THE INVISIBILITY OF 19th CENTURY AFRICAN AMERICAN (AUTO)BIOGRAPHIES

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Abstract: This paper aims at investigating how slavery experiences of African Americans have been disregarded as traumatic, leading to the marginalized position their (auto)biographical works have had in the academic field. Drawing from the concepts of memory and identity, the analysis here proposed will examine how African American literary invisibility can be understood within academic discourse concerning the difference between (auto)biography and slave narratives as classificatory terms. Henceforth it will be possible to advocate for a visible space of African American (auto)biographies in the literary canon culminating in the production of neo-slave narratives in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, which have enriched studies of collective memory and identity.
Key words: Slave narratives; Autobiographies; Neo-slave narratives; Memory; Identity.

Resumo: Este artigo tem como objetivo investigar como as experiências de escravidão de afro-americanos dos Estados Unidos foram desconsideradas como traumáticas, levando à posição marginalizada que estes escritos (auto)biográficos tiveram no campo acadêmico. Partindo dos conceitos de memória e identidade, a análise aqui proposta examinará como a invisibilidade literária afro-americana pode ser avaliada no discurso acadêmico a partir da diferença entre (auto)biografias e narrativas de escravizados como termos classificatórios. A partir disso, será possível advogar por um espaço visível das (auto)biografias afro-americanas no cânone literário, culminando na produção de neonarrativas de escravidão nos séculos XX e XXI, que enriqueceram os estudos sobre memória e identidade coletivas.
Palavras-chave: Narrativas de escravidão; Autobiografias; Neonarrativas de escravidão; Memória; Identidade.

> *Reader, be assured this narrative is no fiction. I am aware that some of my adventures may seem incredible; but they are, nevertheless, strictly true. I have not exaggerated the wrongs inflicted by Slavery; on the contrary, my descriptions fall far short of the facts. I have concealed the names of places, and given persons fictitious names. I had no motive for secrecy on my own account, but I deemed it kind and considerate towards others to pursue this course. I wish I were more competent to the task I have undertaken. But I trust my readers will excuse deficiencies in consideration of circumstances.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Self-referential writing comprehends a broad and diffuse area of study within academic research. Its various angles and perspectives characterize the blurriness as well as the richness and resonance of this literary genre. Curiosity about one's life and experiences has engaged people towards the intimate and profound accounts narrated by men and women about their fortunes and misfortunes. The many types of self-referential writings, however, create their diversity: memoirs, testimonies, testimonio, autofiction, diaries/journals, narratives, and (auto)biographies are some representatives of this literary branch. The specificities comprised in each kind of writing lead them to a particular study approach, culminating in the creation of a canon with the most famous works to be tackled by academics as well as by literary readers. However, if this standard and discriminatory list is on one hand created and creates identities and history, on the other hand, it also has the power to render other voices, identities and histories invisible.

The identities, monuments and celebrations derived from such historical selections have impacted in the way excluded and marginalized memories are portrayed in current academic discussions. The invisibility to which some people, places and events are condemned is a class struggle, as it makes evident the strategies and manipulations of history orchestrated by those who consider themselves the "master[s] of memory and forgetfulness" (LE GOFF, 1996, p. 56). Thus, the importance of studying and questioning the presence of specific historical characters and periods must not exclude - but enhance - the investigation of the absence of the Others of history.

In the canon, the Others of history are represented mostly through colonial and enslaved lenses. Their presence in Western literature has been disguised and their memories and traumatic reminiscences have been undermined as a means to portray these subjects as limited and voiceless. The somewhat scantiness of African American literature in the canon highlights the apathy towards blacks' experiences before and after the abolition of slavery and their literary production from this cultural trauma, as argued by Roy Eyerman (2001). With this in mind, it is possible to investigate how slavery experiences of African Americans have been disregarded as traumatic, leading to the marginalized position their (auto)biographical works have had in the academic field. Drawing from the concepts of memory and identity, we intend to analyze how African American literary invisibility can be understood within academic discourse concerning the difference between (auto)biography and slave narratives. Then it will be possible to trace the similarities and peculiarities of each as a means to advocate for a visible space of African American (auto)biographies in the literary canon. It is necessary, however, to state that the examination of these concepts in this article do not aim at unwinding them completely, for the goal is only to understand how they have been perceived and argued by some academic writers. From this point forward it will be possible to scrutinize their relations as a means to advocate for their important position in the study of African American history and identity, with a special remark for nineteenth century's African American (auto)biographies/slave narratives as holders of - a yet excluded and marginalized - memory.

II. MEMORY

Literature and memory have had an imbricate relation since the Classical Age Greeks. The interdisciplinary perspective memory has achieved reinforces its crucialness, as Jacques Le Goff in his History and Memory (1996). His conceptualization of memory stresses its social and individual power over history and identity. From this, the writing activity presents itself as one of the most relevant strategies to organize and "solidify" memory. However, even if it is not the only approach, it determines and allows the construction of memory, history, and identity to be made differently. Oral approaches to memory, in a different perspective, have been rendered inferior, as it can be perceived in Plato's dialogue between the philosopher and the rhapsode: "Ion" (1892). The disregard for the oral approach to literature, in this example, was presented by Socrates who admonished Ion's inspiration and great memory as proof that he could not follow logical arguments but only be affected by the chain of inspiration deriving from the Muse[s][3] . The belief that orality distorts memory and reason is, then, expressed in the vision that literature and poets could be associated with the sophists as dishonest people. The writing perspective, however, does not straighten the connection between memory and reason/logic necessarily. In relation to this, time plays an important role, for it enriches narratives and tales by change and adaptation.

The association between time and memory has many aspects. The access to the past occurs through expressions of "imagination, memory, recollection, trauma, forgetfulness, omission, remembrance, celebration, identity, origin, traces, community, belonging, nation, country" (MARTINS, 2007, p. 36). These expressions represent the uncontrollable part of memory which is presented along with society's attempt to control it. According to Plato's Phaedrus, Socrates addresses the invention of the alphabet as a negative event for memory, for "by relieving men of the need to exercise their memories, will produce forgetfulness in the souls of those who learn it, so much so that trusting to writing, they will seek outside themselves, and on their own, the means of remembering; as a result, you have found a remedy, not for memory, but rather for the process of remembering" (PLATO, 275a, *apud* LE GOFF, 1996, p. 64). Hence, it can be argued that the writing activity is not enough for the solidification and perpetuation of memory, for its interactions with time and individuals make forgetfulness and remembrance emerge as components of memory, emphasizing its flaws and relativeness. Therefore, the apprehension of language and the act of learning are within the scope of memory as they result in the communicative development, which produce narratives and bear a social function. Language and memory, then, are organized in literature both in writing and oral perspectives. The sketches drawn from this connection serve as a basis for the constant transformation of identities and history.

The selective nature of memory is another relevant part for the formation of history and identity. The dispute of memory, as argued by Michael Pollak (1989, 1992), shows that

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3 The Muse[s] which inspired poets of the oral tradition, are the nine daughters of Mnemosyne, Titan goddess of memory. The Muses are goddesses of poetry, music and history, and Mnemosyne was considered their mother since "poetry preserves the memory of the past" and also "because the poet himself had to place special reliance on memory before the invention of writing" (HARD; ROSE, 2009, p. 78).

competition and conflict between memories induce the creation of strategies to subvert the silencing that is often imposed upon marginalized groups. According to him, memory bears opposing characteristics, of being "floating, changeable" as well as having "relatively invariant, unchanging points"(1992, p. 2). The selectiveness, then, highlights the vision of memory first as an individually and collectively constructed phenomenon which is "subjected to fluctuations, transformations, constant changes", and also as one that usually privileges the written memory as the official one, due to its "solidification". Thus, the use of this selective power can exclude or manipulate the participation of Others in the so-called official history.

The union of memory and identity helps the understanding of how disputes of power influence in the historical and identity construction of a person or a group. Identity, following Pollak's conceptualization, as the "self-image, for oneself and others[4]" (1992, p. 5), bears three key elements: the physical unity, the boundaries of a body or of a group; the continuity in time; and the feeling of coherence, that "the different elements forming an individual are effectively unified" (1992, p. 5). The elaboration of an identity from these elements is, according to the French sociologist, a negotiation, for the Other is what establishes the self. Thus from the entrance into the Symbolic Order, the self-image starts to be negotiated as the self is transformed and becomes acquainted with the Other, who becomes a reference. The role played by memory is relevant in this process for it constitutes otherness as well as identity, not as an essence, but as a process open to discussion. The selective processes of memory, accompanied by the effects of time, build a self-image that is likely to be redefined and in constant transformation, for it is constructed "in reference to the requirements of acceptability, admissibility, credibility and through direct negotiation with others" (1992, p. 5). These mechanisms promote the framing of memory as well as its internal negotiations, which reaffirm its changeable and unchangeable nature.

Drawing from these aspects, the construction of history is embedded by the subjectivity in the mechanisms of selection and negotiation that are associated with memory and remembrance. The literariness of documents and history, as argued by some historians, such as Hayden White, link memory, identity, and history. Understanding that there is always an intercession in these processes, the work of the historian becomes "an inescapable intermediation" (1992, p. 8) - a reconstruction derived from some source, which, in its composition was already a reconstruction. Mediation is, then, perpetuated in the relations established by the subjects: it is in language and communication in general, spoken and written and also in the way each person creates his/her own story, leading to his/her formation of the self.

III. FICTION, MEMORY, AND (AUTO)BIOGRAPHY

The encounter between what is referenced as true, as the historical event experienced, and the writing account of such story occurs in literary discourse. For autobiographies and history books, the writing element characterizes the transcription of memorable events into

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4 This passage and all others from Michael Pollak and Philippe Lejeune have been translated by the authors.

words. Notwithstanding, as Hayden White (1985) proposes, historical texts are constituted of literary artifacts and so the fictionality contained in them stresses their literary and subjective construction. Hence, the dissolution of the rigid binary between fiction and reality provides insight into what Wolfgang Iser (1993) called fictionalizing acts. In the triad composed of the real, the imaginary, and the fictive, The German scholar understands that the fictive is an intermediary for it "pass[es] from the diffuse to the precise" (1993, p. 3). It is through the act of transgression, of crossing of boundaries, performed by the fictionalizing acts – selection, combination and self-disclosure – that the imaginary "take[s] on an essential quality of the real, for determinacy is a minimal definition of reality", since it was first experienced "in a diffuse, formless and fluid way and without a referential object" (1993, p. 3). Consequently, the transcoding of these worlds transforms the subjectivity of life narratives' sources into an element of biographical composition, as it exposes the multiple constructions of identity and also of history, as pointed out by White in his "The Historical Text as a Literary Artifact" (1985). Hence, in a relational way, since selection and combination are the basis of the (auto)biographical writing and of the representation of the self, both movements are made possible through access to memory and remembrance.

In view of this, the fictional is observed as a literary strategy, but also as a constitutive element of the subjects' identity. When structuring a story with beginning, middle and end, in view of the impossibility of encompassing its completeness, there is a need to select elements that are classified as relevant and insert them into the textual reality that is being created. When removed from their field of reference, these elements cease to refer to the reality to which they belonged, and, when combined and inserted into a new field, create extra textual relationships that express the intentionality of the text implemented by the arbitrariness of these arrangements. It is possible to extend the scope of these movements (selection and combination) beyond the construction of written narratives, as these are, according to Philippe Lejeune (2014, p. 121), only an extension of what Paul Ricoeur called the "narrative identity" creation that precedes the act of writing[5]. The centrality of this creative work is presented because "we do not live stories" (WHITE, 1985, p. 90), for they are built in the course of established social relations, because "trying to see myself better, I keep creating myself, I clean the drafts of my identity" (LEJEUNE, 2014, p. 121). Thus, the identity and the (auto)biographical construction make use of Iser's fictionalizing acts described before and also reinforce White's argument about fictional historical texts, stating that "no given set of events attested by the historical record comprises a story manifestly finished and complete"(WHITE, 1985, p. 90); hence, the need of the exposed acts of transgression for the continuous formation of stories highlights that "all men who walk the street are narrative men, that's why they can stand in two legs" (LEJEUNE, 2014, p. 121). Accordingly, the understanding of the daily transgressions for identity construction and life writing reinforces the flexibility of Iser's triad relationship and its link with memory, since the access to life experiences is through mediations and interventions which compromise any type of work that is understood to be entirely real and true.

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5 Lejeune makes such a connection in the article "Autobiographie et fiction", translated by Jovita Maria Gerheim Noronha and Maria Inês Coimbra Guedes (2014), drawing from Paul Ricouer's *Temps et récit* (1991).

The use of fictionalizing acts would allow African American (auto)biographers to adjust their narratives into the amount of reality they would depict, in order to convince the reader of his/her experiences and also maintain room for self-preservation. Even though the fictive present in the literary texts, as argued by Iser and White, cannot be interpreted as being related to falsehood, it is relevant to observe that, in relation to ex-slaves or African Americans' writings, white skepticism is imbued with the stereotypical view of blacks as deceitful people. The strategies that were used in their (auto)biographies enhance the complex relation towards truth and lie, for "yuh can't call a white man a lie 'n' git erway with it"[6], as presented by Richard Wright in his autobiographical sketch: "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow" (1968), and, at the same time black people would have to "learn[ed] to lie, to steal, to dissemble. I learned to play that dual role every Negro must play if he wants to eat and live" (WRIGHT, 1968, p. 292–297). Considering this, the discredit of African Americans' lives as equal and of their literary works as trustworthy unveils the power structure created through racism. Grada Kilomba, in Plantation Memories (2008), while discussing the psychological origins of racism, explores how out of slavery whites developed strategies and mechanisms to oppress blacks. The white subject, through the "brutal mask of speechlessness" (2008, p. 16) sought to dominate black subjects both physically and symbolically. As Kilomba refers to the Freudian psychological split between the self and the Other, she believes that the white subject develops two attitudes toward external reality: only one part of the ego - the' good ', accepting and benevolent - is experienced as 'self;' the rest - the 'bad', rejecting and malevolent - is projected onto the 'Other' and experienced as external." (2008, p. 18). In this division, the white subject will retain all positive feelings towards him/herself and will externalize what is considered bad and negative in the black subject: the "Other," as a projection of what "the white subject fears recognizing about himself/herself"(2008, p. 18). This projection is linked to the mask of speechlessness since it exposes only the alienated perspectives created and spread by whites about black subjects, and thereby, due to the control of the enunciation and oppression of what could be said, is perpetuated so that the black subjects themselves could only see these "white fantasies of what Blackness should be like" (2008, p. 19). Such mask then embodies the impossibility of blacks telling or elaborating their visions of who they are, how their lives had been, or what type of identity they want or can create. This corroborates the whites' distrust of black subjects' testimonies and the whites' disrespect for their beliefs. The white subject's fear of listening, according to Kilomba, can be represented by Freud's notion of repression, because its essence is to divert something away from the conscious. Consequently, white people's control over the silence and self-vision of black subjects correlates with the former's refusal to listen.

Blacks' identity is, then, intertwined by these hegemonic power structures. However, it is possible to say that the use of memory in African American (auto)biographies evokes a resistance movement. For, in spite of the white audience and publishers' eagerness for the horrific account of slavery, men and women made use of their written narratives to represent their development as people through difficult times coherently. The memories African Americans recollected were selected, as associated to Iser's fictionalizing acts, for there is

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6 "You can't call a white man a liar and get away with it".

a natural silencing and forgetting of traumatic events: "she shudders, even now, as she goes back in memory, and revisits this cellar, and sees its inmates" (GILBERT; TRUTH, 1998, p. 10). The self-image from their works made room for an identity construction of and for themselves as well as for their families As Pollak (1992) argues about the inheritance of memory, a connection can be traced between the writing of a book that promotes the one who wrote it, and the collective aspect a work such as an (auto)biography can have, for in the particularity of enslaved accounts, the writing state of memory helps to construct the unofficial history of the marginalized.

This aspect sheds light into the four elements, according to Pollak (1992), of which memory is composed. The first relates to the experience of events which a person lived; the second is related to the experiences shared by the social groups to which one belongs. Such experiences are encompassed according to the group and are not necessarily lived by such person, however, due to their relevance, they are incorporated in a group's imaginary in a way that "it's almost impossible to know whether one participated in it or not" (1992, p. 201). This characteristic points to the permeability of memories, personal and collective, as argued by Maurice Halbwachs (1992). Another element of the memory refers to people and characters whose connections have been blurred, as Pollak states, by the holder of memory. The presence of some figures in one's life is not concrete, yet somehow present. The last element is connected to the places of memory, which, as Pollak describes, may be connected to specific recollections that can be linked to a time period. These components portrayed by the French sociologist are easily exemplified by the memories one holds of childhood. Therefore, memories are constructed and learned by the person who is experiencing events, along with the events that are shared with him/her through the groups she/he belongs to. The reliability of memories is constantly questioned since forgetting and omitting are commonly experienced in life. The writing experience of one's life is, somehow, an attempt to solidify a selected version of such life. The intentions behind the writing of (auto)biographies are innumerous, and yet the "final" work is composed of memories.

IV. FROM INVISIBILITY TOWARDS VISIBILITY

African American (auto)biographies are the most famous representation of black literature during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These works helped the abolition campaign as they portrayed the horrors and traumatic experiences of African Americans during that period. They were also crucial for the construction of an African American identity after the Civil War. These narratives represented the lack of historic and memorial records, which would then be articulated by those interested in raising their voices against the innumerous injuries they had been subjected to.

Written by men and women, these works would focus in their past as a way to construct the memories, since important information such as the date of birth, names of parents, and origin had been denied. The approximately six thousand slave narratives, as argued by James Olney (1984), have similar characteristics: like the "I was born" written in the beginning of most texts; "an engraved portrait or photograph of the subject of the

narrative; and authenticating testimonial" (1984, p. 49). His understanding, however, is not that these voices had been silenced, rendered invisible and marginalized, but that these narratives are repetitive, for the reading of two or three give "a sense not of uniqueness, but of overwhelming *sameness*[7] " (1984, p. 46). So, in his vision, slave narratives cannot be considered (auto)biographies for "the slave narrative, with a very few exceptions, tends to exhibit a highly conventional, rigidly fixed form that bears much the same relationship to autobiography in a full sense as painting by numbers bears to painting as a creative act." (1984, p. 48). His disregard for African American literary works may be observed under layers of complexity if one considers what is commonly associated to an (auto)biography: a work by a white author. In Olney's view, "ex-slaves do exercise memory in their narratives, but they never talk about it as Augustine does, as Rousseau does, as Wordsworth does, as Thoreau does, as Henry James does, as a hundred other autobiographers (not to say novelists like Proust) do" (OLNEY, 1984, p. 48–49), for these are the people entitled to acquire an identity and therefore their lives are constituted of unique elements. It is interesting to mention that Rousseau's Confessions has inspired the creation of an (auto)biographical model, thus undermining Olney's belief that only ex-slave narratives would have a rigid form. The use of the term narrative, then, just like the use of *testimonio* for the Latin American tradition - as opposed to testimony, from the Anglo-Saxon tradition-, stresses its particularities and at the same time it may convey an inferior label to such works, enhanced by both the geographical configuration of power and the derogatory position orality bears in the academic world.

As it has been addressed earlier in this article, the oral approach to memory and history was not considered accurate, leading to the value of written versions. The conflict between the spoken and the written accounts is also a relevant feature in the African American literary tradition, especially for nineteenth century (auto)biographers, for

> while attaining the prohibited literacy is often cast as one of the crucial stages in the progress to freedom in slave narratives and later African American *Bildungsromane*, the written word is also a potent weapon against people of African descent. As Williams puts it in her preface to Dessa Rose, "Afro-Americans, having survived by word of mouth – and made of that process a high art – remain at the mercy of literature and writing; often, these have betrayed us." This ambivalent relationship with the written word has produced a kind of double consciousness which Robert Stepto describes as African American culture's simultaneous "distrust of literacy" and "abiding faith in it". (RUSHDY, 2004, p. 99)

From this quote it is possible to draw on how the distrust upon African American accounts of their experiences have been disregarded by the ambiguous relation ex-slaves had with writing. The "distrust of literacy" carries the burden of the prohibition of learning to read and write and the need to follow a "tight bind" intention with the writing of their experiences, "to give a picture of "slavery as it is" (OLNEY, 1984, p. 48) and therefore to

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7 Italics from the author.

have the acquiescence of the white sponsor and reader to spread their lives and horrors as a means to advocate for the inhumane treatment slavery has perpetuated. This last point also carries the "abiding faith" in literature and written works, for that was the resisting practice to which they had access.

Memory is the gateway to the past and at the same time the possibility to heal from it. The perception that slave narratives are "a non-memorial description fitted to a preformed mold, a mold with regular depressions here and equally regular prominences there - virtually obligatory figures, scenes, turns of phrase, observances, and authentications" (OLNEY, 1984, p. 49) is a reductionist view that neglects the peculiarities of these works. The literary strategies African American men and women had to resort to in order to have their voices heard are part of their composition and richness. Their ability to recollect and approach memories is connected to the construction of an identity and of a narrative, as White and Iser's fictionalizing acts have explored.

Enslaved people, like rhapsodists, were discredited. They were depicted as dishonest and deceitful people, who lacked the ability to follow logic arguments and who were only reproducers of the inspiration derived by a chain instead of capable producers of knowledge or reflections. Accordingly, the use of (auto)biography to refer to ex-slaves' literary works is also a place of resistance, in order to shed light upon how the canon is composed and how some labels have the power to exclude literatures that do not conform with the Western written and white pattern. The use of slave narratives must not elude the idea of inferiority or sameness, but of plurality and respect. The word (auto)biography as a literary genre is very controversial and yet it carries the author-function in the word auto, and this means the acknowledgment of an individuality for these men and women whose humanity has for so long been ignored.

A new approach to African American memory of slavery in literature has developed with the production of *neo-slave narratives* in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. After the Civil Rights Movement "historians began to produce studies of slave life that were newly attentive to the culture and community and resistance of slaves, giving a portrait both closer to the experience of slaves that lent itself more to a rich fictional treatment." (RUSHDY, 2004, p. 89,90). The fictional nature of neo-slave narratives appears as an attempt to revisit and reconsider the traumatic experiences of slavery after its "end". Both African American (auto)biographies and neo-slave narratives draw attention to blacks' invisibilities and their resistance against the power structure around them, for "issues of power, political struggle and cultural identity are inscribed within the formal structures of texts." (WEST, 1993, p.41 *apud* RUSHDY, 2004, p. 97). Therefore, these narratives of slavery have helped create a space for African American works in the American literary canon[8]. By doing so, enslaved men and women have been recollected and read as people "whose enslavement did not cause them to lose sight of their humanity" (RUSHDY, 2004, p. 103–104). This contemporary literary enterprise exemplifies that the label *slave narrative* does not necessarily point to the "sameness", as argued by Olney.

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8 Represented by great and canonical names such as Langston Hughes, Lorraine Hansberry, and most famously, Toni Morrison, who was granted the ultimate canonization as a Nobel laureate in 1993.

Memory and identity are deeply rooted in the African American experience, and (auto)biographies are an important and significant part of it. Slavery, as a traumatic event that subsists until today under a racist social structure, must be addressed properly. Emphasizing the literary strategies enslaved men and women have used while constructing and reconstructing their memories and remembrances will, hopefully, open space in the academic world to reflections concerning the places African American Literature has occupied and how these texts have been received and labeled. This exercise is still difficult due to the resistance of white subjects to rethink and face the horrible projections that have been thrust upon black subjects. Thus, there is a need to reevaluate the canon and to understand that the formation of an identity does not need to subjugate the Other.

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