

Decolonizing African Autobiography

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ABSTRACT

Despite Western autobiographical theory's ongoing efforts to render it impossible, African autobiography—and autobiography in general—thrives. Examining the process of decolonization in African autobiography, this essay traces a discursive shift from tragedy to comedy in three African autobiographies by explaining how these texts negotiate the challenging terrains of history, language, genre, modernity, and colonialism. Camara Laye's haunting *The Dark Child* tragically narrates his discursive alienation from African society, while the other two—Dugmore Boetie's *Familiarity Is the Kingdom of the Lost* and Buchi Emecheta's *Head above Water*—comically challenge Western autobiographical discourse by denying the possibility of verifying autobiographical truth or by contesting the Western success narrative. Thus, in its analysis, this essay seeks to avoid a crippling essentialism by approaching Africans texts both as specific, localized narratives and as a part of an emerging global discourse of “noncoercive knowledge.”

If one looks at the history of post-Enlightenment theory, the major problem has been the problem of autobiography: how subjective structures can, in fact, give objective truth. During these same centuries, the Native Informant . . . was unquestioningly treated as the objective evidence for the founding of so-called sciences like ethnography, ethno-linguistics, comparative religion, and so on. So that, once again, the theoretical problems only relate to the person who knows. The person who knows has all of the problems of selfhood. The person who is known, somehow seems not to have a problematic self. . . . Only the dominant self can be problematic; the self of the Other is authentic without a problem, naturally available to all kinds of complications. (Spivak 66)

Do (or can) Africans even write autobiographies? Given an extensive number of self-identified African autobiographies, the answer to this question would seem to be self-evident—and the question itself absurd. Yet James Olney in *Tell Me Africa*, the only general discussion of the subject to date,¹ essentially suggests that Africans ultimately do not—or cannot—write autobiographies. In identifying and distinguishing an African autobiographical mode from the European, Olney curiously dehistoricizes and thus ultimately makes, despite empirical evidence to the contrary, African autobiography impossible. That is, he suggests that the last African autobiography is like the first one: all partake of the same generic and narrational elements. An African “community of existence” (*Tell* 57), Olney tells us, “accounts for the typicality and archetypicality of African stories and tales” (*Tell* 76). The African subject, immersed in this community, metonymically recapitulates his or her social formation. The existential project of the traditional African subject, Olney maintains, is “to merge individual identity with group identity so that the part represents the whole, the whole is embodied and personified in the part, and the linear immortality of either is assured in the birth, reincarnation, and perpetuation of the common spirit” (*Tell* 67). Africans, he elsewhere concludes, do not actually write autobiography, they write “auto-phylography”: “The African autobiographer [does not claim] absolute uniqueness . . . instead the African autobiographer [portrays] the life shared by the group now—by the phyle. [It] is one lived countless times before, shaped by the ritual stages of birth, naming, initiation, marriage, parenthood, eldership, and death that have given form to the life of the people for as far back as the legendary, mythic memory of the people extends” (“Value” 218).

This stance curiously positions Olney with other Western theorists of autobiography who similarly claim that the writing of autobiography may be understood as the sole province of the west. Georges Gusdorf’s 1950s essay on autobiography—which occupies the first position in Olney’s important 1980 collection of autobiographical criticism—has often been cited as the opening gambit in the modern, academic study of autobiography; and it contains an astonishing aside on the Western locus of autobiography: “Autobiography,” Gusdorf comments, “is not to be found outside of our cultural area; one would say that it expresses a concern peculiar to Western man, a concern that has been of good use in his systematic conquest of the universe and that he has communicated to men of other cultures; but those men will thereby have been annexed by a sort of intellectual colonizing to a mentality that was not their own” (29). Gusdorf here intriguingly connects the impulses to empire and autobiography—a move that perhaps ought to have called into question what he emphasizes as the heroic aspects of Western autobiography—yet he still characteristically limits the genre to the west. Roy Pascal, whose 1960 *Design and Truth in Autobiography* may be said to inaugurate the academic study of autobiography in the United States, similarly argues that “there remains no doubt that autobiography is essentially European” (22), “a distinctive product of Western, post-Romantic civilization, and only in modern times has it spread to other civilizations” (180). Despite discussing an autobiographical account by Babur, the sixteenth-century Moghul emperor of India, Pascal strangely concludes that “it is beyond my scope to suggest why autobiography does not come into being outside Europe, and the existence of such as work as Babur’s memoirs of the sixteenth century, which would occupy a significant place in the history of autobiography

had it belonged to Europe makes one hesitate to generalise" (22).² Well, perhaps not hesitate too much.

There is, of course, another, more recent perspective—a poststructuralist one—that also declares autobiography impossible, not just by Africans but by anyone, including those in the past who mistakenly believed they were indeed writing an autobiography. Candace Lang, for example, informs us that "not only is autobiography 'in the Augustinian sense' no longer possible, *it never was*" (5). The Derridean acolyte Robert Smith declares, "As soon as language becomes an issue for autobiographical theory, any last footing 'the autobiographical subject' may have had gives way. The 'I' ends up not only as a political and philosophical delusion but as a linguistic one too" (58). Or later: "The dismantling of the autobiographical subject is surely now complete" (58).³ The odd triumphal certainty in these pronouncements in a critical perspective that otherwise champions uncertainty echoes the equally curious suggestion that, at the very moment when Africans and others finally have sufficient access to literacy and, even more important, publication, autobiography should be declared nonexistent (or, what is the same thing, pervasive). Thus anyone who would study African or any other kind of non-Western autobiography is immediately confronted with an apparently insoluble problem: how to examine something that, if we agree with these scholars, doesn't essentially exist.

A solution to this debate might be found in Gayatri Spivak, who implicitly contends that anyone who can ask the question "Who am I?"—that is, anyone with consciousness—has a "problematic self," the very condition that may allow non-Europeans in general, and Africans in particular, no longer mere ethnographic objects, to write autobiographies. This would seem to be the general trajectory of what Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson term a "third wave" (13) of autobiographical criticism, an approach that attempts to recuperate autobiography by reconciling socially constructed discourse with self-liberationist agency or by conflating the postmodern with the postcolonial. These critics retain the poststructuralist critique of a unified subjectivity that seemingly obliterates the possibility of autobiography while, simultaneously, valorizing the liberating aspects of autobiography, particularly for those once excluded from historical discourse—women, colonials, gays, the disabled or diseased, and so forth: in short, those whom Fanon calls "the wretched of the earth." "For them [the "colonized"]," Smith and Watson contend, "autobiographical writing has often served as a tactic of intervention in colonial repression" (45). However, despite their political, philosophical and even institutional imperative to reiterate that any kind of coherent self remains a fantasy, these "third wave" critics cannot help employing selfhood in its traditional sense. Paul John Eakin, for example, describes "'self' less as an entity and more as a kind of awareness in process" (*How* x). Yet, throughout *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*—a recent discussion that chronicles his own autobiographical struggle to move beyond using "'the self'" as "the definite article suggests something too fixed and unified to represent the complexity of self-experience" (x)—he relentlessly deploys phrases and terms like "emergent selfhood" and "self," suggesting that he, like other third wave critics, cannot fully abandon the traditional language or concepts of autobiography: he even acknowledges that "all self-narration is by definition a narrative of individuation" (*How* 136).

I prefer Spivak's notion of a "problematic self," one in which subjectivity is not imprisoned by language. Indeed, while representations of the self (as well as mimesis in general) pose philosophical problems, Terry Eagleton counters that "when I have language . . . my sensory experience still represents a kind of surplus over it. The body is not reducible to signification, as linguistic reductionists tend to imagine" (61). Are we, including these critics who ironically include their names and thus a supposed stable subjectivity in their work, hopeless captives of language? My sense is that African autobiography *does* exist—even in the traditional sense, as outlined by Philippe Lejeune: "*Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality*" (4)—and that it struggles with the same rhetorical and existential problems that are found in other autobiographical texts, as well as issues that confront the African subject alone. As Smith and Watson make clear, the "widespread use of self-representation in both preliterate and literate non-Western cultures contradicts the allegation . . . 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" (84). My sense is also that we need another perspective by which to examine African autobiography, one that allows it to exist and evolve—that is, to be historical—without fetishizing generic ambiguity and instability or insisting on the textual equivalence of narrative and criticism.⁴

One heuristic method for examining African autobiography might be located in William L. Andrews's work on antebellum African American autobiography, *To Tell a Free Story*, which focuses on the rhetoricity of the African American slave narrative, especially the developing manner in which black autobiographers negotiate a hazardous rhetorical terrain with their white readership (and editors). What I find most useful in Andrews's work is, however, less his astute analyses of the various kinds of rhetorical control deployed by the slave narratives and more his sense of an ongoing (though not necessarily steady) movement toward freeing the black voice. The history of African American autobiography, Andrews suggests, involves subtle but recognizable shifts in the discursive control that black authors asserted over their texts, and with the work of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and J. D. Green, African American autobiography was able to liberate itself from other discourses—those of slaveocracy and those of the white abolitionists—to articulate an autonomous, dialogical voice of freedom. And in something that will connect to my thesis, Andrews also points to a comic element in more liberated black American autobiography: "To make fun is to make free, at least temporarily" (275), he states in discussing the comic moments of resistance in these slave narratives, a suggestion that echoes the liberatory effect of comic discourse against an oppressive regime. As Kofi Awoonor, in a passionate discussion of the need for an African-focused criticism of African literature, concludes: "Any African writer worth his salt will reject the infinite tragedy" (93).⁵ Put in another critical register, Leigh Gilmore suggests that "the ways in which an autobiographer variously acknowledges, resists, embraces, rejects objectification, the way s/he learns, that is, to interpret objectivity as something less than simply subjectivity itself marks a place of agency" (12). This shift, at times, may be understood in Caren Kaplan's suggestion of decolonizing autobiography one example of many "out-law genres" (119). The African autobiographers I discuss attempt to enter, insofar as

it is possible, a powerful narrative discourse on their own terms, and her contention that such decolonized autobiographies “mix two conventionally ‘unmixable’ elements—autobiography criticism and autobiography as thing itself” (Kaplan 119)—heuristically delineates a mode of self-reflexivity and agency in postcolonial autobiography.

In juxtaposing Andrews’s work to Olney’s and the others, I am not attempting utterly to dismiss Olney’s approach. His admirable work reflects an initial stage of African literary criticism when the imperative to distinguish the African text from other discourses was paramount. Indeed, his theory of African autobiography may clearly apply to *some* African writers.⁶ Olney also seems powerfully influenced by the structuralist/functionalist school of African anthropology that envisioned a timeless Africa, one fundamentally unchanged despite the astonishing impact of outsiders (Islam, Europe) on African culture over the past eight hundred years.⁷ Rather, I want to suggest two things: first, the *ongoing* presence of African autobiography that has fundamentally challenged the notion that the genre of autobiography is essentially European, and, second, a *shift* in the deployment of what Hayden White terms the four master tropes of historiography, a shift in African autobiography from the romantic and the tragic to the ironic and the comic—that is, from a hopelessly divided self that envisions its sure obliteration to one that struggles both to understand itself as well as the social and political realities that shape and threaten its understanding of identity. This approach would recognize the reality not only of an African self but also of a *problematic* self—as Spivak suggests—a human subjectivity attempting to understand the contingencies of identity in a colonial and postcolonial location.⁸ Indeed, this shift from tragedy to comedy offers one textual way of understanding how more recent African autobiographers challenge the seemingly inescapable discourses of history, language, genre, modernity, and colonialism—not necessarily in order of importance—to work towards a discursive decolonization. To outline this shift I want to make comparisons, when appropriate, between African and African-American autobiographers.⁹

Of the three African autobiographies I want to discuss, all of which emerge in the crucial moment of decolonization in Africa, the first one—Camara Laye’s *The Dark Child* (1953)—essentially presents a more romantic and tragic narrative that yearns for an idealized African culture that is in the process of being (or has been) destroyed by colonialism and, at the same time, depicts the tragic or colonized schizophrenia of the African subject that has replaced an imagined older unity. Metonymically representing any number of other tragic African autobiographies, Laye’s text emphasizes education as the vehicle for colonization and presents tragic images of the colonized African subject hopelessly divided against himself. Indeed, Camara Laye in many ways documents, perhaps unreflexively, his own cultural suicide and subsequent tragic alienation from a romanticized, precolonial culture. The other texts—Dugmore Boetie’s *Familiarity Is the Kingdom of the Lost* (1969) and Buchi Emecheta’s *Head above Water* (1986)—are also set in recognizably colonial sites (for Boetie, in pre-World War II and then Apartheid South Africa, and for Emecheta, second-class status in 1960s and ’70s England), but they deploy narrative structures and strategies that comically and ironically disrupt colonial discourse and suggest nontragic African autobiographies can be written. Boetie’s text chronicles his life as a criminal—and his story suggests how apartheid is

clearly responsible for criminalizing the African—but his text also violates the norms of (and thus criminalizes) what has been termed the “autobiographical pact” (Lejeune) between writer and reader, a textual strategy that undermines the colonial/Foucauldian relationship between the writer as confessor and the reader as interrogator.¹⁰ Emecheta presents a story of assimilation that she then comically deconstructs: her autobiography thus refuses the tragic conclusion of a divided consciousness while nevertheless offering a narrative of hope and perseverance.

Camara Laye’s *The Dark Child* is a lyrically constructed narrative of his life growing up in Guinea; and in many ways, it presents a specific account of the tragically divided African subject. To suggest the world he has been forced to abandon, Laye presents episode after episode in which the reader is shown the rich, spiritually full world of his childhood, through romanticized portraits of his parents (both of whom possess magical powers), his grandmother’s rural village, his education, the secret initiation rituals he undergoes, as well as his move away from his family into the higher echelons of the French colonial educational system. Unfortunately, as he moves from school to school, Laye experiences a growing sense of alienation from his family and community. The primary school he attends is in particular a site of physical and psychological violence, humiliation, and alienated work, although Laye seems almost unconsciously compelled to succeed in it. His growing and tragic sense of alienation is clearly articulated when the narrator, during a vacation, has returned to his grandmother’s village and, out working the fields in his uncle’s concession, he offers a lyrical scene of unalienated labor:

The tom-tom, which had followed us as we advanced into the field, kept time with our voices. We sang as a chorus, now very high-pitched with great bursts of song, and then very low, so low we could scarcely be heard. Our fatigue vanished, and the heat became less oppressive.

On such occasions, if I happened to stop work for a moment and look at that long, long line of reapers, I was always impressed and carried away by the infinite love and kindness of their eyes, as they glanced here and there. *Yet*, though their glances were also distant and preoccupied, though it seemed million of miles from their task, they never slighted it. Hands and sickles moved without interruption.

And, what actually *were* they looking at? At one another? A likely idea! Perhaps at the distant trees or the still more distant sky. And again, perhaps not. Perhaps they were looking at nothing. Perhaps there was nothing to look at, and this only made them seem distant and preoccupied. The long line of reapers hurled itself at the field and hewed it down. Wasn’t that enough? Wasn’t it enough that the rice bowed before these black bodies? They sang and they reaped. Singing in chorus, they reaped, voices and gestures in harmony. They were together! —united by the same task, the same song. It was as if the same soul bound them.

Was it pleasure, and not the combat against fatigue and heat, that urged them on, singing? Obviously. The same pleasure filled their eyes with that lovingness which had struck me, delightfully and a little regretfully, for though I was near them, part of them, I was not entirely one of them. . . . (61)

Laye here emphasizes that, of all the workers, he *alone* possesses self-consciousness—significantly, only he stops work and observes the others, while his fellow

workers toil on in oblivion. He cannot imagine anyone else with his tragic consciousness: “they were looking at nothing.” This scene eerily parallels a moment in Frederick Douglass’s 1845 *Narrative* in which he also feels an ambivalent sense of connection to an inner circle of blackness. In that scene, Douglass describes the “wild songs” sung by his fellow slaves that “reveall[ed] at once the highest joy and deepest sadness” (24) and then comments: “I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs. I was myself within the circle; so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear” (25). Now, however, Douglass is outside the “circle” and can only look back with reverent nostalgia. Laye is similarly *near* his fellow workers—but he is not, clearly, *of* them. He recognizes his tragic alienation but can do little about it.

The unalienated work occurring in these fields may be usefully compared with the often pointless and cruel physical labor, along with brutal beatings, that is imposed on Laye at his school. School, he tells us, “was a deadly serious matter” (79) in which the students were continually disciplined—by being beaten or punished by outside work. If a student failed to do an assignment perfectly he was caned. Laye writes: “Irregular downstrokes [at the blackboard],” for instance, “made our teacher furious. He examined our exercises under a magnifying glass, and dealt out his blows accordingly. He was indeed quicksilver, and he wielded his rod with joyous *elan*” (80). Anticipating Laye’s experience in the fields, the teacher closely observes the students at work (as well as their work in magnified detail): the real lesson, of course, is how to become a self-conscious observer of others—to reproduce the ideology of colonialism. The students under these circumstances tried “to be noticed as little as possible, for we lived in continual dread of being sent to the blackboard. This was our nightmare. The blackboard’s blank surface was an exact replica of our minds” (79–80). A reminder of the Enlightenment metaphor of the *tabula rasa*, the blackboard is in fact a trope for an educational system that, in the French colonial world, attempts to assimilate its subjects—to transform them into Frenchmen. In fact, the whole disciplinary regime that Laye must contend with is designed to colonize him, to incorporate Laye into a taxonomized world of the French society of surveillance.

At the same time, the entire autobiography narrates Laye’s own translation into European discourse. In each succeeding scene, he moves farther away from his family and culture into the European society, and at the same time, his narrative increasingly resembles the European *bildungsroman*. Near the end of his autobiography, in each of his annual school vacation returns to his home, he transforms his hut into something more European. “Originally,” he tells us, his hut “had been like the other huts, but gradually it began to acquire a European look. I say ‘began to,’ for the resemblance was never exact. Yet I was keenly aware of the changes, not only because they made the hut more comfortable, but even more because they were tangible proof of how much my mother loved me” (169). A trope for the entire autobiography, the hut embodies both Laye’s own always inadequate colonial assimilation, as well as his discursive surrender to European textual strategies.

Laye includes, interestingly enough, an anticolonial, countertrope in the text, although it is unclear if he is able accurately to read the figure himself. After completing primary school, Laye journeys to Conakry, the colonial capital of Guinea, to further his education, and there he rooms and boards with his more

cosmopolitan uncle, Mamadou, an orthodox Muslim who works as “the chief accountant in a French establishment” (150). As Laye comments:

He wore European clothes only for work. As soon as he came home he undressed and put on a *boubou* which had to be immaculate and said his prayers. On leaving the Ecole Normale he had taken up the study of Arabic. He had learned it thoroughly by himself, using bilingual books and a dictionary. Now he could speak that language as well as French, though he never did so to create an impression. It was simply his desire for deeper knowledge of religion that had persuaded him to learn the language of the Prophet. (150–51)

We might well offer a different interpretation of Laye’s uncle and read his actions—both his change of dress and his learning Arabic—as moments of cultural resistance to colonialism. Laye’s Uncle Mamadou undoubtedly recognizes the hegemonic power of the colonial system, but unlike his nephew, he discovers a method for negotiating with it and ultimately struggling against its totalizing project. His European clothes become, in effect, a disguise; and it would not be difficult to imagine Mamadou participating, without Laye’s knowledge, in legal (or possibly even illegal) anticolonial activities.

During the course of the text, however, Laye almost blithely narrates his own cultural suicide; and his seeming lack of self-consciousness in the text about the true causes of his alienation has led to charges—mostly famously by fellow African writer Mongo Beti—that he has sentimentalized his childhood.¹¹ Indeed, in his autobiography, Laye offers virtually no critical comments about the colonial system that has so traumatically affected his life and thus seems to tacitly accept the colonizer’s perspective. It is difficult, however, to resolve this issue. While Laye indeed seldom even mentions the colonial regime, the narrative itself presents evidence concerning the devastating impact of colonialism. Phillippe Thoby-Marcellin, the Haitian novelist who wrote the introduction to *The Dark Child*, comments that “the book has the force of the nostalgia which spurred him to write it to relieve his exile when he was far from his people” (13). In this sense, Laye wrote the text to archive a rapidly disappearing culture and to cope with the exigencies of being a colonial student and an autoworker in what was a hostile metropolitan site, France.¹² The tragedy of it all is that his culture can never be preserved by a text; the text itself offers evidence of its demise.

Dugmore Boetie’s *Familiarity is the Kingdom of the Lost* recounts his life as a criminal in South Africa, presenting scene after scene in which the picaresque Dugmore lies and cajoles his way in and out of increasingly difficult situations. Unlike Laye’s, his narrative mode is consistently ironic and even comic, as he relentlessly moves through the brutally racist society of South Africa. Indeed, to survive, Boetie must continually play the trickster, fooling both his victims and the police.¹³ Several scenes that he narrates perfectly capture Boetie’s ingenious efforts to defeat the system. On one occasion, after buying a pack of cigarettes at a tea shop and seeing the owner carelessly walk away from the cash register, an extraordinarily young and opportunistic Boetie grabs a large roll of bills left lying on the open counter, instinctively tosses it to his partner at the door, and then calmly remains in the shop, brazenly demanding his change. The storeowner, convinced that Boetie has committed the crime, forcibly detains Boetie and calls the police. But after intensive body searches and interrogation, the policeman compels

the owner to apologize to Boetie and return his change. At other moments in his narrative, he cleverly exploits the racist expectations of whites to commit crimes and to escape from the police. At one point, for example, Boetie concludes that “the white man in South Africa suffers from a defect which can be easily termed limited intelligence. . . . I say this because no man, no matter how dense, will allow himself to be taken in twice by the same trick. They don’t learn by mistakes, for the simple reason that they’d rather die than talk about their mistakes. . . . Their pride is based on colour, and it’s on this pride that we blacks feed ourselves” (55–56). To illustrate his point, Boetie recounts several incidents in which he and his fellow gang members ask an illiterate white truck driver to read a note; and while the driver—unwilling to admit to blacks that he can’t read—is trying to make sense of it, others unload goods from the back of the trailer. In another caper, Boetie’s car, full of marijuana he is transporting, breaks down in front of a police station. His two companions run away, but Boetie, unwilling to abandon his product, approaches two policemen and asks them to help him restart the car. Again, to escape, he depends on the racist attitudes of whites, who cannot imagine a black being so ingenious or daring.

These anecdotes present just a few of the numerous criminal activities Boetie is involved in and provide a figure for the autobiography itself. Boetie’s narrative is ultimately an outlaw text that both chronicles the life of an out-law and violates the law of the autobiographical genre, again Lejeune’s notion of an “autobiographical pact” between autobiographer and reader. Indeed, the story of how Boetie’s autobiography came into existence suggests how he ingeniously resists the discursive demands of whites. His autobiography was essentially financed by Barney Simon, a well-known white, liberal South African theater director. Because Boetie died before being able to complete and polish the narrative, Simon—much like white abolitionist editors of nineteenth-century slave narratives—appends an explanatory epilogue that ironically both praises and debunks the autobiography.

What is of particular interest is Simon’s account of the genesis of the text. Simon first reports on his dealings with Boetie, especially on the advice he gave Boetie on what to write. Simon is anxious to locate and encourage black South African writers who can testify to the evils of apartheid, and in Boetie, Simon believes he has discovered a native informant, a seemingly untainted, reliable witness who can document the sufferings that apartheid imposes. After reading a short autobiographical piece by Boetie “which excited many people” (163), Simon convinces Nat Nakasa, the editor who published the piece, to bring Boetie to their multiracial improvisation acting group; and there Simon encourages Boetie to write a full-length version of his life history.

Later, however, after Boetie has shown Simon an adventure novel he has written, Simon, in a classic coaxing gesture in autobiography, patronizingly urges Boetie to return to the autobiographical mode and write a full-length autobiography:

We discussed [his adventure novel manuscript] extensively, passionately. I explained that this kind of writing was valid in itself, and that if it was what he wanted to do he might easily get good support. But that it was not writing that interested me, that I truthfully did not know enough about it to help in any way.

I quoted Dickens—*David Copperfield*. Begin with “I was born,” I said.

“Do you want it all?” Duggie asked. “As it was? All the shit?” I assured him that I did.

“We’ll all get into trouble,” he said. I asked him to tell me what he knew, what mattered to him, as best, as simply, as truthfully as he could. Then we’d worry about trouble. So he began again. Not with “I was born” but a kind of equivalent. (163–64)

Beginning an autobiography with “I was born,” of course, echoes not just Dickens but also the familiar first line of many nineteenth-century black American slave narratives,¹⁴ although this “equivalent” scene depicts not information on Boetie’s birth but a seven-year-old Boetie accidentally killing his mother. Indeed, with this murder, Boetie in effect deconstructs the birth trope that inevitably begins most nineteenth-century slave narratives. And as the narrative unfolds, we also find out about Boetie’s picaresque life—especially about his adventures as a criminal; his life as a soldier during World War II, when he lost a leg; his many imprisonments; and his attempts to survive the imposition of apartheid after World War II. (It is also interesting to note that Simon’s comments ironically echo a police interrogation, urging Boetie to tell the truth, as if the truth would somehow free him of guilt.)

Yet, after reading Barney Simon’s epilogue, we must ask if much of what Boetie reports in the autobiography actually occurred, at least to Boetie himself. In the epilogue, Simon, attending a now dying Dugmore Boetie in a hospital, recounts meeting “a little old woman, unquestionably his mother” (167)—the same woman supposedly burned to death in the narrative’s first scene—who refutes virtually everything Boetie has written in his autobiography. As Simon comments:

She spoke on. Duggie had always been a difficult child. He lost his leg at the age of eight. One day he came home screaming from a pain in his leg. The leg turned black; it had to be amputated. He’d been to jail only twice to her knowledge. He’d never been up north in the Army. (168)

Dugmore Boetie, as Barney Simon ruefully admits, had been conning his white benefactor. Indeed, the entire narrative is something of a ruse in which the reader can never be certain that *anything* Boetie relates is true. Boetie, far better than Simon, recognizes that telling the simple truth about his life in Apartheid South Africa will indeed get him in trouble. Yet, at the same time, Boetie relentlessly conveys the oppressive nature of the apartheid system. That Boetie must have been convincing about the cruel nature of apartheid is demonstrated by Barney Simon’s initial, unquestioning acceptance of his narrative.

One wonderfully comic scene in Boetie’s text provides a figure for his overall textual strategy. By exploiting the white racist notion that all blacks are alike and incapable of ingenious (or really *any*) planning, Boetie impersonates an employee at a white-owned department store. As a fake employee, Boetie systematically loots the store, all the while seeming the perfect worker. Indeed, at one point he even suspects that he is going to be promoted! Similarly, in his autobiography, Boetie impersonates an autobiographer and thus subverts what is conventionally expected of the autobiography. In this way, his text resists Western hegemonic discourse by not telling the truth—or better, by offering a narrative that cannot be verified and is thus useless to Western institutions interested in inciting confession

and inscribing others in Western discursive practice.¹⁵ Boetie's autobiography thus can be read as a novel—or at least as a novelized or fictionalized autobiography, one that subverts genre just as it cons Simon. Boetie essentially does the same thing to Simon that he did to the illiterate white truck driver—neither of whom can make sense of a written black text (although Simon eventually admits that he is unable to understand what Boetie has written). Simon begins his epilogue by asserting that “this book was *meant* to be the first volume of the autobiography of Dugmore Boetie. Now I don't know what it is” (162; emphasis added). The point I want to emphasize here is *meant* by whom. We cannot know with certainty what Boetie meant this text to be, even if he intended it to be a political indictment of apartheid. Yet in that indeterminate space, I want to argue, can be located the truly subversive nature of Boetie's narrative.

At first glance, Buchi Emecheta's *Head above Water: An Autobiography* easily outstrips tragic autobiographies like Laye's in its seemingly blithe acceptance of Western values—and in Emecheta's case, specifically British ones. In her narrative, she relentlessly recounts what might generally seem like utterly mundane activities (such as apartment hunting, studying for her college degree, deciding on what to wear to her college graduation, interviewing for a job, going on vacation, and eventually buying a house, among other things)—and, of course, some less ordinary events (e.g., publishing novels)—to convey “the little happenings that helped to mould and shape [her] into a fairly prolific writer” (1): all of which form part of her steady but difficult assimilation into (white) British social life. Like many capitalist autobiographies, the narrative thus details her struggle to become an economic success: through pluck and persistence, she rises from humble origins to become a successful writer and homeowner in London, an example of heroic triumphalism. In a real sense, a major climax of the text occurs when Emecheta purchases her own home, signifying that she had not only entered the British middle class but also achieved a kind of British identity. As such, *Head above Water* clearly resembles another well-known (and for some, infamous) autobiography, Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* (and through Washington, Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* and any other self-made autobiography¹⁶). Washington, of course, recounts how, against all odds, he transformed himself from an impoverished ex-slave who, at one point, must sleep in the street because he is broke, into one of the most powerful African Americans of the late nineteenth century, and he deploys his text to articulate his philosophy of self-reliance and racial accommodation. Emecheta's story follows a similar trajectory: born into poverty in Lagos, she is able to overcome patriarchal Igbo expectations, racist elementary teachers from England, a useless, parasitical husband, and a disappointingly racist/classist/sexist England to keep her “head above water” (2) and survive *and* prosper in 1960s and 1970s London. Much like Washington, Emecheta is deeply religious (she often sees the hand of a benign Providence in her success), very much identified with what she sees as Western, even at times imperial values (she especially prizes the British Empire and the British royal family as well as posh English stores: for example, Marks and Spencer¹⁷), and a striking example of self-reliance. As she tells us early in her autobiography, “However much I admired the village life, I knew that for sheer survival I had to make a go of the education the school was offering me—free, when almost all of the girls in the school were paying. I kept more and more to myself, because I did not pay for my education, a fact that made me feel

awful, even though I was not given the scholarship out of charity *but won it for myself*" (17; emphasis added). Like Washington, she also includes axiomatic bits of advice and definitions:

Because whatever you want to do in this world, if you set your heart on it, you will always get it. (75)

I feel that people who deliberately choose not to have children do miss out on a great deal. (78).

Success in life does not necessarily mean a nine to five job, but a young person who cannot enjoy a good book or is not taught how to make himself useful has been robbed of his full humanity. (166)

In Washingtonian terms, she herself learns "not to brand any boy or girl as completely bad" (160). Indeed, Emecheta believes in ameliorist fashion that the current social order offers the only means for freedom. In an apostrophe to her own children, she writes: "You can work your independence through the system" (89).

And Emecheta offers a commensurate Washingtonian philosophy of education that preaches self-reliance and autonomous effort as the keys to personal success: "Sometimes," she tells us, "it is very good to meet people like Carol, Miss Humble and Sylvester [respectively, her London social worker, a strict elementary teacher from England, and her husband]. Such people were particularly good for me and my chi, because the way to set my mind to achieving something was for another person to tell me I could not do it" (43).¹⁸ Later, much like a self-authorized missionary, when she decides to accept a job as a social worker at an all-black youth community center, she articulates how she is going to inculcate middle-class values into the aimless black youth of London:

[S]eeing people of my race reduced to banging tables and shouting at each other instead of talking overpowered my instincts. I must accept the job. I must improve the lot of these young people. I must help.

I was going to teach them to talk in low voices, to show them how to relax with a good book rather than banging draughts, which only stimulated them into a state of high excitement. I was going to introduce them to cultural activities such as listening to music, my own type of music, which in my over-optimistic state I was sure they were going to like. I was going to make them realize that they could achieve things with their lives, lives which were just beginning. I was going to make their visits to The Seventies [the youth center] worth their while and make the center serve as a place of relaxation and civil education, the type of education that would teach them political and social awareness. (132)

Compare her educational philosophy to that of Booker T. Washington's:

From the very beginning at Tuskegee, I was determined to have the students do not only the agricultural work and domestic work, but to have them erect their own buildings. My plan was to have them, while performing this service, taught the latest and best methods of labour, so that the school would not only get the benefit of their efforts, but the students themselves would be taught to see not only utility in labour, but beauty and dignity, would be taught, in fact, how to lift labour up from mere drudgery and toil, and would learn to love work for its own sake. (388)

Washington in the nineteenth century admittedly focuses on manual labor (and apparently subscribes to the myth of the lazy black), while Emecheta emphasizes cultural and political themes, but they share the idea of constructing institutions that would work to undermine what they believe are bad habits and beliefs.

What redeems Emecheta's autobiography from simply rehearsing Washington's accommodationist stance and, perhaps more importantly, from a curious obliviousness about the social roots of oppression, however, is not only the fact that what might seem ordinary to others is actually a series of extraordinary achievements on her part but also her ultimate recognition that self-reliant hard work is not always sufficient to overcome the realities of race, gender and class oppression.¹⁹ She insists, at one point, that she "was going to make them [her black charges] all respectable, lower-middle-class people exactly like myself, because in my ivory tower I felt they should all aspire to be like me. My argument was always, if I could get a university degree with five children, why could not other people, who had fewer responsibilities, do the same?" (140). Yet she eventually realizes that her "black experience was not the same as the type weathered by the members of the Seventies" (140) and that "it was all very well being told that the greatest agent of mobility is education" but "what then occurs in a society which is multi-racial, and you happen to belong to the minority, the hated and scapegoatable group? Education, then, could never be your sole agent for both social and economic mobility" (125). Indeed, unlike Washington, she comes to understand that she "stood for the very type of black image they felt emphasized their failures. They knew that blacks like me who could claim to have made it were a pain to the masses of other blacks who could never make it" (133). In fact, she recognizes that "it was left to people like [her] to keep our dissatisfied youth in check" (126): "We blacks were employed to face our unhappy blacks" (145). The main purpose of youth clubs like the Seventies, she reminds us, is "to keep boys off the streets" (169). Washingtonian clichés about personal achievement are thus tempered, even at times dismantled, by the social realities of race and class—and Emecheta clearly understands her mediating role as a visible agent of social control.

This realization is emphatically and humorously underscored when Emecheta first visits the youth center and, in response to a strange odor she encounters, naively contends that "people of different races smell differently":

The smell in the Underground reminds one of the rotten corn we use in Africa to make a custard-like food called *ogi*. But the young men from The Seventies conjured up a different kind of smell. Most of them wore very clean clothes, and one or two were smartly dressed—too smart in my estimation just to come to The Seventies. Still, the stuffiness could not but bring out a kind of smell I had experienced before, when I was a little girl. (129–30)

Emecheta at first associates the odor with farmers from her home village, but eventually she wryly discovers that she is clueless about this "bush smell" (130) at the club: indeed, the smell is actually from marijuana which she learns after a prank when, just before Guy Fawkes night, the young men (any one of whom could easily be someone like Dugmore Boetie) set off firecrackers and sparklers in the club. In response, Emecheta, embodying middle-class values, reflexively calls the fire department and the police:

The firemen kicked the door open, then I saw The Seventies in a new light: "She's call the law, she's call the pigs, the woom'n's call the f . . . pigs . . . Oh guy!"

This I knew was the cry of fear. These young people feared everybody white and in uniform. I had wondered why.

The firemen on their part worked as if they were deaf and dumb. They probably know the place well. They soaked the whole place in water, took away the remaining fireworks and opened the windows to let in air. Four policemen came in their wake. It was then that I saw my mistake.

The young men hated the sight of policemen even more than firemen. . . . I was one of those who would rush to the London bobby for help. . . . I did not fear them, neither did I find them intrusive, so I did not understand why the members of The Seventies looked at them with such horror. (142–43)

She soon finds out. One policeman says to her:

"Risky job for a woman, especially with the smell."

"Yes, it's the smell of their cigarettes."

As soon as two of the officers began to smile, and another to rub his nose, something clicked. I think I looked into the eye of one of the older members, and saw him dropping white packets the size of tea bags behind him. My feet suddenly became wobbly with fear. "Oh good Lord," I screamed inwardly, "are we all going to be arrested? My poor kids." (144)

The police, of course, have no intention of arresting anyone: they understand the social function of the youth center—to provide an outlet for individual frustration and incipient social rebellion without permitting significant political opposition. They will save the arrests and brutality for the street. Once again, Emecheta's middle-class, even Tory conception of the police and of a benevolent social order has been challenged. And, perhaps more important, she is able to poke fun at herself to comically challenge her own heroic triumphalism.

Her autobiography also regularly registers her ongoing sense of guilt, especially about her inability to jettison a traditional ideology of gender: "Why, oh why," she asks early in her text, "do I always trust men, look up to them more than to people of my own sex, even though I was brought up by women?" (2). Later, she comments, "[W]henver I failed in anything I always remembered what I considered my greatest failure—the inability to make my marriage work" (154). And at the end she states, "I had felt that to be a full human being, I had to be a mother, a wife, a worker and a wonder-woman" (228). But she ultimately refuses to succumb to the psychology of self-imposed gender inferiority. That is, Emecheta does not see herself as a tragic victim of colonialism or of racism and sexism. She is, of course, aware of the devastating effects of these forms of oppression; and while she struggles with a sense of guilt throughout her autobiography, ultimately she reconciles herself to herself. Her assertion that "I am just me, Buchi Emecheta" (216) may strike poststructuralist critics as hopelessly naïve, if not delusional, and it may offer a pre-metaphorical tautology, but it displays a rigorous honesty—one that any number of others would readily understand—and a defiant refusal to accept the destruction of her self. Like everyone, Emecheta indeed has a problematic self—but it isn't a *tragic* problematic self. If Emecheta's sense of herself echoes anyone, it would be Zora Neale Hurston, who similarly asserts that she isn't "tragically colored" (153). Hurston also had triumphantly problematic self: she was,

as her biographer tells us, “a complex woman with a high tolerance for contradiction . . . a Republican conservative and yet an early black nationalist” (Hemenway 5). Likewise, Emecheta is a conservative who champions hard work, individual initiative and perseverance, yet she knows all too well that these attributes may not be enough to secure full admission into white, middle class culture. Expecting an England where the people “lived like they did in Jane Austen’s novels,” she receives “a cold welcome” (26) and learns that “however well educated we were, our colour which we had hitherto regarded as natural was repulsive to others and posed a great problem. Our hosts in our new country simply refused to see beyond the surface of our skin” (20). Indeed, her autobiography functions as an attempt to recount *her* life story, to explain how she was able to survive and prosper. But unlike Washington, she doesn’t necessarily suggest that she offers a model to others. Above all, she rejects the idea that she is a tragic victim, one who can only try to archive a hopelessly lost past, yet, at the same time, she does want to recount her success, a condition that, owing to her steadfast belief in her need to protect her family, she feels justly proud of. I suspect that it is precisely this success and attitude that account for much of her popular appeal.

The postcolonial critic Edward Said ironically provides what might be understood as a politically and morally totalizing *précis* of criticism and theory:

In its suspicion of totalizing concepts, in its discontent with reified objects, in its impatience with guilds, special interests, imperialized fiefdoms, and orthodox habits of mind, criticism is most itself and, if the paradox can be tolerated, most unlike itself at the moment it starts turning into organized dogma . . . criticism must think of itself as life-enhancing and constitutively opposed to every form of tyranny, domination, and abuse; its social goals are noncoercive knowledge produced in the interests of human freedom. (“Secular” 29)

In the field of African literary criticism, however, such universalist calls, however progressive they might seem, have often generated scorn and criticism. Perhaps the most famous (or again infamous) is Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuke’s audacious statement that “to insist on judging African literature by European criteria, or by criteria allegedly universal that in closer scrutiny turn out to be European, is indeed to define African literature as an appendage of European literature, and to deny its separateness and autonomy” (10). Chinweizu and his colleagues take this stance as part of an effort, in their terms, to decolonize African literature, something that they claim requires a nativist theoretical cleansing. And it is precisely such a position that compels Kwame Anthony Appiah to suggest that their nativism ironically recapitulates western dominance by “actually presuppos[ing] the cultural institutions of the West and the ideological matrix in which they, in turn, are imbricated. Railing against the cultural hegemony of the West, the nativists are of its party without knowing it” (59).

For my purposes, the question becomes—how can we decolonize a discourse such as African autobiography, much less ourselves, without resorting to seemingly crude rehearsals of essentialism? It is, after all, Fanon who describes decolonization as “always a violent phenomenon” (35), “a program of complete disorder” (36). The equivalent in literary criticism, if such a comparison doesn’t trivialize anticolonial struggles, would presumably involve a rupturing split, a

clear separation from colonizing habits of thought and practice, even though Fanon is prescient enough to foresee “the pitfalls of national consciousness,” an ideology that he believed will ultimately reproduce a colonial hierarchy with an African comprador elite replacing (and still working with) colonial authorities. One solution for African literature, then, might be to theorize an African textual practice that is both discursively unique yet fundamentally related to the rest of the world. That is what Wole Soyinka suggests, in regards to African literature in general, when he argues that “in a comprehensive world of myth, history and mores . . . the African world, like any other ‘world’ is unique. It possesses, however, in common with other cultures, the virtues of complementarity. To ignore this simple route to a common humanity and pursue the alternative route of negation is, for whatever motives, an attempt to perpetuate the external subjugation of the black continent” (*Myth* xii). Abiola Irele similarly argues that “while in its initial thrust . . . modern African literature presents itself both as a challenge to the pervasive spirit of imperialism in the West and as a mode of a creative process of self-differentiation . . . today our need is less to press our claim, however justified, to an original difference, than to begin to restate our common involvement with the rest of humanity” (*African* 2–3). That is, Irele calls for “a critical understanding culled from a *double understanding*, of the process by which, in the work of our best writers, a true integration of an African content with a European means of expression is being worked out” (*African* 38; emphasis added). Said likewise proposes that “if at the outset we acknowledge the massively knotted and complex histories of special but nevertheless overlapping and interconnected experiences—of women, of Westerners, of Blacks, of national states and cultures—there is no particular intellectual reason for granting each and all of them an ideal and essentially separate status” (*Culture* 32).

For these theorists, any reading of African literature or, for our purposes, autobiography must be both specific and global—and must account both for the synchronic realities that emerge from the localized experience of specific writers and for the diachronic, historical developments that presented different imperatives for different historically situated writers. If an autobiography is indeed, as James Olney’s romanticist-inflected analysis suggests, “a metaphor of the self at the summary moment of composition” (*Metaphors* 35), then African autobiographies—part of an ongoing historical process—are Africanized metaphors, both *human* narratives attempting to construct an order from life and *African* texts crucially impacted by a global imperial system that sought (seeks) both land and identities. Otherwise, African autobiography is indeed impossible, a view that recapitulates what Christopher Miller describes as the African as irrelevant to the world: “The Other’s other, the Orient’s orient” (16), a self thus relegated to a discursive limbo or even nonexistence.

Olney, echoing Cardinal Newman, writes that “the difficulty is in realizing that every other man [and, presumably, woman] has a soul and that it is equally ‘whole and independent’” (*Metaphors* 23). When we are able indeed to extend this vision to include all human beings, including Africans, then we will have reached a point when we can begin to believe that we have, as Ngũgĩ suggests, decolonized our minds. The decolonized theory of African autobiography I propose here emerges from this vision—the same vision that animates Said’s sense of “noncoercive knowledge”—and equally from the emergent comic vision within

African autobiography itself. It is Bakhtin, after all, who reminds us that “the serious aspects of class culture are official and authoritarian; they are combined with violence, prohibitions, limitations and always contain an element of fear and of intimidation. . . . Laughter, on the contrary, overcomes fear, for it knows no inhibitions, no limitations. Its idiom is never used for violence and authority” (90). In the autobiographies of Boetie and Emecheta may be found this fearless laughter, but it may well have never had a chance to manifest itself without the desperate efforts made by writers like Laye and others who courageously insisted that the problematic stories of their lives had value and significance, despite a world that believed otherwise.

NOTES

1. See the Summer 1997 special issue of *Research in African Literatures*, which focuses mostly on francophone African autobiography, as a kind of supplement to Olney’s book. Patricia Geesey, the issue’s guest editor, comments, “[A]s the essays collected in this volume show, Olney’s influence is still felt, even if it is as a faint shadow . . .” (1–2). Referring only to Olney and the Geesey issue, Smith and Watson, in their consolidating text *Reading Autobiography* acknowledge the “still relatively few” (154) scholarly discussions of African autobiography.

2. See Kaplan who similarly criticizes the generic limitations imposed by Eurocentric autobiographical theory.

3. See Eakin, *Fictions*, who further elucidates, without necessarily reconciling, the apparently irreconcilable dilemma between language and the self as the authentic origins of autobiography.

4. Awoonor emphasizes the idea that “Africa has never been a historical or cultural desert” and that “Africa continues to expand, change, adapt” as two of six principles he believes ought to guide any reader of African literature” (89). Any theory of African literature, much less African autobiography, that doesn’t account for change may well be useless or worse. At the same time, theoretical premises that always already equate autobiography itself with colonial or patriarchal discourse similarly and ironically insist on the unchanging nature of the genre. For example, while I agree with Whitlock’s sense that “to read for processes of multiple identification, for the making and unraveling of identities in autobiographical writing . . . is an important gesture to decolonization” (5), I question the ironically binary opposition she identifies between colonial and postcolonial autobiography: “If binaries, thinking in terms of origins and authenticity, center and periphery, and the separation into consistent and homogenous identities are fundamental to colonizing discourse, then the work of decolonization is to return [to] ambivalence and duplicity, and to look to intersubjectivity in cultural formations and texts” (60; emphasis added). This is to impose a postmodern agenda on writers: I suspect that ambivalence is undoubtedly more widespread than any discursive threshold might allow.

5. My thesis undoubtedly begs the question—how universal are concepts or cultural tropes like comedy and tragedy? Given the sobering warnings about African literature delivered by, among others, Achebe, Armah, and Awoonor, any non-African writing on African literature must be sensitive, at the very least, of the dangers of imposing yet one more Eurocentric theory on what has all too often been thought of as an eminently knowable, even transparent African subject or textual practice. Still, Soyinka has clearly delineated an African tragic mode in *Myth, Literature and the African World*. See especially “Appendix: The Fourth Stage” (140–60), and laughter, wit, humor, and comedy—as different yet clearly related as they may be—appear to be found in every human culture, particularly the African ones. Mel Watkins has amply

and brilliantly described comedy's historical evolution in African American culture, focusing specifically on its dual nature—one comic mode for black audiences, the other for non-black ones (something that may help point to an embedded comic vision in African literature), and Watkins identifies some of the roots of an African American comic tradition in African wit, trickster narratives and verbal contests. (See also Barksdale's survey of the comic mode in African American literature.) Henry Louis Gates, Jr., similarly locates the origins of signifying, a comic African American mode of verbal expression that underlies his theory of African American literature and criticism, in African social practices and beliefs. We can look to anthropology, in particular, Melville and Frances Herkovits's *Dahomean Narrative* for further evidence of comic forms in African folk narrative (especially in the often humorous Yo and Legba tales) and to the African drama criticism of Kwabena N. Bame who in his fascinating *Come to Laugh: African Traditional Theatre in Ghana* examines the work of Ghanaian concert parties, traveling theater troupes that perform popular comic plays. (Anyone who has lived in Africa would know about the countless acting companies in any number of African countries that perform popular dramatic and comic works.)

It is also worth acknowledging, at this point, those who argue against seeing African American slave autobiographies as unambiguous examples of textual liberation. See, for instance, Baker in "Autobiographical Acts" who argues that even a culture hero like Frederick Douglass undermines his authenticity by describing his freedom in Christian terms, and Stepto who emphasizes the presence of authenticating material in African American slave narratives, something that clearly complicates our sense of the free nature of earlier slave narratives.

6. See Equiano, Kenyatta, Laye, Kariuki, Gikoyo, Odinga, and Nkrumah for examples of tragic African autobiographies. Ngũgĩ in *Detained* rewrites the Kenyan autobiographies, while Mandela rewrites Nkrumah.

7. See Sally Falk Moore, esp. 29–73, for a summary discussion of the structuralist/functionalist school of African anthropology.

8. See Bruss, who offers a similar genealogy for European autobiography.

9. The need for an authentically comparative approach to African autobiography, much less any number of other discourses, is paramount. Said, in a different context, calls this approach "contrapuntal" (*Culture* 32 ff.). I do not want to reduce African autobiography to a formula in which these writers helplessly rehearse what other emerging literatures and writers have done, yet our sense of a globalized response to the imperatives of imperialism might be strengthened by astute, comparative-based analyses of various situated literatures. For other comparative discussions of African and African American autobiography, see Bruchac's early effort, as well as Olney, "The Value of Autobiography for Comparative Studies" and Philipson, "Images of Colonized Childhood: Abrahams, Wright, Laye."

10. Foucault comments: "The obligation to confess is now relayed through so many different points, is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us . . ." (60).

11. Laye's *The Dark Child* (as well as Laye himself) has been the subject of an ongoing, vigorous critical debate. His detractors, beginning with Mongo Beti (or, Alexandre Biyidi) in 1954, have criticized Laye's apparent indifference to the realities of French colonialism, suggesting that he instead provides "an image stéréotypée" (Beti, "L'enfant" 420), a timeless realm of African existence and values. Beti plaintively asks: "Est-il possible que pas une seule fois, Laye n'ait été témoin d'une seule petite exaction de l'administration coloniale?" "Is it possible that Laye fails to witness, even just once, a single act of injustice on the part of the colonial administration?" ("L'enfant" 420). See also his "Afrique noire, littérature rose." Others, extending Beti's critique, emphasize what they see as Laye's sentimentality (Edwards and Ramchand) or his aesthetic

shortcomings (Palmer). Eustace Palmer, in particular, suggests that while Laye's autobiography possesses "a peculiar charm," one cannot ignore "its flaws—the over-idealization, confused point of view, the propensity for assertion, rather than demonstration, the self-conscious questions or comments, and the addiction to clichés, stock-phrases, and stereotypes" (95). Laye's defenders—like Senghor, King, Gerald Moore, Carroll, Macaulay, Okolie, Brière, and Philipson, Mortimer, and, from a gendered point of view, Wehrs, among many others—argue that his critics want to dictate what writers should write (something that goes beyond the bounds of acceptable criticism) and that *The Dark Child* in any case is not the sunny, mindlessly nostalgic narrative its critics suggest it is. My sense is that its alleged sentimentality and aesthetic weaknesses—especially the shifts in point of view—are symptomatic, as I have suggested, of a tragic mode of consciousness: Laye fluctuates, for instance, between a communal "we" and an exilic "I"—and between the romanticized experience of a child and the often baffled perspective of an alienated adult who simply doesn't understand all of the rituals and social life he describes not necessarily because of incompetence or a need to pander to a French reading audience anxious for the experience of an exotic authenticity but because of his lived reality, his problematic self. Gerald Moore, in this sense, comes closest to articulating this self when he terms Laye's autobiography as "frankly nostalgic" that nevertheless contains a "great authenticity" (88). African American slave narratives are also seen to occupy a similarly problematic discursive terrain. Byerman, for example, argues that the slave narrators had to partially accommodate a white Northern audience employing deceit both to escape from slavery and to disguise their distrust of all white readers. Niemtow likewise discusses the rhetorical difficulties confronting slave narrators: paradoxically, she argues, the ex-slaves had to preserve their slave self to construct a self.

There is also the entirely predictable complaint—similarly ones have been lodged against any number of African-American writers—that Laye didn't write *The Dark Child*, as well as his other works. Irele demolishes this claim: see "In Search." I might add that to avoid confusion, I employ the familiar, though undoubtedly, inverted form of Camara Laye's name. See Miller's discussion, 114–17.

12. See King who offers the canonical position: "Laye's purpose is to preserve for African readers a sense of their cultural heritage and to explain this heritage to non-African readers" (21).

13. See Edgecombe for a discussion of Boetie as comic picaro. Nichols considers African American slave narratives as similar examples of the picaresque. See also Andrews, esp. 210–13, for discussion of the trickster figure in slave narratives. And see James Williams's slave narrative, another, possibly fraudulent text that positions itself between fact and fiction.

14. See Olney, "I was born: Slave Narratives—Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature" in which he points to any number of repeated formal and generic elements in slave autobiographies.

15. See Adams who similarly questions Richard Wright's veracity in *Black Boy* yet still argues that "although he is often deliberately false to historical truth, [Wright] seldom deviates from narrative truth" (185). For a discussion of autobiographical truth-telling through fictional means in women's autobiography, see Smith.

16. Olney in "The Founding Fathers—Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington" clearly links Washington and Franklin, especially in terms of arrivals and hygiene.

17. In response to a question on "the impact of [her] British education on [her] writing," Emecheta comments: "It has had a lot of influence. My attitude and language is very English" (Umeh 21).

18. Compare to Washington: "I have begun everything with the idea that I could succeed, and I never had much patience with the multitudes of people who are always ready to explain why one cannot succeed" (357).

19. See Ezenwa-Ohaeto's discussion of Emecheta's autobiography as a survival narrative.

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