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# The limits of postcolonial autobiography and the empowering capacity of life-writing for the postcolonial subject

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## 1. PRELIMINARY REMARKS

The issues of subject and subjectivity are probably the most intriguing ones when it comes to facing the actual potential and validity of both postmodern and postcolonial theories. In fact the principles on which both rely seem to hold as long as the operation that is at stake is that of de-constructing: on the one hand postmodernism de-constructs the grand narratives and the assumptions inherent in the West, on the other postcolonialism de-constructs the hierarchies on which power relationship are built; but as soon as the objection that comes to the fore is that of a subsequent re-construction they both find themselves at a loss. The gesture of re-construction seems necessarily bound to that of agency, and such kind of agency can be carried out only by a coherent subject that in a sense *knows what s/he is doing*. In fact, in these few lines I have just outlined two of the main misunderstandings generally linked to the issue of disrupted subjectivity which can also be read in such statements as:

The current post-structuralist, postmodern challenges to the coherent, autonomous subject have to be put on hold in feminist and postcolonial discourses, for both must work first to assert and affirm a denied or alienated subjectivity: those radical postmodern challenges are in many ways the luxury of the dominant order which can afford to challenge that which it securely possesses. (Hutcheon 1989: 152)

The problem of re-construction is considered to be an exclusively postcolonial or feminist issue. What is nowadays a widespread counter-argument to the postmodern problem of the inconsistency of the subject is that you must have a subject in order to be able to afford the luxury of discarding it.

In short the postmodern subject can be a fragmented and polivocal one since his/her environment suits such a condition, but the postcolonial one has to be consistent and integrated since his/her fight for self-determination is not over. The postmodern tendency to undo assumptions is often mistaken for a nihilistic impulse that does not require any form of salvation afterwards. I think instead that the common purpose of both postmodern and postcolonial practices is that to find a way out the *impasse* subsequent to de-construction. Therefore, the issues of re-construction, agency and subjectivity represent a common concern for both, and not just for postcolonialism. The other misunderstanding I was outlining above is that only a coherent and integrated subject can perform the type of agency necessary for re-construction; the prejudice according to which only a self-confident, unitary subject can act seems to reinscribe the modernist assumptions that both the postmodern and the postcolonial have tried hard to discard. Paradoxically, the flip side of Hutcheon's statement might be read in a way she would probably disapprove of, that is, that in order to be able to act postcolonial and feminist subjects need to conform to the integrated, 'humanist' self and become respectively, or at least act as, white and male. John M. Coetzee's *Foe* makes a literary parallel to this issue by linking the construction of the self to authorship: the female protagonist and narrator Susan Barton begins her account in the form of a detailed, *realistic* report in the first person with the implied conviction that autobiography is the best means for a subject to construct his/her own identity; since carefully chosen words perfectly convey the meaning one has in mind, a realistic description intended as sticking as much as possible to the truthfulness of facts is the form one uses to convey one's experience and thoughts. The absolute faith in the *referential* capacity of language and the humanistic thrust implicit in the genre of autobiography make self-expression necessary: that is why when Susan meets Cruso's and Friday's unwillingness (or impossibility) to tell their story she finds herself at a loss and tries to find some logic in their type of behaviour. Only later, when she comes across the English writer Foe and *his* version of her story with all the assumptions inherent in it, does she realise that there can be many different nuances of one's self and that enclosing it in *one* narration is an act of subjugation. In a way, Susan's change of mind exemplifies the dichotomy in conceiving the subject: on the one hand, the humanistic, 'integrated' subject that comes with a burden of assumptions and constructions regarding gender and race; on the other, the fragmented self. Susan's initial preference for the former, entailed in her stylistic preference for realism and autobiography, leaves way to her doubt as to its claimed legitimacy and alleged superiority. Coetzee's *Foe* is interesting in its meta-fictional and highly *word-ly* form because it deals with the issue of subject construction and the way a literary genre can participate in this

process. Besides, I think *Foe* is especially interesting for the way it *stages* the different subjects of contemporaneity forced to face their Master's voice: the feminist subject embodied by Susan, the postcolonial one by Friday and the postmodern one by Cruso, all have to disentangle their stories from Foe's attempt at a 'realistic' narration; yet, the fact that they hardly succeed in telling their own story is the bitter conclusion that Coetzee seems to offer. Therefore, these three characters are set as the representatives of their own condition (the feminine, the postcolonial and the postmodern respectively) face to face with the white, male Master, that is, their literary *foe*; nevertheless, even when given the opportunity to speak, they refuse or are unable to articulate a story. Susan realises at some point that she is trapped in Foe's narration but she cannot find a way out anyway: at first she hands over the narration to Foe thinking that she is not as good as he is at it; when she realises the conventionality of narration and the relations of power it entails she is paralysed with doubt and unable to act: "[b]ut now I am full of doubt. Nothing is left to me but doubt. I am doubt itself. Who is speaking me?" (Coetzee 1986: 133). Friday cannot speak but it is not clear whether it was Cruso who cut his tongue and at all rates he does not make any attempt at communication through any other means that is not his voice; the fact that his deeds, like the scattering of petals, are without any explanation and that the only sounds that come out of his mouth are the sounds of the island might signify that no *intelligible* (for the addressee) communication is possible; the stream of silence Friday pulls out in the end seals this impossibility. Finally, Cruso is characterized as a resigned subject whose nihilism stems from having realised that all narration is biased, hence that all fuss is useless. Cruso's listless, indifferent stance when it comes to listening to Susan's story or recounting his own evokes the attitude of what John Barth called the literature of exhaustion, that is, the antechamber to postmodernism: the awareness that all forms of expression are *worn up*, 'exhausted' makes one conclude that the only possibility left to make oneself heard is *silence*; this late Modernist feature will find an echo in some postmodernism, nurturing the latter's nihilistic thrust. Coetzee's *Foe* seems to thematise the degree zero of communication and of self-expression; his dismantling of the master-narratives inherent in genre- and self-construction is not followed by any attempt at re-construction, nor is this possibility just hinted at. On the contrary, Coetzee makes clear that the three main subjects of contemporaneity are a far cry from achieving a stable condition; this stability does not rest in the capacity to *construct* a defined, consistent subject but in the ability to *communicate*. This holds for all the three of them; Cruso's silence weighs as much as Susan's and Friday's because he is at a loss just as much as they are. In the end, the feeling one gets in reading *Foe* is that silence is more of a problem than a solution: it was a problem before, when

logocentrism fed on the silence of the Other; it is a problem now, when the Other is finally given the opportunity to speak and keeps quiet instead. At all rates, Coetzee's presentation of the three subjects of contemporaneity and their impossibility to communicate is unbiased and, most of all, does not try to denigrate one in favour of the other. But the general attitude when it comes to dealing with this theme of subjectivity and self-construction is one of pre-emptive hostility towards the postmodern. John Heartfield's intervention does not attempt at a simple discussion on postmodernism and subjectivity but is more of a pamphlet to prove the former wrong as regards the latter: "It was not immediately clear that the implications of the theory called first 'post-structuralism' and later postmodernism were hostile to subjectivity." (Heartfield 2002: 13). In fact postmodernism does not announce the death of the subject *per se* but, since the underlying motif is that of the incredulity towards *metanarratives*, it is the myth of the modern Subject with a capital letter that is contested. Implicit in Heartfield's definition of subjectivity then is the idea that an individual must be unitary and consistent in order to be considered a *subject*; a fragmented individual is not a subject.

## 2. AUTOBIOGRAPHY OR LIFE-WRITING?

### DIFFERENT WAYS TO REPRESENT THE SELF

Issues of subjectivity and representation are still the pivotal ones when it comes to exploring the actual efficacy of postmodern and postcolonial practices since they set the basis for further discussion. The field of self-(re)presentation is potentially the most interesting and tangled one since a subject comes to face his/her own self and has to find a way out from what I figure as an 'embarrassment' and a re-discovery. In literary terms the playground for such a challenge is that of autobiography or life-writing, of writing-the-self. Nevertheless, as my last sentence suggests, some preliminary distinctions need tracing in order to clear the ground from misunderstandings. The problem of defining autobiography and distinguishing it from life-writing, two terms that both describe the act of self-writing but with different attitudes, is a prickly one. The most open definitions would go with Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's:

The widespread use of self-representation in both preliterate and literate non-Western cultures contradicts the allegation of an earlier generation of literary critics that "autobiography" is a uniquely Western form and a specific achievement of Western culture at a moment of individuation in the wake of the Enlightenment. (2001: 84)

The commonsensical objection to defining autobiography in solely Western terms is that the impetus to self-representation has always existed in all parts of the world. Of course this can hardly be denied and in fact nobody has any interest in doing so. But the fact that this thrust belongs to all cultures does not deny the fact that some cultures have done it with specific purposes and attitudes in mind. If self-representation is a shared concern, nonetheless the discourses underlying it change. Smith and Watson's description is in overt contraposition to Georges Gusdorf's traditional definition of the genre, or even more the character, of autobiography:

First of all, it is necessary to point out that the genre of autobiography seems limited in time and space: it has not always existed and nor does it exist everywhere. [...] [It] is a late phenomenon in Western culture, coming at the moment when the Christian contribution was grafted onto classical traditions. Moreover, it would seem that autobiography is not to be found outside of our cultural area; one would say that it expresses a concern peculiar to Western man. (Gusdorf 1956: 28-29)

Of course Gusdorf's definition has a good deal of reactionary and even racist manners especially in passages like "[i]t is obvious that autobiography is not possible in a cultural landscape where consciousness of self does not exist" meaning with it "primitive societies such as ethnologists describe to us" (*ibid.*: 30), but such a harsh and definitive attitude can actually be helpful for grasping the full nature of the assumptions on which it is based. Gusdorf's considerations are not isolated ones; they rather represent the conviction of a whole category of thinkers plunged into a certain form of discourse that praises the values of individuality, unity of life, and self-knowledge, and for whom autobiography is consequently "one of the means to self-knowledge thanks to the fact that it recomposes and interprets a life in its totality." (*ibid.*: 38). Smith and Watson's definition rather seems to follow Paul De Man's deconstruction of the autobiographical genre on the basis of the arbitrary nature of the assumptions that make up the canon so that "[a]utobiography, then, is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts." (De Man 1979: 921). De Man is actually equating a literary genre to a literary theory, with the same level of abstraction that allows the universal application of certain reading keys. I think that this equation does not hold; what is more, once genre assumptions have been unmasked, they should not be stigmatized and erased from the critical vocabulary but simply used for what they are: arbitrary boundaries that define *a priori* what fits in a category and what does not. If we concede then that autobiography 'proper' is the genre that emerged with the Enlightenment in order to give voice to the newly-formed, self-asserted individual,

with all the assumptions that this may take with it, we are just stating the obvious and I think that there is nothing monstrously reactionary in it. It is not just a matter of life-writing modifying the established Western canons of autobiography, since life-writing should be understood as a genre *per se* distinct from autobiography. Once we understand the latter in terms of self-absorbed individualism that exalts the white male citizen, the form of life-writing can be seen as the best one for the purposes of postmodern and postcolonial subjectivities to overturn and finally overcome this ideal. The most important difference in perspective is the one that occurs between the *descriptive* nature of autobiography and the *performative* one of life-writing. While characterization in the former is pre-determined, words have referents and *represent* things, in the latter words are productive and *do* things. Life-writing is self-formation through self-formulation. Nevertheless, this premise can take to a twofold conclusion: if brought to its extreme, the fact that the subject is *made* of words, that it is an effect of language, leads to its dissolution and fragmentation; but if this breakdown in reference is taken as a means of empowerment, in that language loses its power to determine, then the subject is given the opportunity to be the *maker* of its own life and its own self. As a consequence, life-writing has grown to be seen as the literary form of the outcasts, of those that cannot be inscribed into the mainstream category of the subject of autobiography. I would like to add briefly that no moral judgement is made from my part when describing the one form or the other: there is nothing wrong with self-absorbed individualism, even as sometimes it is described in terms of selfishness and egotism by some critics in order to give it a negative connotation, since I think it is more sensible to suspend any moral judgement when talking about literary genres and the assumptions they rely on. Categories of good and evil as they are sometimes used by critics to stigmatize a literary genre do not apply to the discussion. In the same way, there is nothing wrong with the arbitrariness of the canons and values that shape the genre of autobiography; needless to say, such canons are the product of the discourse of their time, and they simply carry within themselves the moral statements of their making.

For different aspects Saint Augustin's *Confessions*, Benvenuto Cellini's *Life* and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* are generally taken as the original and paradigmatic literary form of autobiography. Saint Augustin's confessional mode sets the tone for the kind of intimate, thorough internal search of the essence of the Christian self that nevertheless does not forget its role of public guide and example. The experience of the 'blessed' individual becomes the model for those who read about it. More in general what links all these three paradigmatic autobiographies is the ideal of the exceptional individual, the belief that his experiences are peculiar to himself, and that they can be a

useful example to posterity. Such convictions are the landmarks of Rousseau's opening lines:

I am resolved on an undertaking that has no model and will have no imitator. I want to show my fellow-men a man in all the truth of nature; and this man is to be myself. Myself alone. I feel my heart and I know men. I am not made like any that I have seen; I venture to believe that I was not made like any that exist. If I am not more deserving, at least I am different. [...] Here is what I have done, what I have thought, what I was. I have told the good and the bad with equal frankness. I have concealed nothing that was ill, added nothing that was good, and if I have sometimes used some indifferent ornamentation, this has only ever been to fill a void occasioned by my lack of memory. I have shown myself as I was; [...] I have disclosed my innermost self. [...] Let each of them [my fellow-men] in turn reveal his heart with the same sincerity; and let one of them say to you, if he dares: *I was better than that man.* (Rousseau 1782: 1)

Cellini's opening confirms this ideal of exceptionality, together with the values of truthfulness and sincerity, and sets the conditions for the writing of one's life: real experience and 'citizenship'; the patrilineage of his family gives legitimacy to the telling of his own life. The centrality of the human being to the universe makes possible that his self-knowledge leads to the knowledge of the world since the individual's experience and interpretation is the touchstone for what revolves around him. The landmark of the autobiographical subject appears to be his self-confidence, not so much because he is not touched by doubt and weakness in his daily experience, but in a wider sense because he thinks that even his flaws will necessarily be of interest to others. Rousseau's confessions are less an attempt to remember the past than to make others recognise the worthiness of his inner and outer experiences. All along he insists on his good faith in the telling of his story and the fact that he will not leave even the tiniest detail behind; given such a transparency and good intention of honesty, if the reader comes to the wrong conclusion, then s/he is the one to blame because s/he has been given all the means and information necessary to a correct understanding.

The difference between autobiography and life-writing can be therefore traced in their respective *subjects*: the self-confident individual as against the self-conscious self<sup>1</sup>. I have already explained the character of the first term, the nature of its self-confidence and of its individualism. The choice to define the second as self-conscious is due to its opposition to the former: while the

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<sup>1</sup> From now on, for the sake of simplicity, whenever I use the terms 'self' and 'subject' in the sense of abstract, theoretical entities I refer to them singularly with the neutral, denotational pronouns *it*, *its* and *itself*; when used in the practical sphere of the postmodern or the postcolonial context, I will refer to them with the more connotational masculine and feminine pronouns.



autobiographical subject does not interrogate the opportuneness and necessity of its own history, the narrator of life-writing begins the story with the mining of such a conviction and more in general the whole writing is permeated with doubts as to the sincerity and the transparency of its intent. Here, the term *self* rather than *subject* has a reason in its special connotation that can be related to Michel de Montaigne's *moi* as distinguished from Descartes's *je*. While for the latter the subject is an autonomous entity that knows itself objectively through a universal science based on mathematical principles and knows the world accordingly, for Montaigne the definition of the self is neither unitary nor involves an appropriation of the self. Montaigne's self is both subject and object of its self-knowledge and interpretation, observer and observed, and this takes to a doubling and to a proliferation of itself. While Descartes's subject is absolute and transcendental, Montaigne's is 'social', plunged into the world of representation. He knows that self-knowledge is a matter of self-representation: since the relationship between the observing subject *je* and the observed object *moi* is a mediated one, "[i]t is as representation that the self comes to know its identity in terms of sameness and difference, as self and other" (Judovitz 1988: 11). It is a process of self-estrangement and doubling that engenders differentiation of the self rather than repetition; the subject comes to know itself in difference and its self-knowledge through the paradigm of interpretation is never objective.

If we look at the subject of life-writing with this particular connotation in mind it is easy to see how apt it is to the purposes of postmodern and postcolonial practices. What is more, Montaigne's concern with the *self* suggests that uncertainty and inconsistency of the subject do not mine an interest in self-knowledge. In the same way then, poststructuralism's statements as to the fragmentation of the subject should not be mistaken for its wholesale dismissal: the subject is always the centre of interest and debate even if it is questioned. The matter at stake is whether the postmodern challenges to the coherent, autonomous subject can be reconciled with a postcolonial agenda and so in a sense whether the subject of life-writing would suit the postcolonial subjectivity better than the one of autobiography. A first thought goes to what could be the practical examples of these two alternatives: I regret to say that I agree with Gusdorf when he writes that "[w]hen Gandhi tells his own story, he is using Western means to defend the East" (Gusdorf 1956: 29):

It is not my purpose to attempt a real autobiography. I simply want to tell the story of my experiments with truth, and as my life consists of nothing but those experiments, it is true that the story will take the shape of an autobiography. I believe, or at any rate flatter myself with the belief, that a connected account of all these experiments will not be without benefit to the reader. [...] I have gone through deep self-introspection, searched myself through



and through [...]. Yet I am far from claiming any finality or infallibility about my conclusions. One claim I do indeed make and it is this. For me they appear to be absolutely correct, and seem for the time being to be final. [...] For me truth is the sovereign principle. This truth is not only truthfulness in word, and not only the relative truth of our conception, but the Absolute Truth, the Eternal Principle, that is God. I hope and pray that no one will regard the advice interspersed in the following chapters as authoritative. The experiments narrated should be regarded as illustrations. I trust that to this limited extent the illustrations will be really helpful: because I am not going either to conceal or understate any ugly things that must be told. I hope to acquaint the reader fully with all my faults and errors. (Gandhi 1927: 14-15-16)

Although it might seem that I am still quoting from Rousseau, this is in fact Gandhi's introduction to his autobiography. It sounds like Rousseau but with a hint of petulance added and an ill-concealed self-righteousness. This is an example of a non-filtered appropriation in which the Master's tools will not dismantle the Master's house. If the model for the autonomous, coherent, and integrated subject is that of autobiography, then I am not so sure that the alternative self-conscious subject of life-writing would be a worse option; in no way nevertheless would I use expressions like 'autoethnography' or 'ethnic autobiography' to describe the area of competence of postcolonial life-writing since, as politically-correct as the connotations that the critics gave them may be (Marie Louise Pratt for the former, Betty Ann Bergland for the latter), these expressions sound to me quite unhappy. The flip side of Gandhi's account is the work of the Trinidadian writer Sam Selvon who actually makes fun at *émigrés'* attempts at autobiography in both his first novel of immigration *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) and especially in *Moses Ascending* (1975). In the first instance the idea of writing about one's own experiences (and the subtle ridiculing of it) is already in kernel, but it is in its sequel that Moses, upgraded from being the protagonist of the first novel to being the first-person narrator of the second, gives it a go. Now that he has finally reached his personal success and fulfilment in the promised land of London and he is about to retire, Moses Aloetta is ready for writing his memoirs. After buying a house, renting out rooms, and hiring a white English domestic servant, his final achievement would be to undertake a literary project to let others know how he made it. Selvon's goal is to subtly ridicule his character's pretentiousness at the task showing the sombreness with which he tackles it: "I smoothed the pages of my Memoirs, and am giving it to you sic, as I intended to do as long as I can – how much faithful can I be? You have it straight from the horse's mouth." (Selvon 1975: 13-14). It is his first friend in London who brings him back to earthly matters:

"What shit is that you are writing?" "I am composing my Memoirs," I say, stiffly, hoping that my tone would put him off. "You don't know one fucking

thing about what's happening Moses", "Memoirs are personal and intimate," I say. "They don't have to be topical nor deal with any social problems". "That's no fucking use," Galahad say. "Nobody ain't going to be interested in anything you have to say." (*ibid.*: 49)

Galahad's (and Selvon's) rage goes on for a few pages, blaming Moses's intention to write his own autobiography without being aware of the actual new situation of Caribbean people in London and the fact that a whole new kind of Black Literature has been created in order to tell the world about their struggle. Apparently, both of Selvon's novels warn his fellow-Trinidadians against behavioural mimicry in general, and it seems literary mimicry in particular. Nevertheless, despite Selvon's irony towards Moses's autobiographical ambitions, he is actually performing the same act himself, not in the form of the first person autobiography, but drawing from his own experience as a first-generation immigrant, performing a kind of healing process also enacted by most postcolonial writers. Life-writing is in this way necessary to pin down who one is in a given place and at a given time, to get over the sense of displacement and subsequent loss of identity.

### 3. ESSENTIAL SUBJECTS AND POLIVOCAL SELVES

The fact is that the practice of self-criticism, the dismantling of the self, is one that belongs to postmodern rather than to postcolonial studies, which in turn has focused on the other-critique of the ex-colonizer's assumptions. The postmodern and the postcolonial can be viewed as complementary strategies that represent the two flip sides of the same coin: the one enacts a critique of Western values from the inside, the other from the outside. Nevertheless the two can fruitfully exchange their tools: postcolonialism can borrow the practice of auto-critique; postmodernism can learn how to broaden its scope of inquiry and can find in the postcolonial humanitarian approach a safety boat from the pitfalls of its nihilistic tendency. A fruitful collaboration can take place for instance if the postcolonial subject finds itself at a loss. Frantz Fanon's autobiographical fifth chapter from *Black Skin, White Masks* has normally been translated as 'The Fact of Blackness' but its original title of 1952, 'L'expérience vécue du Noir', suggests that it would be more appropriate to talk of "the *lived experience* of blackness". Fanon takes a cue from an episode in his own life, a child's shouting to him "Look, a Negro!" (Fanon 1952: 109), to expand on the way the body of a black person overdetermines him/her from without. Embodiment of physical characteristics determines thus who one is, or rather how one gets to see oneself through

the eyes of the other <sup>2</sup>. As he also affirms, the relationship Self/Other is one that affects the postcolonial subject more than it does with the Western one, whose main focus is on his/her own person: "Ontology does not permit us to understand the being of the black man. For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man. Some critics will take it on themselves to remind us that this proposition has a converse. I say that this is false." (*ibid.*: 110). While the white man's *ontology* is determined by himself alone, the black man's does not even exist, it is rather an *epistemology* of the self. The white man *is*, the black man *is known*. In fact Fanon is at this point still describing how the colonial subject came into being and not yet the postcolonial one. However his achievement of self-determination seems to peep out from time to time in the text, hinting at the possibility to sort a postcolonial subject out of a colonial one: "I subjected myself to an objective examination [...] On that day, completely dislocated, unable to be abroad with the other, the white man, who unmercifully imprisoned me, I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object." (*ibid.*: 112). Fanon makes himself the object of his own knowledge, away from the object of the white man's alleged knowledge. He is now both subject and object of his self-knowledge, a postcolonial subject. And here come the problems: because how do you determine yourself as a black man ("My cry grew more violent: I am a Negro, I am a Negro, I am a Negro ..." [*ibid.*: 138]) if you only have the experience of being rejected in the world but no philosophical space to describe your condition? Fanon's view of the matter is quite dim and he does not envisage any positive solution as the title of his following book *The Wretched of the Earth* suggests. His subject is neither de-colonized nor postcolonial; s/he is at best ex-colonized in a temporal sense but keeps relating his/her being to the being of the white man. Fanon's individual, as developed in subsequent studies, is hybrid but is not happy; his/her hybrid condition seems to be in fact a source of suffering. In Fanon's view the ex-colonial subject is at a loss when it comes to reconstructing an identity; the possibility of self-knowledge and self-determination was only a breach in the dark.

It is at this moment of *impasse* that a collaboration between the post-modern and the ex-colonized can take place. Fanon's account, which is, to be exact, the account of a first-generation postcolonial author, is in fact quite

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<sup>2</sup> The same episode appears as a kind of quotation from Fanon in Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* that, as I said, tells the stories of Caribbean people trying to settle in London and for which Selvon probably drew from his own experience. "Mummy, look at that black man!" (Selvon 1956: 87). So Galahad sounds almost childish in his desperate attempt to explain and justify white people's *natural* contempt: "Is not we that the people don't like," he tell Moses, "is the colour Black." (*ibid.*: 89).

essentialist in his vision of identity formation and seems to suggest that the only way for the ex-colonized to be happy would be to go back to a pre-colonial condition; but given that such condition is now impossible, the postcolonial subject is doomed to be cracked and unhappy forever. Black feminist critic bell hooks (sic) tries instead to tackle the opportunity of an interweaving of the postmodern and black experience in an interesting essay titled "Postmodern Blackness". First the bad bits though: in her stark defence of the suitability of such a collaboration bell hooks forgets to mention the usefulness of postcolonial studies; never in the essay does she mention the word 'postcolonial', or she seems to treat it implicitly as just a branch of postmodernism. Her claim that "[r]adical postmodernist practice, most powerfully conceptualized as a 'politics of difference', should incorporate the voices of displaced, marginalized, exploited and oppressed black people" (hooks 1990: 423) burdens postmodern studies with further responsibility that actually does not belong to them and deprives the postcolonial of the main point on its agenda. Lamenting the fact that postmodernism lacks any study in black experience because its theory was constructed in reaction to Modernism denies the simple fact that postmodernism is a context-specific practice which came out of a certain time and situation and in reaction to a previous practice; the only way in which postmodernism can be called exclusivist is in the sense that it is itself not universal but context-specific, yet its use can be expanded. What is more, as I said, it has as its own agenda the questioning of its own self before that of the other. In a sense she gives the impression of wanting to make black studies fit at any cost in postmodern practice and accuses the latter of not having enough theorizing about the subject-matter. Nevertheless, her account on how the postmodern critique of identity can enhance the making of a black subjectivity (and not just mine it) is well worked out and goes against the mainstream opinion on the matter. From this perspective then her disregard for postcolonial studies might be a polemical provocation aimed at their more traditional, radical branch, the one that denies any possibility of theoretical cross-breeding between the East and the West. What she would borrow from postmodern theory is actually its critique of essentialism in identity formation. In a way she seems to be responding to Fanon in that over-determination does not come from the outside but from the inside; embodiment of blackness is the hallmark of much reactionary African-American criticism that enhances a universal and *authentic* black character. In the attempt to counter-react they reinscribe the prejudice and prevent the formation of multiple, varied black identities, besides strengthening racial paradigms that nurture racism. bell hooks starts from self-criticism of identity to construct multi-faceted, polivocal *identities*. Moreover if by critiquing essentialism black people enhance the recognition of 'multiple ex-

periences of black identity that are the lived conditions which make diverse cultural productions possible' (*ibid.*: 426), then life-writing seems to be the natural site where such lived experience can be narrated whereas once again autobiography would be the site where the myths of uniqueness and authenticity find their expression. Comparing Fanon's choice to stage himself as essentially a *blackman*, other-determined but also self-determined by the colour of his skin through the 'I-am-a-Negro', self-determining cry, makes Gloria Anzaldúa's attempt at a polyvocal *mestiza* consciousness even more liberating:

I began to think, "Yes, I'm a chicana *but that's not all I am*. Yes, I'm a woman but that's not all I am. Yes, I'm a dyke but that doesn't define all of me. Yes, I come from working class origins, but I'm no longer working class. Yes, I come from a *mestizaje*, but what part of that *mestizaje* gets privileged?" I started to think in terms of *mestiza* consciousness. [...] I was trying to articulate and create a theory of a Borderlands existence. (quoted in Hames-Garcia 2000: 102, emphasis mine)

Anzaldúa's work is one of the most surprising examples of contemporary postcolonial literature, her *Borderlands/La Frontera* being a brilliant attempt to come to terms with her past and the way it was determined but also to come to terms with her present and how to reconcile all the aspects that make up her own self. She offers an all-round portrait of a self that is not essentially determined by either race, gender or class, but by these aspects all together; and together with this personal self-portrait also comes the social portrait of an American society that is rapidly changing. Despite the peculiarity of her approach to postcolonial thematics, Anzaldúa seems to meet what for Gayatri C. Spivak are the requirements for a postcolonial autobiographer: the ability to address the problematics of the ex-colonized in the widest sense. The difficulty, and the great responsibility that comes with it, is not the ability to simply narrate oneself as a colonized subject for an audience but to give a voice to a community and enable their understanding. After the polemical accusations cast in her seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) to the postcolonial intellectuals who claim to speak for the subalterns but in fact prevent them from speaking up with their own voice, Spivak smoothes her stance ten years after in "Three Women's Texts and Circumfession" (1998) where she tackles the definition of postcolonial autobiography, or rather, of autobiography in postcoloniality. After distinguishing the latter from testimony, which is the practice of giving a filtered account of lived experience with the claim to let the author/narrator/protagonist freely express him/herself, she goes on to explain how the postcolonial autobiographer can succeed in giving a voice to the subaltern. The task, for which Spivak indicates Assia

Djebar's *Fantasia* as a successful example, comes from actually reversing and displacing the role of the autobiographer and that of writer/reader in order to create a "withheld autobiography" (Spivak 1998: 10) where the author does not speak out its own experience but that of his/her people. The autobiographer's authority when telling his/her own story is put in check and annihilated by the fact that s/he has "to learn to be taken seriously by the gendered subaltern [change the implied reader, as it were] who has not mastered the practice [thus responsibility, not interpellation]" (*ibid.*: 10); in the end, it is the subaltern reader who gives the autobiographer the legitimacy to tell his/her (intended as a collective *their*) story:

Such a reversal and displacement, in postcoloniality, of the autobiographer's privilege, is to be strictly distinguished from the generic or structural impossibility of autobiography being narrativized through the agency of colonialism. The former best describes, indeed makes visible, the situation of autobiography in postcoloniality. The latter is postcolonialist autobiography. (*ibid.*: 11)

Previously in this same essay, Spivak openly shows her contempt for what she recognizes as Rigoberta Menchú's bad faith in simulating spontaneity when she willingly is a product of editorial control: "Rigoberta, an organic intellectual taken for the true subaltern, represents herself as representative even as she points out that she is not representative. The deliberate and powerful play of the individual and representativity is the impossible signature of the ghostly witness in all autobiography." (*ibid.*: 9). The first few lines of Menchú's autobiography *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* are in fact a telling example of what Spivak considers postcolonialist autobiography:

My name is Rigoberta Menchú. I am twenty three years old. This is my testimony. I didn't learn it from a book and I didn't learn it alone. I'd like to stress that it's not only *my* life, it's also the testimony of my people. It's hard for me to remember everything that's happened to me in my life since there have been many very bad times but, yes, moments of joy as well. The important thing is that what has happened to me has happened to many other people too: My story is the story of all poor Guatemalans. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people. (Menchú 1983: 1)

Personally, I do not want to put in doubt Menchú's good faith and her desire to account for *her* people, but it is easy to see why Spivak does: Menchú claims for herself a status of representativeness and the authority to speak for the subalterns, which is the exactly the contrary of what Anzaldúa does. Anzaldúa succeeds in the task of making her own experience one with that of her people thanks to the way she conceives of the writing process in conjunction with the 'death' of the author, intended as the demiurge and owner of a text. Her composition theme is known by the term of *compustura*, which to her

means seaming together fragments to make a garment one wears and represents one's identity in the world. It is stitched together from "what's out there, what the culture and others give you, what you can take and use" (Lunsford 1997). The result of such a refiguration would be to open up the text to multiple voices, not just to those who are *author-ized* to speak/write/be heard, and thus to enlarge and enrich the conversation for all and, incidentally, to refigure literacy as the ability to respond to a conversation already and always ongoing in a way that invites the participation of others. Anzaldúa's stinging critique of traditional literacy education and her own commitment to giving voice to multiple positionalities as well as to women's voices that have been muted or ignored indicates that she is already participating in such a refiguration. Anzaldúa's own description of her composition technique makes clear why she perfectly fits Spivak's demands:

I also think that there is no such thing as a single author. I write my texts, but I borrow the ideas and images from other people. Sometimes I forget that I've borrowed them. I might read some phrase from a poem or fiction, and I like the way it describes the cold. Years and years go by, and I do something similar with my description, but I've forgotten that I've gotten it somewhere else. Then I show my text in draft form to a lot of people for feed-back: that's another level of co-creating with somebody. Then my readers do the same thing. They put all of their experience into the text and they change Borderlands into many different texts. It's different for every reader. It's not mine anymore. [...] When you get into reading and writing the 'other', into assuming some kind of authority for the 'other' – whether you are the 'other' or you are the subject – there's a community involved. There's a responsibility that comes with invoking cultural and critical authority. (Lunsford 1998: 15).

In conclusion, it is clear now the extent to which Gloria Anzaldúa successfully pursues a postcolonial intent through a postmodern writing technique. I want to rapidly suggest a comparison between Anzaldúa and another Chicano writer whose autobiography has been read as representative of Chicano culture. Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger for Memory* is about, as the subtitle itself goes, 'The Education of Richard Rodriguez' from his early years until the days when he is doing research for the British Museum and starts writing his memoirs. It is in fact an account of his personal social achievement through education and self-improvement that makes individualism, upward mobility and Anglo cultural superiority seem natural and does not account for any collective writing. The difference between postcolonial autobiography and postcolonial life-writing, whose definition has been the purpose of my essay, can therefore be exemplified by these two Chicano writers. If on the one side, the anxiety of representativeness for a collectivity and the will to stage oneself as a model for the achievement of personal success reinscribe given



assumptions that the postcolonial has tried hard to discard, on the other, the capacity to recount other people's stories as if they were one's own becomes the peculiarity of a truly empathetic figure that best responds the needs of postcolonial subjectivities, that is, the *selfless* autobiographer.

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## ABSTRACT

Autobiography and life-writing are two opposite forms to represent the self: while the former is inextricably bound to assumptions of coherent subjectivity, wholeness of sight and universal validity, the latter leaves room for doubt and contradiction and gives voice to the fragmented, inconsistent self. Therefore, whereas autobiography still bears the intrinsic ideology of its making and represents the 'mainstream' subject, life-writing proves to be a more suitable means for those who are not inscribed in this 'narrative', that is, the postmodern, the postcolonial, and the female subject. Starting with some foundational examples of autobiography, the present study confronts where the attempts to assimilate this genre to give expression to the postcolonial self have failed, in that they have appropriated the Master's tools without dismantling the Master's house, and where life-writing has managed to convey one's self in a disinterested way, free from the anxiety to 'representativeness' that characterizes the traditional autobiographer.