

## RACIAL IDENTITY THROUGH AUTOBIOGRAPHY: RE-COVERING THE PAST/SHAPING THE FUTURE

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(Resumen)

En el presente ensayo se examina la tradición autobiográfica afro-americana. Las narrativas de esclavos establecieron la forma y contenido de los escritos afro-americanos mediante una serie de características que condujeron a la expresión de identidad racial. Estas características, tras un período de crisis literaria coincidente con el cambio de siglo, fueron recuperadas y potenciadas de distintas formas por un grupo de artistas que formaron parte de lo que ha venido en denominarse "Harlem Renaissance". Las autobiografías de Langston Hughes y Zora Neale Hurston son un claro ejemplo de ello y su análisis muestra la relevancia de su recuperación, tanto como reconocimiento de los valores de una tradición como del establecimiento de esos valores para el futuro. La autobiografía no es sólo el recuento de la vida del autor sino, sobre todo, la construcción y muestra de la identidad, en íntima relación con el sistema cultural en el que se produce. Es por ello que la identidad afro-americana muestra una conciencia política y una identidad colectiva, sustentada por la experiencia vivida, y que es al mismo tiempo un legado para la próxima generación de narradores.

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Considering autobiography as the ideal form of privileged access to the experience of an author, this paper examines African American autobiographical tradition in its search for identity. The main focus is placed on how the slave narratives create a series of characteristics that define the African American tradition, and how the artists of the Harlem Renaissance recover them, thus making them prevail in the future of the tradition. The work of writers such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston are appropriate examples of this process. But first, we need to explore the concepts of autobiography and identity to define the margins of our speech.

To paraphrase Fernandez Prieto, autobiography is not only the author's account of his or her life but, above all, the construction and exhibition of identity, which is in close relation to the cultural system in which it is conceived (121-22). The main question about identity is "Who am I?" Identity is a definition and interpretation of an individual, establishing who that individual is and what his or her position is in the social and psychological sense. According to Bausmaister, "the search for identity includes the question about the adequate relation between the individual and the society as a whole."(7) This search emerges out of the necessity to belong to a community. The autobiographical author presents and interprets him/herself, giving meaning to the community to which he/she belongs.

The kind of identity I address is the kind found in autobiographical texts. The

autobiographical identity includes cognitive aspects in all their expressions, establishing both a common past and a sense of difference. Thus, autobiographical identity is the verbalized, the narrativized, the construction of a self through writing that emerges as a firm and new self by the conscious introspection and revision of the author's life and experiences, written by the author. It is then, the result of what I call "interior insight".

According to some anthropological studies,<sup>1</sup> the criteria defining identity are, on one side, continuity of common experiences through time, which are comprehensible to the members of a given group or community, and, on the other side, awareness of difference from others, which emerges as a result of consciously being part of a community with a specific culture in a given territory. To understand the process of identity formation, it is necessary to point out two elements. These elements reinforce the existing links among the members of a community: a common past, and a political project for the future of that community (Renan, 19; Guibernau, 116). A common culture favors the creation of solidarity and allows one to imagine the individual's community as separate and different from others. A subject integrated into a culture deposits an emotional weight on certain symbols, values, beliefs and customs, interiorizing and conceiving them as part of him/herself. (Guibernau, 115)

African American autobiography offers a different identity as the response to a distinct historical perception. It shows a collective awareness of shared triumph and loss, which build the sentiment of solidarity. At the same time, it searches in its past to find the ethnic characteristics that are part of that identity. The search for a common identity is the main goal of African American narrative. First, this common identity is sought as a proof of existence: a hope against slavery, breaking the walls of exploitation and oppression. Along its evolution, it explores its individual and collective roots, as well as the form of political struggle necessary to develop a solid project for the future, in order to be an active part of the nation's destiny.

African American autobiographical self, therefore, shows a political and collective identity, sustained by the past experience of the group and offered to the next generations. Saunders Redding affirmed that African American writers have composed a "literature of necessity". (quoted in Jackson, 8). That is, the fact of the difference of color has been a major force in the creation of the coherence of the group and its expression. Likewise, color has been responsible for the development of a literary tradition with a common cause: the racial protest. Even after the abolition of slavery, American society maintained its racist attitudes. This is why, as Jackson pointed out, African American literature is the expression of a common protest, and adjustment to sociopolitical changes has determined the form and content of this literature.(9)

Slave Narratives settle the form and content of African American writing in first person, influencing this production in the future. Its main characteristic is the struggle against oppression and slavery. First, the influence of the dominant culture and literature is obvious, as the first narrators try to imitate white writing. Later, the collaboration of abolitionists help to shape the form of these narratives. Long before the abolitionist movement, the narratives tend to be moral works in order to give testimony of the slave's human intelligence and capacity. Their aim is to demonstrate that there are no reasons to keep blacks under the "peculiar institution". They

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1. See Bausmaister, Guibernau, Bhaba, Renan, DeVos, etc.

implicitly condemn and criticize the system, showing its dark side, but with no direct negative opinions or criticism. Later, when the abolitionist movement arises, that criticism becomes harder and explicit, showing the horror of the slave's life and of the system. The works are narrated by their protagonists and they include a series of documents to prove and guarantee the veracity of the author and his/her condition as an slave. In fact, some of these narratives have been considered as "dictated" works, doubting its veracity. (Stepto, 1979; Olney, 1985) The first examples of the genre show slavery as a benevolent institution, portraying the slave as an outlaw. In these cases, only the paternal, white help could offer protection to the slaves. (Andrews, 7) Before 1830, slavery was considered necessary to maintain the agrarian economy and to socialize the blacks. Later, the aim was to develop a theory that avoided racial inferiority. As the narrators contest the concept of inferiority, they become subject of the narrative, which, as Gusdorf pointed out, affirms the value of the self.(29) Therefore, they show their ways of life at the plantation, before escaping; how they learn to read and write; the development of their consciousness, and the flight to the North, to freedom, together with the episodes and adventures in their path. But the acquisition of literacy and resistance are the two fundamental values against violence and abuse. The slave uses a mask, or fictitious personality, under which his/her true self lies. These characteristics are evident in Henry Bibb's *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave* (1849), Salomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* (1854), William Wells Brown's *Narrative of William Wells Brown, A Fugitive Slave, Written by Himself* (1847), and Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845), the latter being one of the most important texts of this period.

Thus, writing is the act of rebellion. This rebellion emphasizes the affirmation of humanity, and the search for liberty and identity. Butterfield (11-31), considers work, religion and education as the main pillars sustaining African American perspective in this period. Work becomes an ethical value against the stereotype of laziness, which said that African Americans worked only the minimum to avoid punishment. Work, then, is considered the way to show humanity and desire to improve. Religion is also deeply integrated in the value system, as the Church has always had a major role in African American culture. Many similarities can be found in the Bible to the slave situation. Thus, religion satisfies the desire of history and identity. Education, however, is the most important value. Without it, it is impossible to develop into a new concept of self. Learning to read and write is in itself a revolutionary act and part of the process of identity formation. The writer tries also to achieve self-definition and respect. For the narrators, learning to read and write is part of the process of the acquisition of identity. In the construction of that identity, they have to struggle against other obstacles, such as violence and abuse. Thus, a double personality is created: the slave under the point of view of the master and his stereotypes—such as laziness—and the slave under his own point of view, trying to achieve literacy and to struggle against the obstacles mentioned above. That double personality creates a double identity, which gives way to W.E.B. DuBois's concept, which will be developed later. This concept is considered a major aspect of the African American self.

Therefore, the acquisition of identity becomes a process similar to a trip, both physical and metaphorical. The first one runs from South to North, and the description of the voyage is the dorsal spine of the narrative. The aim is obvious: freedom. The acquisition of freedom is part of

the metaphorical trip in its search for a personal identity.

However, the situation of the authors changes as the end of the Nineteenth century approaches. The differences between North and South become wider: Industrialization in the North, on one hand, and the continuity of the system in the South, on the other. This continuity refers not only to the maintenance of slavery, but also to the toughness of racial relations. The approval of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments<sup>2</sup> tried to give a new consideration and status to the African American citizen. But this worked only in theory, making this period one of the most difficult ones for the social situation of blacks.

After World War I, urban nuclei become settlements for the workers of war industry and for returning soldiers. The Great Migration happened because of several reasons, among them, oppression, unemployment, violence and the emergence of the Ku Klux Klan since 1916. But African Americans could escape this hard conditions in the North, bringing along the development of self-respect. At the same time, it encourages the emergence of a middle class, although violence and exploitation are still a part of black life. The flood of migrants is located in cities such as Chicago, Indiana, Boston, Philadelphia and Washington, DC. However, Harlem will be the cultural, political and social center. In the search of identity, it gives rise to a common premise: *negritude*.<sup>3</sup>

Now, however, the concept of identity acquires a double perspective, because African Americans feel as Africans, but also as Americans. The slave narrator didn't distinguish between class consciousness and racial identity, but the new narrator has a choice between the burgeoise values of society, and the popular, folk community. The intellectual who best described this paradox is W.E.B. DuBois, who developed the concept of "double-consciousness" in his work *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903).<sup>4</sup>

African American discourse evolves around the concept of the New Negro, and gives raise to the period called New Negro or Harlem Renaissance. This concept implies greater sophistication and emancipation; a new consideration and treatment from society; autodetermination; urbanity, and the recuperation of the exotic and primitive character of African roots. It also points out new aims: democracy, equality, a different social perspective;

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2. Amendment Thirteenth: abolition of slavery; Fourteenth: Civil Rights of African Americans; Fifteenth: Right to vote.

3. *Negritude* has a double sense, objective and subjective. Objectively, *negritude* is defined by Leopold Senghor as a "set of values of the black civilizations". Subjectively, it is the way in which each black individual or black community lives and feels the values of that civilization. "Interview with Léopold Sédar Senghor," "Escribo en Francés pero siento en Africano". *ABC Cultural*, 258, October 11, 1996, 15.

4. This work marks an important moment in the search for an intelligentsia within African American culture. It also centers its attention on popular experience and its orientation toward the future. As a cultivated and highly educated man --Fisk, Harvard and Berlin-- DuBois studies the universality of black experience through sociology, philosophy, history, and literature. He praises the African American ability to become an intellectual whose origin is in slavery. His concept of "double-consciousness" is still a major trend in African American studies.

respect, pride and recognition of the race. What African Americans wanted, in summary, is to contribute to culture, art, politics, and society with their own particularities: to have a role in their country's life. It was a period of splendor in which "the Negro Was in Vogue". (Hughes,223) But the conflict between a free art, with no racial motives, and a propagandistic art as an instrument of social reform remains. The artists of this period show these conflicts, while maintaining some characteristics from the slave narratives. Nevertheless, racial pride and negritude are part of a new identity, which is also double. The question "Who am I?" becomes the social base of writing, especially in autobiography. Black identity means that the author is proud of his/her race, but, at the same time, he/she has to struggle to reconcile two contradictory identities, thus being alienated in two worlds: being a writer, he/she creates a deeper difference from the race and becomes part of mainstream society; but the penetration into that society is not complete because of his/her color. This crisis becomes the center of the works of DuBois, Saunders Redding or, later, Richard Wright, or it is treated differently by Langston Hughes and Claude McKay, who understand the conflict as the need to investigate the relationship between the black intellectual and political trends, and how this relationship affects the simple people. At a parallel level, the double identity allows the artist to see the world both from within and without. The dilemma, therefore, is to choose between the burgoise values and the unfavored classes. The result is the autobiographer's attempt to develop him/herself as a writer, without refusing his/her two identities.

Thus, autobiography offers different alternatives: DuBois felt trapped into these two worlds; Redding abandoned his life in the city and went to live in a farm in the South; McKay avoided the middle class and found poetry as his aesthetic answer; Langston Hughes focused on romanticizing the popular class. These two authors define their identity as poets, while using a voice capable of assimilating their personal experience of art. That voice is the racial pride as an organizing principle of autobiography: Booker T. Washington spoke of it as the ability to learn, to work and to acquire economical power; DuBois and Redding defended its humanity, integrity and resistance; McKay and Hughes, as an esthetic sense and response to poetry. Thus, African American identity has always had a social and political content, which has been part of the struggle against oppression. There are other artists not so interested in social problems, but rather in individual conflicts, as Zora Neale Hurston, who follows Locke's line, without a well-defined social or political basis. Nevertheless, Hurston recuperates the folk, oral tradition, precisely based on that racial pride.

Likewise, African American music is in its peak. Spirituals, blues, jazz conform a category which identifies African American roots, and whose projection goes beyond the results obtained in other arts. One of the main characteristics of black music is that it portrays a distinct expression, based on folk tradition and in the reconstruction of history. Musical styles influence literary works, especially poetry, as demonstrated by the work of Langston Hughes. Music is also recovered by artists who put these ancient rhythms on stage, as Zora Neale Hurston did.<sup>5</sup> The

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5. She put on stage two musical playwrights in order to show the magic and rhythmic culture to the public, *From Sun to Sun* and *Singing Steel*. She spent many years working with music and literature, traveling around the country, with that goal in mind.

recuperation of the African American roots is a common goal, and the gathering of that type of material is another aim of the period, as shown in Hurston's article "Characteristics of Negro Expression". (Huggins, 1976, 224-236)

These writers' search for identity is based on the concept of *negritude*. The autobiographical works of Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, as examples of two major authors of this period from different points of view (a poet and an anthropologist; man and woman) show the characteristics of African American autobiography since the period of slave narratives. They describe their origin, the value of work, their opinions and experiences about religion, the migration to the North, but, above all, the value of knowledge and education as the main source of identity. They claim this identity to be in touch with tradition and popular forms of expression, each from a different perspective: one through music (Hughes), the other through oral tradition (Hurston). Thus, these authors, and the rest of the artists of the Renaissance, recover the characteristics of their past to transform them into a new concept and a new perspective in their search for identity, which will influence the literary production of the following decades.

Langston Hughes criticizes the romantic, primitive concept of the New Negro that is "in vogue". This concept focuses on racial pride, on the observation of life in the streets and its forms of expression, and on musical forms and voice. Through the description of characters, social events and gatherings, and the different places he lives, we get a personal presentation and a collective reflection of African American perspective in its local and universal consideration. He searches for his self and identity as an African, as an American, and as a poet, redefining himself in a dynamic form, always in relation to popular experience. This is a collective experience that seeks assimilation and links past and present in its search.

The first part of his autobiography, *The Big Sea* (1940), offers the account of his life, his travels around the world and his varied jobs, centering on his relationship with his father, with his patron, and with the intellectuals of the period. Throughout the narrative, we observe a process of formation which gives way to a triple identity. We also observe how the characters, situations and trips he describes help and influence such a process. The desire for education is present throughout the work; religion, or rather the fact of conversion, has a strong influence on him, as well as resistance to oppression, which is shown in his relationship with his father or his patron, Mrs. Mason. These aspects of the autobiography, together with humor and struggle for freedom, conform to the characteristics that inscribe this work within the African American autobiographical tradition.

The second part, *I Wonder as I Wander* (1956), offers more details about travels than personal growth. Through the portrayal of places and peoples, he portrays himself. That's how he offers the intimate side of his unseen self. Hughes's search for identity is centered on *negritude*, and the most important step is the acceptance of that *negritude* as a personal and intellectual force. Class and race are inseparable in Hughes, but both concepts refer to the simplicity of the people who sing their passions with the blues.

Zora Neale Hurston's work is placed within the popular tradition transmitted orally. *Dust Tracks on the Road* (1942) presents a double position of the author-as a mediator between her community and the intelligentsia. That is why her narrative has both a popular and scientific point of view and language. In fact, her autobiography plays a double role between the personal

engagement of the genre and the awakening of consciousness, provoked by the reflection and description of ethnography. Thus, she expresses a colorful world in which her emotional and mental life takes place, and, at the same time, her academic background provides the tools to decipher the characteristics of her life.

Born in a privileged community,<sup>6</sup> she brilliantly shows her pilgrimage through existence with humor and irony. Hurston's identity, in continuous struggle between the two forces of her life and work, embodies a different perspective, based on the engagement and fidelity to herself and to her race. Despite negative criticism, she is an author with "racial health", as Alice Walker pointed out. (86) The value of work and education are indispensable in her growth. She strongly criticizes the concepts of race and religion, and for her the human being, black or white people have the same hopes, happiness and pains.

However, she understands African Americans as creators and owners of a unique character. This character is full of creativity, humor, imagination and dramatic ability. Hurston takes the popular material and develops its possibilities based on the oral tradition. The primitivism characteristic of the period flows naturally in her.

Thus, the autobiography of the Renaissance establishes the basis for a new identity, or a New Negro, whose ambition is to be part of a society that can respect his/her perspectives. In the search for self, political struggle arises. The value of work, the necessity of education, and resistance to domination are characteristics of this writing, as they were of slave narratives, but the authors recover and shape them in a new way to give form to new values. African American self is more individualized, but identity is exhibited collectively.

Some scholars point out the assimilationist approach found in the written expression of this period, meant to maintain the artistic production free from racial connotations. That is, art for the sake of art. However, traditional and racial characteristics are present in these works of art. (Mitchell, 4-5) Other scholars see a propagandistic tone in the production, which becomes essentially political. They consider literature as an attitude and instrument for social reform. (Gates, 235-255) Some authors believe the Renaissance was a provincialist movement, unable to focus and succeed in the goals that the "New Negro" established. (Huggins, 1979, 197) Others think of this period in modernist terms, comparing its results and its projections. (Baker, 1987) As Edward Margolies points out, the nationalistic aspects of the literature of the 1920's became a strong factor in the writing of the next decades. (1968)

In the Depression era of the 1930's, when social and political conditions change, the Harlem Renaissance fades away, but the step taken by these artists is definitive in promoting a change within culture and society. Autobiography establishes a new basis for the search of identity, as a consequence of the previous period and its writers. Thus, religion, which had been an important issue in slave narratives, after the shift of perspective induced by the "niggeratti",<sup>7</sup> is

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6. She was born in Eatonville, Florida, one of the few towns with a black mayor and council. Her childhood was a very happy one, in an ambience of equality and away from the harshness of racism, until her mother died. See Hemenway.

7. This is the nickname used by Hurston, meaning the "Harlem Literatti", or those artists and writers of the Harlem Renaissance. They were also known as "The Talented Tenth", by DuBois.

avoided, filling this gap with a political struggle, and the new ideas of these decades: Communism, Pan-Africanism,<sup>8</sup> and identification with the working class. The value of work, after being an ethical value of liberation for the slave and the first writers of the Twentieth century, is transformed into the consciousness of the working class. This class will set them free, they believe, by abolishing capitalism and racial oppression. Identity is related to class rather than race. The emphasis is placed on ethical and humanistic integration, which will be a broader idea in the 1940's, and 1950's. The writers, moved by the pragmatism of the Depression, strengthened their condition as critics. One of the most relevant authors of this period is Richard Wright. He shows these changes and the maintenance of the tradition as a way to shape the future of the community. In his autobiography, *Black Boy* (1945), he continues the characteristics established by the slave narratives, combining them in new ways to criticize urbanization and the conditions of life in the city. His identity is shown as a political, collective identity.

Therefore, African American narrative has been always immersed in a political point of view within the contradictions of American society. The struggle against oppression has characterized this tradition. Identity, then, has been created as a response to it. African American narrators, when establishing a dialogue to construct and exhibit identity, have done this from the awareness of suffering. To describe this process, the authors discover the particulars of their origin and they develop an individual and collective homogeneity, evolving around the concept of negritude. African American autobiography has a distinguishing characteristic: its veracity and authenticity. African American authors show a self grounded in the community. The search for a common identity has maintained a continuous and double conflict: the need of personal, free choice, and the criticism of external conditions.

The artists of the Harlem Renaissance established the ethnic base as a characteristic of their tradition, which is expressed through music, language, imagination, creativity, humor and pain. Their literary consciousness opens the door to new forms of experimentation and variety in the literary work: the musical rhythm of Langston Hughes will influence other authors, such as Ted Joans; the popular and folk discourse of Zora Neale Hurston will influence autobiographies such as Malcom X's; the description of the life of simple people will give way to the Naturalism of the 1930's and 1940's; the urban settlements in Harlem and other cities will create realistic narratives of the life in the city; the character of the protagonists will be the seed of the existentialist works of the 1960's and 1970's.

African American authors created a mode of expression that became the origin of a tradition. The form and content of this tradition were established by slave narrators, and from then on, and especially after the recovery of its characteristics by the artists of the Harlem Renaissance, numerous other authors have taken them, integrating the past and transforming it into the future. The aspects inscribed in this tradition are obvious nowadays in other works, such as Maya

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8. As a movement, it is characterized by three main goals: to liberate Africa and avoid all the remains that represent European colonialism, as a result of the sharing of the continent in 1884; to unify and free Africa; to liberate all the descendants through the Africa Diaspora. See Margaret Walker, 7-8.



Angelou's, Nathan McCall's, etc., whose autobiographies carry the inheritance of their predecessors. Through these works and lives within the collective identity, we can observe the history of the African American community, which has also a main goal: to provide understanding of a community that, as all others, has its hopes and frustrations, being the latter more numerous. Learning and recovering the past, human beings, with no color distinctions, should be able to shape a better future.

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