

CHAPTER 1

Autobiographical Subjects

Waay Gànaar duma fa dox di dee	Oh, Mauritania, I will not go there to die
Ni siggi dee	If you raise your head, you die
Taxaw dee	Stand, you die
Gëstu dee	Look, you die
foo yëngu mu dig dee	Wherever you move, death promises to come
Dee gaanga Gànaar	Death is in Mauritania
Gànaar duma fa dox di dee	Mauritania! I will not go there to die

This fragment of a performance that I recorded in a Senegalese village in 1993¹ reflects the performer's experiences in 1989, when she and many others were forced to flee Mauritania. The "ethnic cleansing" that took place there occurred for many reasons; however, it was made possible only because collective identities erased individual identities. These erasures are never simple, given the complex identitarian politics of the region. Strategies for constructing identities in such a situation are just as complex. Anta Bouna Dieng's poem is but one example of such strategies, for in it, Dieng has made the blank space of an individual identity under erasure into the sign of a new identity that is at once individual and collective. She is now known as Mother Mauritania, a title that simultaneously refers us to the experiences that made of her an anonymous refugee and the *individual* creator of this poem.²

On one level, we can describe ethnic cleansing as a form of forced collectivization, for individuals are forced into identitarian categories that they may or may not accept. Forced collectivization occurs on a discursive level in some formulations of "Third World" literature as well:

Even those [works] which are seemingly private . . . necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society.*³

I deliberately choose to contrast this extremely sympathetic and idealistic position to the horrors of an ideological collectivization that leads to ethnic cleansing in order to point out the logical error inherent in opposing a col-

lectivist Third World to an individualist West. The positive form of collectivism that Fredric Jameson and others assume simply *exists* in the context of the “embattled Third World” is the product of hard work, just as the collective political consciousness that different groups in the West have sought to establish is the result of intense labor. If the “Third World individual” cannot choose such associations as a social agent, it is difficult to see the difference between the two types of collectivization. Jameson clearly sees the “Third World” individual as representative of the collectivity out of idealism; however, this idealism fails to recognize both the creativity of performers such as Mother Mauritania and the need to resist forced collectivization.

Social scientists face a similar problem, as Abu-Lughod explains very lucidly.

What became for me the most troubling aspect of ethnographic description was that it, like other social scientific discourses, trafficked in generalizations. Whether “seeking” laws of human sociality or simply characterizing and interpreting ways of life, our goal as anthropologists is usually to use details and the particulars of individual lives to produce typifications.⁴

These typifications are analogous to the literary and literal collectivizations described above. They not only reconstruct or reinforce the exoticism of our Others, while robbing them of their individuality, but also feed the notion that these Others are somehow trapped within the coherent, fixed bounds of their “culture.” The notion that Africans experience reality solely in terms of a collective identity belongs to the same problematic school of thought. In fact, observers frequently let the ideological category of western individualism blind them to the very possibility of varied sociocultural constructions of individuality.

Autobiography as a genre offers a solution to the dilemma. Few texts are as unique and full of particulars as an autobiography; however, autobiographies exist as part of a vast discursive project (culture, in other words) that provides the framework for the autobiographer’s chosen subject position. In outlining the autobiographical functions of one highly particular form of autobiography (the Wolof *taasu*) in relationship to other discursive forms of self-representation in Senegal, I hope to find another answer to this dilemma, one that neither erases discursive articulations of individuality, nor ignores the wider network of relationships in which the individual is embedded.

INDIVIDUALITIES

Simplistic oppositions between individualist and collectivist societies obviously cannot describe the complex, shifting phenomena involved in

the construction of identity, especially when such constructions become acts of resistance. A heavy emphasis on the life of the community and a corresponding lack of willingness to be separated from it as a singular member of society does not necessarily negate individuality as a category of experience. As Jacqueline Rabain argues in her study on early childhood in Wolof communities, every culture must negotiate the particular in relation to the general.⁵ A myriad of different configurations of this relationship between the particular and the general is possible, but these possibilities remain invisible to us when we accept a model based on dichotomies opposing "individualist" and "collective" societies.

Autobiography offers us the most striking form of discursive articulation of the problem, for in this genre, the individual agent presents and actively creates a textual self. The autobiographer's fictional self⁶ takes shape in relation to others, thus offering insight into the interaction between the individual and the community. Clearly, the autobiographical self shapes the community as well. This reciprocal relationship between autobiography and other cultural discourses has led some scholars to ask whether autobiography can be tied to particular cultures, as Georges Gusdorf does in his seminal essay on autobiography, "Conditions et limites de l'autobiographie."⁷ In Gusdorf's view, autobiography is a purely western product,

a late phenomenon in Western culture, coming at that moment when the Christian contribution was grafted onto classical traditions. Moreover, it would seem that autobiography is not to be found outside of our cultural area; one would say that it expresses a concern peculiar to Western man, 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 is not their own.⁸

Gusdorf's type of criticism clearly attempted to use the genre to anchor empire. Any further attempts to trace the autobiographical tradition in Africa that define autobiography solely within the rigid limits set by western examples risk reinscribing "self-writing" in an imperialist framework. Studies of African autobiography, then, must attempt to discern the specificities of "self-writing" in Africa.

Given the complexity of this task, it is easy enough to fall into over-generalizations when seeking to define "African" autobiography. As a result, the few studies that specifically focus on African autobiographies often rely on simplistic cultural models that oppose western individualism to African collectivism. The only book-length study, James Olney's *Tell Me Africa: An Approach to African Literature*,⁹ covers a remarkable number of autobiographies. Olney's sensitive readings of these autobi-

ographies and his arguments for a distinctively African form of autobiography¹⁰ constitute a major shift in critical practice, for he reveals GUSDORF's blindness to specifically African forms of autobiography. Nevertheless, his account of African autobiographical discourses suffers from a failure to question GUSDORF's foundational dichotomy. Olney presents that dichotomy differently, but accepts the basic premise that western societies are individualist, while African societies are collective.

Olney's attempt to reconcile the singular with the collective leads to an unfortunate conflation of the two. First, he assumes that cultural "reality" in Africa is a monolithic, unchanging, and ahistorical entity, and argues that African life "has about it an extraordinary unity and cohesion" made possible by a "single principle" that determines everything about life in Africa, including autobiography.¹¹ Eliding all differences among Africans in this way may simplify the task of the critic, faced with enormous diversity within the field of African autobiography; however, a simplistic criticism that flies in the face of substantial evidence is the result. Next, Olney accepts the premise that African identities are always and only collective, arguing that the lateral "unity of life and the communality of existence, as African autobiographies display it" means that "the individual is taken as essentially identical with the group and the group as identical with the individual."¹²

Only a few years after Olney's book on African autobiography was published, Honorat Aguessy argued for a different understanding of individuality in Africa.

Dans tout mode de production culturelle, qu'il s'agisse de la scripturalité ou de l'oralité, aucune valeur ne surgit dans le champ de la consommation publique sans passer, ne serait-ce qu'un instant, par l'individu. Mais l'individu ne s'oppose pas à la collectivité, au groupe. . . . Il y a donc, entre l'individu et le groupe, mille liens tissés et qui demeurent indéchirables.¹³

In any mode of cultural production, whether written or oral, no value emerges in the field of public consumption without passing, even if just for a moment, through the individual. But the individual is not opposed to the collectivity, to the group. . . . There are thus thousands of ties woven between the individual and the group that remain indestructible. (my translation)

Certainly one can argue that throughout most of Africa, the life of the community provides the framework for individual experience. Since this premise provides the basis for all of the human and social sciences, however, it appears to be a given. Indeed, the high degree of individualism that Olney and others point to as the defining characteristic of western societies follows the same logic. Individuals do not necessarily choose

their relative degree of autonomy; western society provides a framework that values and encourages the western *ideology* of individualism, a specific configuration of the relationship between individual and community. Olney's otherwise laudable attempt to explain the discursive phenomenon of African self-representation thus founders upon an uncritical acceptance of a limited number of anthropological theories and exaggerated overgeneralizations.

In fact, the models used by GUSDORF and Olney do not give an accurate description of current autobiographical practices in the West any more than they do of African autobiographical discourses. As János Riesz claims, too many scholars have elevated the eighteenth-century confessional model of European autobiography to a definitive status.¹⁴ Yet the confessional model does not explain the wide range of European autobiography, either, for it simply cannot account for experiments such as Sartre's *Les mots*, Roland Barthes' *Roland Barthes*, Michel Leiris' multivolume autobiographical experiment, or any number of other texts we might name. We must look elsewhere, then, for a theory that can cope with this genre's complexity and plasticity.

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL PACT

The culturalist models outlined above disappoint us primarily because they assume that each culture presents essentially unchanging models of self. In contrast, more recent culturalist analyses of autobiography historicize and contextualize concepts of selfhood and identity. Poststructuralist ideas have played an important role in this shift. Although many theories of autobiography now take poststructuralism into account, few of them take up the notion of the individual's relationship to the community. Philippe Lejeune's theory is an exception, as it focuses on the relations between text and audience. Lejeune's work had a revolutionary impact on genre studies because he argued that generic identity depends upon the reader's interaction with the text. Obviously, cultural conventions of reading inform such a theory. One may ask what is so original about these propositions, since they are common to the schools of reader-response and reception theory. Unlike most reader-response critics, more interested in questions relevant to the psychological experience of the reader (Holland), the construction of a reading community (Fish, Jauss), or the hermeneutic problems involved in reading (Iser), Lejeune applied the concepts of reader-response theory to the formation of a genre and combined the theory with a "thick" contextualization.

The major problem addressed in *Le pacte autobiographique* is that of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophers: how and why

did individuals give up the total freedom of autarchy and form a society or community? Lejeune's work stays well within the borders of the Enlightenment tradition of the social contract, since he chooses Rousseau's *Confessions* as the basis for his theory. Therefore, he accepts the legalistic definitions of the person that grounds the theory, including the notion that each individual possesses property rights in him or herself (the self being construed as the physical body as well as the intellectual capacities attached to the person). In addition, Rousseau defined individuals in terms of their personal interests, arguing that individuals choose to give up the unlimited freedom of the "state of nature" in order to gain a form of collective freedom that is limited but secures certain advantages. Because the community serves individuals' interests, the individuals are loyal to the interests of the community.¹⁵

Likewise, autobiographers sign a contract with their readers; the name on the title page corresponds to the name of a real person, who accepts the legal responsibility that any signatory to a contract holds. According to Lejeune, the key to the genre is the status of the proper name in relation to the text. Because the author is not a person, but a contractual function,

the entire existence of the person we call the *author* is summed up by this name: the only mark in the text of an unquestionable world-beyond-the-text, referring to a real person . . . [whose] existence is beyond question: exceptions and breaches of trust serve only to emphasize the general credence accorded this type of social contract.¹⁶

This is a striking shift from the attempt to isolate the formal elements that distinguish the genre toward a relational model that understands autobiography as a form of social interaction.

Although Lejeune's theory thus offers a more flexible understanding of the relationships between the individual author and the community, it remains well within the bounds of European social contract theory, which provides the basis for the notion of the autobiographical pact. Most scholars of autobiography accepted the historical and cultural limits on the genre that this and other western theories imposed until the late 1980s. However, critics of social contract theory have multiplied since the poststructuralists first presented their reading of the Enlightenment project.¹⁷ These critiques can be linked to increased interest in postcolonial studies, as well as to minority or ethnic studies and women's studies.

As western cultural observers note a growing fragmentation and anomie that trouble the positivist conceptualization of the individual as the agent of progress, the continuing struggle for self-determination in "postcolonial" regions has led to other formulations of the self that

must inform our theories of the genre. The struggle for the “right” to self-determination has not only led to nominal independence in Africa, but has also brought western conceptions of subjectivity into doubt.

Nevertheless, many fairly recent attempts to conceptualize the right to self-determination still depend upon the theories of a social contract made by consenting individuals that found their strongest expression in the political thought of the Enlightenment. This is paradoxical, for social contract theory assumes that only those autonomous individuals who can in some way affect their conditions can demand the right to self-determination. Membership in a group conceived of as “natural”¹⁸ thus precludes self-determination *as a member of that group*. For this reason, members of the groups excluded from the social contract protest the current centrifugal revisions of individual identity. For instance, bell hooks writes that it seems suspicious that elite theorists decided to erase the author’s name¹⁹ just as the voices of oppressed minority groups have begun to gain a measure of public influence. Henry Louis Gates, too, has rejected the “grandfather clause” of criticism that has removed the possibility of self-determination just as subaltern groups have gained public space to articulate their own identities legally, as well as privately and poetically.²⁰ Paradoxically, then, emancipatory movement has been caught in a conservative, centrifugal backlash because of the contractarian framework of the modern nation-state that initially made resistance possible.

The complexity of these problems does not do away with the need for self-determination. As Gates argues, “self-identification” is a prerequisite for agency, and, by extension, of liberatory action. Although such self-identifications clearly have no permanence, as philosophers from Heraclitus to Derrida have argued, this knowledge does not obviate the human need for names. Autobiography and praise poems, two ways of naming the self, voice this need clearly. Yet no one name can satisfy this desire forever; if it were to do so, we would have no need of history. This is as true of group identification as it is of individual identification (and partly explains the history of changing names for peoples of African descent in the Diaspora). This is just another way of saying what Derrida has already told us: the center (of interest, of power, or of any framework we care to build) constantly shifts, and constantly restructures the Law.

Although the rule of Law does imply coercion, anarchy—the absence of Law—does not preclude violence, according to Thomas Hobbes and other social contract theorists (life was “nasty, brutish, and short” before the social contract that instituted the reign of Law). Contractarians, then, perceive the subject as a hyperindividualistic, isolated outlaw who will participate in the life of the community only when con-

strained to do so. Poststructuralist critics who seek to end the reign of Law in order to achieve greater freedom must thus contest the contractarian notion of subjectivity. Either "outlaw" subjectivity must be redefined in positive terms, or the subject itself must be redefined. Typically, poststructuralists have chosen the latter option, proclaiming the fictionality of the subject. Those accounts focused on the individual subject have offered few explanations for the relationships formed between the individual and the community, signaling a contradictory acceptance of social contract theory's insistence that individuals alone can claim the right to self-determination.

Other critics of social contract theory target this very problem from various standpoints. Feminists such as Carole Pateman now argue that the contractarians' thesis that each individual owns himself as one might own a piece of property not only leads to absurd contradictions, but also excludes women from the field of subjectivity. She states that the patriarchal contract establishes a fraternal form of male power and a dual system that structures society in private and public spheres. Since women are part of the private sphere, they are excluded from civil society. "Women both are and are not part of the civil order. Women are not incorporated as 'individuals' but as women" (Pateman, 181). Race, too, has operated to exclude individuals from the social contract. Patricia Williams argues, along Pateman's lines, that African-Americans cannot obtain the right of self-ownership crucial to the social contract in the discursive order that establishes them as a separate group.²¹ These problems heighten our awareness of the difficulties of using social contract theory to explain the relationships between individual agents and communities.

In fact, the social contract offers and simultaneously removes the individual's freedom of choice in the matter of social relationships. We might wish to argue that agency disappears with choice in this context. To do so would mean accepting the model of power relationships that Hobbes presented in *Leviathan* in the seventeenth century. If we accept, for the moment, the notion of a global system much like a leviathan that swallows all in its path, we might associate the beast with European colonization. In the wake of decolonization, Africa does not seem to have emerged whole from the neocolonial leviathan, which also appears to leave monstrous young in its wake. Many postindependence African states have established an internal dual system to distinguish the remainders of precolonial civil society from postcolonial civil society.²² In other words, the modern state's structure both requires the concept of the individual as owner and excludes or gives limited recognition to individuals who participate in the local civil society.

AGENCY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

These problems of theory are directly related to ethical and human rights issues of great urgency. Whether they focus on the same issue or not, human rights activists must struggle with the same need to redefine relationships between the singular and the plural, the individual and the community. Autobiographical discourses thus play a larger role than that of mere testimonies to human rights abuses. Indeed, they may offer new answers to old problems—such as the difference between African and western conceptualizations of human rights in a broad sense. Western notions of human rights have been predicated on contractarian theories of the individual that many African (and Asian) commentators and theorists dispute, claiming that collective rights subsume those of individuals. Here the importance of autobiography theory may seem clearer, as I have presented it as a debate on the construction of identity. The recent, postmodernist interrogation of identity seems to obviate the need to discuss yet again these conflicts between western and African or Asian definitions of human rights, for postmodernists accept the radical contingency of identity.

Autobiographical genres seem most unlikely to disprove postmodernist theories of constructed subjectivities, since they are the record and indeed the very process of self-construction laid out for readers to share. Although some may have taken the postmodernist exposure of the “illusion” of individual identity to mean that studies of the genre (in the sense of studies of an individual’s life) are futile, others regard autobiography as the fascinating site of the collapse of concepts of subject, self, and author.²³ As John Eakin argues, the constructed nature of the autobiographical self may make the discursive articulation of such constructions—in other words, autobiography—more precious, rather than less so.²⁴ In arguing that individuality has falsely been identified with individualism, and that individuality exists in Africa as well as in the West, I do not dispute these theories. Indeed, the fact that a performer such as Mother Mauritania presents the agony of castration endured by male prisoners in Mauritania as if it were her own points in the opposite direction (see the full version of the poem in chapter 7). Rather, I wish to stress that specifically African articulations of individuality have been virtually ignored in the past. In spite of western attempts to reject the heritage of Cartesianism in the twentieth century, this continues to be true, mocking all efforts to escape the prisonhouse of language and the subjects it creates.

Concomitant essentialism rehabilitates the form of individualism that “has ruthlessly excluded countless numbers of our people.”²⁵ Any further discussion of subjectivity or the relationship between the one and

the many thus requires some consideration of human rights. I could easily avoid the real difficulties of the problem by simply arguing that all language is social, thus individuals exist as sociolinguistic creations. This glib answer, however, avoids the problems of human rights and responsibilities that Mother Mauritania's performance emphasizes. What if someone assigns me an identity that I do not accept? What if my social identity is reduced to that of the pariah who must be destroyed for fascists and ethnic "cleansers" to achieve their political goals?

If we wish to take the victims' pain into account, human rights must take center stage. Collectively distributed, human rights do not resolve the problems under discussion. Indeed, the argument for a specifically African, collective basis for human rights legislation was rejected in Dakar in 1967, when francophone legal experts claimed in their "Declaration de Dakar" that "il ne pouvait y avoir différentes interprétations de la dignité de l'homme . . . les exigences fondamentales de la primauté de droit ne sont pas différentes en Afrique de ce qu'elles sont ailleurs" [Different interpretations of human dignity could not exist . . . the fundamental demands for the primacy of law are no different in Africa than they are elsewhere].²⁶ Although the theoretical battles about collective versus individual rights continue, this conference demonstrates that the people who must make legal decisions reject a purely relativist standpoint in the matter.

Yet purely individualistic notions of human rights ignore the possibility of conceptions of individuality other than that of the social contract theorists. If my rights end where another individual's begin, where do we set the limits of individual space? The Senegalese judge Kéba Mbaye claims that precolonial African societies resolved the dilemma in a very practical way, by linking individuals' rights to others' responsibilities. "Il s'agit d'affirmer ces droits indirectement sous la forme de devoirs des autres. Cette conception des droits de l'homme nous paraît beaucoup plus efficace que celle qui se contente d'énoncer des droits sans prévoir la manière de les faire respecter" [This involves affirming rights indirectly in the form of others' duties. This conception of human rights seems much more effective to us than that which is satisfied by proclaiming rights without foreseeing a way of enforcing them.]²⁷

Blending the rights of the community and the rights of the individual in such a way reflects a conception of individuality that always puts the individual subject in a social framework. Since individuality only appears within such constructed frameworks, the battles over whether a notion of constructed identity erases the empirical reality of the individual or not seem unanswerable. Moreover, the individual agent can only be observed with regard to other agents.

The acting subject or agent is . . . a pivot of relationships. I do not mean one who is an assemblage of or locus of relationships—that is the ‘person,’ the form of their objectification. By agent, I mean one who *from his or her own vantage point acts with another’s in mind.*²⁸

This definition of agency implies that agency and responsibility for others are tied to each other, thus supporting Mbaye’s description of a practicable form of human rights.

