

USING THE MARGIN TO TEACH THE CENTER: TEACHING AMERICAN HISTORY THROUGH BLACK WOMEN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

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Introduction

Despite marginalization that emerges from living at the intersection of various oppressions—race, class, gender, and heterosexism among others—Black women's lives are rich with narratives that are central to the American experience.¹ Black women are uniquely positioned to represent fundamental themes of the American experience such as the quest for inclusion, equality, diversity, and liberation via political protest and struggle. Persons who have traditionally held positions of power offer a much different interpretation of historical facts, and what is often presented as *the* American story requires interrogation from multiple perspectives and identities. For this reason, I decided to teach a section of our History Department's American Experience course focusing upon the voices and lived experiences of Black women in the United States of America.² The American Experience is a 100-level course designed to serve as an "introduction to American history through the study of a special topic" and has covered such topics as the American West, Slavery, and Reform Movements.

Black feminist scholars argue that Black women's invisibility in mainstream society has resulted in the need to incorporate alternative forms of knowledge production to ensure adequate and accurate representations of Black women's experiences. For example, feminist scholar Gloria Joseph relates that "Afro-American women have a well-developed alternative way of producing and validating knowledge about their experienced reality. The validations of their experienced realities differ from explanations offered by the dominant Eurocentric masculine [or feminine] viewpoint."³ Black women's autobiographies are one such alternative. These texts are much more than accounts of individual lives; they also represent a collective Black (female) experience and are a manifestation of a social and political struggle for equality. Thus, as American society has evolved, so have the voices, roles, and lived experiences of Black women.

¹I thank Drs. Katey Borland and Kimberly C. Ellis for their key insights during an early draft.

²I taught this course in the History Department at DePauw University.

³Gloria Joseph, "Black Feminist Pedagogy and Schooling in Capitalist White America," in Beverly Guy-Sheftall, ed., *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Female Thought* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 464.

The Course

I structured this class chronologically to journey with my students from the antebellum period to the mid-twentieth century, exhibiting that this course was as much about the traditional American historical narrative as it was about how Black women have shaped and been shaped by this narrative. Specifically, I designed this course to explore the ways in which Black women are embedded within their social, political, and cultural contexts; how they constructed their lives within and against these contexts; and how they subsequently represented their lives in writing. The class focused on the concept of “intersectionality,” particularly the ways in which gender, race, class, and sexual orientation impacted Black women’s lives and how Black women have used autobiographies to (re)define and empower themselves. We examined these narratives for aspects of social and political protests to gain a better understanding of how Black women have attempted to achieve liberation, individually and collectively.

I structured the class as a seminar, relying primarily on class discussion, and taught it three times over the course of two academic years, with the third as a first-year seminar. The first course had an enrollment of fourteen students, five of whom were in their first-year in college. I was extremely pleased with the effort put forth by the students (one of the best of whom had enrolled in the course with a pass/fail requirement) and the level of analysis with which they approached the texts. In the second course, over half of the seventeen students were in their first-year, which resulted in a lesser degree of success in respect to student outcomes. As a result of my experience with a class that had a majority of first-year students, I adjusted some of the readings and assignments to provide a structure that was more amenable to their learning level.⁴

Having a class of only first-year students for the third course required that I begin some classes with lectures to provide students with better contextualization for the time period during which each author lived. I correctly assumed that first-year students would have little to no experience with Black feminist ideology and would therefore require greater guidance to engage in critical analyses of the texts and new intellectual terrain. Therefore, I required that they write two-page analytical responses to each

⁴I replaced Pauli Murray’s autobiography with Alice Walker’s edited collection, *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing ... and Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader* (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 1979), which includes Hurston’s autobiographical text *Dust Tracks on a Road* as well as some of her folktales and essays. Murray’s text proved to be too dense for the first-year students during the second section of the course. Additionally, I included a few shorter autobiographical pieces from Tricia Rose, ed., *Longing to Tell: Black Women’s Stories of Sexuality and Intimacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), and Patricia Bell-Scott, ed., *Life Notes: Personal Readings by Contemporary Black Women* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995). These shorter works also had the benefit of presenting students with more recent autobiographical works by Black women.

narrative to give them as much practice as possible in becoming active readers and critical thinkers.

I began the course with readings that conceptualize the study of Black women's history and Black feminist ideology—Elizabeth B. Higginbotham's *African American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race* (1992) and an excerpt from Patricia Hill Collins' seminal text, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (2000)—to provide a theoretical framework for interpreting Black women's narratives. This type of framework is critical to an accurate reading of the autobiographies, as Black women's history/experiences cannot be understood properly in the context of a white masculinist or feminist framework that marginalizes them as the "other."⁵ In addition, Nellie McKay's *The Narrative Self: Race, Politics and Culture in Black American Women's Autobiography* (1995) provided students with some of the major themes of the Black autobiographical tradition in general and, specifically, for women. McKay's piece also explicates some of these themes via an examination of narratives by Zora Neale Hurston, Marian Anderson, and Lorene Carey, which provided students with examples of the types of analyses that they should be striving for in their readings of the assigned autobiographies. I reminded students that although these were personal stories and likely quite different from typical textbooks to which they had become accustomed, they must not get lost in the story. That is, they needed to maintain a critical eye and remember to engage in an intellectual reading of the texts, not merely a leisurely, superficial one. Toward that end, I provided students with a list of guiding questions (see Appendix A), which were well-received. Many students commented that the questions shaped how they read the autobiographies and that without them they would have overlooked much of the significant information.

Teaching *Six Women's Slave Narratives* (1989) allowed students to see the evolution of experiences among enslaved women. Furthermore, the range of publication dates, from 1831 to 1909, illuminated the differences among earlier slave narratives that were heavily edited by whites and focused primarily on the institution of slavery and later ones that presented clear African American voices openly challenging the institution, while asserting their humanity. Black women not only challenged racist notions about Black inferiority but also reductionist gender prescriptions, such as the "Cult of True Womanhood," by asserting their womanhood and, subsequently, sisterhood with progressive white women. Moreover, these texts are

⁵The concept of the "other" is based on the dichotomous nature of categorization of people (and/or things and ideas) from each other based on their differences. This oppositional characterization justifies one object's being seen as the other and thus deemed inferior. For more detailed explanations of this concept, see Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000); Barbara Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1995); and bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Cambridge: South End Press, 1984).

important as they are the origins of the Black American autobiographical tradition. As William Andrews argues in *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography* (1989), these texts are important for both their historical and literary insights. They provide detailed accounts of slave life and the similarities and differences actuated by gender, geographic location, and more, as well as establish the foundations of the Black American literary tradition. The slave narratives are equally important for their indictment of the contradictory application of democracy and freedom in American society with respect to Blacks. They present models of agency and empowerment among Black women in spite of the limitations of the racist and sexist society in which they lived.

Although Ida B. Wells-Barnett was born a slave in 1862, her autobiography represents the first generation of Blacks who came of age in post-emancipation America. In her explicitly political autobiography and historical memoir, Wells-Barnett recounts her life via her contributions to the social movements of her era. Fully conscious of the utility of presenting a model of political action, Wells-Barnett's narrative presents her personal life as merely the subtext to the larger struggle of achieving equality for Blacks and women. Furthermore, Wells-Barnett's presentation of her life in this context is significant because it allowed students to examine the social mores of American society at the turn of the twentieth century that led her to believe that her life had to be presented as subtext to be well-received. Thus, students reading these texts were expected to interrogate American society along with the authors' representations of their lives.

Wells-Barnett's stated goals were to educate Black youth about not only her life and work as a reformer, race leader, and feminist, but also about Black history, in general. She explains that she was motivated to write her autobiography because "The history of this entire period which reflected glory on the race should be known. Yet most of it is buried in oblivion and only the southern white man's misrepresentations are in the public libraries and college textbooks of the land."⁶ Thus, her autobiography is the story of "herself, her people and her times" and provides an insider's view of the period known as the "nadir" for Black Americans and the "Women's Era" for American women. Wells-Barnett chronicles her international anti-lynching campaign and suffrage work as well as her work with the Black Women's Club Movement, the Niagara Movement, and Black male political leaders and rivals. In addition to challenging whites' misrepresentations of Blacks, Wells-Barnett offers her readers a new construct of Black womanhood while simultaneously defying the expectation that marriage and motherhood signaled an end to one's public life.

Another example of Black women's agency and empowerment was presented in the historical memoir, *Pauli Murray: The Autobiography of a Black Activist, Feminist,*

⁶Ida B. Wells, *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), iii.

Lawyer, Priest & Poet, which documents much of the twentieth century beginning almost where Wells-Barnett's narrative concludes.⁷ The first African American to earn a Juris Doctorate from Yale University Law School, and the first African American woman Episcopal priest, Murray represented the potential for Black women's success despite the barriers that relegated them to less than second class citizens. Central to Murray's narrative is her commitment to being a "race woman," as she confesses that it was made clear to her at an early age that she was "a child of destiny."⁸ Thus, her narrative, like Wells-Barnett's, is an historical memoir that chronicles the Civil Rights and Feminist struggles through her activism. She highlights her experiences with segregated education and her later contributions as a law student to the litigation strategy for *Brown v. Board of Education*, arguably the most significant case of the twentieth century, as well as her legal contributions to the fight for sex equality. From the Great Depression, the New Deal, and work with the Workers Defense League to her first-hand assessment of African nationalism while teaching in Ghana in 1960 and her role as co-founder of NOW, Murray details major events of the twentieth century, from the early 1910s until 1977, when she gives her first Holy Eucharist.

The next two narratives were authored by contemporaries who provide unique representations of Black girlhood in the mid-twentieth century. Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982) and June Jordan's *Soldier: A Poet's Childhood* (2001) shift from social history to coming-of-age memoirs and explore topics such as lesbianism and immigration. Lorde's self-proclaimed "biomythography" openly acknowledges the story-making nature of recounting one's life and regards truth more so as an accurate representation of the larger ideas rather than as a strict adherence to accurately recounting incidents in one's life. Negotiating multiple marginalized identities of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, Lorde interrogates the normative concepts of woman, whiteness, and heterosexuality. She finds empowerment in the strength and support of women, finding and claiming her visibility in contrast to the larger society's effort to render her invisible by denying and devaluing her existence as a Black woman, who is also a lesbian. Thus, Lorde simultaneously chronicles the experience of developing and claiming a feminist identity prior to the second wave of the feminist movement. Additionally, interspersed throughout Lorde's narrative is commentary on some of the prevailing social issues of her childhood, such as McCarthyism, factory working conditions, and pre-*Roe v. Wade* abortions.

June Jordan's autobiography presents the coming-of-age narrative of a child of Jamaican immigrants. Her narrative ends as she enters adulthood when she is sent off

⁷This memoir originally was published posthumously in 1987 as *Song in a Weary Throat: An American Pilgrimage* (New York: HarperCollins, 1987).

⁸Pauli Murray, *Pauli Murray: The Autobiography of a Black Activist, Feminist, Lawyer, Priest & Poet* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 70.

to boarding school for her junior year of high school. Jordan is instilled with a sense of race pride and duty at a very early age. The rearing she experiences from her father, Granville Jordan, a Garveyite, centers on making her a leader, soldier, and fighter, a traditionally masculine upbringing, in order to survive and to achieve the American dream. She presents a unique perspective of what it means to have a gendered upbringing as her father sought to ensure that his daughter would become a "prince among men." Therefore, Jordan's narrative offers insight into a childhood that results in her becoming a prolific writer and anti-racist, anti-sexist scholar-activist. It also represents one of the forms of socialization that developed as a response to racism in American society.

Both Lorde's and Jordan's autobiographies conclude when they are young, Lorde in her early twenties and Jordan at age thirteen. Therefore, these readings were assigned with essays authored by the women as adults, along with a documentary, *A Place of Rage* (1991), that explores their political ideologies and activism as a way to gauge how their childhood shaped and prepared them for the activism that characterized their adult lives, as well as how their life's work shaped the re-telling of their time as youths.⁹

The final two readings that reflect Black women's autobiographical tradition are by Charlayne Hunter-Gault, *In My Place* (1993), and Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* (1987), which explore their involvement in the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, respectively. Both narratives present individuals whose communities were instrumental in shaping the activists they became, and both situate their activism within a context of responsibility to community. They are not the heroines of the story, merely actors within a larger cast of activists striving for Black liberation.

Hunter-Gault's aptly titled *In My Place* discusses the Civil Rights Movement within the context of Blacks challenging their place in a segregated society. The importance of *Brown v. Board of Education* is highlighted, as Hunter-Gault provides an account of how the decision was implemented. The successful defeat of *Plessy v. Ferguson*'s "separate but equal" mandate was only the beginning of the story. The specifics of how the system of segregated education was dismantled as she and Hamilton Holmes integrated the University of Georgia in 1961 provide the backdrop for this narrative. Simultaneously, she presents a perspective of the Civil Rights Movement that is consistent with the current direction of Movement scholarship that focuses on a bottom-up analysis, in which she positions herself within a community of activists and supporters, without whom her efforts would not have been possible.

⁹"Sexism: An American Disease in Blackface" and "Man Child: A Black Lesbian Feminist's Response," in Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: The Crossing Press, 1984); "On the Occasion of a Clear and Present Danger at Yale" and "Toward a Manifest New Destiny" in June Jordan, *Technical Difficulties: African American Notes on the State of the Union* (New York: Vintage, 1994). For information on *A Place of Rage*, see <http://www.wmm.com/filmcatalog/pages/c287.shtml>.

Similarly, Shakur's narrative details an individual story of activism within the context of the Black Power Movement. In so doing, she highlights her childhood and the events that led her to join the Black Panther Party and her subsequent arrest, trial, conviction, and eventual escape from prison. Shakur's autobiography is not meant to provide her with prominence, but to educate readers about the struggle for Black liberation. Like Wells-Barnett, Shakur aims to educate her readers about an important part of American history that has often been misrepresented in the media and in historical records. Additionally, Shakur contextualizes the Black Liberation struggle within the broader struggle for human rights as she makes connections to the Puerto Rican Independence Movement and the Prisoners' Rights struggle among others. Shakur's narrative also brings the class full-circle, embodying themes prominent in the slave narratives, such as (political) literacy making one unfit to be a slave and expressing the shared reality of the oppressed.

These narratives offer a transformative re-telling of American history that encourages the inclusion of marginalized voices and Black women's lived experiences, while highlighting the major events of our nation's history including Reconstruction, Women's Suffrage, and the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. Furthermore, they present an alternate definition of leadership, which affords Black women activists a position of importance in the Black community specifically and in mainstream society generally.

In addition to the critical analysis for each text, students were required to write their own autobiographies as well as a plan explaining how they intended to structure their life histories (see Appendix B). One of the ideas I tried to convey was that thinking about power and privilege is not just the work of the oppressed. It is the responsibility of everyone because each individual is embedded within her or his social, political, and cultural contexts and is impacted by social inequities. Therefore, manifestations of these aspects factor into all of our lives and influence the stories we tell. Many of my students were white and middle class and, initially, assumed that the experiences we read would be completely disconnected from their own. Yet, even students whose experiences initially seemed most different from our subjects were required to use a similar analytical framework for assessing their own lives. Many students were successful in accomplishing this goal. For example, one student's paper recounted her experience of being raped during high school by her boyfriend's best friend, who was a star athlete. Although white and a member of the upper middle class, she recounted how this class privilege did not protect her from male privilege. Her story, similar to those we read in class, was a narrative of moving from victimhood to empowerment, despite circumstances that could have easily been non-transformative and even paralyzing. She concluded her narrative stating:

I thank God every day for what [he] did to me. I am a firm believer that everything happens for a reason and that my rape experience opened my eyes to my calling. He knew I was strong enough to get through it. He knew I

would eventually realize that my experience could be for the best. He knew that I would be able to help other women get their lives back. He knew I would help them survive.

Conclusions: "From Margin to Center"

Although many students made a connection between their autobiographies and those we read in class, some students wrote their autobiographies with no apparent influence from course readings. One Black female student wrote:

When I came to [the University], I thought I would repeat my patterns of friendships that I had established in high school; befriend the white girls, because unless their names are Jenny or Becky, they are bound to screw you over a lot more. But freshman year taught me something. Not all white girls are your friends. Not all black girls are your enemies.

While suggesting the beginning of seemingly profound insight, the author failed to develop an interrogation of the socialization process, and, likely, internalized racism that led to her initial conclusions. Instead, she continued by stating simply that she succeeded in making Black friends who accepted her as herself. Had she drawn on the insights from any of the assigned autobiographies, she would have had a template of how to probe such an issue to uncover the larger significance to her life and to Black women's experiences in general.

Such a lack of perspective led me to an additional course requirement the third time I taught the class to ensure the continuity of the lessons I wanted students to learn and to apply to their own autobiographies—an Autobiography Analysis. This paper required students to analyze their own autobiography in relation to major elements and strategies used by Black women. I asked that they identify the primary themes and strategies of their narratives and explain what factors determined the strategies employed (see Appendix C). This assignment forced students to be more deliberate in penning narratives that were, in some fashion, influenced by the writings of Black women autobiographers. One successful example of the applied learning with the new requirement came from a student who wrote the following:

Like Audre Lorde, who wrote poems in secret for many years before anyone knew, I was afraid to express my talents and gifts, because of fear of rejection ... I did not fit into that stereotype of being a strong black woman. Many times this made me feel as though I was not really black... I did not have the same resolve that black women are supposed to have. The stereotype of a strong black woman is someone who does not let people run over her, and always has an attitude. I was not that at all. It was really difficult, but after reading Lorde's autobiography I learned that all black

women are not the same. What I discovered from Lorde's autobiography is learning to be comfortable in your own skin. I was inspired by her autobiography because I learned that because you are a black woman does not mean you have to live up to the stereotypes society places on you. I was able to define who I was for myself, and not through other people or society.

Through reading the narratives, Lorde's in particular, this student was able to free herself from the limiting definitions of Black womanhood that all the authors addressed. In that sense, her empowerment was a partial fulfillment of the individual and collective liberation that the authors envisioned when they penned their autobiographies. This response was indicative of the ideas expressed in the Autobiography Analysis. For example, another student wrote more broadly about how her autobiography was influenced by the assigned narratives collectively.

These women's books served as an example of how I could express myself, and still maintain my own views and show how my experiences were relevant to those other than just myself. I was especially influenced by the way all of the women used education as a means of bettering themselves so that they could eventually give back to their own communities. I believe that is one of the reasons I wanted to focus on education and how it has impacted and will continue to impact my life.

While some students were initially hesitant, thinking their own lives rather insignificant, by the end of the semester, most had found their voices and produced top-notch narratives. I think this was in large part a result of the variety of styles utilized by the authors we read. Students learned that claiming their voice is an act of empowerment to which they are all entitled. One male student used his Autobiography Analysis to write specifically about the power in finding and asserting one's voice:

I was able to find my voice, and to tell a side of the American, African American, and the male story that is rarely shared textually or verbally. In doing so, I feel as though my insights were able to shed light on the importance of sound relationships with immediate family members, and the impact these relationships have on the development of young black men. ... the dominant culture has never been receptive to positive portrayals in regards to young black men.... I was able to speak for the other black males who, despite the misconceptions of society, were raised well, with respect, dignity, education, manners and love being enforced as the virtues of choice.

He was empowered to present a paradigm of Black masculinity that challenged America's stereotypes about Black men. Far from conforming to racist notions of Black male "thug life" or intellectual inferiority, his autobiography portrayed, like

Shakur's and Hunter-Gault's, an account of the centrality of family and community in nurturing self-defined notions of personhood in opposition to the socially defined spaces in which Black people are expected to exist. Like other students, despite his gender, he was able to see his experiences in the lives of the women whose narratives we read.

Learning U.S. history through the perspective of Black female voices was a unique endeavor for all students, regardless of race or gender. Many were shocked and angry to discover that they knew so little about the experiences, contributions, and accomplishments of Black women. Furthermore, they realized that the humanist component of the Black feminist framework was inclusive and applicable to their individual lives even if they were white or male. Students found the autobiographies particularly useful as they learned to interrogate the identity categories they had been socialized to normalize—whiteness, maleness, heterosexual, and representing the middle class—and to claim their individual and multiple identities as a source of empowerment.

Courses of this nature, which focus on the experiences of a marginalized group, are an attempt to bring women of color into the traditional curriculum and present the importance of people of color in American history. In addressing this curriculum reconstruction, Elizabeth Higginbotham has noted that many attempts to incorporate women of color into the curriculum fail because these women are “addressed as either tangents to the ‘generic’ woman or as the ‘exceptional’ woman of color.”¹⁰ Through the use of Black women's autobiographies, students learned how each person, regardless of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality, is shaped by historical circumstances and what insights those voices can provide in helping us create a more comprehensive narrative of American society. In the end, I believe that students took from this class not only an understanding of the nuanced lives of African American women, but a more informed understanding of our nation's history as well.

Appendix A

- How does the author provide a critique of society?
- What aspect(s) are being critiqued?
- How does the author protest discrimination/resist oppression?
- To what communities is the author connected and how does she express this connection?
- What characteristics of Black feminism does the autobiography embody?

¹⁰Elizabeth Higginbotham, “Designing an Inclusive Curriculum: Bringing All Women into the Core,” in Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Female Thought* (New York: New Press, 1995), 481.

- Does the author carry on the slave narrative tradition?
- How does the author critique/challenge the existing knowledge?
- What silences exist? What can you interpret from them?
- How does the author discuss issues of survival?
- How does she present a racialized self? An American self? A gendered self?
- What differences among Black women does the author discuss (sexuality, class, complexion, geographic location, etc.)?
- What specific contributions of the African American to American culture are represented by this author?
- What view does the author have of herself? What events in the book contribute to that perspective?
- What problems of African Americans, as discussed in the book, are common to all Americans?
- What is the author's most outstanding personality trait? Cite evidence from the book to support your claims.
- What is the author's goal? How does she achieve her goal?

Appendix B

This assignment is to write (portions of) your own autobiography. You might want to write about a fragment of your life, a turning point, or you can do a short "life history." Each paper should reveal something important about the author and the environment in which she/he grew up. It should be well-written and interesting. Autobiographies are often as important for what they leave out as for what they say. You will experience the challenges autobiographers face in writing a book that is both insightful and truthful. Your autobiographies should be fifteen pages in length and can adhere to a format of your choosing. Some examples include:

Full autobiography covers your entire life from birth to the present.

Memoirs limit what is included in your life, usually to a particular period, for example your childhood or adolescence.

- *Coming of age memoir*

- *Historical memoir*—History through your personal experiences.

Spiritual Autobiography focuses on the impact of one's religious or spiritual conversion/development.

Reflective Autobiography details an event or learning experience in your life and its impact on your development.

Autobiography Plan

Write a plan for your autobiography, including a clear articulation of the aspect of your life that you are going to be working on, including responses to the following:

- What is the purpose or significance of your story to yourself? To others?
- What do you want to accomplish by telling this story?
- How is it political? In what ways will your story illuminate your position with respect to gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and their interaction? How does telling this story place you within or expose your contexts? You need not address all social formations, but you should include at least three.
- Who is your audience?
- What form(s) are you going to use to tell your story? Remember, writing a linear autobiographical narrative is only one option. You may use various writing genres that might not have been discussed in the course.

Appendix C

Critique your autobiography for the ways in which it evidences your individual empowerment, challenges society, and accomplishes your intended goals. For example, how does your text give you a voice, produce new or counter knowledge that operates to diversify dominant approaches and ideologies, bring issues from margin to center, or destabilize, expand, or transgress social norms? Additionally, this analysis should discuss how the autobiographies we have studied during the semester have impacted the type of information you believe to be significant to an autobiography and how Black women's autobiographies specifically shaped the writing of your own narrative.