



Introduction

This seminar studied about a dozen African-American autobiographies, mostly of the twentieth century. However, earlier texts were necessarily examined when we reviewed historically important forms such as the slave narrative, the early spiritual autobiography, and the *fin de siècle* “cause” narrative, in which selves are largely defined by the causes they undertake. Our work with the earlier forms prompted considerations of narratives by authors including Gustavus Vassa (Olaudah Equiano), Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Jarena Lee, Ida B. Wells, Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois.

In studying autobiographies of this century, we focused upon narrativists including Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Maya Angelou, Mary Mebane, James Comer, Mildred Taylor, Al Young, James Alan McPherson, and Ellese Southerland. Once engaged with these authors and their texts, we discussed in particular the impulses and strategies of autobiographies of childhood and adolescence, speculating upon what constitutes the African-American practice of this sub-genre of autobiography.

Throughout our discussions, whether of early or more recent texts, we explored several enduring concerns: the particular or even singular tensions between the private and public self in black autobiography; education as an issue and goal in these autobiographies; reading autobiographies, perhaps especially in these times, in search of role models for our youth (and possibly for ourselves as well); sense of place in these autobiographies—where “home” may be found in paradigms so often pitting Africa versus the New World, the country versus the city, the South versus the North, etc. Our interests in these issues frequently were re-explored and discussed anew in the curriculum units which follow in these pages.

For example, while the disparities between private and public selves are touched upon in many of the curriculum units, partly because such divisions and tensions often provide autobiographies with their own particular energy and drive, the units of Ms. Howard and Ms. Marshall stand out in this regard, with Ms. Howard’s unit studying many black selves in early and recent narratives, and Ms. Marshall’s unit focusing on the various selves of Langston Hughes. Education is also a broad concern in the units, but it is a special interest in the units of Ms. Cherry and Ms. Hare. Ms. Cherry’s unit reminds us of how Prince Hall valiantly fought for education for blacks in Massachusetts in the 1780s; Ms. Hare’s offers strategies for teaching the debate on education between Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois, while locating that debate in a historical context extending to the present.

Reading black autobiographies for role models is a topic taken up by no less than four of our seminar members, but in differing ways. Ms. Cherry’s unit presents Prince Hall as a role model but goes on to suggest that the masonic lodge he founded embodies values and principles which have sustained many black Americans of whatever affiliation. In this way, the unit addresses matters of both individual and collective

leadership. This is a concern of the other units here as well. In Ms. Cook's unit, for example, John Johnson, the eminent publisher and entrepreneur, is the focus, but a strength of her unit is her contextualizing of Johnson in a congregation of business-oriented race leaders. One result of this is that Johnson emerges as a model in part because he is shown to be thoughtfully considering the example of models around him, and of an earlier generation. In the units by Ms. Sutherland and Ms. Wilson, New Haven's own Dr. James Comer is carefully studied through his autobiography as a role model; Ms. Sutherland additionally considers the autobiographical fiction of Mildred Taylor while Ms. Wilson further includes Maya Angelou's first autobiography. Attention to the individual in context, in group settings, is achieved when both Ms. Sutherland and Ms. Wilson contextualize each of their individuals in their families, with the families emerging as models of a special force unto themselves. Ms. Wilson's unit additionally considers the church as a nurturing institution.

While the African Americans' sense of place is not broadly a concern of these units, it is sharply so in the units of Mr. Cassidy and Ms. Marshall. Both units focus on Langston Hughes and his first autobiography, and embrace his other writings as well. In the process, they suggest Hughes' exuberance, his travels, his posture as an American ("I, too, Sing America") and as an international man of color. Mr. Cassidy's unit stands out in part for reminding us of Hughes' presence in hispanic as well as (anglo) black communities; Ms. Marshall's unit will be helpful in providing ideas for student writing in conjunction with the study of autobiographies.

Some of our units are striking more for their attention to autobiographical forms than to the "themes" cited above. Slave narratives, for example, are a major concern of the units by Mr. Coden, Ms. Howard, and Mr. Moore. Mr. Coden's unit will be of special interest because of its focus on the writings of black women; Mr. Moore's unit is singular because of its assignment of both oral and written slave testimony, and because of his appropriate insistence that certain works of fiction be studied in conjunction. The "cause" autobiography is reviewed in the units by Ms. Cook and Ms. Hare, partly because both units present plans for the study of Booker T. Washington's most famous life story. Of course, it is intriguing to note that each of them "assigns" Washington to a different cause. Finally, while most of the units must perforce engage the autobiography of childhood, none does so as willingly or as directly as Mr. Coden's.

In closing, I thank the seminar members for their stimulating contributions to our sessions and to their curriculum units. I hope the units enhance education in New Haven and in countless other communities.

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