CHAPTER TWO: ‘We can do no more than tell our story’: On the
Origin and Spread of Life-writings

I am made unlike any I have ever
met; I will even venture to say that I am
like no one in the whole world

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Authorising the self

At the heart of life-writing are individuals who begin to narrativise their story - in
most instances for public consumption. While there may be many reasons why
people write their life-narratives, in western society at least the genesis of the genre
is usually associated with the Confessions of Saint Augustine (c. 400) though it
reaches back to antiquity with, say, Seneca’s Letters from a Stoic (ca. 63-65). This
perception, amongst others, has been instrumental in the logocentricism at the heart
of western culture,¹³ which is to say that the self has a teleological beginning that is
uniquely western in origin. It must be added that it is not only western society which
has preserved a distinct genre in life writings, as Felicity A. Nussbaum attests (1988,
n. 8).¹⁴ Despite evidence to the contrary from scholars outside Europe, however, this
logocentric view is deeply embedded in western scholarship; an attack on such
logocentricism is provided, among other scholars, by Gayatri Spivak.¹⁵

The ‘self’ which Saint Augustine helped to usher into being became a key
symbol in the growth of western culture, and in the confessional model which
allowed for a plethora of later autobiographies. Following in the tradition of Saint Augustine, for example, comes the autobiography of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (The Confessions, 1781), which ushered in the male secular hero intent on creating himself with a view to worldly fame and success. As Jill Kerr Conway suggests, this model of the Napoleonic hero emerges next to Augustine and Rousseau in creating the self ‘who embodies the feelings of his people in battle for political and economic freedom’. Later comes economic man as a model, self-created, given full expression in Benjamin Franklin’s Autobiography (1818). What is celebrated here is the accumulation of wealth, the economic discipline of thrift, industry and deferred gratification, introducing in the process the archetypal captain of industry (Conway: 1998, 8). Heroic stories of conquest concomitant with colonialism added to the genre, but, as Conway notes, the main changes came in the past century in terms of authenticity, that is, when the truthfulness of the narrated life began to be questioned:

By the turn of the twentieth century, a new quest for authenticity emerged in Western European culture. The new concern with authenticity was the product of multiple interactions between economic and cultural forces. The wealth created for Europeans by the economic and technological capacity to exploit distant regions fostered the world-weariness of fin de siècle decadence. The transfer of scientific skepticism to the newly developing social sciences resulted in the idea of cultural relativism. This reductive view of culture was the framework within which materialist economics combined with the first efforts to develop comparative studies of religion to define religious belief as a form of neurosis. And the visible and cultural effects of a fully articulated urban industrial production system raised for the first time the possibility of a radical break between nature and the engineered environment. Decadence, cultural relativism, lost belief and the break with nature were major themes of modernism which gave rise to a new type of autobiography, the story of the modern quest for meaning, given classic form in narratives like James Joyce’s Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1916) and poetic expression in T.S. Eliot’s “Ash Wednesday” (1930) and The Four Quartets (1942). (1998, 10)
The self-absorption of the male hero in these texts is perhaps unsurprising: after all, History (with a capital ‘H’) has always been seen as gender-based, and therefore what Western writers wrote was taken as germane. The feeling that an ‘authentic’ reality can be brought about through the strivings of individuals might account for the reverence in which certain early twentieth-century writers are held and canonised. Men make history, as Marx commented. The sense that culture was decaying, the feeling explored by these writers that modernity was in a state of crisis, and therefore that in reflecting this world writers had to show its complexity – these are captured in a position advanced by Eliot: 16

Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning. (2000, 2361)

For Sidonie Smith, the teleological aspects of the all-purposeful, rationalising self are part of the enlightenment engendered by a number of interlocking phases in western society:

Politically, the enlightenment self is aggressively individualistic in its desires and liberal in its philosophical perspective. The French Revolution with its cry for liberty, equality and fraternity; the philosophical systems of Locke and Rousseau with their emphasis on empiricism and the experience of the individual’s senses as originary loci of knowledge; the self-absorption of Romanticism and its preoccupation with subjective experience; the economic and political shift from aristocratic to bourgeois power; the progressive tendencies of Darwinism, particularly social Darwinism; the consolidation of Protestant ideology with its emphasis on the accessibility of God to individual prayer and intercession; all these phenomena coalesced to privilege the self-determining individuality of desire and destiny. (1993, 8-9)
Smith here outlines the key moments within which the parameters of the enlightenment self operated. That is, the discursive political fields helped and forged ideas of the self, to an extent that the senses were rarified over the spiritual dimension as the loci of (self) knowledge, thus allowing such selves to apprehend themselves as unique beings in the world, unlike any others. In therefore articulating their autobiographical selves, there is a sense that this ‘uniqueness’ sets them apart even while they are part of the whole. This new notion of self retains traces of what St. Augustine had implied, a unique appraisal and interaction with phenomena. But in reality such a view really lies in antiquity. Modern scholarship should not disguise the fact that the discourse on the self may be traced to the philosophical musings of the Greek philosopher Heraclitus. What autobiographers such as Augustine and Rousseau were doing can be traced, in a sense, to how Heraclitus theorized on the self and its functions. While contemporary scholarship holds that Descartes crystallised the discourse on self and reason – the separation of body and mind – a perceptive chapter by James Olney in Metaphors of Self (1972) argues that the postulation of the self as the centre of a logos owes its origins to a larger cosmology of meaning outside the individual, a greater Logos (which to Saint Augustine was God). In the Heraclitean manner, I use ‘logos’ as a suffix to suggest how we harmonise various sites of scholarship as bodies of knowledge (‘logy’) with what we perceive as the real world (what Heraclitus saw as the greater ‘Logos’). Here ‘logos’ will also pertain to self-knowledge. For, as Heraclitus’ notion of continual flux suggests, self-knowledge, too, brings interaction with the world around us, a constantly changing world in which we also change. Following Olney, ‘logos’ would then come to mean ‘the principle of harmony, of measure, of proportion underlying all change … realised in the self as teleological change …’ (5). Thus the greater ‘Logos’ would have to do with the world, the universe as it were. As we shall observe in later chapters, self-knowledge can never be realised if the world is characterised by chaos and disconnection.

Heraclitus made an important inquiry into how individuals arrive at meaning. Though he is best known for his declaration that the elements are in continual flux and transformation, Heraclitus is the first philosopher to declare that every cosmology begins with self-knowledge, and that one can never exhaust one’s search for oneself if this state of flux exists. I find, for the purpose of this study, that
this notion has striking similarities to the modern notion of self, as the re-readings by post-modern theoreticians such as Stuart Hall, philosophers such as Karl Marx and Michel Foucault, and psychologists such as Freud demonstrate (Hall: 1992, 285-291). For, if one concentrates on the meaning of Heraclitus’s four notions - the intimate relation of self-knowledge and cosmology, the flux of the world, the ‘becomingness’ of the self and the identity of the logos with Logos - one comes to realise that his conclusions are wholly human in that humanity (individual or collective) is actively in search of itself: ‘I searched for myself’ (Olney, 6-7). With the passage of time the self continues to be transformed, but it can be argued that humanity itself does not change that much, in that the search for self-knowledge remains at the basis of who we are. Time carries each of our selves away and we are continuously dying to our own passing selves. Thus each self’s ability to assign meaning to something comes about only when the elements that go with that thing take on a relationship to one another. That is, meaning only emerges when the self perceives a pattern which comes about in chronologically or geographically discrete items and elements. For the self whose life is being narrated, it is essential that a pattern should exist, or be seen to exist, before it is committed to paper.

This presupposes phases through which reality is mediated by the self, seeking reasons for life’s inexplicable phenomena and arriving at a logos which makes meaning of one’s life patterns. But central to such reasoning, in Heracliatean terms, is an important premise that at each juncture of this continual search the self evolves. Heraclitus held that ‘one cannot step into the same river twice’, denoting in this cryptic statement the constant state of things as being in flux. If we therefore consider the self in autobiographical writings, we realise how, even with narratorial progression, the logos of the self keeps changing, reflecting and refracting its milieu and circumstances. For the purposes of literature, autobiography poses seemingly endless debate, as this comment from Robert Folkenflik illustrates:

It [autobiography] is a highly problematic form (some would say genre) that encourages the asking of questions about fact and fiction, about relations of reality and the text, about origins. Is autobiography to be found in referentiality, textuality, or social construction? Is there a self in this text? The subject is radically in question. (1993, 11-12)
However fictitious autobiographical writings might seem, it would be inconceivable, for example, for Richard Wright to have written his excoriating autobiography, Black Boy: a record of childhood and youth (1937; rpt. 1966), before experiencing the harshness of his young life in the Deep South reflected in being black and American. The blend of chaos and disconnection that we observe in this text means that there is no harmony between Wright’s ‘logos’ and the outside world. In this autobiography we are able to see the four notions of Heraclitus at work: search for self-knowledge, the constantly changing social and political milieu (and how the self changes with such socio-political pressures and imprints), the growth of self-awareness, and the identification with what he sees as his ultimate Logos – a literary life. While Black Boy is not the culmination of his entire life, it is a phase he went through while becoming.

Louis Anthony Renza refracts the four notions of Herculitus when he notes that the consciousness of the materials of life as past, termed “l’histoire”, is constituted by a more formatively essential, potentially explicit, present consciousness of these materials. In his view, the autobiographers’ present is free from their past-present; it exists in its own right toward its own future, and thus is directed toward their past as if for the first time; that is, in a way, it was not actually lived. Subjects do not negate the past so much as re-live it: their present literally forms their past in the moment of their writing, and is therefore as much an Erlebnis as the experience they recollect (Renza: 1973, 42). Elspeth Graham (1996, 209 & 213) hints at the problems engendered in attempting to define the genre of autobiography when she differentiates among ‘autobiography’, ‘self-writing’, ‘life-history’, ‘narrative’, and ‘life-writing’. For her, the term self-writing perhaps most clearly represents the variety of strategies and forms that are used by writers to articulate and assert themselves through the act of writing about the self. But Olney is not even interested in trying to define the word. In his first chapter he mentions that:

The most fruitful approach to the subject of autobiography, I believe, is to consider it neither as a formal nor as an historical matter ... but rather to see it in relation to the vital impulse to order that has always caused man to create and that, in the end, determines both the nature and the form of what he creates. (1972, 3)
Thus Olney lays great emphasis on what ‘subjects’ have to say about their metamorphosis in line with their lifetime achievements. The lifetime’s work of C.J. Jung seems to confirm Olney’s assertion, when Jung writes in Memories, Dreams and Reflections: ‘My life is what I have done, my scientific work; the one is inseparable from the other. The work is an expression of my inner development; for commitment to the contents of the unconscious produces [my] transformation. My work can be regarded as stations along my life’s ways’ (as quoted in Olney, 91). Hence for Olney it is impossible that the Cartesian subject can be all-knowing, fully self-sufficient and all-conquering since the self needs time to distill meaning emanating from disparate phenomena. Such reasoning extends to the autobiographical act as well:

Awareness of the nature of self-being is essential to the full autobiographic art; this being so, Descartes’ “Cogito, ergo sum” is a preautobiographic statement. Few people would dispute what Descartes said, but a great many people, of course, have disputed what that reveals beyond “sum”, and what it tells about the nature and quality of that being whose existence is indisputable. To realize the quality of such being is an act altogether separate, and different in kind, from the original and mere “cogito”. This separate act, which is an act of realization, definition, and transcendence, is what one finds in autobiography, complete or double, and in poetry. The act of autobiography and the act of poetry, both as creation and as recreation, constitute a bringing to consciousness of the nature of one’s own existence, transforming the mere fact of existence into a realized quality and a possible meaning. In a certain sense, autobiography and poetry are both definitions of the self at a moment and in a place: and I do not mean, for autobiography, that it is a definition of the writer’s self in the past, at the time of action, but in the present, at the time of writing …. In the great autobiographers, whether it be autobiography as such or poetry, consciousness of this continuing creation of the self accompanies the creation, and, in the moment after, becomes it …. (43-44)

To return to an earlier example, when Wright sits down to narrate his Southern experiences, he is not outside their frame of reference, outside their control, and may in this way assign his own meaning and nuance to them borne of
the realization of what impact they had on his psyche and self. He searches for the self that was constantly being denied, constantly being superimposed on by the Jim Crow existence of African-Americans in that part of the United States. Self-realization, self-definition, and transcendence are only allowed to become possible when the self is outside the dehumanising environment. As this study will hopefully show, the disparate experiences of individuals such as Wright became reflected in the autobiographical writings of South Africans. While it is not a re-writing of Wright’s text, Abrahams’ autobiography Tell Freedom (1954, rpt. 1981) has many stylistic and literary allusions to Black Boy, and in this way shows trans-atlantic influences in African autobiography. The search for individuality in both texts is circumscribed, almost incidental, yet both texts show the tenacity of such individuality in societies that threatened it. This is but one aspect that some South African autobiographies share with African American life-writings. Bewildering experiences in both instances, the chaos and disconnection engendered by racism, reveal both sets of writers striving for stability and significance of events. It is Olney, once more, who captures this truth succinctly:

Art, both autobiographic and poetic, mediates between the transient world of sensation and feeling, of event and emotion, and a constant, stable realm of pattern and significance. The poet, in his passion for perceiving and holding formal patterns, transforms a myriad passing sensations into a single, apprehensible and meaningful artifact; and like the poet, the autobiographer who draws out of the flux of events a coherent pattern, or who creates a sufficient metaphor for experience, discovers in the particular, and reveals to us, the universal. (45)

As already noted, Sidonie Smith (1993, 5), among other theoreticians, decries the universalising of the self by tracing this mode of representation back to the Renaissance.\(^{18}\) Thus, in Eliot’s case, the ‘universal’ itself is a problem since he homogenises very disparate experiences in terms of autobiographical writings. Taking her cue from Terry Eagleton, who writes that ‘certain meanings are elevated by social ideologies to a privileged position, or made the centres around which other meanings are forced to turn’, Smith tries to show how the meaning of Western selfhood began in the eighteenth (and nineteenth) century and passed through the
mills of enlightenment, romanticism, expanding bourgeois capitalism and Victorian optimism. In this way the individual came to be conceptualized as a “fixed, extra-linguistic” entity that consciously pursues its own unique destiny (5). Persistently rational through the agency of reason, the self comes to identify, classify and know the world in a monologic engagement that establishes individual consciousness as the centre and origin of meaning. For Conway, the later stories of colonial conquest engendered a self which collapsed its agency within the Western concept of ‘progress’:

In these stories of conquest the Western European male, and occasionally his female counterpart, is engaged in a literal psychological journey. He is tested by the forces of nature and cultural conflict, and he acts as an agent of the Western concept of progress, a god as impersonal as any Greek deity, the dynamic of history which Europeans thought promised perpetual social improvement and gave them the right to “civilize” the world in their image. (1998, 10)

This interpretation has serious implications for the slave and colonial enterprises and especially for how western culture would deride first the slave and later the colonised. From a western cultural viewpoint, slaves and colonised subjects did not possess that critical faculty of reason. This of course was part of the myth engendered by cultural anthropology. For people of African descent, engagement with the genre of autobiography thus began as a problematic: it was a necessary stage in proving that they were human beings. It made little sense to attempt to come up with a self in the European mode that purported to colonise, to engage in industry or in any other social or cultural endeavour by which the Western conception of self had been formulated. As slaves, they were at the very bottom rung of existence, a socio-economic position not encompassed by the models of autobiographical writings. To achieve a subjectivity, slaves and ex-slaves had to show evidence of their humanness. An example of this attempt to prove their humanity can be taken from Sojourner Truth’s ordeal. Bell Hooks (1997, 227) notes that, in addressing the abolitionist cause at the Akron convention in 1851, Truth literally had to bare her breasts when challenged about whether she was a real woman. 19
In analysing slave narratives, Henry Louis Gates Jr notes that black people had to present themselves as “speaking subjects” before they could begin to divest themselves of the burden of being objectified as commodities within Western, and, in this instance, specifically American culture. Writing thus became an important tool for inscribing their humanity. After Descartes, reason was centrally privileged among human characteristics. And writing, especially after printing became widespread, was taken as a visible sign of reason. Blacks were ‘reasonable’, and hence ‘human’, if – and only if – they demonstrated mastery of ‘the arts and sciences’. Hence it was critical to have verification from prominent citizens in countries where slaves lived, attesting to the fact that the narrative was actually written by the subject: ‘Written by himself/herself’ stood in place of the usual contemporary sub-title. An area of western selfhood is thus built on exclusionary practices, that is, it becomes identified culturally through construction of an other – exotic, unruly, irrational, uncivilised, illiterate, regional or paradoxically female, unnatural. Of course, the otherness of those taxonomically classified as ‘black’ comes one step further down the line from the displacement of western woman as less rational than western man: the argument holds that, rather than working logically, women’s minds worked through another, marginalized, kind of logic. Effectively women go incognito before the Cartesian cogito as self-consciousness seems to evade them (Smith, 4). This disregards the question of gender in African-American autobiographies, prevalent even as far back as the Victorian era with cogent contributions from individuals such as Sarah Stickney Ellis, Dinah Maria Mulock and Walter Besant. Thus, while belonging to the West, women are ‘other’. They are in the culture and yet not of it. In interrogating a dominant symbolic order begun with the Chain of Being, one finds negatively constructed exclusions: not-male, not-white, not-American (Betty Bergland, 132). These point to the truth of Smith’s assertion that the autobiographical form is inherently ‘androcentric and has reproduced the patrolineage for the last 500 years’ (1987: 26).

As I hope to have shown, autobiography is a male, bourgeois genre and the result of centuries of preening selfhood. Having made the genre an exclusive zone, the male bourgeois writer went on to give it propriety and literariness. An autobiography, or autobiographical acts, must consider the following criteria: the content reflects the society of the author’s time; the narrative mode is introspective
and intimate; and the events are organised in a coherent, chronological and linear narrative form (Nicki Hitchcott, ‘African Herstory’, 1997: 16). While most autobiographies, such as The Confessions, or autobiographical acts such as John Bunyan’s Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s The Confessions and Thomas De Quincey’s Confessions of an Opium Eater, meet these criteria, these straight-jacketed selves were conceived under the pressure of their own times and discourses. Thus some of those written later, such as James Gronniosaw’s A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronnionsaw actually conformed to the stereotypical thinking concerning major social practices of their times as shown by discourses one reads in the texts: denied humanity as exemplified by slavery, colonialism, and oppression. Texts such as Gronniosaw’s partake in the very mission of oppression. As Abdul R. JanMohamed observes, it is through the construction of a supplicant self that ‘the dominant culture can elicit the individual’s own help in his/her oppression’. The self conceived under such conditions is one about which no theorising during the Renaissance, the enlightenment, or industrial revolution was thought possible. Indeed, such selves are conceived and thought of outside history.

Given these generic assumptions, the concept of selfhood could not ipso facto be extended to non-westerners, for to start with a lack, to start at the cusp of time, is to realise the self in ways that the autobiographical form does not always acknowledge as germane. The slave began life with no authentic name, since this aspect of identity was constantly changed, as masters changed: slaves had no family lineage, no ‘constructive’ social milieu, no certainty about their ages, no teleological assertions to meaning in the greater interplay of the Logos and logos. One has to think not only of the social chaos that the system slavery caused to its victims, but the psychological dislocations that the victims suffered, as documented in Toni Morrison’s powerful novel, Beloved. After being sold as a slave, it was as though the slave had to start a newer, different version of one’s own self. But what kind of self was it if it is not buttressed by kinship, reason and rationality? This is what Gates muses on when he writes about the slave story in James Gronniosaw’s A Narrative of the most remarkable Particulars in the Life of Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, As Related by Himself. According to Gates, in utilising the ‘trope’ of the ‘talking book’ this slave ‘wrote not primarily to demonstrate humane letters, but
to demonstrate individual membership in the human community’. Writing took on the function of a complex ‘certificate of humanity’ (1988, 52). The slave had to become human, and writing was a means to be. But this in itself was a double-bind. In a good example of the fact that writing in itself was not sufficient, Gates notes that Gronniosaw’s primary text, even as it seeks to show Gronniosaw as a human being, remains silent on his humanity:

The book had no voice for Gronniosaw, the book – or perhaps the very concept of “book” – constituted a silent primary text, a text, however, in which the black man found no echo of his own voice. The silent book did not reflect or acknowledge the black presence before it. The book’s rather deafening silence renames the received tradition in European letters that the mask of blackness worn by James Albert Gronniosaw and his countrymen was a trope of absence. (62)

It had to be an exceptional slave, therefore, who could pierce the smugness of European letters in such a manner that a reader would have to acknowledge the presence, and the humanity, of the autobiographical subject. Prejudice had much to do with the arrogant dismissal of Gronniosaw’s subjectivity, and only time and circumstances were to change the willful self-blinding in the habit of seeing black people as absences (shades of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man).

One of Paul de Man’s suggestions with regard to autobiography is that whatever the writer does is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all aspects, by the resources of his [sic] medium. To paraphrase Geoffrey Harpham, if de Man’s suggestion is valid, then the slaves knew that their lives were worth narrating precisely because this medium allowed for two things: to demonstrate their humanity, which was being questioned, and to subvert the enlightenment view that autobiographers were necessarily men and women of action, a mode of being that had as its primary orientation its own conversion into narrative, its own eventual reading by others (Harpham, 42).

Among the more intriguing aspects of the processes of colonising and enslaving was their conflation with Christianity. This gave the colonised and slaves a crutch, for, by reading the Bible against the grain, they – in disparate continents and in different times and places – could recognise in the Bible stories their own material
conditions. Both recognised the brutalising ‘master’ as the antithesis of the very religion he professed. In an analysis of slave narratives, Stephen Butterfield notes:

Most slave narratives are strongly Christian. Evangelists of freedom, the authors praise God, prayer, good works, and the anti-slavery cause and denounce all forms of sin, especially drinking, swearing, lying, stealing, fornication and breaking the Sabbath. They are careful to distinguish between “true” Christianity and the religion used by their masters to justify the slave system and teach them obedience. Slavery itself is the most enormous sin, because it is an intrinsic evil and because it forces a whole range of sins on the people caught in its coils. It leads the master into the temptation of committing any kind of outrage on his slaves; it tempts the slave to murder and mayhem against the master; it has no respect for the marriage relation and thus encourages fornication; and the masters don’t allow the slaves to practice true religion and meet freely to discuss and worship ... Typically, Christian doctrine brings coherence into the life of the former slave, so that he may find a new identity he can take pride in. (1974: 15-16)

Having been freed by any means at their disposal, it behoves former slaves to fight for the eradication of the pernicious system. Renaissance individualism cannot be achieved at the expense of the enslaved. The peculiarity of an ‘I-You’ relationship is intricately African in its dimension of being-for-others - that is, it seems peculiarly African in how it reflects on the cultural sense by which Africans live: one is not born for oneself, but rather for the community. The Southern African saying, motho ke motho ka batho ba bangwe/umuntu ngu muntu nga bantu (you are because of other human beings who in turn are because of others), encapsulates this peculiarity. Butterfield notes that selves borne of this mentality, even in an American context, were never torn apart by the engine of industrialism, or starved by the long and persistent practice of legalised and institutionalised land theft and converting other people’s lives into capital. The self so conceived is a conscious political identity, drawing sustenance from group mythologies and past experiences and giving back the iron of its endurance for use by those who might follow. This self belongs to the people, and the people to the self (Butterfield, 3).
Frederick Douglass serves as an example of someone who put slavery on trial. As a public speaker within the cause of the Abolition Movement, he evolved an identity that merged the public and the private, though his humanity was under question. He writes that his introduction on occasion had to carry assurances that, yes, he could in fact speak: ‘Many came, no doubt, from curiosity to hear what the negro could say in his own cause. I was generally introduced as a “chattel” – a “thing” – a piece of southern “property” – the chairman assuring the audience that it could speak’ (My Bondage, 366). Douglass suffers such humiliation because he knows he can be of better service to those still in chains by being dignified and attaining nobility: ‘I have found in my experience that the way to break with unreasonable custom, is to contradict it in practice. To be sure in pursuing this course I have had to contend not merely with the white race, but with the black’ (Life and Times, 804). Paul de Man notes that readers may see themselves troped in a text and thus enact/re-live the life of the narrating subject. Conway places this point in perspective:

What makes the reading of autobiography so appealing is the chance it offers to see how this man or that woman whose public self interests us has negotiated the problem of self-awareness and has broken the internalized code of a culture which supplies notions about how a life should be experienced. Most of us, unless faced with emotional illness, don’t give our inner life scripts a fraction of the attention we give to the plots of movies or TV specials about some person of prominence. Yet the need to examine our inherited scripts is just beneath the surface of consciousness, so that while we think we are reading a gripping story, what really grips us is the inner reflection on our own lives the autobiographer sets in motion. (1998, 17)

In a sense this is an element of what has become known as ‘the tradition of a model life’ (Leigh Gilmore: 1994, 75). Nevertheless, there is a crucial difference, for as Butterfield observes (156), the elements embedded in a slave narrative involve self-tutored literacy, education as a means of understanding a brutal and brutalising environment, resistance that preserves the integrity and goals of an individual person, the inability to fit the mould of the docile and obsequious skivvy, anger and
discontent, flight, active group politics, and movement up the social scale. Thus, as Julius Lester recognises:

The “I” which is me is more than my name, an identification tag used for social convenience. When “I” say that “I” am a revolutionary then “I” become You, if you will allow me, and You become “I”. God, this is so hard. Most people won’t let you inside them. We are educated to keep “I” exclusive, to protect and to shelter it, but when we are afraid to let somebody else enter our selves, we won’t live. (as qtd in Butterfield, 225)

This ‘I-You’ mode of identification makes it easier for lives, experiences and texts to cross what Paul Gilroy terms the ‘Black Atlantic’. The confluences of such identification have never been more apparent than in the parallel lives of Malcolm X (later re-named Malik Hajj El Shabbazz) and Stephen Bantu Biko, the founder of the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa. Both revolutionaries in their disparate continents died young for their beliefs, leaving lasting impressions and impacts on their nations. It comes across in precisely the same manner as the Wright-Abrahams identification, the trans-atlantic manner which influenced Africans on the continent in profound ways. As Es’kia Mphahlele notes in his historical survey of the encounter between Africans and African-Americans, the latter played an historic role in Africans’ realization of themselves, pointing out how they could imagine the possible futures of their lives and society.  

It ought to be noted that not all forms of identification involve a militant process. Sometimes this process leads directly to identification with the slave master’s culture to an extent where the two, at least in the slave’s mind, are indistinguishable. Through subtly efficient acculturation, slaves such as James Gronniosaw bound themselves to the culture within which they found themselves, utterly rejecting the prevailing culture of black slave communities. Having assimilated completely, it is then essential for Gronniosaw to attempt to position himself within the cultural milieu and social context of his master. The wording of the title of his autobiography reveals the subject’s inherent contradictions: an ‘African prince’ who became a slave and who, against all odds, found the institution a blessing. The phrase ‘Remarkable Particulars’ translates as a meaningful life full of purpose and action, buttressed by recognisable achievements. But clearly Gronniosaw recognised
that his tale might not be believed, hence the rider ‘ As Related by Himself’. If one takes a contemporary example mentioned by Betty Bergland, the problems of assimilation into a dominant culture bedevil the reception of Richard Rodriguez’s Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriquez. According to Bergland, the autobiography of this second-generation Mexican-American speaks a dominant – meaning assimilationist – discourse in which American school experiences become the avenue for upward mobility and erase the subject’s ethnicity. The wide readership and circulation enjoyed by the text among Anglo-Americans would suggest that the narrative privileges certain Mexican-American subjectivities and supports prevailing social relations. This is one way in which to read Kaizer Matanzima’s Independence My Way (1976). For to read this text is to see how one individual’s subjectivity can be willingly subsumed under a dominant ideology, much as Rodriquez forges his subjectivity to fit in with, to be part of, the dominant ideological and cultural milieu.

The special nature of the South African case dovetails with the slave narratives. Colonialism itself took two forms: direct and indirect rule. In South Africa, it was a complex mix of the two forms. The colonial experience – in broad terms when compared to outright slavery – though brutal and punctuated by ‘frontier wars’ of attrition and land alienation, was less savage than the atrocities of slavery, of family disruptions, of having members ‘sold down the river’. The colonial experience was less brutal than the unforgettable indignities suffered by African-American women, and though it placed African cultures under severe constraints, it also allowed these cultures to adapt. Colonial experience was also encountered with the assistance of Christianity through the missionary enterprise. Converts (in Zulu this would be amakholwa) wrestled from their ethnic communities nevertheless led fruitful lives as men and women of enterprise, aspiring to gentrification as a prosperous yeoman class (Bundy: 1979). This process of social differentiation, however, necessarily created class divisions sustained and augmented by the ‘civilising mission’. Indirect rule, seen as benevolent by some scholars and autobiographers, such as William Plomer, was in the words of Mamdani much more dangerous:
Theoretically, the experience of indirect rule should alert us to the relationship between culture and politics, identity and power, thus distinguishing between cultural and political identity – particularly when the raw material of political identity is drawn from the domain of culture, as in ethnic or religious identity. To make a distinction between cultural and political identity, I suggest we historicize political identity by linking it to political power. It will help underline the fact that all political identities are historically transitory and require a particular form of state to be produced. Whether religious, or racial or ethnic, all subaltern identities have a history: that history is framed by the state, in our context, colonial and postcolonial. (2001, 5)

Thus the value of culture may in itself be overturned to construct newer and more antagonistic identities. It is because of this foreclosure that, just as historical disjunctures wrought havoc in the lives of everyone, so did this nascent yeoman class begin to wither and die. However, it clung to the view that education should be the next step for communal self-improvement. As the often-quoted remark by Benedict Anderson attests, it is the nascent middle-class of any society that begins the peculiar sense of identification that makes up the ‘imagined community’, a hallmark of nationalism (1983: 74). In a sense, as Anthony D. Smith observes, capitalist colonialism is its own gravedigger (1971: 71-72). Whereas it tries to preserve the political status quo, in order to exploit the colonies’ labour more easily, it simultaneously needs skilled labour for its modernising impetus. Three groups thus emerge: a native bourgeoisie, a small urban working class, and intellectuals. It is the native intellectuals in a colonial setting who attack the shoring up of traditional regimes of chieftaincy and begin to demand native industries and redistribution of wealth. In their desire for rapid industrialisation, the intellectuals produce their nationalism, just as anti-colonialism fits in with their need for quick modernisation.
The implications of modernity on self-writing

As with slave narratives, it is pertinent to note that any interrogation of literature's construction of identity necessarily entails a need to contend with two points, namely, how narrative facilitates the construction of nationalist identity and the particularities of literature within historical moments. This leads to an important question implicit in the post-colonial experience. Since the act of restoring the African self to its history is usually itself dependent on a western language and register, does the act of restoration lead to the construction of new(er) cultures or is it just the repetition – under the guise of nationalism – of colonialist discourse? In one instance, the question can be posed thus:

Can an oppressed nation or segment of it, engaged in a struggle for liberation from its oppressors rely on knowledge produced, researched and theorized by others, no matter how progressive, who are members of the oppressor nation? The same question put in another way is: can the right of a people to self-determination in the production of knowledge be overlooked and liberation for them through knowledge produced by others?  

For Simon Gikandi (1991, 11), literature has to address the initial situation in which the African problematic developed; that is, it has to begin with a reconstruction of the colonial phase and to express the conditions in which knowledge about phenomena is produced. Further, such literature has to struggle for intellectual space from western thought in the modernising world: it has to attempt to articulate a new way of apprehending the African world and experience. This entails, in Gikandi’s view, a reversal of the cultural disjunctures of the colonised: in effect, it has to address itself to the question of the creation of an African community in the marginal space between autonomy and the colonising structure. Narrative, particularly ‘life-writing’, has to fill in the ‘gaps’ left by everyday practice and is defined by the boundaries of these ‘gaps’. As he further observes, African Literature is determined by the interaction between African cultural traditions and the socio-
historical environment, which triggers a positive consciousness needing to express itself in writing (13). It is the intellectuals’ awareness of the lack of representation in colonial Africa that propels a search for an alternative narrative, which seeks not only to install a cultural genealogy but also to mark the terrain with which the writer can identify (Gikandi, 14). If identities are only formed or searched for once a people perceive a threat to their being, then African nationalisms were the most useful vehicles in the search for identities. This is because, as Frantz Fanon observes, ‘nationalism is that material keystone which makes the building of culture possible’ (as qtd by Gikandi, 7). I would argue that identity in pre-colonial Africa was malleable, a cultural aspect of being that could, with time, privilege and necessity, be discarded for another one. Nationalism consolidated a more nationalist outlook about identity over an ethnicist one which, however, brutally repressed by colonialism. Mamdani is able to show this encumbrance when he notes:

I am not arguing that ethnicity did not exist in African societies prior to colonialism. It did, but as a cultural identity. We need to distinguish between three different claims to ethnic identity: as a cultural identity, a biological identity and a political identity. Before colonialism, ethnicity existed as a cultural identity: every ethnic group had ways of absorbing strangers. You could become a Muganda or a Yoruba. Colonial ideologues like Sir Henry Maine or Lugard denied the historical and cultural nature of ethnicity. Instead, they claimed ethnicity to be a non-historical biological identity, a natural way of being of a primitive society. On these theoretical foundations, colonial power built a legal-administrative edifice. It framed customary law as ethnic, and created an ethnic administrative authority to enforce the law. It enforced ethnicity as a legal and political identity. (2001, 4)

It is useful, then, to highlight the ways in which autobiographical texts are constructed via multiple narrative strategies. Through these strategies we interact with the texts to reach an understanding of their multiple styles. In her study of autobiography Coullie writes:
autobiography defines its own limits, as all concepts do, relationally: like history, it is about ‘real’ events; unlike history, it is personal, not impersonal and does not involve the effacement of the narrating voice; like journalism, it usually covers a protracted period, and does not seek to present itself as a purely ‘objective’ discourse; like fiction, it constructs stories around themes and significances and in forms that will entice the reader; unlike fiction, it insists on the verifiability of much of its material; like fiction and popular movies, television narratives and so on, autobiography often constructs heroes and villains, relying on culturally accepted clichés of narrative situation and interpretative models; unlike these media, it insists that these readers actually lived. Autobiography usually expressly invokes a contractual agreement with the reader: the reader reads the references as true, and the text undertakes to refer to people, places and events which had material existence. (1991, 226)

What this implies is that autobiographies generally employ variegated strategies by which major concerns are made explicit. This does not necessarily mean that there is a simple mimetic correlation between life and the written self, but rather that discursive strategies come into play such that the text is viewed as autobiographical. It is the ‘material existence’, then, of much contested South African history which becomes an organising theme around which most of the autobiographies from the country are written. While there are a host, too, of private autobiographical writings, it is impossible to ascertain how many these may be precisely because they are not in the public domain. The life-stories already in the public domain give, in personal detail, the lived experiences of the subject, and because of the country’s tumultuous history, the reader anticipates that the autobiographies will attest to the ‘real’ of the narrated events.

What may strike most readers of South African autobiographies as an over-emphasis on history and racism must be understood as an enabling factor without which most of these texts may not have been produced at all. In its viciousness, institutionalised racism - while attempting to impose its versions of identities on a whole country - carried its own internal contradictions. As Mala Singh observes:
[A]partheid was a powerful allocator of identity. It assigned identity through legislation and other sanctions. It suppressed identity - through centralising race and ethnicity at the expense of other markers of identity. It facilitated identity through unifying its opponents in a common assertion of non-racialism and anti-racism. (1997, 120)

What Singh points to is the almost schizophrenic motivation of apartheid in constructing ‘otherness’, and the equally tenacious struggles to prove such constructions wrong. The battle for non-racialism embodied in the texts studied herein shows the adherence to the recognition for a common humanity by South Africans. For some critics, particularly those not directly concerned with twentieth-century African self-writing, autobiographies are more fictional than real. This may be explained by the fact that, in the act of writing, the autobiographical subject (the speaking “I” in the narrative) calls upon the historical subject (the biological life) to act as an objective ‘witness’ to the narration. Some autobiographical texts have proved to be works of immense untruth, but rendered so meaningful that at the beginning they are praised as ‘authentic’. As Shari Benstock (1988, 19) sees it, it is the subject who is made a material witness to the object of investigation, and this presents a further division between the present moment of the narration and the past in which the narration is focused (Benstock, 1988: 11). Such gaps in temporal and spatial dimensions are often successfully hidden from reader and writer, so that the fabric of the narrative appears seamless, spun from whole cloth. While Benstock advances reasons for this seeming seamlessness - conscious control over the subject matter, for example, or the view that the life history is grounded in authority - she does not consider whether, as readers, we are not taken in by the ideology of the autobiographical subject. This is a crucial distinction to make, for even as we resist textual interpellation (and probably become irritated by it), we should also recognise that part of the function of the seeming seamlessness of autobiographical writing rests on an ideology being espoused, and how it operates within the text. The rendition of ‘lived experience’, the careful transmutation of mundane historical life into art, is an imperative of ideology. So, whereas Benstock (16) would see the split self of the speaking subject as primordially divided, where the ‘walls that defend the moi are never an adequate defense work against multiple forms of the je”, I would suggest that the apparent suturing of this division, especially with those who write
from the position of the ‘Other’, is the function of ideology. This is particularly apparent in autobiographical instances in which the subject under investigation is from a category that seeks to justify their imperative to write, having existed as ‘forever outside’, thus forever a marginal subject – categories of humanity such as a woman, a black person, a Jew, a homosexual. Terry Eagleton aptly captures this reciprocal relationship:

History, then, certainly ‘enters’ the text, not least the ‘historical’ text; but enters it precisely as ideology, as a presence determined and distorted by its measurable absences. This is not to say that real history is present in the text but in disguised form, so that the task of the critic is to wrench the mask from its face. It is rather that history is ‘present’ in the text as a form of a double-absence. The text takes as its object not the real, but certain significations by which the real lives itself (sic) - significations which are themselves the product of its partial abolition. Within the text itself, then, ideology becomes a dominant structure, determining the character and disposition of certain ‘pseudo-real’ constituents. This inversion, as it were, of the real historical process, whereby in the text itself ideology seems to determine the historically real rather than vice-versa, is itself naturally determined by history itself. History, one may say, is the ultimate signifier of literature, as it is the ultimate signified. For what else in the end could be the source and object of any signifying practice but the real social formation which provides its material matrix? (1976, 72)

Autobiographical texts exemplify Eagleton’s point because they use fictional narrative strategies. Whereas the account we read is ‘true’, in its rendition the society’s self-representation is reconstructed by the subject who draws on the full range of linguistic flexibility and the permutations of descriptiveness and metonymy that are denied a formal, straight historical account of any era. However, this does not mean that such historical predicates are a basis for what can be outright lies, but rather that it is for the subject the very fabric in which to insert a life. Thus, in order to explicate autobiographical writings of the periods under study, it is essential to bear in mind the intertwining of history with power (or lack thereof), together with culture. While autobiographical subjects, for want of any other yardstick with which
to delineate time, will necessarily refer to dates as markers of their passage from one stage to the next in life, these significations of ‘real lives’ remain but attempts to partially abolish the very history within which they operate. History cannot be left behind, or totally discarded, but autobiographical subjects seek to defy its autonomy in the construction of their identities. In order to reduce it to a backdrop for their lives, they shift to the significant others – family, siblings, children, community, organisations. But the insistence of ideology makes the reader aware of what Eagleton implies by history operating as a double-absence: it is forever being made even as a subject progresses with the narrative, but in the texts it may appear as unimportant dates which do not call for elaborate comment. Individuals react to historical markers such as public events while, in writing about them, the autobiographical narrator wishes to put at a distance this social matrix of identity. Such attempts at resistance, of course, stem from the human agency with which the autobiographical subjects imbue themselves, and which, indeed, they possess.

What I have done in this chapter is to show the myriad ways by which the autobiographical form came into being, how, for example, it spread with the influence of commerce and printing and, as it spread, mutated into newer forms or models which served to consolidate selfhood. And yet these models of autobiographical writing excluded those members of society seen as less than human (in this instance, slaves) or less than powerful (western women). With time, however, such subjects, too, learnt the art of autobiography and wrote to confirm their humanity. The colonial encounter in Africa brought its own political, social and autobiographical baggage, but Africans themselves had to prove their humanity and search for selves that had been lost by assimilation. This necessitated the invention of a tradition of autobiographical acts in writing. The spread of nationalism made such self-conceptualization and self-assertion seem even more urgent. But before we concentrate in detail on African nationalism and its concomitant assigning of identities in the period 1900 to 1998, it is important to peruse traditional African self-conceptualisation first. The self-conception of African communities, in antiquity as well as in the modern period, will form the focus of the next chapter. It is inconceivable that these communities did not have a sense of self, a subjectivity that mediated their own world before the colonial enterprise radically changed their lives and ontologies. This sense – expressed in orature – had the significance of making
pre-colonial lives meaningful, and it is only by way of extensive scholarship in the area of self-conceptualisation that it becomes apparent. While I will concentrate on earlier African self-conceptualisation, I will also try to link this with the later process through which enforced identity became the basis for African rural-urban divisions.