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## COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND CULTURAL TRAUMA IN FEMALE-AUTHORED AFRICAN AMERICAN LIFE NARRATIVES

## MEMÓRIA COLETIVA E TRAUMA CULTURAL EM TEXTOS AUTOBIOGRÁFICOS DE MULHERES AFRO-AMERICANAS

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**Abstract:** This study examines the relationship between collective memory and slavery as a cultural trauma in female-authored African American life narratives in the earlier decades of the development of this tradition in African American literature. The literary corpus focuses on Harriet Jacobs' slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) and Susie King Taylor's Civil War account, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp with the 33d United States Colored Troops Late 1st S. C.* (1902). Both texts reveal African American women's underground memories (POLLAK, 1989) of antebellum period and the period of the American Civil War that challenge the *national memory* and American history-writing.

**Key-words:** African American autobiography; Collective memory; Cultural trauma.

**Resumo:** Este estudo examina a relação entre memória coletiva e escravidão como um trauma cultural em textos autobiográficos afro-americanos de autoria feminina no início do desenvolvimento dessa tradição na literatura afro-americana. O corpus literário enfoca, respectivamente, a narrativa de Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), e o livro de memórias da Guerra Civil de Susie King Taylor, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp with the 33d United States Colored Troops Late 1st S. C.* (1902). Ambos textos trazem memórias subterrâneas (POLLAK, 1989) de mulheres afro-americanas do período *antebellum* e do período da Guerra Civil Americana que desafiam as *memórias nacionais* e a história americana.

**Palavras-chave:** Autobiografia afro-americana; Memória coletiva; Trauma cultural.

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Se tratando de um ato empreendido por mulheres negras, que historicamente transitam por espaços culturais diferenciados das elites, escrever adquire um sentido de insubordinação. [...] A nossa escrevivência não pode ser lida como histórias para ‘ninar os da casa grande’ e sim para incomodá-los em seus sonos injustos.<sup>3</sup>  
(Conceição Evaristo, 2007)

## ESCREVIVÊNCIAS OF U.S. SLAVERY AND THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

In her 2006 novel *Becos da Memória*, Brazilian scholar and writer Conceição Evaristo writes: “as histórias são inventadas, mesmo as reais, quando são contadas” (2017, p. 13)<sup>4</sup>. In this context, which circumscribes both fiction and fact to the realm of invention and creation, she coins the term *escrevivência*<sup>5</sup> to designate stories of black womanhood that are constructed around individual lives but refer to a collectivity. These stories, for Evaristo, deal with material bodies that are not only described but most of all experienced (2005, pp. 205–206). Evaristo’s notion also points to particularities of life narratives<sup>6</sup> authored by women of African descent that have been functioning as counter-narratives in both literature and history. These women, as Evaristo suggests, incorporate community-based values into their self-referential practices which function as spaces of consciousness for their people. Evaristo’s theorization, although having emerged in the context of literature written by Brazilian black women, can be particularly valuable to read early female-authored African American life narratives written in the U.S. For African American women in earlier American history, as Joanne Braxton noted, self-referential practices carried a set of values of care, concern, nurturing, and, especially, resistance. It resulted from a tradition that stemmed from not only written but also oral literature as a result of an education of black womanhood that was passed on through generations of women and that began early in life with lullabies, nursery rhymes, and children’s games, all of which contributed to the uniqueness of life narratives of African American women (1989, p. 3). In that sense, these narratives were

In this context, this study examines the relationship between collective memory and cultural trauma in female-authored African American life narrative in the earlier years of the development of this tradition in African American literature. The literary corpus

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3 “Being an act undertaken by black women, who historically move through cultural spaces different from the elite, writing acquires a sense of insubordination. [...] Our *escrevivência* cannot be read as “bedtime stories for the big house,” but to disturb them in their unjust sleep”.

4 “Stories are made up, even real ones, when they are told”.

5 The term *escrevivência* is a fusion of the Portuguese words *escrever* [to write] and *vivência* [experience/life].

6 The more popular term “autobiography”, historically, has primarily been used to refer to a type of writing associated with an autonomous Western individual and their universalizing life story as the utmost achievement of life writing. “Life narrative”, on the other hand, as Smith and Watson suggest (2010, pp. 1–9), is an all-encompassing term used in Anglo-American scholarship to refer to a myriad of self-referential practices, whether in literature, film, photography, music, etc. Many theorists find “autobiography” inadequate to refer to the enormous range of self-referential narratives produced by people who did not fit the early twentieth-century notion of the “sovereign self”, thus preferring to use the term “life narratives”.

is composed of texts produced in the context of the antebellum period and the American Civil War, which are, respectively, Harriet Jacobs' slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) and Susie King Taylor's Civil War account, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp with the 33d United States Colored Troops Late 1st S. C.* (1902). These texts together offer a unique combination that allows for a better understanding of the myriad ways in which African American women used life narratives as a site of resistance. Discussions surrounding the relationship between female-authored African American narratives and memory and history are of great interest to the present study. In that context, many important questions arise: What role did African American women have in the process of collective remembering? How were slavery and the Civil War represented in African American women's writings and for what purpose? What are the social and temporal parameters that mark this process of representation? How was the representation of slavery and the Civil War made by African American women relevant to African American collective memory and collective identities?

## COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND SLAVERY AS A CULTURAL TRAUMA

Memory is an essential part of life narratives that allows the life narrator to remember the past. Although often thought as individually-based, memory, for some theories of identity-formation and socialization, tends to be conceptualized in terms that also refer to a collective. Maurice Halbwachs, in 1925, began using the term "collective memory" to propose an innovative way to think about memory. Although the idea of group memory was already present in earlier Western works dating from ancient Greek culture, Halbwachs' theorization shifted how the notion of memory was conceptualized in intellectual discourse. Unlike his predecessors, Halbwachs argued that all types of remembering rely on the dynamics of collective groups, such as families, social classes, religious communities, etc.. For him, "groups construct their past experiences collectively, and so even though an individual does have a particular perspective on this group reconstruction of the past, he or she does not have an independent memory of the past" (RUSSEL, 2006, 796). In other words, Halbwachs demonstrated that individual memory cannot be separated from group memories; therefore, according to him, in a way, all memory is collective. Additionally, his theorization suggests that collective memory "is essential to a group's notion of itself and thus must continually be made over to fit historical circumstance" (EYERMAN, 2001, p. 7).

Later, in 1989, Michel Pollak added a layer of complexity to Halbwachs's theorization of collective memory. Pollak recognized two constitutive elements of memory: events experienced individually, first-hand; and events experienced through others, second-hand (1989, p. 2). He acknowledged that, besides experienced events, memories are also constituted of three factors: people, characters, and places. Because of those different elements and factors, he drew attention to the fact that memories are ever-changing. In addition, Pollak argued that the negotiation of memory that originates from the processes of domination and submission within different memories would result in both the official memory and also what he called "underground memories" (1989, *passim*). Underground memories,

would, in that context, contradict and often challenge the most legitimated and powerful of all memories: the national memory (1989, *passim*).

In the US, collective memory is an essential part of African American identity and cultural trauma is what constitutes that memory. In his *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (2001), Ron Eyerman, similarly to Halbwachs and Pollak, points to a socially constructed, historically rooted notion of collective memory, which functions to “create social solidarity in the present” (2001, p. 6); collective memory, he adds, “provides the individual with a cognitive map within which to orient present behavior [...]. Collective memory is a social necessity; neither an individual nor a society can do without it” (2001, p. 6). For him, the cultural memory that allows the formation of African American identity is the cultural trauma of slavery. He defines cultural trauma as a “dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion” (2001, p. 2). Eyerman uses the notion of slavery as cultural trauma because the social crisis originated from the collective painful experience of slavery became a crisis of identity. Slavery, then, in the context of Eyerman’s theorization, is not understood as an institution or even as an experience, but as a collective memory:

Like physical or psychic trauma, the articulating discourse surrounding cultural trauma is a process of mediation involving alternative strategies and alternative voices. It is a process that aims to reconstitute or reconfigure a collective identity through collect representation, as a way of repairing the tear in the social fabric. A traumatic tear evokes the need to “narrate new foundations” [...] which includes reinterpreting the past as a means of toward reconciling present/future needs. (Eyerman, 2001, p. 4)

Eyerman claims that, after emancipation and urban migrations, African American artists and writers reconstituted slavery as a starting point in a common past that allowed the creation of African American identity and representation became both a responsibility and a burden (2001, p. 14). Because representing African American communities involves a myriad of viewpoints and different interlocking identities, the problematic issues of representation were, since the slave trade, a central concern of African American people who were caught up in what Klotman and Clutler, cited by Eyerman, call “the struggle of representation” (2001, p. 13).

Collective memory, cultural trauma, and issues of representation are important notions in the study of African American life narratives, especially the ones produced in the context of slavery and the Civil War as these periods marked African American history and were of paramount importance for the construction of African American identity. African American women, specifically, have crafted life narratives that contradict the national memory and also complement the often male underground memories of African American people.

## HARRIET JACOBS' SLAVE NARRATIVE

In “Autobiography and the Making of America” (1980), Robert Sayre notes that in early American history, before writing novels and plays, Americans wrote a vast number of intriguing life narratives (1980, p. 146). Yet, African American life narratives were not, for a long time, considered a part of what later became a national literary tradition of self-referential writing. Slave narratives, more particularly, were first-person accounts written by formerly enslaved people that began to be recorded around the 1750s. These narratives were not only one of the first genres of life narratives written by people of African descent in the United States but were the first African American literary genre. The term, as John Sekora observes, was reserved for antebellum accounts “whose widened application over time and circumstances speaks of a generic power present even in the periods of institutional neglect” (1987, p. 484).

In his controversial essay “‘I Was Born’: Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature” (1985), James Olney puts slave narratives on trial. He points out the sense of “sameness” found in most slave narratives, which seem to be very similar to each other not only in form but also in content (1985, p. 50–51). The textual and para-textual elements that compose these narratives, for Olney, compromised their status as literature. As for textual elements, he observed that most slave narratives include: 1. an opening sentence, “I was born”, which is then followed by a place (but not a date) of birth; 2. a brief description of parentage, usually involving a possibly white father; 3. a description of a mean slaveholder or overseer and a detailed description of physical abuse; 4. an account of a strong, hard-working (usually “pure African”) enslaved man who refuses to be whipped; 5. records of obstacles against literacy; 6. a description of a Christian slaveholder who was particularly evil and commentary about the relationship between Christianity and slavery; 7. an account of the scarce food and clothes provided by slaveholders; 8. an account of auctions and families being separated; 9. a descriptions of patrols and failed attempts to escape; 9. a description of a successful and difficult escape; 11. an episode of taking on a new last name; and 12. general reflections on slavery (1985, p. 50–51). As for para-textual elements, Olney identified that most of these narratives had: 1. an engraved portrait, signed by the author; 2. a title page that sought to claim the veracity of the account, such as “written by himself” or “as told to”; 3. some type of introduction or preface usually written by a white abolitionist that downplayed the literary abilities of the author as a means to attest to the authenticity of their account; 4. a poetic epigraph; and 5. an appendix epigraph containing documentary material (1985, p. 50–51).

In his essay, Olney understands autobiography as a “recollective/narrative act in which the writer, from a certain point in life — the present — looks back over the events of that life and recounts them in such a way as to show how that past history has led to this present state of being” (1985, p. 47). According to him, memory has a major role in autobiographies in general, but not in slave narratives, since they attempt to show slavery “as it is” to meet

the needs of a Northern white abolitionist agenda (1985, pp. 45–47)<sup>7</sup>. Olney states that most, if not all, slave narratives focus on:

Slavery, an institution and an external reality, rather than a particular and individual life as it is known internally and subjectively. This means that unlike autobiography in general the narratives are all trained on one and the same objective reality, they have a coherent and defined audience, they have behind them and guiding them an organized group of “sponsors,” and they are possessed of very specific motives, intentions, and uses understood by narrators, sponsors, and audience alike: to reveal the truth of slavery and so to bring about its abolition. (OLNEY, 1985, p. 52)

Olney also remarks on the intricate interplay between narrator, sponsors, and audience, which determine the theme, content, and form of slave narratives (1985, p. 53). He concludes that “an autobiography or a piece of imaginative literature may, of course, observe certain conventions, but it cannot be only, merely conventional without ceasing to be satisfactory as either autobiography or literature” (1985, p. 64). Although Olney’s essay may bring useful contributions to the study of African American life narrative, his narrow view of autobiography on this particular point prevents him from acknowledging slave narratives as autobiographical and as literary. Many of the limitations found in slave narratives were mostly imposed by their sponsors and audiences. Olney, then, fails to understand that the idea that an African American narrator needs to be supported in order to be validated does not imply a drawback on the part of the author, but rather a problem with the reading audience.

Although men wrote the majority of slave narratives, women also contributed significantly to the tradition of slave narratives. The imperative of the formerly enslaved African American writer was “to tell a free story”; however, African American men’s quest for freedom involved reclaiming their manhood, while African American women’s quest involved reclaiming their children. Enslaved women conceptualized their individual freedom in terms of a collective freedom that often involved friends and especially family. Furthermore, their narratives denounced uniquely gendered kinds of exploitation that happened to African American women in bondage, like sexual violence and the disavowal of motherhood<sup>8</sup>. Nevertheless, because of the para-textual apparatuses that framed the production, publication, and reception of the text and because of the traditional models of femininity and womanhood held at the time — which were incompatible with the experiences of African American women, especially in regards to experiences of sexual violence — African Ame-

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7 In his essay about the relationship of the white abolitionist movement and slave narratives, Sekone argues that “the black message [would] be sealed within a white envelope” (1987, p. 502). He traces how white abolitionists sought to use African American life narratives in their favor.

8 Enslaved women would usually perform caring work associated with motherhood for white children and that situation made it difficult for them to care for their own children. Additionally, the fact that enslaved women’s children would often be considered property that could easily be sold made it even more difficult for these women’s to act as mothers. In a way, many African American women in bondage were prevented from being mothers.

frican women often framed the representations of violence in their testimonies so as not to harm the sensibilities of their white female audiences.

Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), in which she documents her life as an enslaved woman in North Carolina, is one of the most well-known slave narratives written by a woman. Jacobs' text, however, was for a long time considered a novel. In the time of its publication, people were confused about Jacobs' identity because of her use of the pseudonym "Linda Brent"<sup>9</sup>. Her account received a lot of public attention before and during the Civil War, but lost the attention of the public after the war ended. The book was read as a novel until American historian Jean Fagan Yellin, after a six-year study, confirmed that the book was not only authored by Harriet Jacobs but was also her life narrative. An updated edition was then published in 1987 and the book began regaining popularity.

Similarly to most slave narratives, Jacobs tells her story chronologically, starting from her birth: "I was born a slave; but I never knew it still six years of happy childhood had passed away" (2000, p. 131). Her unusually "fortunate" childhood during which Jacobs was taught how to read and write — an important achievement for enslaved African American people — contrasts with the remaining part of her narrative. After the death of her slaveholder, she finds herself in the hands of Dr. Flint, her late slaveholder's brother-in-law. When Jacobs turns fifteen, Dr. Flint begins to harass her. In "Trails of Girlhood", the narrative's fifth chapter, Jacobs writes: "No matter whether the slave girl be as black as ebony or as fair as her mistress. In either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or even from death; all these are inflicted by fiends who bear the shape of men" (2000, p. 159). From that point on, she begins to associate collective traumatic memory of slavery with her "individual" traumatic memory of sexual violence.

Although sexual violence was a controversial topic, the abuse of enslaved women was not. At the time Jacobs' narrative was published, many white women involved in the abolitionist movement "publicized" African American women as victims of sexual violence. The treatment given to the representation of violence against enslaved women by white abolitionists, in that context, was problematic because it often disregarded the possibility of the survivors themselves testifying to their experiences. Life narratives that exposed sexual violence during slavery, like Jacobs', allowed African American women to own their narratives of sexual violence in bondage.

Jacobs' experiences with Dr. Flint's harassment continued for a few years and in order to escape her advances, Jacobs outwits him and has a consensual affair with a lawyer who lived in the area, Mr. Sands. During this time, Jacobs bears two children, Benny and Ellen. Jacobs becomes aware of how slavery affected the bond between mother and child;

9 Many scholars differentiate authorial/historical "I", the narrating "I", and the narrated "I". The authorial/historical "I" is the flesh-and-bones person that can be located in time and space, who creates the narrative. It is important to note that this person occupies a series of subject-positions in the society in which they live and also that their life is much more than what is inscribed in the narrative. The narrating "I" is the persona available to readers: the narrator. The narrated "I" is the object of the narrative, the character/protagonist. At the time, as well as today, not all critics subscribed to the ideas behind these concepts; however, although some critics problematized and/or rejected them, these notions can be important when theorizing autobiographical subjectivity and are still relevant in the field. Although this study does not mark the differentiation between authorial/historical "I", the narrating "I", and the narrated "I", these distinctions are important, especially to understand the relationship between life narratives and memory.

many mothers were forced to stand-by while their children were whipped. The disavowal of motherhood becomes a recurrent topic in her reflection about slavery. Taylor writes: “The spirit of the mother was so crushed by the lash” (2000, p. 229). She then begins to develop an idea of freedom that is fundamentally connected to the freedom of her children: “I could have made my escape alone; but it was more for my helpless children than for myself that I longed for freedom” (2000 p. 232).

After discovering that her children are going to be sent to work in the fields, Jacobs decides she and her children need to escape. Because escaping with her two children to the North would be a nearly impossible task, she has Dr. Flint unknowingly sell her children to a slave trader who represented Mr. Sands and, as for herself, seeing that she could simply escape her fate as an enslaved women, she goes into hiding for seven years in an attic in her aunt’s house from where she could still watch her children from afar. Jacobs is finally able to escape on a boat to the North, but her narrative only ends after she is finally reunited with her children after many agonizing years of being separated by slavery.

Jacobs’ contribution to the collective memory of slavery is primarily constructed around experiences of sexual violence and the disavowal of motherhood; because of that, they complement male narratives that are usually centered around physical violence and barriers to black literacy. “Slavery is terrible for a man, but it is far more terrible for a women” (2000, p. 218), Jacobs writes. Hers and other women’s memories of slavery show how the intersectionality<sup>10</sup> between race and gender affected the lives of African American women in bondage. Furthermore, as Beth Maclay Doriani points out, “the world of the black woman — as a person inextricably bound up with others yet responsible for her own survival, emotionally, economically, and politically” (1991, p. 207).

## SUSSIE KING TAYLOR CIVIL WAR ACCOUNT

The American Civil War, which was supposed to settle the issue of slavery, left a deep imprint on the U.S. collective memory. In *Race and Reunion* (2001), David Blight identifies three overall visions of the Civil War that were constructed over time: the reconciliatory vision, the white supremacist vision, and the emancipationist vision. African American people, by and large, identified themselves with the emancipationist vision because of their “complex remembrance of their own freedom, in the politics of radical Reconstruction, and in conceptions of the war as the reinvention of the republic and the liberation of blacks to citizenship and Constitutional equality” (2001, p. 2). Blight argues that, although the forces of reconciliation overwhelmed the emancipationist vision in the national memory, much

10 Intersectionality, a term coined by black feminist scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, is a theoretical frame that allows the analysis of interlocking systems of oppression. Crenshaw problematizes the use of a single-axis framework — usually focused either on race or gender — present in much of the feminist theory and antiracist policies in the U.S. (1989, p. 139). Including black women in the already established single-axis analysis does not solve the problem, she argues, because the intersectional experiences of these women is more complex than the sum of racism and sexism. Intersectionality, then, offers a new, multiple-axis frame through which one can look at how various forms of social stratification (race, gender, class, sexual orientation, age, religion, etc.) overlap and how they affect the lives of marginalized people.

of the emancipationist vision persisted during the early decades of the twentieth century. Blight also writes: “Americans faced an overwhelming task after the Civil War and emancipation: how to understand the tangled relationship between two profound ideas—healing and justice” (2001, p. 3).

Because, in general, civil wars mark an internal friction that cannot be ignored, these wars “have the power to transform women’s understanding of their roles and identities precisely because they anticipate a change in government, allowing women to conceive of broadened political choices for themselves” (JAMES, 2007, 104). In the context of the American Civil war, many women were able to hold roles that were traditionally held by men. Women also served in many ways and were not merely spectators. Although narratives of women’s participation tend to concentrate on white women’s participation, African American women also participated actively in war. After the war ended, black women had to reinterpret and renegotiate their positions in relation to the black men in the new black “nation within a nation” that was formed after the war. With the end of slavery, African American women’s narratives in self-referential writing began to shift and were no longer centered around sexual violence and the denial of motherhood. They now began to join African American men in the construction of an emancipationist vision of the memory of the war, which would be important for the formation of African American identity.

Susie King Taylor’s *Reminiscences of My Life in the Camp with the 33rd United States Colored Troops Late 1<sup>st</sup> S. C.* is the only known account written by an African American woman who actively participated in the Civil War (JAMES, p. 103). Jennifer C. James, in *A Freedom Bought with Blood: African American War Literature from the Civil War to World War II* (2007), notes that Taylor’s rare narrative “seems remarkable in consideration of the great numbers of African American women who gave their services to the Union forces” (2007, pp. 103-104). Taylor begins with “I was born under the slave law in Georgia, in 1848, and was brought up by my grandmother in Savannah” (1999, p. 5). Her life was very different from the lives described in slave narratives such as Jacobs’. As Cynthia Ann Everts suggests in her documental research in Georgia, Taylor might not ever have been a slave (2016, p. 8). The question of whether her narrative can fall under the categorization of slave narrative is still unanswered by some scholars, but, considering the similarities between her account and slave narratives is important to better understanding both her work and the tradition of slave narratives.

In chapter one, Taylor’s presents a mostly matrilineal narrative of her ancestry in which she “establishes herself as a descendant of a long line of vital, robust women” (JAMES, 2007, p. 112). She then continues in the following chapter, writing about her grandmother, who was a “hard laborer” and “practical” woman, and her mother, who was a widow and opened a grocery store shortly after her father’s death and made a good profit from it. For Taylor, both her mother and grandmother were examples of women who “made it happen”. Taylor’s framing of her narrative in the first two chapters is essential to her autobiographical act that seeks “to grant narrative primacy to her female body and the other female bodies it represents” (JAMES, 2007, p. 106).

Additionally, Taylor’s observations about the Civil War attest to the particularities of the gaze of African American women. As James points out, “the proximity of women to the

front helped blur the distinction between ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ spaces, undoubtedly making it easier for some black woman such as Taylor to proffer their services to the military” (2007, p. 104). Her interests were not limited to the nurturing roles associated with her position as a nurse, she was also interested in weaponry. She learned how to handle a musket “very well” and “could shoot straight and often hit the target” and she was also able to “take a gun all apart, and put it together again” (1999, p.26). Although an isolated case, Taylor’s narrative also raises interesting discussions about the Civil War, race, and gender.

Taylor’s account focuses primarily on her experiences on the battlefield and little attention is given to her personal life. Because of that, historians claim that little is known about Taylor apart from what is recorded in her Civil War account. Everts suggests that “[the] interface of biographical information and the historical moment in which Taylor lived and wrote is where we can locate a primary theme of Reminiscences: black female agency” (2016, p. 4). The narrative, published years after the end of the war, constructs a memory of the war that is rooted in the needs of the time Taylor was writing:

Living here in Boston where the black man is given equal justice, I must say a word on the general treatment of my race, both in the North and South, in this twentieth century. I wonder if our white fellow men realize the true sense or meaning of brotherhood? For two hundred years we had toiled for them; the war of 1861 came and was ended, and we thought our race was forever freed from bondage, and that the two races could live in unity with each other, but when we read almost every day of what is being done to my race by some whites in the South, I sometimes ask, “Was the war in vain? Has it brought freedom, in the full sense of the word, or has it not made our condition more hopeless?” (TAYLOR, 1999, p. 61)

Taylor reflects upon her memories of the war in relation to the realities of lynchings and the racial segregation that were very much part of the African American experience at the beginning of the twentieth century. Taylor then emphasizes the participation of African American women in the war, which is often forgotten in the national memory. Finally, she also urges people not to forget the war and the hardships African American soldiers went through:

Let us not forget that terrible war, or our brave soldiers who were thrown into Andersonville and Libby prisons, the awful agony they went through, and the most brutal treatment they received in those loathsome dens, the worst ever given human beings; and if the white soldiers were subjected to such treatment, what must have been the horrors inflicted on the negro soldiers in their prison pens? Can we forget those cruelties? No, though we try to forgive and say, “No North, no South,” and hope to see it in reality before the last comrade passes away. (TAYLOR, 1999, p. 68)

Taylor's narrative illustrated an important shift in African American women's life narrative after the war. This shift would go "from preoccupation with survival found in slave narratives to a need of self expression and self-identification" (BREXTON, 1989, p. 10).

In conclusion, although their life narratives were often marginalized, African American women contributed to the processes of collective remembering in the context antebellum period and the Civil War. Their contributions are important because they confront the national memory that excludes them from American history-writing, while also highlighting African American women's intersectional experiences. Jacobs' representation of slavery is essential to African American literature and African American history because it denounces the experiences of sexual violence faced by enslaved women and also offers substantial insight into the challenges of black motherhood during slavery. Taylor's representation of the Civil War sheds light on how the participation of African American women in the war disrupted gender roles. Because of that, even though both texts were produced within the limitations imposed by white sponsors and white audiences, their narratives become relevant to African American collective memory and collective identity.

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