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Transgressive Black Female Selfhood

Abstract

By using textual examples from three autobiographies written by African American women in different periods of U.S. history, this paper argues that two distinct features mark black female autobiographical selfhood. One is its being a “selfhood-in-relation” that stands in stark opposition to “a lonely hero” subjects created by both black and white male American autobiographers. And the other is the political nature of African American autobiography as a genre which leads the authors to intense consideration of their reading public in the process of creating their autobiographical selves. The discussed texts include Harriet Jacobs’s (or Linda Brent’s) *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (1861), Zora Neale Hurston’s *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942) and Angela Davis’s *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (1974).

Key words

African American autobiography; black feminism; selfhood-in-relation; slave narratives; political autobiography

Contemporary theory of autobiography revolves around two issues – the self and the truth. In agreement with this, Kenneth Mostern describes autobiography theory as having two main “distributive axes” – subjectivity and referentiality ax (1999: 28). The former refers to “the position of the speaking subject [...] which narrates the autobiographical text” and the latter points to the “question of whether autobiography is to be understood as representing, or as non-representational with regard to, a real world external to the text” (1999: 28). In this paper, for space reasons, I focus solely on the subjectivity ax and try to demonstrate in what ways African American autobiographies written by female authors occupy a distinct position within the genre of American autobiography when it comes to their treatment of selfhood. As particular samples of black women’s life writing

that I use to demonstrate my arguments, I have chosen the following three works: Harriet Jacobs's (or Linda Brent's) *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (1861), Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942) and Angela Davis's *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (1974).

The claim of the "I" of black American autobiographies actually standing for "we" and signifying the whole of this minority's community forms the very core of African American autobiography theory. As early as 1974, Stephen Butterfield in his seminal work *Black Autobiography in America* wrote that "black writers offer a model of the self which is different from white models" (1974: 2). "In black autobiography," Butterfield argues, "the unity of the personal and the mass voice remains a dominant tradition" (1974: 3). Black feminist autobiography theory has taken the issue in question even further. Scholars like Valerie Smith, Jean Fagan Yellin and Yvonne Johnson have argued not only that the "I" in black women's autobiography stands for "we" – meaning we, black women and/or we, black people. They have also stated that autobiographies by African American women craft the black female selfhood as collective, as what is called "selfhood-in-relation."

Harriet Jacobs's autobiographical subject has often been described as a prototype of this self-in-relation. The whole of the *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* focuses not on the "I" so typical of other, especially male, slave narratives, but on "they" – Jacobs's relatives, friends and acquaintances. With her courage, her immaculate work ethic, her absolute moral integrity and her unwavering piety, Jacobs's grandmother, Aunt Marthy, figures as an important role model in Jacobs's life and an ideal Jacobs feels she should aspire to. After the death of Jacobs's mother (and father), the grandmother fulfills the role of a surrogate parent to Jacobs. Jacobs describes her as a "remarkable woman in many respects" (1987 [1861]: 341) and calls her "the faithful old friend of my entire life" (1987 [1861]: 416). Jacobs also pays tribute to the character of Sally, to her advisor, uncle Phillip, and her friend Peter. Jacobs is not alone during her escape from the South – another black woman and a white captain accompany her. Likewise, Jacobs gives thanks to sympathetic white people who helped her on her way towards freedom.

Despite the amount of help that Jacobs admits to having obtained while trying to break free from slavery, she should not be perceived merely as a passive receiver of other people's benevolence. On the contrary, using her determination, intelligence and ingenuity she *acts* on behalf of her own and her children's destiny. Jacobs does not allow her confinement in her grandmother's garret to entirely rob her of agency. As Yellin comments: "From her cramped hiding place, she manipulates the sale of her children to their father, arranges for her daughter to be taken north, tricks her master into believing that she has left the South and, quite literally directs a performance in which Dr. Flint plays the fool while she watches, unseen" (2000: xxx).

Like Jacobs, Hurston begins the story of her life by focusing on others, rather than herself. The first two chapters of *Dust Tracks* are named "My Birthplace"

and “My Folks” and place the autobiographer first in a wider historical context of her home community – Eatonville, Florida – and then into a narrower context of her family tree. Hurston perceives her life as a result of, what she calls, “the material that went to make me” and considers it important that the reader knows “something about the time and place where I came from, in order that you may interpret the incidents and directions of my life” (1942: 561).

Even if Hurston did not spend her whole life in Eatonville, its culture and its communal feeling left their permanent imprint on her artistic sensibility. This can be best appreciated in the stylistic make-up of the first half of the book. Here, using free indirect discourse, Hurston “constantly covers up her personal voice with the voice of the community” (Raynaud, 1992: 112). She thus, according to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “reaffirms the link that binds her to communal lore” (qtd. in Rodríguez, 1998: 243), creating a work that Françoise Lionnet appropriately terms “autoethnography” (1993: 114). The effect Hurston achieves through this stylistic approach is that of presenting “these early episodes through the eyes, the voices, the dialect of the men and the few women sitting on the porch of the Eatonville store” (Raynaud, 1992: 113). The community is present not only in the dialect of Eatonville inhabitants, but also in Hurston’s employment elsewhere in the text of African American idioms and folklore in general (descriptions of black cultural customs, such as religious revivals, inclusion of folk tales and so on).

In a more traditional sense of a “self-in-relation,” Hurston talks about the importance of women in her life, especially her mother. *Dust Tracks* (and in a way, the whole of Hurston’s literary career) can be looked upon as Hurston’s confirmation and celebration of her mother’s influence on her personality. “Hurston’s autobiographical text,” Sidonie Smith argues, “dramatizes the act of remembering the mother” (1993: 116). Not allowing the racism and sexism of American society to thwart the spontaneity of her daughter’s outlook on life, Hurston’s mother defends her “lies” (the stories Hurston makes up) and her “tendency [...] to stand and give battle” (Hurston, 1942: 572). Hurston’s sense of her gender identity clearly comes from her mother’s example (McKay, 1988: 184).

Hurston, further, devotes an entire chapter of her autobiography to two women friends – Fannie Hurst and Ethel Waters. Unlike love, friendship in *Dust Tracks* is presented as an “empowering force” (Lionnet, 1993: 134). In Hurston’s own phrasing: “It seems to me that trying to live without friends, is like milking a bear to get cream for your morning coffee. It is a whole lot of trouble, and then not worth much after you get it” (1942: 742). Hurston’s depiction of her friendship with Waters – “I am her friend, and her tongue is in my mouth” – strongly reminds one of the female bonding between Janie and Phoebe in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) (1942: 739). If it is a feeling of intimacy that characterizes Hurston’s relationship with Waters, shared eccentricity seems to be her link with Hurst (Brantley, 1993: 206). In addition to these “two women in particular,” Hurston writes affectionately about Big Sweet, a remarkable woman and Hurston’s “bodyguard” during her research in Polk County (1942: 734). Hurston also acknowledges the help provided her by a poor white woman who finds her

a job with Miss M——, Miss M—— herself who treats her well, the acting troupe that offers her “a warm fire [...] [and] the feel of peace,” the Hughes family and finally, her anthropology professor, Franz Boas (1942: 665).

And yet, despite all the human networks that Hurston talks about in her life story, critics have described her persona as “Melvillian isolato” (Rayson, 1973: 42) and have found in *Dust Tracks* a “radical individualistic strain” (Brantley, 1993: 187). These observations, however, have less to do with the web of relations that Hurston developed and cherished over the course of her life and more with some of her comments on race problematic, most of which she places in the chapter called “My People, My People.” In this chapter, Hurston denies the reality of the terms, such as race pride, race prejudice, race man, race solidarity and race consciousness, and expresses her preference for individual action and assessment of people on an individual basis. As she puts it: “Light came to me when I realized that I did not have to consider any racial group as a whole. God made them duck by duck and that was the only way I could see them” (1942: 731). It is not difficult to see why assertions like this brought Hurston under the label of an assimilationist. In the period when African Americans were still exposed to numerous manifestations of American racism and black writers were expected to produce works of protest, Hurston’s request to be assessed more generally as a human being and a writer, rather than specifically as a black female writer in racist America, could have been perceived as considerably daring.¹ As Gates, Jr. has suggested, Hurston was ahead of her time by censoring “all that her readership could draw upon to pigeonhole or define her life as a synecdoche of ‘the race problem’” (1985: 43). Among the autobiographies explored here, Hurston’s is perhaps the only one that emphasizes (in such a degree) the uniqueness, rather than the representativeness, of the autobiographer’s life in America.

In contrast to Hurston’s goals, the aim of Davis’s autobiography is to downplay her uniqueness as much as possible. In reality, Davis was an exceptional (and privileged) black woman. “Very few black females at the time,” bell hooks argues, “had gone to radical high schools where they learned about socialism or traveled to Europe and studied at the Sorbonne” (1992: 54). Yet, in the preface to her autobiography Davis asserts: “The forces that have made my life what it is are the very same forces that have shaped and misshaped the lives of millions of my people,” and later: “The one extraordinary event of my life had nothing to do with me as an individual – with a little twist of history, another sister or brother could have easily become the political prisoner.” As a Communist and a revolutionary, Davis rejects uniqueness and individualism as parts of the “decadent capitalist culture” (Jackson, qtd. in Perkins, 2000: 8) and is “concerned that she not be viewed in isolation from the mass struggle which [...] gives her speech legitimacy” (Perkins, 2000: 8).

All of this naturally implies that Davis’s autobiography, like female slave narratives, tries to “evince a relational understanding of self” and emphasizes the ethic of mutuality (Perkins, 2000: 7). Davis dedicates her life story to her family, her comrades and all the “sisters and brothers” who fight against “racism and

class injustice.” Davis’s consistent use of the kinship terms *brother* and *sister* to denote other African Americans suggests her perception of the black community as a large family whose ties are made not necessarily of blood, but of shared discrimination and the (ideally) common struggle against it.

Davis makes sure to acknowledge her, predominantly female, ancestors’ role in the development of her (radical) political subjectivity. It is from her grandmother that Davis learns about slavery. Remembering her grandmother, Davis writes: “She was born only a few years after the Emancipation Proclamation, and her parents had been slaves themselves. She did not want us to forget that” (1974: 81). Saying so, Davis stresses the importance for the African American community of remembering the past, so that present times can be better understood and future life improved. In a vein similar to Jacobs, Davis pays tribute to her grandmother who, as she says, “had always been a symbol of strength, of age, wisdom and suffering” (1974: 81). Davis’s mother was an activist herself – “she had become involved, as a college student, in anti-racist movements” – and it is through her influence that Davis starts to believe in “a future world of harmony and equality” achieved through political action (1974: 79). Rather than teaching her hate for whites, Davis’s mother trains her to see them “in terms of their [positive] potential” (1974: 79). Although Davis recognizes her mother’s part in the formation of her oppositional consciousness, she names another woman – Charlene Mitchell – as her true political mother who is responsible for Davis’s final decision to join the Communist Party. Similarly, Margaret Burnham, Davis’s attorney and close friend, can be looked upon as Davis’s “legal” mother. She nurtures Davis in a maternal sense; her daily visits are described as “oases, refreshing reentries into humanity” (1974: 37). As a lawyer, she also protects Davis in a legal sense, offering her advice and participating in the preparation of her trials.

Davis also vocalizes her respect and admiration for Maître Archimede (who helps Davis and her group get out of Guadeloupe on their trip home from Cuba) when she states: “If I had surrendered to my desires, I would have remained on this island to learn from this woman” (1974: 214). Davis further acknowledges the strength that solidarity with other political prisoners gives her and the perseverance with which the masses demonstrating outside her prison(s) endow her. It is impossible to recapitulate the names of all the people to whom Davis expresses thankfulness in her autobiography – the roll call is so extensive. Perhaps Davis’s sister Fania should be added, Jon and George Jackson and female jurors at her trial in California. Davis’s thought that some of the books she comes across in the prison library have been read by other Communist women imprisoned during the McCarthy era establishes her connection with her female political ancestors. She writes: “I felt honored to be following in the tradition of some of this country’s most outstanding heroines: Communist women leaders, especially the black Communist Claudia Jones” (1974: 52). Her numerous allusions to slave narratives, on the other hand, affirm her link with her literary predecessors.

The second issue that needs to be mentioned in relation to the subjectivity of black female autobiographies is autobiographers’ consideration of their reading

public while they are crafting their autobiographical personae. This points, above all, to the political nature of black autobiographical subjectivity, be it male or female. Namely, the reason why numerous black autobiographers feel the selves they create in their life stories have to be acceptable to their readers is their belief in the autobiography's potential to serve as a tool improving the socioeconomic position of American blacks in the U.S. society.

One of the central topics around which Jacobs's *Incidents* revolves is that of the double jeopardy that black slave women fall prey to. In order to evade her master's obsessive sexual advances and eventual rape, Jacobs becomes a lover of a white man, Mr. Sands. She presumes this act will so infuriate her owner, Dr. Flint, that he will immediately sell her to Mr. Sands from whom it would be easier to obtain her freedom. Even if she claims: "I knew what I did, and I did it with deliberate calculation," she, in retrospect, calls her decision to start an affair with Mr. Sands "a plunge into the abyss" (1987 [1861]: 384). In order to understand the autobiographer's supposed regret over something she seems to have done with an unquestioned conviction, it is necessary to place both Jacobs and her narrative within the ideology of "true womanhood" which was a leading social construct of Jacobs's age. Jacobs is conscious of the fact that her decision to get involved in an extramarital and interracial relationship with Sands will be denounced by her white women readers (to whom *Incidents* is addressed) as an act seriously trespassing the standards of "true womanhood." Not only does Jacobs violate the purity part of the "true womanhood" definition; she likewise breaches its submissiveness element. That is why, to make her actions more acceptable to the reading public, she veils her autobiographical subject in a discourse of guilt and shame.

Yet, ultimately, Jacobs rejects representing herself as nothing more than a fallen woman and offers her readers a revolutionary perspective on her position. *Incidents*, as a result, becomes "a powerful expression of the often entwined nineteenth-century reform causes of abolitionism and feminism" (Fleischner, 1996: 61). Jacobs claims that, due to the peculiarity of her experience, "the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others" (1987 [1861]: 386). "The condition of a slave," she argues, "confuses all principles of morality, and, in fact, renders the practice of them impossible" (385). Saying so, Jacobs challenges "an ideology that would condemn her as immoral [and unfeminine]" (Carby, 1987: 58). In effect, she asserts that "purity of mind [and body] is unavailable to virtuous black women. She discredits the image of the sexualized [and thus impure] black woman by demonstrating that it was the licentious habits of white men that forced her into 'premature knowledge'" (Mercer, 2001: 4) "of the evil ways of the world" (Jacobs, 1987 [1861]: 384). The narrator of *Incidents*, according to Johnson, "asks for a new definition of the true woman" (1998: 27).

Another revolutionary step that Jacobs takes in her narrative is that of blurring her period's (much treasured) social boundaries between the private and the public spheres and extending the relatively intimate sphere of parenthood into the realm of politics. Reading *Incidents* in the context of the nineteenth-century

American sentimental fiction, such as Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Claudia Tate offers an interesting interpretation of maternal discourse employed by Jacobs as a "particularly black and female politicization of domestic ideology" (1992: 26). In Tate's view, "Jacobs depicted freedom not simply as an escape from the political condition of slavery but as the gaining of access to the social institutions of motherhood, family, and home" (1992: 32). Just like Stowe, Jacobs points to the inextricable connection between the public and the private which were normally thought of as absolutely separate.²

In the case of *Dust Tracks*, the autobiographer's considerations about her reading audience can be detected best in those passages where Hurston comments on the race situation in the United States. Hurston's life story has been accused of advocating assimilationism, an observation that eventually won it the attribute of "a discomfiting book" (Hemenway, 1977: 276). To prove their point, scholars have often referred to Hurston's "politically incorrect" comments on African Americans in the chapter "My People, My People!" (See above) and in the barbershop episode. The latter is one of the most racially charged incidents in the book and is connected with Hurston's job as a manicurist. One day she passively observes a black man thrown out of the store for requiring to be provided services on the same basis as white customers. Hurston admits that, despite being black herself, she wanted the man to be thrown out, because he threatened her business. Although she perceives the idealism of racial solidarity and social equality as beautiful, she considers the rational reaction reflecting the employees' self-interest instinctive and "human-like" and thus pardonable (1942: 680). Hurston depicts the problem mainly as a disparity between theory/ideals and practice in life, claiming, in effect, that a "full belly" generally comes before values and principles. Hurston ultimately criticizes the black man for causing trouble and remains rather neutral on the issue of racial segregation that forces African Americans employed in the services to make a given type of decisions in the first place. Finally, although Hurston does not openly complain about it, the types of jobs she obtains before her writing and anthropological career – maid, nurse, waitress, manicurist – attest to her period's sexist division of professions into masculine and feminine, as well as to the inescapability of the young Hurston's submission to it.

Some literary scholars have seen in Hurston's approach a conscious strategy which they have given various names – "feather-bed resistance" (Reith 1998), "hitting a straight lick with a crooked stick" (Meisenhelder 1999), and a "trickster" tactic (Meisenhelder 1999; Snyder 1988). As the terms above suggest, this type of stratagem consists in criticism which is definitely present in the text, but rather than being explicit and obvious at first reading is hidden between the lines. Still others have chosen to interpret Hurston's text as literature of self-empowerment. In *Dust Tracks*, Hurston herself wrote: "I do not wish to close the frontiers of life upon my own self" (1942: 786). In line with this, Deborah G. Plant argues that Hurston intentionally suppresses her experiences of racism, since "acknowledged pain, fragility, timidity and fear are all considered forms of weakness" (1995: 16). Hurston's wish to portray herself as an empowered person is also re-

flected in her decision to present her life story as that of a “self-made woman.” As Josie P. Campbell argues, the plot of *Dust Tracks* “is that of a pilgrim’s progress, of a poor, black, orphaned girl who becomes a respected scientist, a well-known author, the winner of Guggenheims and other awards” (2001: 105). The implication, of course, could be read as follows: “if all of this is possible for her, then it is possible for other marginalized people” (Campbell, 2001: 105). However, while using the Horatio Alger myth, Hurston also subverts it. Whereas its plot was “simple, one dimensional, racist, and most assuredly sexist,” Hurston’s decidedly is not (Campbell, 2001: 106).

When compared to Jacobs’s and Hurston’s autobiographical personae, Davis’s autobiographical self seems to be extremely impersonal and strictly public. This, to a large extent, has to do with the fact that Davis’s book falls under the genre of political autobiography, the role of which is to figure primarily as a pedagogical “tool for advancing political struggle” (Perkins, 2000: xii). In political autobiography, the focus of the autobiographer is not his/her private life, but rather his/her public activity as an agent striving to bring about social change. Margo V. Perkins suggests yet another explanation of why political autobiographers keep relatively silent in their work on private matters. The most compelling rationalization Perkins comes up with is that, if they decided to write about their intimate matters in detail, a number of activists writing political autobiographies would have to admit that their risky lives created conflicts with their closest family members. By deciding not to “air personal conflicts” with their relatives in the public accounts of their lives, the autobiographers avoid informing the state about its success at undermining one of the most important “support networks available to political dissidents” – that of a family and a community (2000: 69). Even one of the most personal events in Davis’s autobiography – the death of Jonathan Jackson for whom Davis felt affection – is handled in a very rational manner. As Davis writes: “I tried to dispel my blind rage over Jonathan’s death in order for my anger to become constructive” (1974: 279). During Davis’s trial in California, the prosecution presents as the main motive for her “crimes” her uncontrolled passion for Jonathan Jackson. Davis “reads” the proceedings of the trial through a feminist prism and expresses solidarity with the female jurors who “too had known the experience of being accused because they were women of acting irrationally and according to emotions, rather than logic” (Davis, 1974: 364).

The subjectivity axis of the African American female autobiography, as the above paper has argued, is marked by two distinct features. One is the presentation of a black woman’s self as closely connected with other people, be it relatives or members of both black and white American communities who help the protagonists on their journeys through life. The other is the effect that autobiographers’ consideration of their reading public has on their crafting of their autobiographical personae. Perceiving their autobiographies, above all, as political tools for achieving racial (and gender) liberation, authors tend to create such autobiographical selves that they deem capable of making the reader empathize with their situation and their point of view.

Notes

Parts of my Ph.D. dissertation entitled *A Dream Deferred: Continuities in African American Autobiographies* (successfully defended at Charles University in Prague in 2008) form the main basis of this paper.

- ¹ See for instance, Richard Wright's "Blueprint for Negro Writing" (1937).
- ² In this sense, Jacobs was ahead of her time. It was not until the 1960s – almost a hundred years after the publication of *Incidents* – that (mainly thanks to feminists) the motto "private is public" (or "personal is political") started to penetrate the social discourse in the United States.

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