public sphere, are also, therefore, afforded fastidious access to the mind—are, in fact, directly associated with minds and the intellectual world. On the contrary, women as private, as secular almost, are associated with the body, with their bodies. As the physical is devalued, women become a kind of necessary evil, the means to a more enlightened end that is metaphysical, that is intellectual.

The strict demarcation of public lives and private lives threatens a similarly dangerous and arbitrary valuation of not only each sphere's respective products, but of their producers. As per tradition, significance has stood with the public. To publicize the private is to then correspondingly politicize and, therefore, validate its existence and recognize its importance. "The personal is political" flies in the face of the typically amerikkkan notion of binary opposition and segmentation. bell hooks indicates that

It is that political movement (feminism) which most radically addresses the person—the personal—citing the need for transformation of self, of relationships, so that we might be better able to act in a revolutionary manner, challenging and resisting domination, transforming the world outside the self. (hooks 1989, 22)

Not only does the conventional feminist battle cry question the white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy's system of arbitrary valuation, it also entirely redefines our conception of the political. The political no longer stands as distanced, and therefore free from accountability. The notion of the political as eminently personal takes its place. The political as personal is ultimately, then, a relationship inherently responsible and of which its participants are ultimately accountable and response-able.

White feminist theorist Nancy Love suggests a metaphorical shift parallel to that political shift from the public as political to the personal as political. She points to the shift from problematic metaphors of vision used to describe the world, which too easily lend distance, domination and normalization of that world by its "seers" to those of voice, which are relational, imply contextualization and emphasize interaction (Love, 85-86). The movement away from ocular metaphors (i.e., Plato's Eye of the Soul, Descartes' Eye of the Mind, and Locke's Eye of the Mind) has been philosophically fundamental as we move into the postmodern era. It is a trend that emphasizes a profound historical consciousness as well as a Foucaultian "insurrection of subjugated knowledge" (West 1985, 265).

The philosophical ground is thus fertile for and, at the same time, in desperate need of, a kind of introspective political discourse. African American women's autobiographies respond with a deeply historical, highly contextualized dialogue which confronts the contemporary intersection of race, class, gender and sexuality. The politics of autobiographies is a re-definition of theory which prioritizes experience and self-actualization, it is, as Cherríe Moraga terms, "a theory in the flesh":

A theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete where we grew up on, our sexual longings—fuse to create a politic born out of necessity. Here, we attempt to bridge the contradictions in our experience: we are the colored in a white feminist movement, we are the feminists among the people of our culture, we are often the lesbians among the straight. We do this bridging by naming our selves and by telling our stories in our own words. (Anzaldúa & Moraga, 23)

As it has been established, the distinction between cultural appreciation and cultural appropriation is difficult if not impossible to discern. Therefore, the foundations of revolutionary thought and identity must be self-determined. Self-determination must lie at the heart of a revolutionary politics of difference. As the foundations of domination and oppression lay bare and their fundamental

definitions questioned, the "I" is necessarily viewed as a *product*, a contextual, epistemological, empirical product. The autobiographical journey, a journey through and to self-determination, is a substantive ingredient in the mix of a personal politics. West explains the requisite vision for such a politics, his new cultural politics of difference:

The vision must be guided by profound, not provincial, conceptions of what it is to be a human being, an African human being in predominantly white, postindustrial, capitalist America, and of how human potential can be best realized in an overcoming of existing economic exploitation, racial and sexual oppression. Likewise, the analysis must be informed by the most sophisticated and cultivated, not self-serving and cathartic, tools available in order to grasp the complexity and specificity of the prevailing African American predicament on the local, regional, national and international levels. Last, the political praxis, though motivated by social vision and guided by keen analysis, must be grounded in moral convictions. Personal integrity is as important as correct analysis or desirable vision. (West 1993, 290)

It is important to ask by what exactly do we intend our politics to be defined? Confusion abounds in the dawn of this, our contradictory new age of progressive post-structuralism. There is, on the one hand, a renewed interest/appreciation of difference. And, on the other hand, there are the retro-active forces of rugged individualism, binary oppositional valuation and cultural appropriation.

The political consequence of Descartes' mind/body dualism has been a similar separation of state and soul, the political completely devoid of the personal. It results in a disembodied politics. Without a direct link from the public to the private sphere, it is also a politics lacking in any kind of moral and/or ethical continuity. Highly compartmentalized, it is a politics free from the constraints of responsibility. A politics without accountability, as has been proven and is continually being proved by our present condition, becomes a dangerous weapon wielded against the disenfranchised resulting in the overtly oppressive stultified

socio-political, psycho-sexual reality that is contemporary white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

The synthesis of mind and body, a recognition of the political as imminently personal, results in an holistic political framework. A society's politics are thus recognized as synonymous with its constituents. A fully embodied politics empowers those a politics of the mind seeks to disenfranchise. As the political debate is expanded to include private lives, there is, in effect, nowhere to hide from public accountability. There can be no realm of irresponsibility, no moral or ethical free zone. This kind of holism insures political integrity and accountability. It is a politics of community, of which one belongs, to which one is responsible, and from which one gains both support and critique.

Both hooks and West, in their collective project, Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life, speak of more localized communities—communities of faith. I wonder if it is indeed a reciprocal relationship between expansive societal communities and those core communities of comrades? If faith in the broader community provokes the assemblance of smaller, intensely supportive, highly specialized (in the sense of serving the needs of its specific members) faith fellowship? And, similarly, if faith in a localized community feeds its larger counterpart?

The impetus of faith can then be seen as an unwavering commitment to struggle and change along with a necessary hopefulness. While not essentially an optimistic world view, this kind of communalistic faith requires an anti-fatalistic stand against the malaise of hopelessness—a sense of positive continuity, of change to come, of wisdom to be found and justice to be served. While speaking primarily of sexuality as a particularly important site for political re-valuation, white lesbian feminist author Shane Phelan in her book, Identity Politics, writes: "The search for a home must stop short of narcissism if liberty is to exist for whole human beings,

just as liberty must stop short of social disintegration and individual alienation if we are to have a home" (Phelan, 58). Phelan's commentary is representative of an extensive political overhaul.

hooks characterizes the desire for her own pro-active population as her desire for

A community of comrades who are seeking to deepen our spiritual experience and our political solidarity, and others of us seeking primarily to deepen our understanding of Black life and Black political experience. (hooks & West 1991, 2)

A cultural politics of difference speaks both to and from this kind of community. The traditional liberal notion of rugged individualism—one for one and none for all—is superseded by a reliance on mutual interdependency. Bodies and minds come together as inseparable subjects, as coherent parts of a much greater whole. Responsibility thus lies not only with oneself but also with the entire community. West characterizes his new cultural politics of difference as

Neither an ahistorical Jacobin program that discards tradition and ushers in new self-righteous authoritarianisms, nor a guilt-ridden, leveling, anti-imperialist liberalism that celebrates token pluralism for smooth inclusion. Rather, it acknowledges the uphill struggle of fundamentally transforming highly objectified, rationalized and commodified societies and cultures in the name of individuality and democracy. (West 1993, 30)

It is, however, a different type of individuality, a kind of collective individuality in which personal agency is prized and self-determination is essential. It is an individuality which cherishes autonomy while simultaneously recognizing the vital importance of coalition. It is not a stagnant insular individuality, but a more dynamic pluralistic individuality as part and parcel of the art-full politics of African-American women's autobiographies. It is a far cry from the traditional liberal definition of rugged individuality currently in full affect in the dog-eat-dog world of our dehumanized capitalistic patriarchy.

Ironically, it is this notion of individuality-at-all-costs that lies at the base of cultural commodification, consumption, and cannibalism. As hooks suggests, the Other is signifier of difference, uniqueness. Appropriation is the desire to make that difference one's own, to be an other without the "stigma of *a priori* hatred and intentional poverty"* of Others. So you get all the good stuff that comes with being not-white—the uniqueness, the rich cultural heritage, the music, the books, etc.—without all of the shit—the poverty, the hatred, the struggle. Mutual interdependency, Rev. Bernice A. King's "compassionate communalism,"** must take the place of a balkanized view of individuality.

West extends the work of the community beyond support to include a "critical recovery and a critical revision of one's past, of one's tradition, of one's history, of one's heritage" (hooks & West, 2). Implicit in the idea of community is the corresponding notion of historical relevance; a socio-political communalism is highly contextualized. African-American women's autobiographical journeys are / do the work of a particular African-American community committed to change. West comments:

The literary objects upon which we focus are themselves cultural responses to specific crises in particular historical moments. Because these crises and moments must themselves be mediated through textual constructs, the literary objects we examine are never merely literary, and attempts to see them as such constitute a dehistoricizing and depoliticizing of literary texts that should be scrutinized for their ideological content, role and function. (West 1993, 42-3)

By publicly re-visioning her past and actualizing her present in relation to a collective past and present the author contextualizes her journey in relation to the broader community, thus transforming the private into the public, the personal into the political. hooks quotes black theologian James Cone's My Soul Looks Black:

* June Jordan. Technical Difficulties. 1992: 226.

** Bernice A. King - Colby College, Waterville, Maine, 3 March, 1994.

Testimony is an integral part of the Black religious tradition. It is the occasion where the believer stands before the community of faith in order to give account of the hope that is in him or her. Although testimony is unquestionably personal and thus primarily an individual story it is also a story accessible to others in the community of faith. Indeed the purpose of testimony is not only to strengthen an individual's faith but also to build a faith of the community. (hooks & West 1991, 1)

As testimony, bearing witness to both the past and present, the project of the autobiographical journey is twofold, immanently personal and incontrovertibly political.

"Home" is a frequently used metaphor when discussing issues of community. One's sense of home, of a safe space, an emotionally charged location of growth and change, is fundamental in a revolutionary struggle of opposition. Home is synonymous with "freedom, safety, and self-determination" (West 1993, intro, xv). Lorde's Zami and Walker's Our Mother's Gardens demonstrate that it is also a place not surprisingly frequented by African-American female autobiographers.

West offers "that sense of home that we are talking about and searching for is a place where we can find compassion, recognition of difference, of the importance of diversity, of our individual uniqueness" (hooks & West, 18). It is a place from which to come, supported, inspired, loved, and a place to go, excited, frustrated, and exhausted. It is a kind of energy / hope / faith recycling station without which the struggle would be, if not impossible, then certainly short-lived. It is not, however, a kind of politically correct utopia, free from the socio-political complexity of its members. bell hooks offers:

When we evoke a sense of home as a place where we can renew ourselves, where we can know love and the sweet communion of shared spirit, I think it's important for us to remember that this location of well-being cannot exist in a context of sexist domination, in a setting where children are the objects of parental domination and abuse. On a fundamental level, when we talk about home, we must speak about the need to transform the African-American home, so that

there, in that domestic space, we can experience the renewal of political commitment to the Black liberation struggle. (hooks & West 1991, 18)

This definition of home suggests the holistic and multivalent transformation requisite for an effective cultural politics of difference.

African-American women's autobiographies are exactly those "most sophisticated and cultivated," as well as those most revolutionary, tools of exploration and critique central to West's vision of a new cultural politics of difference. They are revolutionary primarily in their focus—the lives of black women. Situated in our contemporary context of Other-appropriation, abnegation, and annihilation, it is a radical political and supremely audacious move to upstage dominant white discourse, to concentrate on the lives and times of black women. Cultural critic Mary Helen Washington points out that

If there is a single distinguishing feature of the literature of black women—and this accounts for their lack of recognition—it is this: their literature is about black women, it takes the trouble to record the thoughts, words, feelings, and deeds of black women, experiences that make the realities of being black in america look very different from what men have written. (Washington, 35)

Black women's multifarious autobiographical discourse, as an exercise in personal historicization, prioritizes socio-political contextualization. The life stories of African-American women, by definition, address the complex intersection of the oppressive counter-life forces of our past and present condition: racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism. They offer a critique leveled on multiple fronts based on personal experiences. Insurgent black intellectual Manning Marable, during a recent trip to Bates College, pointed out that it is "no wonder that the work of black women writers is becoming so popular. It is because black women speak from and of a nexus of experiences—as black, as women, as disenfranchised—to which a wide variety of people can relate."*

* bell hooks and Manning Marable - Bates College, Lewiston, Maine, 2 March, 1994.

contextualization is a kind of universal personal politics of experience. Author, artist, revolutionary Angela Davis, in her book Women, Culture & Politics remarks:

Progressive art can assist people to learn not only about the objective forces at work in the society in which they live, but also about the intensely social character of their interior lives. Ultimately it can propel people toward social emancipation. (Davis 1989, 200)

A journey to the past, through the past via memory produces a unique amalgam, a kind of past and present chronicle, as the autobiographical "I" is continually being negotiated by and through the terms of memory and present condition. hooks quotes James Baldwin's Notes of a Native Son, when he says "'I think that the past is all that makes the present coherent and further that the past will remain horrible for as long as we refuse to accept it honestly'" (hooks & West 1991, 9). For a lot of African-American women writers the past is a horrible place, heavy with fear, pain and injustice. The re-visitation of the past is not necessarily a glorification of the past as much as it is a negotiation of the past and present, so that the former becomes a consciously constructive, not subtly destructive, component of one's self-determined present and future.

In Keeping Faith, West discusses the theoretical and actual limits the past imposes on the future, i.e., once an act is done it is done, it remains done, it cannot be taken away or changed. It is, in fact, a physical reality, a reality of irretrievable physical action and reaction with temporal constraints. It is also, however, a reality left open for metaphysical reform. Therefore, the limits the past may impose on the future, can be interrupted, and potentially obliterated, by the re-vision of the past by the present. Once again the personal is extended beyond insular particularities and into the realm of universal temporal actuality. In other words, re-memembering one's past is thus not merely a spiritual, emotional metamorphosis, but an actual metaphysical and existential reality. The point being the extension of the personal to the universal, from a change in feeling to a change in being.

In In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens, Walker speaks of memory not always in terms of past experiences, but often in terms of present re-formation. Re-formation of the past certainly, but most especially of the present. Memory becomes a conveyance, a tool by which to live one's life presently and by which to re-create/re-define one's past. She explains:

It is memory, more than anything else, that sours the sweetness of what has been accomplished in the South. What we cannot forget and will never forgive...I thought of this one day when we were debating whether to go for a swim and boat ride in the Ross Barnett Reservoir...But I remembered state troopers descending on us the first time we went swimming there,...and the horror they inspired in me...Not present fear but memory makes our visits there infrequent. For us, every day of our lives here had been a "test." (Walker, 166-7)

Autobiographies synthesize the interrelation of past and present realities by looking un-flinchingly at one's past as a means for present self-actualization. Cornel West asks "How can we as a people talk seriously about spirituality and political engagement in order to project a future, while simultaneously coming to terms with the past?" (hooks & West 1991, 79)

In one sense, autobiographies are a prerequisite for a Cornel Westian new politics of difference—"coming to terms with the past" so as to be able to "talk seriously about spirituality and political engagement in order to project a future." The art then is a cause of its effect, the theory. However, in another sense, the two projects—the autobiography and the politics, the art and the theory—are not only viable simultaneously, they are, in fact, one and the same thing. The balkanization caused by systematic schisms—the public and the private, the personal and the political—prove to be impossible with the alliance of art and theory.

We listen to those of us who speak, write, read, to those who have written, to those who may write. We write to those who write, read, speak, may write, and we try to hear the voiceless. We are participants in a many-voiced palaver of thought/feeling, image/language that moves us to *move*-toward a world where, like Alice Walker's revolutionary petunias, all of us can bloom.

– Barbara Christian
Reading Black, Reading Feminist

That is revolution. Not instant eradication of habits learned over a lifetime, but the abolition of everything that would foster those habits, and the creation instead of new structures that prevent them from returning.

– Alice Walker
In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens

Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, the first edition of her four-part autobiographical series, serves as testimony to her various communities of a past re-membered, of a Self *known*. Angelou's autobiographical journey is an attempt to reunite the parts of her whole Self, balkanized for the sake of survival. Alice Walker asks, "for who among us does not wish to be seen completely? And loved in our entirety?" (Walker 1993, 19). Maya Angelou literally re-members her past as a means to the end of *knowing* her present Self.

The almost antithetical communities of big-city California and St. Louis, contrasted with the tiny Southern town of Stamps, Arkansas inform the complex realities of Angelou and her beloved brother, Bailey, as they are shuttled from their estranged parents to their resolute grandmother and back and forth and back again. Angelou's project is to make sense of these disparate realities, to make connections, binding ties between her Self and her communities.

George E. Kent, in his critical essay, "Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Black Autobiographical Tradition," contends that "the major function of the imagination is to retain a vigorous dialectic between self and society, between the intransigent world and the aspiring self" (Kent, 170). Angelou's autobiographical imagination, her testimony to herself and her community, forms a segue between her particular and the universal, her Self and society.

Her autobiographical journey is an anti-foundationalist project, as well as a kind of conduit between the personal and political aspects of her life. Angelou's journey is anti-foundationalist to the extent that she bridges what Elizabeth Fox-Genovese calls "the gap between black women and the dominant (white) model of womanhood" with an aesthetic of her own black womanhood. Her aesthetic is contrary to that foundation constructed by the white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy which labels white beautiful / desirable and black neither beautiful nor desirable. It is a re-definition in which she is engaged, and thus, even the most fundamental terms—truth, closure, beauty, desire, for example—can not be taken for granted. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is a re-generation of sorts, an imaging of Angelou's past and present Self, the creation of her own aesthetic that is undeniably political. Cornel West states that

Aesthetics have substantial political consequences. How one views oneself as beautiful or not beautiful or desirable or not desirable has deep consequences in terms of one's feelings of self-worth and one's capacity to be a political agent. (hooks & West 1991, 117)

Angelou begins her story with the wistful dream of a "too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair, broad feet and a space between her teeth that would hold a number-two pencil" to be white. Her dream is reminiscent of Pecola Breedlove's in Morrison's, *The Bluest Eye* (Angelou 1969, 2).^{*} Angelou re-visions this construction

^{*} There is an interesting dialogue across space, time and even genre between Angelou's *Caged Bird* and Morrison's *Bluest Eye* to which I will soon return.

of whiteness as desirable—which is the foundation of the dominant white aesthetic—throughout her autobiographical journey. She makes room for her Self as both beautiful and desirable as her self-esteem is strengthened both by and for her newly constructed aesthetic. In this way, her project is more an anti-white malestream foundation anti-foundationalism. This means that Angelou holds as true her own aesthetic of black womanhood, her re-creation of her Self is a foundation of her philosophy of becoming. However, she is very much against balkanization, and anti-rugged individualism, two solid foundations of the white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

Angelou further intensifies her anti-foundationalist project by engaging in the demystification of the dominant white malestream. Through her interactions with and support from her multifarious communities—her grandma and Uncle Willie, Stamps' religious community, her mother, grandmother, grandfather, uncles, and their fast-paced community at Louie's—Angelou's assertion of Self demystifies the dangerous and painful bi-polar construction of white as good, black as bad. West defines demystification as a process which

Tries to keep track of the complex dynamics of institutional and other related power structures in order to disclose options and alternatives for transformative praxis; it also attempts to grasp the way in which representational strategies are creative responses to novel circumstances and conditions. (West 1993, 23)

Maya Angelou deconstructs the aesthetic foundation of the oppressive super-structure by offering a black female-centered alternative while she continues to subvert and so demystify capitalistic patriarchal truths of rugged individualism through her inter-dependence with her various communities. Thus, Angelou is fully engaged in an anti-foundationalist deconstructionist demystification project of the most radical sort. From start to finish, hers is a "representational strategy" of valuing what has been devalued, of re-naming and re-defining what has been mis-

named and unsuitably defined, of emphatically voicing what has been forcibly silenced.

Her autobiography, like Gwendolyn Brooks' Report from Part One, is a kind of survivor's account from the battleground that is the white supremacist capitalist patriarchal society. She employs a radically historicist testimony and her various communities as her weapons against the dominant paradigm and in favor of her own "self-conscious humanhood."

The Black female is assaulted in her tender years by all those common forces of nature at the same time that she is caught in the tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and Black lack of power. The fact that the adult American Negro female emerges a formidable character is often met with amazement, distaste and even belligerence. It is seldom accepted as an inevitable outcome of the struggle won by survivors and deserves respect if not enthusiastic acceptance. (Angelou 1969, 231)

Angelou moves, from the time of her childhood to her young adulthood, along a particularly poignant path from voice to silence, and then, back, into voice and action. Plagued by overwhelming guilt after her mother's lover and her rapist, Mr. Freeman, is murdered by her own over-protective uncles, Angelou silences her active eight-year old tongue.

The only thing I could do was stop talking to people...Just my breath, carrying my words out, might poison people and they'd curl up and die like the black fat slugs that only pretended.

I had to stop talking.

I discovered that to achieve perfect personal silence all I had to do was to attach myself leechlike to sound. I began to listen to everything. I probably hoped that after I had heard all the sounds, really heard them and packed them down, deep in my ears, the world would be quiet around me. (Angelou 1969, 73)

Hers is a silence mandated by fear and guilt as young Angelou, following her rape, falls prey to self-hate and self-blame. Constructing her own insular world of books and Bailey, little Maya retreats, speaking as little as possible and reading with a kind of voracious insatiability. She finds, in her books, a fantastic shelter from the

surrounding storm of racism and sexual abuse. It is a place for Angelou to prepare her totality before she presents it. It becomes a bridge from a time of gathering information, secreting her Self to a time and place where she can express her Self in its entirety. Black feminist critic Barbara Christian points to the similar creative endeavors of African-American women writers as a location of personal and political Self synthesis: "It is primarily in expressions of herself that she could be her totality. And a result of that expression is also the articulation of the interconnectedness of race, sex, and class as a philosophical basis for the pattern of domination and hierarchy in this society" (Christian 1985, 162).

Angelou's silence is inspired by her physical and more perseverent psychic wounds. However, like Njeri's sense of closure, Angelou's is a non-conventional construction of silence. She re-shapes the definition of silence, born of white feminist discourse, that depicts silence as stultifying, female silence as a means of male control, silence as a kind of victimized death. Her silent response to sexual abuse, while shutting down her voice, simultaneously amplifies her hearing—"I began to listen to everything." Silence, for her, is not a life-sentence of ineffectiveness. Angelou refuses to be victimized twice. A victim of sexual assault, she refuses to be a life-long victim of patriarchal domination. She molds her scars of abuse into what Alice Walker calls "warrior marks." She explains the importance of this kind of transformation in her newest book, a collaboration with Pratibha Parmar, Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women: "Those of us who are maimed can tell you it is possible to go on. To flourish. To grow. To love and be loved, which is the most important thing. To feel pleasure and to know joy" (Parmar & Walker 1993, 19).

Walker tells the story of her injured eye, shot out by a pellet gun at the end of her brother's arm. The incident is dismissed as an "accident" by her parents, who gave her brothers their guns. Walker is the victim of a patriarchal parlance which

gives boys guns and girls dolls with which to defend themselves. It is a system to which both her parents and her brothers subscribe, and a system of which she becomes, in their eyes, an inevitable victim of an inevitable cycle—"my head was down, my brothers still had their guns...more powerful guns...their sons had guns."

As part of her autobiographical journey, Walker attempts to re-visit her injured Self through her mother and sister's recollections:

Years later, in the throes of a mid-life crisis, I ask my mother and sister whether I changed after the 'accident.' 'No,' they say, puzzled. 'What do you mean?' *What do I mean? Did I imagine the anguish of never looking up?* (Walker 1983, 364)

Walker's physical scar heals, of course. It is the complex web of political causes and psycho-spiritual consequences that is the focus of her healing. In Warrior Marks, Walker parallels her own "patriarchal wound" to that of the many girls and young women in various African countries who have been and continue to be circumcised. It is a vicious personal wound with enormous political consequences. She speaks of these wounds, however, not primarily in terms of health-related risks, but in terms of psychic transfiguration. Walker, like Angelou, parlays her "patriarchal wound." She gains strength from both her physical and psychic scars by converting them into warrior marks:

The fact that I learned to rebalance, to continue, to go on with my life, without the support of my parents' protection and thoughtfulness, means I have by now turned my wound into a warrior mark—for I have had to live with it and to transform myself, from someone nearly devastated by childhood suffering, into someone who loves life and knows pleasure and joy in spite of it. It is true I am marked forever, like the woman who is robbed of her clitoris, but it is not, as it once was, the mark of a victim. What the woman warrior learns if she is injured as a child, before she can even comprehend that there is a war going on against her, is that you can fight back, even after you are injured. Your wound itself can be your guide. (Parmar & Walker 1993, 18)

Toni Morrison tells a similar story of indelible patriarchal scars and a little girl's creative, utilitarian response in her first novel, The Bluest Eye. In the novel, Pecola Breedlove turns to her impossible dream of blue eyes, her wish for whiteness, as a refuge from her family's alienation from their community, and the recurring sexual abuse of her father. She creates for herself a safe haven in her imagination, she protects herself with her madness. While undeniably a tragic story of a little girl's mental and physical abuse, Pecola, like Angelou and Walker, transforms the scars of violation into a figurative location of resistance, and a defense against further victimization. In her critique of Morrison's first novel, bell hooks comments:

Morrison was trying to delineate, for a country which has historically discarded the experience of Black females, the processes and experiences which construct and shape Black women's identities. She shows fictively ways we make it despite the oppressive conditions of poverty and racial / sexual subordination but she also shows the wounds—the scars we carry into adulthood. (hooks & West 1991, 71)

Both the scars and the survival are fundamental factors, interdependent variables, which shape black women's identities. Angelou, Walker and Pecola fashion tools of resistance from their "patriarchal wounds." They make helps out of hindrances and Self-definitions out of Self-erasures. It is a process of synthesizing Selves after mental and physical fragmentation, the result of patriarchal victimization, of "making it despite the oppressive conditions of poverty and racial / sexual subordination." Angelou, Walker and Pecola thus stand not only as survivors, but as creative agents of change.

Carolyn Heilbrun, in her book, Writing a Woman's Life, points to the opposing *lack* of agency in white women's autobiographies as their fundamental flaw. Heilbrun suggests African-American women's autobiographies as her successful models of self-determinism, of autobiographical agency. She quotes Morrison when she says "it's not so much that women write differently from men,

but that black women write differently from white women" (Heilbrun, 62). She points to Fox-Genovese's "gap between black women and the dominant [white] model of womanhood" as her explanation for this difference (Heilbrun, 62). The reader to wonder if Heilbrun is engaged in a project based on biological determinism. Does she subscribe to some notion of essential black femaleness that inherently enables black women writers to negotiate the gap between their Selves and the dominant white model of womanhood?

I wonder if black women's autobiographical agency contrasted to white women autobiographers' lack thereof is fundamentally a function of difference? If black women re-figure their position as different, in the white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy, so as to make the struggle on a representational level for social acceptance irrelevant? In Zami, Audre Lorde relates her acceptance of her own difference as both a relief and a further challenge to her humanity:

In a paradoxical sense, once I accepted my position as different from the larger society as well as from any single sub-society—Black or gay—I felt I didn't have to try so hard. To be accepted. To look femme. To be straight. To look straight. To be proper. To look "nice." To be liked. To be loved. To be approved. What I didn't realize was how much harder I had to try merely to stay alive, or rather, to stay human. How much stronger a person I became in that trying. (Lorde, 1982, 181)

Do black women writers re-structure their position of difference so as to create a certain amount of liberty of definition when it comes to representational strategies like autobiographies? As "outsiders-within" do African-American women play by different rules, are they judged by different standards? Or, more plausibly, do black women writers, as true survivors of racist and patriarchal domination throw off those definitional chains that bind, creating new definitions and standards by which to be judged?

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings exemplifies this kind of re-creation, this kind of fundamental transfiguration. Angelou's herstory deconstructs patriarchal

notions of victimization *and* white feminist notions of silence. She is victimized but once, and her scars of domination become warrior marks. She proves true what Itabari Njeri says in her autobiography, "the pen is mightier than the penis" (Njeri, 194).

None of this is to say that silence is a preferable alternative to voice or that warrior marks should actively be sought. I do not subscribe to the typical locker room slogan: "no pain, no gain." If, however, one must experience pain—patriarchal or otherwise—Angelou, Pecola and Walker provide exceptional examples of the valuable transformation of physical and psychic pain into a source of strength. Little Maya, finally ready to transform her silence into voice and action, is coaxed from her word-less refuge by Mrs. Bertha Flowers who shares her love of books but insists upon the profound importance of language:

'Now no one is going to make you talk—possibly no one can. But bear in mind, language is man's way of communicating with his fellow man and it is language alone which separates him from the lower animals.' That was a totally new idea to me, and I would need time to think about it... 'Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shade of deeper meaning.' (Angelou 1969, 82)

The same may be said concerning contemporary theoretical discourse: "It takes the human voice to infuse (words) with the shade of deeper meaning." Autobiographical discourse is the essential "human voice" of abstract theory. It is the thickening agent that puts a face with the philosophy, an experience with the discourse. Angelou's art takes the theory of a cultural politics of difference out of the realm of insignificance, making it consequential: a meaning-*full* pragmatic politics of ongoing experience.

The two components—art and politics—become inextricable parts of the whole that is cultural critique. In an interview with Claudia Tate, Audre Lorde maintains:

'The question of social protest and art is inseparable for me. I can't say it is an either-or proposition. Art for art's sake doesn't really exist for

me. What I saw was wrong, and I had to speak up. I loved poetry and I loved words. But what was beautiful had to serve the purpose of changing my life, or I would have died. If I cannot air this pain and alter it, I will surely die of it.' (Tate, 108)

An urgent personalization of politics with its partner and similarly urgent politicization of art constitute the impetus of the highly contextualized art-full politics of African-American women's autobiographies.

Mrs. Flowers, a member of the Stamps community, acts, for Maya, as a lifeline of sorts, transforming the depths of silent self-hatred into the light of self-realization. The most important element of Mrs. Flowers' attention, for Angelou, was the very attention itself:

I was liked, and what a difference it made. I was respected not as Mrs. Henderson's grandchild or Bailey's sister but for just being Marguerite Johnson. Childhood's logic never asks to be proved (all conclusions are absolute). I didn't question why Mrs. Flowers had singled me out for attention, nor did it occur to me that Momma might have asked her to give me a little talking to. All I cared about was that she had made tea cookies for *me* and read to *me* from her favorite book. It was enough to prove that she liked me. (Angelou 1969, 85)

The power of recognition, the identification of Maya's independent and viable humanity, was, for her, a new, truly unique, and profoundly moving experience. Mrs. Flowers acknowledges Angelou's independence, an independence that is not a matter of individualism per se, but is a matter of positive Self-definition. Maya is no longer Not Bailey or Not Momma, but Maya. For African-American women, the struggle for positive definition, definition in relation only to their Selves—not Not white or Not black men—is essential in the pursuit of "self-conscious humanhood."

Mrs. Flowers fosters Maya's transformation of silence into language and action, her attainment of "self-conscious humanhood" which, for African-American women, is the audacious attempt, in West's words:

To believe truly one is fully human and to believe truly that whites can accept one's black humanity. This utopian endeavor indeed is crippled by black self-hatred and white contempt, yet the underlying fire that

sustains it is not extinguished by them. Rather this fire is fueled by the dogged fortitude of ordinary black folk who decide that if they cannot be truly free, they can, at least, be fully themselves. (West 1993, 61)

The attainment of "self-conscious humanhood" is a path not easily trod alone. It is one whose success, although not its possibility, is contingent upon community. Angelou moves among a variety of different communities who greet her silence with manifold responses. Her relatives in St. Louis viewed her silence as "impudent sullenness" as compared to the Stamps community where "the resignation of its inhabitants encouraged me to relax. They showed me a contentment based on the belief that nothing more was coming to them, although a great deal more was due. Their decision to be satisfied with life's inequities was a lesson for me" (Angelou 1969, 74).

Neither community offers an ideal solution to Angelou's metaphysical dilemma—how to regain her voice stolen by Mr. Freeman and the more powerful patriarchal thieves, guilt and fear. However, it is the continuous support of both groups that foster Maya's struggle, allowing her a safe psychic location from which to fight, strengthened by love, and a place to return, exhausted and in need of revitalization. She offers:

To be left alone on the tightrope of youthful unknowing is to experience the excruciating beauty of full freedom and the threat of eternal indecision. Few, if any, survive their teens. Most surrender to the vague but murderous pressure of adult conformity. It becomes easier to die and avoid conflicts than to maintain a constant battle with the superior forces of maturity. (Angelou 1969, 231)

Childhood communities are particularly politically important as they form the foundation for Self in relation to society. Angelou's vacillation between her various communities proves to be both confusing and enlightening. Her experience exemplifies the importance of fluidity—fluidity of Self and community. Essayist, academic and revolutionary Angela Davis comments on the need of changing and change-able communities in our changing and ultimately change-able times:

I'm interested in communities that aren't static in any way...We have to find ways of coming together in a different way. I'm not suggesting that we do not anchor ourselves in our communities. But I think, to use a metaphor, the rope attached to that anchor should be large enough to allow us to move into other communities. (Davis 1992)

Angelou's autobiographical journey is a kind of work-in-progress, as she lives a life perpetually in-progress. She embarks on a radically creative journey of representation, re-visioning, re-creating an aesthetics of her own black womanhood. bell hooks, in an early collection of essays, Talking Back: Thinking Feminist. Thinking Black states that "oppressed people resist by identifying themselves as subjects, by defining their reality, by shaping their new identity, naming their history, telling their story" (hooks 1989, 43).

Angelou's autobiographical journey—like Lorde's, like Walker's, like Njeri's—is an undeniably political endeavor of Self synthesis as she travels back and forth, to and through the intersection of racism, sexism, and classism. African-American women autobiographers are in a constant dialogue across time and space, effecting an abiding sense of moral continuity and interconnectedness—benchmarks of a Cornel Westian new cultural politics of difference and a unique and profoundly significant literary tradition. It is at the intersection, integration and overlapping of the two—art and politics—that our discussion takes place. Toni Morrison describes her own struggle of integration as the author both of books and of her life. She speaks of the integration of Self and society, of condition and discourse:

My work requires me to think how free I can be as an African-American woman writer in my genderized, sexualized, wholly racialized world. To think about (and wrestle with) the full implications of my situation leads me to consider what happens when other writers work in a highly and historically racialized society. For them, as for me, imagining is not merely looking or looking at; nor is it taking oneself intact into the other. It is, for the purposes of work, *becoming*. (Morrison 1993, 4)

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Participating in the Senior Scholars' Program has been one of the most significant, deeply educational experiences of my Colby College career. While I take issue with various aspects of the selection process, I have been continually overwhelmed by the incredible opportunity to work so closely with such amazing professors. So much so that I think another thank you is necessary.

I would like to thank Professor Dan Cohen for his persistence. Without him, my proposal would never have even been passed.

I would like to thank Professor Jean Sanborn for her boundless support and unique insights.

Most especially, I would like to thank Professor Cedric Bryant. Professor Bryant, not surprisingly, proved to be an invaluable resource and an inspirational teacher. More importantly to me, however, as the days, weeks, and months wore on, he also became my friend.

And, as always, I need to thank Karen Oh and Eric Miles for both their input and their output. If I have learned anything this year, it is that psycho-spiritual energy is a precious commodity. Our tripartite friendship is a kind of recycling station for energy renewal and emotional, intellectual, and spiritual fulfillment. In Toni Morrison's Beloved, Sixo describes his love for Thirty-Mile Woman, he says "She is a friend of mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order. It's good, you know, when you got a woman who is a friend of your mind." I am lucky, no, blessed to have two friends of mind. No matter where we are geographically, together we have a home.