



PROJECT MUSE®

## Autobiographical Voices

Françoise Lionnet

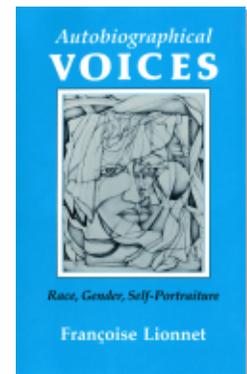
Published by Cornell University Press

Lionnet, Françoise.

Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture.

Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018.

Project MUSE., <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/58045>

Access provided at 16 Sep 2019 01:50 GMT with no institutional affiliation



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

## Part II

# Creating a Tradition

There is no theory that is not a fragment, carefully prepared, of some autobiography.

Paul Valéry

To read a narrative that depicts the journey of a female self striving to become the subject of her own discourse, the narrator of her own story, is to witness the unfolding of an autobiographical project. To raise the question of referentiality and ask whether the text points to an individual existence beyond the pages of the book is to distort the picture: as Picasso once said about his portrait of Gertrude Stein, although she was not exactly like it, she would eventually become so. The ability to “defamiliarize” ordinary experience, forcing us to notice what we live with but ignore, has long been considered an important characteristic of art. Such is the Russian formalists’ notion of *ostraneniye*, or “making strange,” the surrealists’ dream of a heightened level of awareness, Nathalie Sarraute’s “era of suspicion.” New ways of seeing can indeed emancipate us. Literature, like all art, can show us new means of constructing the world, for it is by changing the images and structures through which we encode meaning that we can begin to develop new scripts and assign new roles to the heroines of the stories we recount in order to explain and understand our lives.

The female writer who struggles to articulate a personal vision and to verbalize the vast areas of feminine experience which have remained unexpressed, if not repressed, is engaged in an attempt to excavate those elements of the female self which have been buried under the cultural and patriarchal myths of selfhood. She perceives these myths as alienating and radically other, and her aim is often the retrieval of a more authentic image—one that may not ostensibly be “true” or “familiar” at first, since our ways of perceiving are so subtly conditioned by our social and historical circumstance and since our collective imagination is so overwhelmingly non-female. Having no literary tradition that empowers her to speak, she seeks

to elaborate discursive patterns that will both reveal the "hidden face of Eve" and displace the traditional distinctions of rigidly defined literary genres. Formulating a problematics of female authorship is thus an urgent task for feminist writers and one that they approach with much ambivalence.<sup>1</sup>

Theorists of autobiography have traditionally assumed with Roy Pascal that we read autobiographies "not as factual truth, but as a wrestling with truth."<sup>2</sup> In their attempt at selective grouping of first-person narratives, however, theorists have largely failed to "take hold of autobiography's protean forms," as Avrom Fleishman puts it.<sup>3</sup> And feminist critics in particular have been quick to suggest that "any theoretical model *indifferent* to a problematics of genre as inflected by gender" must needs be regarded as suspect.<sup>4</sup> Since it is notoriously difficult for women to recognize ourselves in the traditional images that literature and society (sometimes including our own mothers) project or uphold as models, it should not be surprising for an autobiographical narrative to proclaim itself as fiction: for the narrator's process of reflection, narration, and self-integration within language is bound to unveil patterns of self-definition (and self-dissimulation) which may seem new and strange and with which we are not always consciously familiar. The self engendered on the page allows a writer to subject a great deal of her ordinary experience to new scrutiny and to show that the polarity fact/fiction does not establish and constitute absolute categories of feeling and perceiving reality. The narrative text epitomizes this duality in its splitting of the subject of discourse into a narrating self and an experiencing self which can never coincide exactly. Addressing the

<sup>1</sup>I borrow the quoted phrase from the book by Nawal El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World* (London: Zed Press, 1980).

<sup>2</sup>Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 75. But see also Elizabeth W. Bruss, *Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976); James Olney, *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), and Olney, ed. *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), and *Je est un autre* (Paris: Seuil, 1980).

<sup>3</sup>Avrom Fleishman, *Figures of Autobiography: The Language of Self-Writing in Victorian and Modern England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 37.

<sup>4</sup>Nancy K. Miller, "Writing Fictions: Women's Autobiography in France," *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography*, ed. Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 47.

problematics of authorship, the female narrator gets caught in a duplicitous process: she exists in the text under circumstances of alienated communication because the text is the locus of her dialogue with a tradition she tacitly aims to subvert.<sup>5</sup> Describing the events that have helped her assume a given heritage, she communicates with a narratee who figures in a particular kind of relationship both with her as narrator and with their shared cultural environment. By examining the narrative structure through these constitutive relational patterns, we can elicit from the text a model of reading which does not betray its complicated and duplicitous messages.

For example, Maya Angelou dedicates her first volume of autobiographical writings to her son, focusing on the difficult relationship between writing and mothering which is at the center of all feminist inquiries into the nature of creativity. The conflict between these roles is all too often a source of paralyzing guilt for the creative artist, as Tillie Olsen, Adrienne Rich, and Alice Walker have convincingly shown.<sup>6</sup> Marie Cardinal, on the other hand, dedicates her novel to the "doctor who helped [her] be born," and he is the explicit listener of her life story.<sup>7</sup> As such, his role is clear, but the text also encodes his presence as a catalyst whose function is not only to facilitate access to the narrator's effaced, forgotten, joyful "Algerian" self but also to mediate the reader's understanding of the story being told in the book, the "histoire racontée à du papier."<sup>8</sup> Marie-Thérèse Humbert's narrator wrestles with an impossible relationship to a twin sister who is a figure for the effaced and repressed

<sup>5</sup>The problematics and anxieties of authorship are brilliantly analyzed by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 45–92.

<sup>6</sup>See Tillie Olsen, *Silences* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1978); Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Norton, 1976); and Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983).

<sup>7</sup>Marie Cardinal, *Les Mots pour le dire* (Paris: Grasset et Fasquelle, 1975). English translation by Pat Goodheart, *The Words to Say It* (Cambridge, Mass.: VanVactor and Goodheart, 1983).

<sup>8</sup>*Les Mots pour le dire*, p. 266–67. The story as told to the paper: this phrase recalls Montaigne's "mémoire de papier," his well-known need to "parler au papier." See Michel de Montaigne, "De l'utile et de l'honneste," *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard/La Pléiade, 1962), p. 767. "Of the Useful and the Honorable," *The Complete Works of Montaigne*, trans. Donald Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1948), p. 599.

other in her. Through this double, whose untimely death releases her, she comes to an acceptance of her privileged position at the intersection of different colonial cultures and recognizes the values of creolization, *métissage*, and transculturation. Relationships with parental figures, lovers, siblings, or offspring provide the important structuring elements of the narratives of all of these writers, revealing complex modes of interaction between familial and social contexts, the personal and the political, the textual and the historical. The tradition these women writers have begun to create is informed both by the systematic recovery of occulted histories and the utopian visionary power with which they unsettle our all-too-complacent notions about the present and the future.

Zora Neale Hurston's training as an anthropologist influences the way she looks at the complex system of human relations that constitute culture. Her autobiography makes use of the formal descriptive paradigms of anthropological research, becoming a self-portrait of the fieldworker in search of her own roots, her own siblings, her lost ancestral traditions, her veiled maternal heritage. Unlike the fixation on the past of Maryse Condé's narrator, which turns into a pathological flight from the political realities of life in her own country, Hurston's focus on the New World shows her sophisticated understanding of the transformations ancient African culture has undergone through the slave trade. Condé's Véronica is an ambiguous victim who identifies with the oppressor, much as her Europeanized father admires the values of French culture. To rebel against her father's self-defeating dressage of the mind, she first uses the only weapon she has: her body. But she thus manages to exchange one form of colonization for another, and remains a profoundly ambivalent and recalcitrant daughter of Africa.<sup>9</sup>

As they recover the past, women writers have to confront the images and stereotypes that have limited their choices. They must retrace the narrow paths along which the female heroine of literature has been allowed to walk. But they must also attempt to find new and empowering directions for themselves and their literary heirs. For all these writers, the personal and the political, the text, its contexts, and its intertextual elements are always interrelated; that is

<sup>9</sup>See Jonathan Ngaté, "Maryse Condé and Africa: The Making of a Recalcitrant Daughter?" *A Current Bibliography on African Affairs* 19 (1986-87), 5-20.

why these writers do not attempt to create new directions out of totally new cloth: they understand that our perceptions of ourselves are strongly influenced by the past, and they seek to focus our attention on the different kinds of heroines the (male) literary tradition has provided. Weaving the threads of old stories into new images of their own, women make their texts into a *métissage* of voices and textures. Hurston rebels against the patriarchal folk customs of her village; Maya Angelou rewrites the picaresque tale from a black feminist point of view; Marie-Thérèse Humbert creates twin sisters who represent, on a superficial level, the conventional romantic and tragic heroines of Bildungsromane. Against the distortions of the languages we speak and the literature we have been trained to consider "good" by our literary fathers, Marie Cardinal articulates the difficult process of coming to language, of becoming a writing subject. She spells out the deadening internalization of patriarchal rules of literary production, which continues to plague women writers. By showing the arbitrary nature of these standards, she undermines the conventions of genre and the concept of *patrie*, or nationality. Hurston goes a step farther: by reclaiming the Afro-Asiatic roots of Greek mythology she subverts all narrow appeal to an unproblematic "Western" tradition. Condé's use of the techniques of free direct and indirect discourse allows her to dramatize the impasses of realist representations.

The alienation women writers experience in creating a new tradition is reinforced by the difficulty they have in defining their audience, a difficulty compounded in the case of *métis* women, who write in a standard language but hope to transmit a vision molded and enriched by their vernacular customs. On one level, Angelou, for example, writes for white readers; but on another, she gestures toward the black community and "signifies" upon an established Afro-American mode of presenting truths and untruths. Because of the nature of (white) literary patronage during the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston had to perform her own self-censorship, evidenced in the gaps and the unsaid of her autobiography. Condé's representation of the colonized mentality continues to unsettle readers everywhere. Véronica can be seen as a self-indulgent character with no political sophistication of any kind, but if *Heremakhonon* is read as a political allegory in which Véronica is a figure for the collective unconscious of the people of Guadeloupe, the narrative takes on

new dimensions and reveals a complex network of relationships of dominance. This network contributes to the infantilization of a people who do not have the right to self-determination despite a seemingly democratic system of government. Finally, with Humbert, we have a kind of nonresolution of the double vision, since her book can be read by different audiences either as best-selling romance or as complex self-portrait of the writer as web maker and storyteller.

As the following discussions show, all the women writers draw on many diverse heritages while remaining unsure about the relative value of their conflicting backgrounds. As they emancipate themselves from the established codes that constrain them, most go through a process of healing and reconciliation which takes them beyond *ressentiment*, thus allowing them to build bridges between cultures and to further the "pratique de *métissage*" for which Glissant calls.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup>Edouard Glissant, *Le Discours antillais* (Paris: Seuil, 1981), p. 462.