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**Solomon Northup vs. Booker T. Washington:  
Reconfigurations of African-American Identity  
in Autobiographical Life Writing**

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## I. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Introduction

*“In the postwar narrative, the measure of a slave’s dignity is much more pragmatic than existential, more public than private, than it is portrayed in the most noted antebellum narratives.”*<sup>1</sup>

Professor William L. Andrews has argued that post-Civil War autobiographical narratives meant to reinforce the idea of power and leadership among ex-slaves in relation to their community. The quote above illustrates the shift of antebellum individualism in life narratives and the emphasis on the slave’s journey from slavery to his liberation and life in the North to a post-Civil War call to action in the struggle for African-American equality through engaging in political activism and calling for a sense of community. In this sense, post-antebellum authors such as Booker T. Washington changed views of black history because they wrote “externally directed memoirs of what they accomplished for others rather than internally focused confessions of how they developed as individuals,”<sup>2</sup> and as such ended up being part of America’s stories of success.

The study will bring a new dimension to African-American representations of identity in order to provide an answer to broader issues of contemporary American society, such as racism and the black and white dichotomy:

*“Slave and ex-slave narratives are important not only for what they tell us about African American history and literature, but also because they reveal to us the complexities of the dialogue between whites and blacks in this country in the last two centuries, particularly for African-Americans.”*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> William L. Andrews, *Slave Narratives After Slavery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), xiii.

<sup>2</sup> Andrews, *Slave Narratives*, xvi.

<sup>3</sup> William L. Andrews, “An Introduction to the Slave Narrative” *Documenting the American South*, 26 April 2016, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/intro.html>.

The quote highlights the ongoing struggles of African-Americans from slavery to freedom up until today, but also the complexities of the black race that whites were never able to comprehend. In this sense, this illustrates the pattern of American thought regarding race and ethnicity since colonization and how race was the determinant factor in which Americans embedded their historical discourses based on white supremacy, in which African-Americans had to fit. Over centuries, life writing remained for African-Americans not only a means of psychological relief, but also a way of reinventing and re-creating the black identity in the attempt to solve the black and white dichotomy.

“Those who constantly direct attention to the Negro youth’s moral weaknesses and compare his advancement with that of white youths, do not consider the influence of the memories which cling about the old family homesteads,”<sup>4</sup> said Booker T. Washington. He thereby stressed the memory of the past for African-Americans even when post-Reconstruction narratives had come to redefine ideals of achieving freedom and equality at a community level. Because violence and protests happened frequently in a time when African-Americans still did not escape lynching and white hatred, the formation of a powerful black identity could not be undermined anymore. Moreover, the post-Reconstruction period also amplified the trauma of slavery and its psychological consequences, which contrasted with the American ideals of liberty and democracy that African-American authors attempted to represent in their autobiographies. Subsequently, during Reconstruction, the South maintained its segregationist position through white supremacy and hatred towards blacks.<sup>5</sup>

However, before and after slavery black authors such as Booker T. Washington, Solomon Northup, and Frederick Douglass tried to write themselves into white American ideals, such as freedom, equality, democracy, and rags-to-riches, they shifted their stories based upon personal experiences in slavery to public activism in civil rights for blacks as a whole: “The outside world does not know, neither can it appreciate, the struggle that is constantly going on in the hearts of both the Southern white people and their former slaves to free themselves from racial prejudice.”<sup>6</sup>

According to Smith and Watson, the ‘I’ in autobiographical writing is embedded “in all the institutional discourses through which people came to understand themselves and

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<sup>4</sup> Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery: An Autobiography* (Auckland: The Floating Press, 2009), 53-54.

<sup>5</sup> Andrews, *Slave Narratives*, ix.

<sup>6</sup> Washington, *Up From Slavery*, 338.

placed themselves in the world.”<sup>7</sup> This opens up the idea of an autobiographical identity crisis for African-Americans, in which limitations of language/voice and speaking for the collective, the colonizer as audience, white editors, but also representations of identity were present in post-Reconstruction life narratives. An example is Washington’s attempt to fit his autobiography in the form of a traditional bildungsroman, in which he presents his accomplishments as a free man: “I have learned that success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has overcome while trying to succeed.”<sup>8</sup> Northrup fits into the traditional literary convention of a conversion narrative, as his freedom is taken away and he is brought into slavery, presenting his “descent into darkness, struggle, moment of crisis, conversion to new beliefs and worldview, and consolidation of a new communal identity”<sup>9</sup> before he gains his freedom again.

However, the ‘autobiographical crisis’ is problematic for African-American life writing in the sense that blacks mostly had to fit their writings in a genre that always reaffirmed American ideals, such as freedom and democracy, and always had to prove the credibility of their writings through letters from a white person. Moreover, the above-mentioned ideals contradicted blacks’ experiences in slavery and post-Reconstruction as they only applied to white Americans at that time. This also confirms that as witnesses of slavery, African-American writers could not completely exclude their traumatic experiences from their daily lives, but they were forced to leave them out and focus on the positive side of their futures, in order to fit the white American tradition.

Likewise, in black life narratives, the autobiographical voice is shaped by dominant ideologies at a certain historical moment.<sup>10</sup> The oral tradition of African-Americans did not fit the standards of white literary writing, therefore blacks had to adapt to whites’ norms in order to write themselves into existence. Voice was also often associated with speaking for the collective, as “the narrated, descriptive ‘eye’ was put into service as a literary form to posit both the individual ‘I’ of the black author as well as the collective ‘I’ of the race.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, African-Americans did not only write for white communities in their attempt to reaffirm their identities individually, but they also wrote in the name of African-American

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<sup>7</sup> Smith, Sidonie and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 59.

<sup>8</sup> Washington, *Up From Slavery*, 57.

<sup>9</sup> Smith, *Reading Autobiography*, 91.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>11</sup> Mostern, *Autobiography and Black Identity*, 12.

ones.<sup>12</sup> For example, both Northup and Washington expressed political messages through their writings and blamed the institution of slavery. “Nevertheless, the institution that tolerates such wrong and inhumanity as I have witnessed, is a cruel, unjust, and barbarous ones,”<sup>13</sup> Northup wrote, with Washington adding, “No one could make me believe that my mother is guilty of thieving. She was simply a victim of the system of slavery.”<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, in order to have a voice in the white dominant culture, African-Americans also needed to be literate. Language and voice were accordingly problematic for the African-American identity as they forced the individual to fit into certain standards that negated his actual self and put “the narrator in jeopardy because what is told is in some sense publicly ‘unspeakable’ in its political context.”<sup>15</sup>

Besides language and voice, the problem of the ‘colonizer as audience’ also influenced most African-American literary works, when “ex-slave narrators and their sponsors had learned that certain kinds of facts plotted in certain kinds of story structures moved white readers to conviction and to support of the antislavery cause.”<sup>16</sup> The fact that African-Americans had to write for their oppressors even after Reconstruction when they gained agency as independent persons created another identity crisis, because they had to leave their real ethnic identity behind and use writing “as a tactic of intervention in colonial repression.”<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, the majority of pre-Civil War black autobiographical narratives, such as Douglass’ *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Northup’s *12 Years a Slave*, Jacobs’ *The Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* had white editors and letters from white abolitionists that confirmed the authenticity of the authors’ writings who in this way gained credibility in the eyes of their white audiences. Besides this, their autobiographies became less a story about their personal traumas, black heritage and culture, and more about their oppression in slavery and their attempts to fit in white America and leave their real black identities behind: “To sound authentic to whites required them to adopt a mask, to play a role, to feign authenticity in and through a carefully cultivated voice.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Smith, *Reading Autobiography*, 88.

<sup>13</sup> Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 140.

<sup>14</sup> Washington, *Up From Slavery: An Autobiography*, 21.

<sup>15</sup> Smith, *Reading Autobiography*, 85.

<sup>16</sup> William L. Andrews, “The Novelization of Voice in Early African American Narrative,” *PMLA* 105, no.1 (1990), 23.

<sup>17</sup> Smith, *Reading Autobiography*, 59.

<sup>18</sup> Andrews, “The Novelization of Voice,” 24.

The issue of manhood/personhood was also problematic for African-Americans' position and representation of identity in life writing. During slavery, African-American males and females were dehumanized, held captive as properties, and were inhibited in becoming literate, having a personal life, and participate in American civic life. Therefore, after Reconstruction, former slaves such as Booker T. Washington "deployed the familiar 'before and after' structure of classic rags-to-riches American autobiographies to show how a disadvantaged slave could make a name for himself or herself in some honored field of endeavor."<sup>19</sup> In this sense, Washington's reconstruction of personhood is revealed at the point when he had the right to decide his own future. He did so in order to prove to his white audiences that he was the model of the black self-made man, who became a leader for other ethnic minorities after rising from slavery, but also a man whom even white Americans admired: "The officials of the town, came aboard and introduced themselves and thanked me heartily for the work that I was trying to do for the South."<sup>20</sup>

Life writing experts Smith and Watson use Althusser to define human agency as "a subject of ideology – not in the narrow sense of propaganda but in the broad sense of the pervasive cultural formations of the dominant class."<sup>21</sup> Walter Johnson underlines that human agency when referring to slavery is an "'instrumentality' of another's purpose,"<sup>22</sup> since "it is impossible to imagine enslaved people as being, in any simple sense, liberal 'agents.'"<sup>23</sup> Therefore, post-Emancipation narratives distinguished themselves in terms of agency, since for blacks "becoming an agent is a goal these writers work for, on their own behalf and on behalf of others."<sup>24</sup>

Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin explain in their *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* that agency and identity have become problematic in their interdependency, as agency "hinges on the question of whether individuals can freely and autonomously initiate action, or whether the things they do are in some sense determined by the ways in which their identity has been constructed."<sup>25</sup> In the black literary tradition, agency influenced the former and future identity of ex-slaves and consequently, their writings, as the new

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<sup>19</sup> Andrews, *Slave Narratives*, xviii.

<sup>20</sup> Washington, *Up From Slavery: An Autobiography*, 185.

<sup>21</sup> Smith, *Reading Autobiography*, 55.

<sup>22</sup> Walter Johnson, "On Agency" *Journal of Social History* 37, no.1 (2003): 116.

<sup>23</sup> Johnson, "On Agency," 116.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas R. Smith, "Agency," in *Encyclopedia of Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms*, ed. Margaretta Jolly, (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2001), 28.

<sup>25</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Garet Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (New York and Oxford: Routledge, 2013), 9.

independent self was marked by the psychological trauma of the past.

The purpose of this study, therefore is to investigate the shift of African-American representations of identity in autobiographical life writing in Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years A Slave* and Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery* by looking at three aspects that characterize the autobiographical crisis for African-American writers in search of agency and identity: Emancipation; the black jeremiad, and the issue of manhood and literacy.

Investigating this key moment in black history is important because it set the stage for the black freedom struggle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by revealing how autobiographies worked as a means of pointing at the existence of black identity. Moreover, one cannot understand the present American society without looking back to this period in history. Looking at this time period through the lens of autobiographical writing is essential because the black literary tradition was always a tool of activism in the American multicultural landscape, and therefore intrinsically intertwined with black history.

## 1.2 Background

The territorial and racial division of the American North and South and the tension between states rights and federal authority as well as white southerners' desire to maintain the slavery system, led to the Civil War of 1861-1865 and the abolition of slavery as a result of the Union's victory.<sup>26</sup> However, even in its aftermath, America was still regionally divided by the legacy of slavery, as African-Americans were still exposed to white hatred and most white southerners "refused to acknowledge black as citizens and continued to treat them as property."<sup>27</sup> Lynchings also happened frequently, since political terrorist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, established in 1865, "made it extremely difficult to enforce black civil rights laws."<sup>28</sup> William L. Andrews acknowledges that "during and after the slavery era, the culture of white racism sanctioned not only official systems of discrimination but a complex code of speech, behavior, and social practices designed to make white supremacy seem not only legitimate but natural and inevitable."<sup>29</sup> Therefore, the division of the American North and

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<sup>26</sup> James O. Horton and Lois E. Horton, *Hard Road to Freedom: The Story of African America* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 151.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>29</sup> William L. Andrews, "An Introduction to the Slave Narrative," *Documenting the American South*, 18 June 2016, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/intro.html>



South and the events of the 1860s were also determinant for the direction in which black literary writing took shape.

Since most antebellum narratives illustrated accounts of slave-born blacks during their captivity until their liberation, Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years A Slave* represented a story of a free-born black man who was kidnapped into slavery. Solomon Northup was a free-born man in Minerva, New York, whose family had been enslaved in Rhode Island, but gained their freedom after moving to New York. In the 1830s, Northup married Anne Hampton and became a farmer, raftsman, and violin player in the American North. In the 1840s, two white men kidnapped Northup into slavery after he had accepted their offer to do a musical show for a higher wage. After he was kept in a slave pen in Washington and whipped, the two white men sold Northup to a slave trader in New Orleans, Mr. Freeman, who renamed him 'Platt.' Subsequently, he belonged to different masters in the American South, such as William Ford, John Tibeats, and Edwin Epps, and was subjected to their brutality on the plantation. Northup sent several letters to his white friends in the American North in his attempt to escape, but he was saved when he came across Bass, a white abolitionist from Canada, who sent the letters to Northup's family and friends in the North. Solomon was liberated after twelve years of captivity by his white Northern friends. Afterwards, he filed charges against his kidnappers, Brown and Hamilton, but the charges were unsuccessful. Northup is believed to have died in 1863, as there is no account of his life after that date.<sup>30</sup>

Besides the written text of the autobiographies, peritexts were also important in the construction of black autobiography, since they were indications of the subjects' authority over the representation of their identity. According to Smith and Watson, peritexts are "the materials added in the publishing process that accompany the text in some way, including some elements as cover designs, the author's name, the dedication, titles, prefaces, introductions, chapter breaks, and endnotes."<sup>31</sup> Therefore, all the above-mentioned elements said something about the way in which the narrative was influenced. In slave narratives, these elements were even more important since they played an important role in the representation of black authors.

David Wilson, a white Northern abolitionist, interfered in Northup's narrative as amanuensis, which influenced the way in which the narrative was reframed. Therefore, the

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<sup>30</sup> Patrick E. Horn, *Documenting the American South*, 18 June 2016, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/northup/summary.html>

<sup>31</sup> Smith, *Reading Autobiography*, 99.

narrative conveyed abolitionist political messages that were of big importance during the Reconstruction fervor since “editorial choices involve conforming the story to publishing conventions.”<sup>32</sup> Moreover, Wilson also confirmed the authenticity of Northup’s story, since his status of a white abolitionist made Northup’s words more credible to white audiences. Similarly, Smith and Watson argue that antebellum slave narratives “were often introduced and situated by an ‘expert’ whose authority lends credibility to the veracity of the life narrative.”<sup>33</sup> The abundance of details, such as exact words from conversations and names of places, also questions Wilson’s involvement in the construction of the narrative and Northup’s agency over his own writings. James Olney claimed about Northup’s story that “Northup's narrative is not only a very long one but is filled with a vast amount of circumstantial detail, and hence it strains a reader's credulity somewhat to be told that he (David Wilson) invariably repeated the same story without deviating in the slightest particular.”<sup>34</sup>

Furthermore, the fact that Northup’s story had to be introduced by a white abolitionist in order to become credible shows the racial superiority of whites, regardless blacks’ literacy. Therefore, although Northup was a literate man from the North who could write the narrative himself, his story includes David Wilson’s preface, who attested that Northup’s account presented “a correct picture of Slavery in all its lights, and shadows.”<sup>35</sup>

Slave narratives also included illustrations. Although it was not uncommon for a slave narrative to include photos, Solomon’s portrait from the beginning of the book and its description, ‘Solomon in his plantation suit,’ does not self-empower Northup as the author of the narrative. Moreover, although Northup attempted to maintain his superiority among other slaves throughout the narrative, the fact that Solomon’s portrait resembled other illustrations in the narrative actually meant that in whites’ view, he was like other slaves. John Ernest, an English Professor specialized in African-American literature, claims that illustrations in slave narratives usually pointed at the involvement of another person: “Rather, the illustrations themselves offered layered testimony, often carrying traces of other sources, and often opening up rather than resolving narrative possibilities.”<sup>36</sup> Northup’s

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>34</sup> James Olney, “I Was Born: Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature” *Callaloo*, no.20 (1984), 58.

<sup>35</sup> Northup, *Twelve Years A Slave*, 21.

<sup>36</sup> John Ernest, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the African American Slave Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 14.

story actually shows the lack of agency that blacks had during slavery and their institutional limitations to have a voice, given their abilities to read and write.

Besides this, the authenticity of *Twelve Years A Slave* is questionable since the title page of most antebellum slave narratives attested who wrote the story, as a proof of existence. Northup's narrative does not attest whether the narrative was 'written by himself,' so this could also attest Wilson's influence in the narrative, in terms of agency. James Olney underlines that "there is much more to the phrase 'written by himself,' of course, than the mere laconic statement of a fact: it is literally a part of the narrative, becoming an important thematic element in the retelling of the life wherein literacy, identity, and a sense of freedom are all acquired simultaneously."<sup>37</sup> That is to say that the 'written by himself' statement was not only a proof of black literacy, but one of identity and representation.

Booker T. Washington was considered the national spokesman for blacks in the American South, as he was actively involved in promoting the economic progress of blacks after Reconstruction. Washington was born into slavery in 1856 in Franklin County, Virginia. After his liberation as a result of the abolition of slavery, Washington studied at Hampton Agricultural Institute, which paved the way for his later career as a teacher. Here he also acquired the industrial and agricultural skills that he later planted in the Tuskegee Institute. The Tuskegee Institute was established in 1881 in Alabama, with the help of Samuel C. Armstrong, a white American abolitionist whom Washington met during his years at Hampton. Tuskegee was "a symbol of black progress and capacity in education, management and technology" at that time.<sup>38</sup> Washington shaped Tuskegee after his own views and dedicated the school not only to formal education, but also to practical matters that helped blacks to make the first steps in the white world, after slavery: "We wanted to teach the students how to bathe; how to care for their teeth and clothing. We wanted to teach them what to eat, and how to eat it properly, and how to care for their rooms. Aside from this, we wanted to give them such a practical knowledge of some one industry."<sup>39</sup>

Published in 1901, Washington's *Up From Slavery* has the structure of a bildungsroman. Moreover, the story shows his childhood struggles of becoming educated, placing an emphasis on literacy as a starting point for his career as a teacher at Tuskegee.

The fact that Washington aimed to reach white audiences is illustrated through his

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<sup>37</sup> Olney, "I Was Born," 54.

<sup>38</sup> Norman E. Hodges, "Booker T. Washington: We Wear the Mask" *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 7, no.4 (2006), 103.

<sup>39</sup> Washington, *Up From Slavery*, 142.

tactics of constructing his autobiography according to white standards. For instance, Washington's autobiography resembles *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, the story of a white Protestant male who achieved success through hard work and perseverance, and managed to become part of the American myth. Even so, white audiences considered Washington's autobiography a success, because it did not celebrate the formation of a new black identity but instead, he "strained to win over white opponents by adopting the tactic of determinedly reconstructing the world from their perspective, not that of his own ethnic community."<sup>40</sup>

Booker T. Washington is best known for his famous Atlanta speech, which was held in front of predominantly white audiences, at the Cotton States and International Exposition in 1895, a fair designed to present the technological attractions of that time. With that speech, Washington underlined the importance of cooperation between blacks and whites, leaving out the political and pointing at economic and industrial progress.<sup>41</sup> The Atlanta Speech included Washington's perspective on segregation in America at that time: "Washington's Atlanta Address accepted the new post-bellum segregated regime in the South and the suppression of black political rights that went with this; he insisted that blacks, despite hurt and injury, remained loyal, generous and forgiving."<sup>42</sup> In other words, Washington acknowledged the existence of racial segregation and encouraged blacks to accept it, as the solution to eliminate it was economic equality: "In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress."<sup>43</sup> Booker T. Gardner claimed that "explicit in Washington's educational philosophy was the underlying assumption that education was the avenue to progress and economic independence."<sup>44</sup>

In what concerns Washington's *Up From Slavery*, it deviated from earlier antebellum slave narratives. Instead of focusing on experiences from slavery, the autobiography conveyed messages of hope for the future. For instance, unlike Northrup, Washington did not have to attest that the story was 'written by himself,' since its publication happened after slavery. Besides this, the autobiography did not include a portrait of Washington either, nor

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>41</sup> Harris Henderson, *Documenting the American South*, 18 June 2016, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/washington/summary.html>

<sup>42</sup> Hodges, "Booker T. Washington: We Wear the Mask," 78.

<sup>43</sup> Washington, *Up From Slavery*, 236.

<sup>44</sup> Booker T. Gardner, "The Educational Contributions of Booker T. Washington" *The Journal of Negro Education* 44, no.4 (1975), 517.

a preface of a white Northern abolitionist. However, despite the fact that his *Up From Slavery* was different in terms of paratexts, its beginning did follow the same conventions as classic slave narratives, as categorized by James Olney: “I was born a slave on a plantation in Franklin County, Virginia,”<sup>45</sup> followed by the author’s place of birth.<sup>46</sup>

William L. Andrews presents *Up From Slavery* as the post-Emancipation classic American success story that gained more recognition in the American South, than antebellum slave narratives, since it did not focus on the injustices of slavery.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, Norman E. Hodges underlines that Washington’s autobiography “was welcome among whites especially because it was not presented as an angry moralistic jeremiad against the oppression of blacks in America.”<sup>48</sup>

The difference between the two books is not only the time period in which they were written and the Civil War that plays a central role in the delimitation of the two autobiographies but also the representation of agency itself. This shows from the start how the two autobiographies differ from one another in terms of agency, as both authors had the same heritage but different experiences due to their shifting ideologies in which their identity was also embedded.

### 1.3 Theoretical Framework

Several scholars have researched how the black literary tradition was rooted in autobiographical slave narratives, as well as these narratives’ wider role in American culture. Autobiographical slave narratives have not only been essential in shaping the political voices of blacks, but also in understanding life in the American South and American history as a whole.

In *Reading Autobiography*, Smith and Watson emphasize the politics of agency and how life writing has had the role of intervening in colonial repression, but also how the author’s agency is limited by white dominant culture. According to them, the representation of agency in life writing is important, since it challenges the idea of a slave’s personal freedom and identity by shaping his voice in order to become acceptable to his audiences. Smith and Watson mention that autobiographical narratives “have often been read as

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<sup>45</sup> Washington, *Up From Slavery*, 20.

<sup>46</sup> Olney, “I Was Born,” 50.

<sup>47</sup> Andrews, “An Introduction to the Slave Narrative,” <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/intro.html>

<sup>48</sup> Hodges, “Booker T. Washington: We Wear the Mask,” 95.

narratives of agency,”<sup>49</sup> even as most of the times “the issue of how subjects claim, exercise, and narrate agency is far from simply a matter of free will and individual autonomy.”<sup>50</sup> However, the limitations of African-Americans in their agency before the Civil War brought a new phase in life writing after the Civil War, when African-American autobiographies in the United States gained a new dimension and became more ‘self’-conscious, as the narrator wanted to consider himself a part of that process of history in the making.<sup>51</sup>

William L. Andrews’ *Slave Narratives After Slavery* discusses the importance of post-Civil War slave narrative, pointing out that it “was the most democratic literary genre adopted by African Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,”<sup>52</sup> in the sense that they resembled the image of the free man who was able to rise from slavery in the American South. He emphasizes how African-American authors’ voices changed from abolitionists to the activists that they became after Emancipation: “Many of the authors of slave narratives in the post-Reconstruction era were southern migrants determined not only to succeed but to leave to their descendants, as well as white America, a record of how they had made a way out of no way.”<sup>53</sup>

In her *Black Subjects: Identity Formation in the Contemporary Narrative of Slavery*, Arlene Keizer argues that unlike classic slave narratives, post-Reconstruction narratives “are participating in the discovery and production of counterhistories to destabilize the official history imposed by colonial and neocolonial powers.”<sup>54</sup> In other words, post-Reconstruction narratives shifted from their lack or limitation of agency to political activism. Nonetheless, black authors’ identity was still influenced by slavery and the legacy of the past, and although one could argue that post-slavery narratives, such as *Up From Slavery*, wrote themselves into white American ideals, the psychological trauma is still there. Keizer states that the post-Emancipation literary “figure of the rebellious slave is thus particularly important to an investigation of the black subject, because the black slave in rebellion against white domination is the prototype for a black resistant subjectivity, a founding model of African-American and Afro-Caribbean subjectivity.”<sup>55</sup>

Darwin T. Turner, an African-American literature critic, points out two core

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>50</sup> Smith, *Reading Autobiography*, 54.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>52</sup> Andrews, *Slave Narratives*, ix.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Arlene R. Keizer, *Black Subjects: Identity Formation in the Contemporary Narrative of Slavery* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2004), 4.

<sup>55</sup> Arlene R. Keizer, *Black Subjects*, 9.

motivations for black literary writing: 1) To show their white audiences that blacks deserve equality and offer an insight into black psychology through writing. Therefore, antebellum authors, such as Frances Harper and W.W. Brown, and postbellum ones, like W.E. B. Du Bois, and J.W. Johnson, “have chosen to prove their skill in the artistic patterns approved by that public,”<sup>56</sup> so that they could “be part of the American Dream.”<sup>57</sup> But in a way, the writers also “blackened the models”<sup>58</sup> by using “a mixture of humor and pathos”<sup>59</sup> and referring to themes such as liberation and survival from oppression. 2) Black literary writing also has the purpose of educating “black audiences to their needs and their condition,”<sup>60</sup> and aims to appeal to a sense of community. However, Turner also points out that white audiences often misinterpreted the writings of several black abolitionists, such as David Walker, Martin Delany, Sutton Grigs, and Monroe Trotter. Although they aimed to educate blacks, just like Booker T. Washington, they “wrote essays attacking white American oppression”<sup>61</sup> and encouraged African-Americans to rebel against slavery, which excluded them from being part of America’s stories of success.

Kenneth Mostern also points out that the tradition of African-American writing “is simultaneously the result of oppression, since, as Andrews states, “the white reading public will not trust anything but the (supposedly) transparent testimony of the slave, who is presumed only to report, not theorize.”<sup>62</sup> This emphasizes the idea of how African-Americans came to redefine themselves in relation to the racial other and adapt their discourses to white audiences, but also how they continuously had to reaffirm their position as active agents in the forming of their own culture and prove their centrality in American history.

#### **1.4 Research Question and Chapter Outline**

In this thesis it will be argued that the post-Civil War representation of black identity changes the understanding of earlier representations in traditional slave narratives. The study will

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<sup>56</sup> Darwin T. Turner, “Introductory Remarks about the Black Literary Tradition in the United States of America” *Black American Literature Forum* 12, no. 4 (1978), 141.

<sup>57</sup> Turner, “Introductory Remarks about the Black Literary Tradition,” 144.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>62</sup> Kenneth Mostern, *Autobiography and Black Identity Politics: Racialization in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 11.

analyze under what circumstances these transformations of identity occurred and what its implications were for the black identity by looking at three aspects that characterize the black literary tradition: emancipation, the black jeremiad, and the issue of manhood.

Therefore, the research question that will guide this study is: *In what ways did Booker T. Washington's Up From Slavery and Solomon Northup's Twelve Years A Slave use the black literary themes of emancipation, black jeremiad, and manhood, to define and redefine African-American identity and agency before and after the Civil War?* In other words, since “for Washington the more significant transformation is not from past to present but from past to future,”<sup>63</sup> it is interesting to analyze how exactly his work in the aftermath of the Civil War deviated from the tradition of black autobiography by comparing it with Northup's *Twelve Years A Slave*.

The above-mentioned three literary themes are introduced and explained throughout the three chapters of this paper in order to answer the main research question. How did Emancipation change representations of agency and identity in Booker T. Washington's and Solomon Northup's autobiographies? How did the two authors use memory and ‘politics of remembering’ as a means to represent themselves in life writing? The first chapter will refer to emancipation of slaves as the root of blacks' struggle for self-representation in life writing. This is relevant for understanding how the two autobiographies differed in terms of agency and use of language as a result of their different space and time period of publication, but also how Emancipation brought a different kind of identity crisis for Washington than Northup's, although they had the same black heritage.

The first chapter of this paper uses the concept of ‘autobiographical I.’ As described by Smith and Watson, autobiographies incorporate multiple ‘autobiographical I's’ that serve as different models of identities that are available for the autobiographical subjects at a certain historical moment.<sup>64</sup> Smith and Watson admit that there are four sides to the autobiographical ‘I’. The ‘historical I’ “is unknown and unknowable by readers and is not the ‘I’ that we gain access to in an autobiographical narrative.”<sup>65</sup> The ‘narrating I’ represents the subject as an agent whose identity is embedded in the available discourses at a certain time, always “split, provisional, fragmented, provisional, multiple, a subject always in the

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<sup>63</sup> Roger J. Bresnahan, “The Implied Readers of Booker T. Washington's Autobiographies Black American Literature Forum 14, no.1 (1980), 17.

<sup>64</sup> Smith, *Reading Autobiography*, 86.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.



process of coming together and of dispersing.”<sup>66</sup> The ‘narrated I’ is chosen by the ‘narrating I,’ in the sense that it might be embedded in the author’s memory or remembering and does not directly experience the past.<sup>67</sup> Therefore, all these examples make the readers aware of the complexities of interpreting autobiographies. The ‘ideological I’ refers to the cultural concept of identity available to the author at the moment when he or she tells the story.<sup>68</sup>

Besides this, the first chapter will also refer to the politics of remembering, as used by Smith in Watson in their *Reading Autobiography*. Therefore, the study refers to this notion as being the way in which a subject’s present identity was shaped by a certain ideology available to him at a certain time, as a result of a certain politics accepted by the dominant culture, which inflicted traumatic memories on the way in which the subject remembers that event and narrates his present story.<sup>69</sup>

The second chapter focuses on the theme of the black jeremiad, as both authors try to fit their discourses into white American rhetoric and mythology in order to make the voices of the black communities heard. How did the rhetoric of the African-American jeremiad interfere with the personal and political voices of Washington and Northup? Did Washington’s rhetoric shift after slavery? In this sense, Howard-Pitney emphasized that rhetoric played an important role in shaping Washington’s agency, since “self-help rhetoric appealed powerfully to racial pride and solidarity to make collective economic progress and so realize a grand racial future of millennialist proportions.”<sup>70</sup> The black jeremiad as explained by Harrell, represented a black rhetoric, which took a political dimension in life writing. Although it was embedded in the rhetorical tradition of the white Puritan jeremiad, the black one criticized the racial inequality and emphasized the wrongs of slavery through pointing at whites’ deviation from the American divine mission.

Therefore, in order to explain the political dimension of the African-American jeremiad, the chapter will focus on two sub-themes. First, the struggle for utopian politics and the restoration of the American dream will emphasize how Northup’s and Washington’s discourses attempted to reconstruct the American Dream in their autobiography and how their agency was influenced in this sense. Second, the use of the Bible, will also point out

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<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>69</sup> Smith, *Reading Autobiography*, 24.

<sup>70</sup> David Howard-Pitney, “The Jeremiads of Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and W.E.B. Du Bois and Changing Patterns of Black Messianic Rhetoric, 1841-1920” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 6, no.1 (1986), 54.

how Northup and Washington used religion as a form of agency in order through emphasized their ongoing struggles in of self-representation through political discourses.

The third chapter will discuss how the issue of black manhood was symbolic for black emancipation, since it was the first step in blacks' struggle of self-representation. How did the interrelation between masculinity and language and literacy work as a means of self-representation in life writing for Northup and Washington? Although the authors sometimes used language and literacy as 'tools' against white repression and in order to create the idea of self-empowerment, autobiographical conventions showed how whites still dominated the ideologies in which Northup and Washington had to fit. Therefore, the chapter will emphasize the way in which the two authors engaged in writing themselves into existence in the white world.

These three chapters answer the question of how these themes defined and redefined representations of black identity and agency before and after the Civil War in Northup's and Washington's autobiographies.

### **1.5 Methodology**

The paper brings an insight into the discipline of history by emphasizing the importance of the black literary tradition in the American culture. Whereas white American autobiographical narratives found their place easily in American society because they represented the dominant culture, slave narratives have always embodied interior struggles of a less understood part of American culture, hiding different meanings that usually embodied psychological patterns of the same trauma of different generations of African-Americans.

The study is grounded in academic debates about the black literary tradition. The approach will thus combine the literary and historical field in order to provide an analysis of three representations of identity that come back in Northup's and Washington's autobiographies. However, in this paper only Booker T. Washington and Solomon Northup's autobiographies are used as case studies, so they do not make the case for black representations of identity in all autobiographies written in the same time period. Moreover, Chris Weedon claims that subjects of slavery were agents of change, as "identities may be

socially, culturally and institutionally assigned,”<sup>71</sup> and thus their agency shifted depending on geographical space and time.

The study focuses specifically on these two autobiographies because, regardless Northup’s and Washington’s different representation of identity, they reflect the same racial problem that has been going on for centuries for African-Americans. The differences between these two autobiographies illustrate the striking truth that no matter the space, time, historical events, and African-Americans’ literacy or class, America had an underlying racial problem based on white supremacy. This is mostly proved by the fact that Washington’s *Up From Slavery* was published almost 50 years after Northup’s, after blacks regained their freedom and made a significant progress in terms of education, but it deals in fact with the same struggles of identity.

Moreover, what is distinctive about *Twelve Years A Slave* is that it presents a different perspective on slavery than that of other antebellum slave narratives. In his account, Northup did not strongly support slavery, nor its abolition. Unlike most antebellum black authors who became abolitionists and were involved in supporting justice and equality for the Southern black communities, Solomon Northup did not become one. He disappeared from the public scene and did not publish other works either after his return to the American North. This makes Northup a special case among other antebellum accounts before Reconstruction.

Although Washington lived in a time when blacks lacked political rights and not many were literate, his *Up From Slavery* differentiates from other works of that time. Washington had a different approach regarding blacks’ situation in America. Even though Washington became literate and made it to the North, he returned to his Southern roots in order to advance the interests of black communities. Besides this, Washington’s discourse rejected racial violence and protest against whites, and supported cooperation between races. This made the book a success of that time but also questionable in terms of identity.

To answer the thesis question both primary and secondary sources are analyzed. As primary sources, the study uses the first published versions of Booker T. Washington’s *Up From Slavery* and Solomon Northup’s *Twelve Years a Slave* and focuses on framing the agency of both authors in a socio-political context, and compares them in order to emphasize the different representation of identity by looking at three aspects: emancipation; black

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<sup>71</sup> Chris Weedon, *Identity and Culture: Narratives of Difference and Belonging* (New York: Open University Press, 2004), 6.

jeremiad; the issue of manhood.

Secondary sources will also incorporate Smith and Watson's *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, a critical guide for interpreting life writing. Regarding this book, the study uses a number of concepts and themes that are explained and illustrated through examples, which offer a detailed insight into the way in which autobiographies are constructed. Therefore, the book helps to analyze how subjectivity in life writing contributes in the representation of black agency and identity.

## II. Emancipation: From Slaves to Free Agents?

### 2.1 Introduction

*“Before emancipation, ‘acting White’ was that out of compliance Blacks had to behave and talk in the manner defined for them by the Whites to satisfy White people’s expectations. After emancipation, Blacks were required to behave and talk the way White people actually behaved and talked.”*<sup>72</sup>

There are several aspects that underline the ongoing crisis of African-American representation in the white world even after Reconstruction. Although the autobiographies mark two different time periods, both Northrup and Washington wrote for the ‘colonizer as audience.’ This determined an ‘autobiographical crisis,’ in which having to support ideologies of the white American culture in life writing led to a representation of black identity which conflicted with their true self.

The chapter will refer to the theme of Emancipation as the after slavery period in which freedom of blacks became associated with their struggles to acquire social and political equality. In this sense, “emancipation gave new substantive meaning to such ideas as personal liberty, political community, and the rights attached to American citizenship.”<sup>73</sup>

Moreover, Emancipation also represented the beginning of blacks’ struggles to become free agents in literary writing. “The emancipated slave, a southern newspaper insisted, needed to be taught that he is free, but free only to labor.”<sup>74</sup> That is to say that even after slavery, blacks were limited in the representation of their identity, since they were not offered full social and political recognition of their rights, as promised by the Declaration of Independence and Constitution. Therefore, through their writings, African-Americans often conveyed political messages and voiced thoughts that would eventually determine social and political changes in their real lives.

Although most slave narratives before Reconstruction recounted black experiences in slavery, they were all different from one another in terms of agency, and thus, revealed

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<sup>72</sup> John U. Ogbu, “Collective Identity and the Burden of Acting White in Black History, Community, and Education,” *The Urban Review* 36, no.1 (2004), 14.

<sup>73</sup> Eric Foner, “The Meaning of Freedom in the Age of Emancipation,” *The Journal of American History* 81, no.2 (1994), 438.

<sup>74</sup> Foner, “The Meaning of Freedom in the Age of Emancipation,” 455.

different dimensions of African-American representations of identity. In their attempt to prove their existence, instead of being just witnesses of slavery, “many slave narrators become I-witnesses as well, revealing their struggles, sorrows, aspirations, and triumphs in compellingly personal story-telling.”<sup>75</sup> In contrast, authors after Reconstruction aimed to represent their identity as free agents “on their own behalf and on behalf of others.”<sup>76</sup>

This chapter will also underline the importance of memory and the politics of remembering, since memory in life writing is temporal and politically charged. Smith and Watson claim that memory is “central to the cultural production of knowledge about the past, and thus to the terms of an individual’s self-knowledge.”<sup>77</sup> Therefore, the way in which traumatic events were perceived during and after slavery needs to be analyzed, as well as their implications for the way in which they shaped the representations of the two African-American authors’ identity.

## **2.2 The ‘Autobiographical Crisis’: Speaking for the Collective**

*“Thus, if the autobiographical subjects are read as effects of the intersection of resistance and prevailing discourses, exposing complex traces of cultural remnants, these narratives overwhelmingly expose oppression and suggest effects on oppressed groups. At the same time, they also attest to the ongoing struggle and resilience of diverse ethnic groups and display the brilliance of American cultural diversity carried within ethnic communities in the United States.”<sup>78</sup>*

As explained by Smith and Watson, autobiographies make a statement about the author’s representation of identity in a cultural context through the way in which he engages to tell certain stories. They also point at autobiographical narratives as the product of “any person

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<sup>75</sup> William L. Andrews, “An Introduction to the Slave Narrative,” *Documenting the American South*, 20 May 2016, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/intro.html>.

<sup>76</sup> Smith, “Agency,” 28.

<sup>77</sup> Smith, *Reading Autobiography*, 25.

<sup>78</sup> Betty Ann Bergland, “Representing Ethnicity in Autobiography: Narratives of Opposition,” *The Yearbook of English Studies* 24, *Ethnicity and Representation in American Literature* (1994), 87.

or institution or set of cultural imperatives that solicits or provokes people to tell stories,”<sup>79</sup> which most of the time influences the way in which autobiographies were written. Therefore, for African-Americans, autobiographical writing was mostly shaped by white norms and values that constrained them to write in a certain manner in order for their writings to gain recognition.

Autobiographies are embedded in agency and related to institutional discourses and ideologies available at a certain moment in time.<sup>80</sup> That is to say that although writers had the freedom to write their own stories, they were always limited in terms of ideology and culture. Therefore, this points at the fact that subjects are never liberal in life writing, but their identities are shaped by ideologies that are often “so internalized (personally and culturally) they seem ‘natural’ and ‘universal’ characteristics of persons.”<sup>81</sup> Self-representation in autobiographical writing was problematic for black authors in the sense that it interfered with their true identity, because it had to serve as a tool of activism in public discourses regarding the African-American struggle for equal rights.<sup>82</sup> Dehumanized through slavery, middle-class black authors who had the chance to be educated, usually used their literacy to ‘speak for the collective’ and represent the voiceless in their political messages.

Washington’s Atlanta speech of 1895 showed that although he made his way to the American North, he did not forget his African-American heritage. Since whites considered African-Americans as inferior to them even after 1865, Booker T. Washington emphasized his ongoing struggle for racial equality and called for equal chances for blacks in the American South. In order to do so, he used elements of white American utopian discourses, such as hope for equality and unity: “When persons ask me in these days how, in the midst of what sometimes seem hopelessly discouraging conditions, I can have such faith in the future of my race in this country, I remind them of the wilderness through which and out of which, a good Providence has already led us.”<sup>83</sup>

Likewise, Solomon Northup expressed his desire to abolish the institution of slavery, through using white ideals of democracy and freedom. As he sat in William’s Slave Pen, the place in Washington where he was held captive before he was sold into slavery, Northup said: “Strange as it may seem, within plain sight of this same house, looking down from its

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<sup>79</sup> Smith, *Reading Autobiography*, 64.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>83</sup> Washington, *Up From Slavery*, 35.

commanding height upon it, was the Capitol. The voices of patriotic representatives boasting of freedom and equality, and the rattling of the poor slave's chains, almost commingled."<sup>84</sup>

Smith and Watson point out that "autobiographical subjects know themselves as subjects of particular kinds of experience attached to their social statuses and identities."<sup>85</sup> Therefore, although Northup's *Twelve Years A Slave* is embedded in pre-Civil War ideological discourses and abolitionist propaganda, one could argue that Northup's free-born status influenced him to see the twelve years of imprisonment as an experience, rather than part of his identity, as "Northup's identity as a citizen of New York, and thus as a traveler in the South, is always available to him, at least rhetorically."<sup>86</sup> However, one cannot argue against the fact that Northup's identity, just like other African-Americans', was affected by the institution of slavery which inflicted wounds upon the entire black race. For example, although Northup was not himself a slave, his family did not escape enslavement: "Though born a slave, and laboring under the disadvantages to which my unfortunate race is subjected, my father was a man respected for his industry and integrity."<sup>87</sup> Moreover, the fact that Northup was kidnapped from the North and sold into slavery shows the collective treatment of blacks and the insecure status of African-Americans in the American North before the Civil War.

However, the autobiographical 'I' interfered with Northup's true representation of the slave identity as he continuously reaffirmed his position and free-born status during his enslavement: "Having all my life breathed the free air of the North, and conscious that I possessed the same feelings and affections that find a place in the white man's breast."<sup>88</sup> Moreover, the fact that Northup knew that he was going to be liberated also gave him a sense of not belonging on the Southern plantation. Despite the fact that Northup was renamed 'Platt' by his master when he entered slavery, he still viewed it "from the perspective of Northup, the fully formed traveler, rather than from that of 'Platt.'"<sup>89</sup> For instance, Northup avoided speaking for the collective, as his experiences in slavery were not enough to understand the life of slave-born blacks. Therefore, the narrative "plainly illustrates the dependence that he and his fellow slaves feel on the community as a whole."<sup>90</sup> Moreover,

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<sup>84</sup> Northup, *Twelve Years A Slave*, 39.

<sup>85</sup> Smith, *Reading Autobiography*, 31.

<sup>86</sup> John D. Cox, *Traveling South: Travel Narratives and the Construction of American Identity*, (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 2005), 96.

<sup>87</sup> Northup, *Twelve Years A Slave*, 29.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>89</sup> Cox, *Traveling South*, 96.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.



Northup also focused on describing Southern life as seen through the lens of an observant foreigner: “Ploughing, planting, picking cotton, gathering the corn, and pulling and burning stalks, occupies the whole of the four seasons of the year.”<sup>91</sup>

However, Northup did not identify himself with the newly constructed self, since he already had an identity prior his enslavement: “I was not known as Platt, the name given me by Burch, and by which I was designated through the whole period of my servitude.” But although Northup’s name was temporary, his real name, Northup, was still the name of the white colonizer: “As far as I have been able to ascertain, my ancestors on the paternal side were slaves in Rhode Island. They belonged to a family by the name of Northup.”<sup>92</sup>

Similarly, Washington had to name himself in school, when the teacher asked for his name and he did not have one: “Before going to school it had never occurred to me that it was needful or appropriate to have an additional name.”<sup>93</sup> Washington claimed that his right to self-representation by naming himself was a privilege, as this meant coming to voice: “I think there are not many men in our country who have had the privilege of naming themselves in the way that I have.”<sup>94</sup> Herbert L. Sussman argues that “another step in becoming a man is through self-naming, a crucial move in fashioning one’s own ancestry, thereby becoming one’s father in a society that denies knowledge of origins to a person defined as property.”<sup>95</sup>

Northup’s autobiographical ‘I’ was embedded in the pre-Civil War abolitionist discourses, since he emphasized the wrongs of the institution of slavery and his consideration that white individuals were also victims of the system itself. In this sense, he said: “Nevertheless, the institution that tolerates such wrong and inhumanity as I have witnessed, is a cruel, unjust, and barbarous one.”<sup>96</sup> In the end, although he was a free-born man, Northup’s liberation still depended on his white Northern friends: “I besought him to write to some of my friends at the North, acquainting them with my situation, and begging them to forward free papers, or take such steps as they might consider proper to secure my release.”<sup>97</sup>

Although Northup regained his freedom and was able to tell his story, racism and

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<sup>91</sup> Northup, *Twelve Years A Slave*, 120.

<sup>92</sup> Northup, *Twelve Years A Slave*, 25.

<sup>93</sup> Washington, *Up From Slavery*, 52.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> Sussman, *Masculine Identities*, 105.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

white superiority is revealed by the the way in which Northup's true voice was limited since he needed David Wilson, a white abolitionist editor, in order to make his story possible and confirm its authenticity: "It is believed that the following account of his experience on Bayou Boeuf presents a correct picture of Slavery in all its lights, and shadows, as it now exists in that locality."<sup>98</sup> Moreover, Wilson's intervention in the narrative was not excluded, since the editor "has invariably repeated the same story without deviating in the slightest particular, and has also carefully perused the manuscript, dictating an alteration wherever the most trivial inaccuracy has appealed."<sup>99</sup> This shows how attaining literacy did not actually solve the race problem that African-Americans had to cope with before and after Emancipation.

Whereas pre-Civil War narratives recounted the physical imprisonment of the slave, post-Civil War ones stressed the mental imprisonment and the struggles of African-Americans to escape the past through embodying a new identity, which had to fit a new white discourse that ignored the slavery past. Washington's *Up From Slavery* revealed the post-Emancipation 'autobiographical crisis' because although he was an ex-slave, his autobiography underlined the way in which he became a symbol of black communities and a leader who educated them. Washington laid the foundation for the Tuskegee Institute, which proved whites that ex-slaves were "faithful and true to the national ideal, that of a united people in the states of America."<sup>100</sup> This shows that Washington wrote for both black and white communities and appealed to a sense of hope for reconciliation between the two races, despite the way in which whites treated them during slavery: "I have long ceased to cherish any spirit of bitterness against the Southern white people on account of the enslavement of my race."<sup>101</sup> William L. Andrews argues that "by demonstrating the moral leadership in such reunions, the former slave comes before the reader of the postbellum slave narrative as an active agent in the reconstruction of the South."<sup>102</sup>

For instance, Washington's way of situating himself on both sides of the black and white battle shows that he not only had to encompass acceptable discourses to both races, but also point at the non-homogeneity of his individual identity, as he did not embody any of the two. For instance, he mentions that the Ku Klux Klan was lynching blacks, but at the

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<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>100</sup> William L. Andrews "Reunion in the Postbellum Slave Narrative: Frederick Douglass and Elizabeth Keckley," *Black American Literature Forum* 23, No. 1 (Spring, 1989), 12.

<sup>101</sup> Washington, *Up From Slavery*, 34.

<sup>102</sup> William L. Andrews, "Reunion in the Postbellum Slave Narrative: Frederick Douglass and Elizabeth Keckley," *Black American Literature Forum* 23, No. 1 (1989), 12.

same time he showed his appreciation for whites who tried to defend blacks: “General Ruffner tried to defend the coloured people, and for this he was knocked down and so seriously wounded that he never completely recovered.”<sup>103</sup> Moreover, Washington supported the post-Civil War white discourse on freedom and democracy in order to make his audiences believe that racism was a thing of the old South: “There are few places in the South now where public sentiment would permit such organizations to exist.”<sup>104</sup> Besides this, in order to emphasize the institutional discourse of the past, he mentions that he has referred “to this pleasant part of the history of the South simply for the purpose of calling attention to the great change that has taken place since the days of the Ku-Klux.”<sup>105</sup> Darwin T. Turner similarly underlines the double goal of African-American autobiographies in trying to speak for two different audiences. Namely, African-Americans wrote either to white audiences in order to emphasize the importance of black equality and offer an insight into black psychology through writing, but also to black ones, to educate them and stress the formation of a powerful black identity.<sup>106</sup>

Although he was born a slave in the American pre-Civil War South and grew up to see his mother “a victim of the system of slavery,”<sup>107</sup> Washington’s ‘autobiographical crisis’ was certainly present since “another feature of slave childhood was the added psychological trauma of witnessing the daily degradation of their parents at the hands of slaveholders.” However, institutional ideologies of his time forced him to recognize that the only way for post-Reconstruction black equality was to adapt to the white dominant culture in which the slavery past was to be forgotten. Therefore, Washington’s newly constructed autobiographical ‘I’ came in contradiction with his trauma of slavery by having to fit his autobiography in the post-Reconstruction ideology that embodied positive images and hope for the future, unlike the majority of authors before the Civil War, “whose autobiographies detailed the legacy of injustices burdening blacks in the postwar South.”<sup>108</sup> Therefore, Washington also acknowledges the white effort for black integration. Throughout the narrative, Washington pointed at white figures that he met, such as General Armstrong, who hired him as a teacher and supported him in establishing the Tuskegee Institute: “Fresh from

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<sup>103</sup> Washington, *Up From Slavery*, 95.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>106</sup> Turner, “Introductory Remarks about the Black Literary Tradition,” 144.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>108</sup> William L. Andrews, “An Introduction to the Slave Narrative,” *Documenting the American South*, 22 May 2016, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/intro.html>.

degrading influences of slave plantation and coal-mines, it was a rare privilege for me to be permitted to come into direct contact with such a character as General Armstrong.”<sup>109</sup> Moreover, he did not cease to show that cooperation between blacks and whites had existed ever since and once he taught his black community how to make bricks, he acknowledged that this “helped lay the foundation for the pleasant relations that have continued to exist between us and the white people in that section, and which now extended through the South.”<sup>110</sup>

Even after slavery, Washington’s lack of agency while captive and its effect on the construction of his identity, was still embedded in his memories of slavery and influenced by the political construction of the autobiographical ‘I’ that “enters a scene of narration.”<sup>111</sup> Regarding this, the fact that Washington constantly struggled to show that blacks were capable of being educated meant showing that blacks were somebody, and that they were supposed to be equal to whites: “The education of the Negro was not making him worthless, but that in educating our students we were adding something to the wealth and comfort of the community.” Moreover, reaffirming the importance of African-American identity was also a way of intervening in the society’s dominant ideology that excluded blacks at that time: “Where there is more than one ethnic group and/or tradition in play, dominant versions of history and culture and the forms of identity that they encourage often function to exclude, silence, stereotype or render invisible those who do not fit within hegemonic narratives.”<sup>112</sup> Smith and Watson use Butler to define identity, “the ‘I’ cannot knowingly fully recover what impels it, since its formation remains prior to its elaboration as self-reflexive knowledge.”<sup>113</sup> In other words, although the autobiographical ‘I’ gives the impression that the construction of identity is the one of the true self, the narration happens according to norms in which the true self remains separate from the fictional one.

As the true self cannot fully recover from prior experiences,<sup>114</sup> one could argue that Washington’s autobiographical ‘I’ is also at odds with his true self, since his autobiography was supposed to fit the colonizer’s utopian ideals of freedom and democracy, that only applied to white Americans even after Reconstruction. However, Smith and Watson say that “the importance of affirming American identity drives many life writings as, with westward

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<sup>109</sup> Washington, *Up From Slavery*, 71.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>111</sup> Smith, *Reading Autobiography*, 58.

<sup>112</sup> Weedon, *Identity and Culture*, 24.

<sup>113</sup> Smith, *Reading Autobiography*, 58.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

expansion, people become increasingly mobile and migratory.”<sup>115</sup>

For example, Washington aspired to gain recognition in the North through his speeches, in order to intervene in the reconstruction of the South: “The address which I delivered at Madison, before the National Educational Association, gave me a rather wide introduction in the North, and soon after that opportunities began offering themselves for me to address audiences there.”<sup>116</sup> Moreover, the fact that Washington’s autobiography reinforced the example of Franklin’s autobiography of a self-made man and respects the structure of a bildungsroman also reveals an autobiographical crisis, since it shows how black autobiographical writing had to fit white American literary standards in order to be authentic. Even so, although Washington stressed the importance of African-Americans “as subjects of American progress,”<sup>117</sup> he used white American ideals in his autobiography to forward promises that have not yet been achieved by African-Americans: “As we have proved our loyalty to you in the past, nursing your children, watching by the sick-bed of your mothers and fathers, and often following them with tear-dimmed eyes to their graves, so in the future, in our humble way, we shall stand by you with a devotion that no foreigner can approach.”<sup>118</sup>

However, after slavery, autobiographies resemble the ones before slavery regarding their dependency on white acceptance. If pre-Civil War slave narratives relied on the confirmation of whites to gain credibility, post-Civil War autobiographies needed the confirmation of the white colonizer in order to be accepted by the white world. The fact that Washington’s narrative took the model of the self-made man and created parallels with the way in which whites represented themselves in American history shows his concern that in order for his race to succeed in the white world, he could refer to the past: “I determined never to say anything in a public address in the North that I would not be willing to say in the South.”<sup>119</sup>

Although Washington emphasized the post-Reconstruction progress of the black race and his hope towards a better future, he still remained humble and lacking in agency, as he was able to define himself only in the relation to the white ‘other’: “This country demands that every race shall measure itself by the American standard.”<sup>120</sup> This shows the traumatic

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<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>116</sup> Washington, *Up From Slavery*, 219.

<sup>117</sup> Smith, *Reading Autobiography*, 122.

<sup>118</sup> Washington, *Up From Slavery*, 236.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 316.

memory of both races, although blacks were the victims of slavery.

### **2.3 Memory and The Politics of Remembering**

*“What is recollected and what is obscured – is central to the cultural production of knowledge about the past, and thus to the terms of an individual’s self-knowledge.”*<sup>121</sup>

Yale sociologist Ron Eyerman differentiates between individual and cultural trauma, pointing out that the latter is related to the formation of a collective memory, which “came central in the forming of African-American post-Civil War identity.”<sup>122</sup> That is to say that even if many of the descendants of ex-slaves did not directly experience slavery and if they did, their experiences differed, they felt related to those traumatic events which “came to be central to their attempts to forge a collective identity out of its remembrance.”<sup>123</sup> Since after the Civil War “the memory of slavery was recast as benign and civilizing, a white man’s project around which North and South could reconcile,”<sup>124</sup> black authors who had experienced the time before and after Emancipation, such as Booker T. Washington, appealed to a sense of community in post-Civil War life writing. In his attempt of “reinterpreting the past as a means towards reconciling the present/future needs,”<sup>125</sup> Washington emphasized the importance of a powerful black identity that revealed how “memory is always group memory, both because the individual is derivative of some collectivity, family, and community, and also because a group is solidified and becomes aware of itself through continuous reflection upon and recreation of a distinctive, shared memory.”<sup>126</sup> However, “this interpretation of their social reality further motivated them to forge collective solutions to their collective status problems that reinforced their oppositional identity.”<sup>127</sup>

By way of contrast, memory also concerned issues of representations, especially in life writing, in which not all blacks desired to fit their stories in certain white literary standards and continued to deliver their stories orally or construct them in such a way that

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<sup>121</sup> Smith, *Reading Autobiography*, 25.

<sup>122</sup> Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>127</sup> Ogbu, “Collective Identity,” 12.

they criticized white oppression. As Darwin T. Turner argues, this resulted in their misinterpretation by whites. Therefore, the stories that became represented in mainstream American culture had to adapt to white cultural norms, and thus to the politics of remembering and “who is authorized to remember and what they are authorized to remember.”<sup>128</sup>

Furthermore, Smith and Watson claim that remembering and self-representation in life writing constantly changes, as it depends on a politically charged context at a national level during a specific historical moment in time. Therefore, the politics of remembering had different meanings especially for ethnic minorities, as “a culture’s understanding of memory at a particular moment of its history shapes the life narrator’s process of remembering.”<sup>129</sup> Since white Americans remembered the making of the American nation as a story of success in their national past, ethnic minorities such as Native Americans and African-Americans were still trapped in the trauma of slavery and had to fit the white dominant culture’s standards: “Those who celebrate the nineteenth century as a century of America’s Manifest Destiny have strongly differing versions of the meaning of westward expansion from those of the descendants of Native Americans displaced across the western plains.”<sup>130</sup>

Because memory was not to be trusted, black authors appealed to experiences that relied on memory, in order to convince the audiences of the authenticity of their autobiographies. For example, Northup gave details from his everyday life while he was enslaved: “The fourth morning, having become recruited and refreshed, Master Ford ordered me to make ready to accompany him to the bayou. There was but one saddle horse at the opening, all others with the mules having been sent down to the plantation.”<sup>131</sup> Even so, it is questionable that authors remember accurate details, such as: conversations, names, places, or even the logical order of events. Similarly, Washington offered details from his remembrance of his life as a young boy, which was recreated from the voice of the abolitionist that he had become at the moment when he wrote the autobiography. For example, he claims that his desire to read and write was already present since his childhood years: “From the time that I can remember having any thoughts about anything, I recall that I had an intense longing to learn to read.”<sup>132</sup> Moreover, remembering was also related to black identity. Namely, it underlined the fact that blacks did not forget their heritage, as their

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<sup>128</sup> Smith, *Reading Autobiography*, 24.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>131</sup> Northup, *Twelve Years A Slave*, 106.

<sup>132</sup> Washington, *Up From Slavery*, 45.

stories were reconstructed from memory and thus, whether they were truthful or not, they emphasized what could not be forgotten, as a “recall of experience via the lens of traumatically constrained ideology, to describe the continuing racialization of politics.”<sup>133</sup>

Washington aimed to educate the ex-slaves at the newly-established Tuskegee school, in Alabama, which stressed the formation of a powerful black identity and a sense of unity towards reconciling the present and the future. However, this also showed the post-Reconstruction black struggles against their exclusion from white society, their “trauma of rejection,”<sup>134</sup> “the failure of Reconstruction to truly integrate blacks into American society,”<sup>135</sup> but also the realization that education was the only way that blacks could make it in the white world. For instance, Washington tried to make the case for all African-Americans with his Atlanta speech but he discovered that other black communities held different perspectives on the issue of slavery, so Washington did not succeed to represent them as a leader under a collective identity: “They seemed to tell that I had been too liberal in my remarks toward the Southern whites, and that I had not spoken out strongly enough for what they termed the ‘rights’ of my race.”<sup>136</sup>

Besides this, slavery could not be erased from the memory of less educated blacks and was part of their post-Reconstruction identity, since “in the rural areas of the antebellum South, identity was rooted in land and locality, with a particular area and region.”<sup>137</sup> Washington added that many blacks experienced “a strange and peculiar attachment to ‘old Marster’ and ‘old Missus,’ and to their children, which they found it hard to think of breaking off.”<sup>138</sup>

## Conclusion

To conclude, this chapter showed how this historical moment was an essential tool for framing the way in which time, space, memory, the authors’ different backgrounds and different ideologies available to them at the moment when their narratives were published, determined the construction of two different African-American experiences, but also how identity is a complex matter when it comes to fully understanding ethnic mindsets.

The true self and the autobiographical ‘I’ revealed variations of the two authors’

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<sup>133</sup> Mostern, *Autobiography and Black Identity Politics*, 10.

<sup>134</sup> Smith, *Reading Autobiography*, 39.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>136</sup> Washington, *Up From Slavery*, 245.

<sup>137</sup> Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma*, 35.

<sup>138</sup> Washington, *Up From Slavery*, 38-39.



identity. Northup's identity, although African-American, was influenced by Northern abolitionist discourses of the evil of slavery and determined by his respected status of a free man and violin player. At the same time, Northup dealt with the limitations of his agency as a result of his enslavement, rather than the lack of it, since his literacy and status helped him regain his freedom before Reconstruction. For Washington, his and his family's enslavement but also his in-existent status outside the plantation had implications for his later identity, as his true self could not recover from the psychological trauma of slavery, even as he gained agency over his own life as a result of Reconstruction.

Memory and the 'politics of remembering' was also an important aspect in the discussion about black identity. In this sense, pre- and post-Civil War life writing for ethnic minorities differed in terms of discourse, since it had to adapt to the making of white American history. Northup's slave narrative had to support the Northern abolitionist propaganda, as his self-representation during his enslavement was that of a white observant foreigner.

Similarly, Washington had to leave out his terrific experiences in slavery and focus on a future full of hope for reconciliation of the two races. In his struggle for self-representation, memory worked as a means to forge a collective identity with a shared past. As he avoided speaking about himself, he fell into an 'autobiographical crisis' as a result of actually having to represent contradicting ideals of freedom and democracy that did not fit African-Americans' social and political situation at that time.

Now that this chapter has shown how both authors had to fit different ideologies available to them at a certain time in order to gain representation, the next chapter will deal with the way in which these different ideologies shaped their political messages, but also how the intertwining of the personal and political had implications for the identities of Northup and Washington.

### **III. The African-American Jeremiad**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

*“The black jeremiad may well reflect the influence of hegemonic ideology upon subordinate groups’ public ideas and programs, but it also illustrates the shrewd and artful tendency of an oppressed group to refashion values taught by privileged classes – even as it accepts them into ideological tools for its own ends.”<sup>139</sup>*

This chapter will investigate how the African American Jeremiad was used in the black literary tradition as a means to achieve equality and freedom. By looking at two aspects of this theme, namely the struggle for utopian politics and the use of the Bible, one could analyze the way in which utopian political messages were conveyed in black life writing during and after slavery and see the implications that these ideals had for the African-American identity. All these will be analyzed in order to emphasize how blacks had to face a continuous struggle for their acceptance in the American society, which also led to the fragmentation of their identities up until today.

By doing so, this will show how jeremiadic rhetoric interacted with the identities of Northup and Washington in *Twelve Years A Slave* and *Up From Slavery*, and whether the theme was used differently before and after the Civil War. It is important to analyze this theme as this rhetoric intertwined with the personal and political voices of Washington and Northup, as both expressed political messages that were usually associated with white America and were embedded in the founding of the white American nation, such as the American Dream, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and the abolition of slavery and the cooperation between blacks and whites.

#### **3.2 The Struggle for Utopian Politics and the Restoration of the American Dream**

*“Black political thought is by its very nature diverse, complex, involved, simple, radical, submissive, conservative, ambiguous, clear, disjointed, utopian, practical,*

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<sup>139</sup> David Howard-Pitney, *The African American Jeremiad Appeals for Justice in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 219.

*realistic, and sundry other variation.*”<sup>140</sup>

The rhetorical tradition of the American Jeremiad dates back to 1630 and John Winthrop, one of the Puritan founders of the English settlement, specifically the Massachusetts Bay Colony. In a sermon aboard the *Arabella*, the ship that had transported the English Puritans to the new continent, Winthrop emphasized the importance of their divine mission in America, away from the European “mundane, social matters”<sup>141</sup> toward the “fulfillment of their destiny”<sup>142</sup> and the city of God. Therefore, America represented the promised land and the given destiny from God, for the English colonizers. Although the American jeremiad represented a lamentation about the wrongs of the past, it was also oriented towards a positive and hopeful view of the future and the achievement of what became known as the American Dream. Moreover, English Puritans believed that all wrongs happened for a certain reason, as they had a divine mission. Therefore, “God punished them, they believed, only to hasten their fulfillment of their final destiny. ‘In short, their punishments confirmed their promise.’”<sup>143</sup> However, throughout time, Bercovitch argues, the American jeremiad became central in the discourse about the forming of the American nation, since it “outlived its Puritan origins and evolved into a central rhetorical feature of American middle-class culture.”<sup>144</sup>

According to Willie J. Harrell, Jr., a black English professor, the Afro-American Jeremiad developed during the American Republic, from 1790s to 1800s, and was influenced by the Puritan Jeremiad. The American one “contributed to the socio-political and religious development of an emerging African American literary tradition,”<sup>145</sup> so the latter relied on the same utopian visions as the previous one, such as the hope for freedom and equality for all races in the attempt to recreate the idea of the American dream. But the African-American Jeremiad was also unique in a number of ways which differentiated it from the American

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<sup>140</sup> Hanes Walton, Jr., “Black Political Thought: The Problem of Characterization” *Journal of Black Studies* 1, no. 2 (1970), 213.

<sup>141</sup> Sacvan Bercovitch, *Studies in American Thought and Culture: The American Jeremiad* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2012), 56.

<sup>142</sup> Bercovitch, *Studies in American Thought and Culture*, 56.

<sup>143</sup> David Howard-Pitney, “The Jeremiads of Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and W.E.B. Du Bois and Changing Patterns of Black Messianic Rhetoric, 1841-1920,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 6, no. 1 (1986), 48-49.

<sup>144</sup> Howard-Pitney, “The Jeremiads of Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and W.E.B. Du Bois,” 49.

<sup>145</sup> Willie J. Harrell, Jr., *Origins of the African American Jeremiad: The Rhetorical Strategies of Social Protest and Activism, 1760-1861* (Jefferson, N.C., and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011), 10.

one. The black jeremiad was adapted to the collective needs of African-Americans and it became a rhetorical discourse for the black consciousness, which focused on the “outcome of blacks seeking basic civil liberties which would comprise, for them, political participation.”<sup>146</sup> Therefore, the African-American jeremiadic rhetoric “attempted to connect the oppressors and the oppressed”<sup>147</sup> and as a result of slavery and racial injustices, it criticized the unfulfilled promises of racial equality that white Americans supported, while still holding on to the hope of “moral uplift and elevation in its black audience.”<sup>148</sup>

Likewise, the black jeremiad comprised the following aspects: the indictment against whites and lamentation about the slavery past, by pointing at the deviation of whites from the American promise of democracy and freedom for all races; the utopian politics, that is, citing the promises that blacks were supposed to experience, as promised by the Declaration of Independence and Constitution; and a solution for restoration of these promises by appealing to the American Dream and the return to origins. Since these aspects “appear, somewhat intermittedly, throughout African American social protest in the early republic,”<sup>149</sup> the chapter will analyze how these aspects come back in Northup’s and Washington’s autobiographies.

In life writing, the antebellum African-American jeremiad took on a more distinctly political dimension than the white one, emphasizing the wrongs of the institution of slavery and the ways in which America deviated from its promise of including all races in its utopian ideals through slavery. This was the black jeremiad in its first form, used “to denounce the sin of slavery as a desecration of America’s sacred mission.”<sup>150</sup> Similarly, William L. Andrews wrote that the black Jeremiad was a lamentation about blacks’ condition in America, combined with “constant warnings to whites to beware the inevitable judgment of God for the sin of slavery.”<sup>151</sup> Therefore, African-American ex-slaves, such as Frederick Douglass, intervened in the abolitionist propaganda of the South through his writings by using religion to point at the need of all Americans to fulfill their American Dream and move toward the unity of all races through common ideals, such as liberty and democracy, in order

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<sup>146</sup> Harrell, *Origins of the African American Jeremiad*, 8.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>150</sup> Howard-Pitney, “The Jeremiads of Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and W.E.B. Du Bois,” 49.

<sup>151</sup> William L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 14.

to fulfill the nation's destiny.<sup>152</sup> Therefore, he believed that "Northern whites would respond to this denunciation of the sin of slavery as a declension from the promise of a Christian America,"<sup>153</sup> changing their attitudes towards blacks during the Reconstruction. As most slaves were converted to Christianity by their masters during slavery, antebellum slave narratives used Christian religion as a political discourse in order to "argue for basic civil liberties"<sup>154</sup> for blacks, but also to show whites how slavery damaged the common promise of a truly Christian nation.

Although a free man from the North with full agency over his own fate, Northup's faith was influenced by the religion of the white colonizer even before he entered slavery, since he was already converted to Christianity at the moment when he was sold into it. While enslaved, he "could not comprehend the justice of that law, or that religion, which upholds or recognizes the principle of Slavery."<sup>155</sup> An example of the antebellum jeremiad, is that Northup condemned the institution of slavery in the American South, but also supported the solution for restoration, namely by suggesting that the American North embodied the American Dream.

One could argue that Northup's situation of being a free, accomplished middle-class man in the North determined his abolitionist discourse, in which the North represented the utopian place in which African-Americans could reconstruct their lives when they escaped the South. For example, the way in which Northup opened his autobiography made the reader understand that the North was the place where he found the American Dream: "Having all my life breathed the free air of the North."<sup>156</sup> Additionally, he refers to Patsey, a slave woman on the plantation of one of Northup's masters, Edwin Epps, who is the victim of Epps' sexual harassment and violence. Northup describes her through the eyes of a Northern outsider: "Far away, to her fancy an immeasurable distance, she knew there was a land of freedom. A thousand times she had heard that somewhere in the distant North there were no slaves – no masters. In her imagination it was an enchanted region, the Paradise of the Earth."<sup>157</sup> While for Patsey, the North represented an unfulfilled dream, for Northup it only meant waiting for his Northern friends to save him: "I could only gaze wistfully towards the North, and think of the thousands of miles that stretched between me and the soil of

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<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>154</sup> Harrell, *Origins of the African American Jeremiad*, 8.

<sup>155</sup> Northup, *Twelve Years A Slave*, 29.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

freedom, over which a black freeman may not pass.”<sup>158</sup> In contrast, although Northup supported this abolitionist propaganda, Northup himself was kidnapped from the North, which shows the opposite of the Paradise that captive slaves actually imagined at that time, as well as their insecure status, even as free agents, in the antebellum North.

Nonetheless, one could argue that Northup’s *Twelve Years A Slave* deviated from the first form of the African-American jeremiad, as he did not have the same experiences as Southern antebellum slave-born authors, such as Frederick Douglass. Therefore, Northup’s jeremiad did not include lamentations about the past, since he spent his past life as a free man, but he only pointed at the restoration of the American Dream that he had himself experienced in the American North: “Suffice is to say, during the long day I came not to the conclusion, even once, that the southern slave, fed, clothed, whipped and protected by his master, is happier than the free colored citizen of the North.”<sup>159</sup> Another example is when he specifically emphasized the Southern states that still practiced slavery at the moment when he regained his freedom in the North:

*“I doubt not hundreds have been as unfortunate as myself; that hundreds of free citizens have been kidnapped and sold into slavery, and are at this moment wearing out their lives on plantations in Texas and Louisiana. But I forbear. Chastened and subdued in spirit by the sufferings I have borne, and thankful to that good Being through whose mercy I have been restored to happiness and liberty, I hope henceforward to lead an upright though lowly life, and rest at last in the church yard where my father sleeps.”*<sup>160</sup>

Although Northup emphasized that faith was the reason to look forward to the fulfillment of the American promise, unlike typical antebellum jeremiads, Northup deviates from speaking for the needs of the black community. Therefore, “Northup’s rhetorical strategy is but a paradigm for the classic manipulation of the master by the slave.”<sup>161</sup> He places himself above other slaves and claims to understand their suffering in the same

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<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>161</sup> Robert Stepto, *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 13.

measure, no matter his free-born status and Northern background: “To the Almighty Father of us all – the freeman and the slave – I poured forth the supplications of a broken spirit.”<sup>162</sup> Although all blacks in the American South were captive, Northup focused on his own self, claiming that he “was the forsaken of God, it seemed – the despised and hated of men!”<sup>163</sup> The fact that he was saved by his white Northern friends is also due to God’s mercy: “I thank God, who has since permitted me to escape from the thralldom of slavery, that through his merciful interposition I was prevented from imbruing my hands in the blood of his creatures.”<sup>164</sup>

Washington’s struggle to plant utopian ideals in the collective mind of blacks comes back several times in his autobiography, as he encouraged blacks to be aware of their free agency and use that in a positive way, since the future was in their own hands. Here, his hope for restoration is revealed when he points out how America is the land in which he had the opportunity to reconstruct his own self and start his life all over again: “I think there are not many men in our country who have had the privilege of naming themselves in the way that I have.”<sup>165</sup>

Washington offered African-Americans an example of how becoming successful even as a black person was possible through hard work and perseverance: “I have a strong feeling that every individual owes it to himself, and to the cause which he is serving to keep a vigorous, healthy body, with the nerves steady and strong, prepared for great efforts and prepared for disappointments and trying positions.”<sup>166</sup> As such, he picked up the example of a self-made man in the vein of Benjamin Franklin and tried to write himself into white American ideals, pointing out how hard work and obstacles represented the step towards fulfilling the utopian mission: “From any point of view, I had rather be what I am, a member of the Negro race, than be able to claim membership with the most favored of any other race.”<sup>167</sup> In this sense, he distanced himself from his initial African identity and assumed the identity of a white man, as rhetoric in most white narratives was inspired from “an Enlightenment model of emancipation as a guiding political principle.”<sup>168</sup>

One could argue that Washington’s book was not a black jeremiad in the traditional

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<sup>162</sup> Northup, *Twelve Years A Slave*, 61.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>165</sup> Washington, *Up From Slavery*, 52.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

sense, but only used some of its elements. One is example is Washington's hope for restoration. He assumed that blacks had the same opportunities as whites after Reconstruction and it was all up to them to make the best out of their future. Therefore, he appealed to his belief in the American Dream by claiming: "I felt that I had reached the promised land, and I resolved to let no obstacle prevent me from putting forth the highest effort to fit myself to accomplish the most good in the world."<sup>169</sup> Moreover, Washington emphasized that just like whites, blacks should not look back into the past anymore. Therefore, he emphasized that organizations, such as the Ku Klux Klan, that wanted to prevent blacks' involvement in politics, did not exist anymore: "Today there are no such organizations in the South, and the fact that such ever existed is almost forgotten by both races."<sup>170</sup> Howard-Pitney argues how Washington in this sense "criticized blacks for letting expression of their grievances against whites take precedence over efforts to make the most of the chances for self-improvement already open to them."<sup>171</sup> This shows the fact that Washington was aware of racism and white hatred but also realized that if blacks behaved in the same way, this only deepened the gap between the two races. Therefore, he encouraged cooperation between the two races, despite their differences: "In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress."<sup>172</sup>

Leaving out the trauma of slavery and having to conform to the white colonizer's life writing style impacted on the way in which Washington's and blacks' identity was shaped, since blacks had to pretend that their identity was constructed in the same way as white ones. For instance, Washington placed the slavery past of blacks and whites on the same level, although the psychological trauma of being a slave had no degree of comparison with being in the position of a master: "The cruel wrongs inflicted upon us, the black man got nearly as much out of slavery as the white man did."<sup>173</sup> Therefore, by blaming the institution of slavery in his rhetoric, just like his antebellum predecessors did, shows how Washington gave up his real identity for one that is institutionally shaped and standardized to the collective level of all blacks. However, instead of criticizing the wrongs of whites, he thought that "blacks were responsible for their state of declension,"<sup>174</sup> since they remained in a state of

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<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.



lamentation about the past and did not make a step towards their future.

Washington underlined the cooperation between blacks and whites and the lack of color prejudice through the manner in which he depicted whites that he met along the way. He gave examples of white men who got hurt while trying to defend blacks from the Ku Klux Klan: “General Ruffner tried to defend the coloured people, and for this he was knocked down and so seriously wounded that he never completely recovered.”<sup>175</sup> However, although Washington admired people who defended blacks, his rhetoric undermined the racial hatred that was still present after slavery, to a degree that he almost denied its existence: “I saw at one time a rather amusing instance which showed how difficult it sometimes is to know where the black begins and the white ends.”<sup>176</sup> He also believed that blacks’ education would eliminate the color barrier:

*“I said that any individual who learned to do something better than anybody else—learned to do a common thing in an uncommon manner—had solved his problem, regardless of the colour of his skin, and that in proportion as the Negro learned to produce what other people wanted and must have, in the same proportion would he be respected.”*<sup>177</sup>

Similarly, Howard-Pitney also underlined that “Washington dismissed evidence of whites’ determination to strip blacks of legal and social rights as a trend which was superficial.”<sup>178</sup>

Furthermore, it is essential to note that Washington’s rhetoric came from the position of a black middle-class leader who “filled the role of a black Moses leader leading his people to the Promised Land while preaching the terms of an American covenant and instructing blacks in the fulfillment of the covenantal duties.”<sup>179</sup> Therefore, he forged the construction of a collective identity in which blacks’ self-improvement was more important than reform. In this sense, Washington made clear that he rose above other ex-slaves and became someone who could legitimize blacks: “This was the first time in the entire history of the Negro that a member of my race had been asked to speak from the same platform with white Southern

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<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>178</sup> Howard-Pitney, “The Jeremiads of Frederick Douglass,” 55.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

men and women on any important National occasion.”<sup>180</sup> For example, Washington pointed at ex-slaves who kept coming back to their old captivity places even after they gained their freedom, not knowing what to do with it: “After they had remained away for a while, many of the older slaves, especially, returned to their old homes and made some kind of contract with their former owners by which they remained on the estate.”<sup>181</sup> As William L. Andrews argues, the post-bellum slave narrator chose to support scenes of black reconciliation with their old masters in order to fit the white literary tradition, but also to indicate “a progressive, forgiving spirit among blacks, born of their faith and hope in a God who delivers the captive and shows mercy on the sinner.”<sup>182</sup>

The perspective from which Washington wrote also creates the idea that he spoke for white audiences. For instance, Washington wanted to promote the progress of his race in the American South, so he returned from the North in order to establish the Tuskegee Institute. But he also needed the confirmation of whites in order to do that:

*“I have referred to the disposition on the part of the white people in the town of Tuskegee and vicinity to help the school. From the first, I resolved to make the school a real part of the community in which it was located. I was determined that no one should have the feeling that it was a foreign institution, dropped down in the midst of the people, for which they had no responsibility and in which they had no interest.”*<sup>183</sup>

This points at the way in which Washington used his agency as a free man in order to prove to whites that blacks made the first step in becoming part of the American nation. By establishing Tuskegee, Washington wanted to point out that as soon as blacks found their freedom, they were capable of becoming educated, as their intelligence was not lower than the white one: “Counting those who have finished the full course, together with those who have taken enough training to enable them to do reasonably good work, we can safely say

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<sup>180</sup> Washington, *Up From Slavery: An Autobiography*, 225.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>182</sup> William L. Andrews, “Reunion in the Postbellum Slave Narrative: Frederick Douglass and Elizabeth Keckley” *Black American Literature Forum* 23, no. 1 (1989), 6.

<sup>183</sup> Washington, *Up From Slavery: An Autobiography*, 152.

that at least six thousand men and women from Tuskegee are now at work in different parts of the South.”<sup>184</sup>

Similarly, he adapted his autobiography in such way that it had political consequences, since most African American political leaders “have chosen to write personal stories as a means of theorizing their political positions.”<sup>185</sup> For instance, Washington’s Atlanta speech of 1895, to which he also referred in his autobiography was actually meant to give his white audiences an idea of what being black was really like.

*“As we have proved our loyalty to you in the past, nursing your children, watching by the sick-bed of your mothers and fathers, and often following them with tear-dimmed eyes to their graves, so in the future, in our humble way, we shall stand by you with a devotion that no foreigner can approach, ready to lay down our lives, if need be, in defence of yours, interlacing our industrial, commercial, civil, and religious life with yours in a way that shall make the interests of both races one. In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.”*<sup>186</sup>

For instance, he stressed the importance of social and political equality of southern blacks and whites, and underlined the commitment of blacks to contribute to the wealth of the country. Similarly, D.T. Turner wrote that there were two core motivations in the black literary writing: to educate black audiences and appeal to a sense of community, but also give white audiences an insight into blacks’ psychology.<sup>187</sup> In other words, although Washington fit his discourse into white American ideals, his true identity could not escape the past as he remained humble in front of the white dominant culture and was aware of blacks’ position in the eyes of white Americans: “No race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem. It is at the bottom of life we must begin, and not at the top.”<sup>188</sup> Therefore, he delivered his speech in order to convince white audiences that African-Americans were worthy to be part of the American nation: “While

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<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 334.

<sup>185</sup> Mostern, *Autobiography and Black Identity*, 12.

<sup>186</sup> Washington, *Up From Slavery: An Autobiography*, 236.

<sup>187</sup> Turner, “Introductory Remarks about the Black Literary Tradition,” 142-144.

<sup>188</sup> Washington, *Up From Slavery: An Autobiography*, 235.

we take pride in what we exhibit as a result of our independent efforts, we do not for a moment forget that our part in this exhibition would fall far short of your expectations.”<sup>189</sup>

Subsequently, Dexter B. Gordon, an African-American expert, argues that “one of the first problems facing intellectuals was in fact mediating levels of identity, especially from the local to the national and international levels,”<sup>190</sup> because they had to shift between different models of rhetoric, which also contributed in the African-American identity crisis. For example, Washington’s trip to Europe together with his wife was also due to funds from whites, as well as the financial support that kept the school in function while Washington was away. He pointed out his lucky situation of having been born in a land which gave him such opportunities to develop himself: “Luxuries had always seemed to me to be something meant for white people, not for my race. I had always regarded Europe, and London, and Paris, much as I regarded heaven.”<sup>191</sup> But it was also a reason to acknowledge one more time the greatness of America: “In fact, when I left France, I had more faith in the future of the black man in America than I had ever possessed.”<sup>192</sup> These examples show his positive rhetoric embedded in myths of white nation building that celebrated the American Dream.

### **3.3 The Use of the Bible**

The idea of exceptionalism was one of the founding myths of the American nation, according to which English Puritans colonized America as a result of their divine mission from God in their quest of finding the utopian promised land. There, they could reinvent themselves, away from the European world of hierarchy.<sup>193</sup> The religious roots of the American nation were thus settled once with the arrival of the first colonizers and still persist in today’s society. The white jeremiad shows how whites claimed their dominant position and placed the Bible and belief in God at the grounds of forming the American nation.

Throughout time, American myths have been reinvented, and white Americans came to represent a paradox: they held their belief in God but also practiced the brutalities of slavery, since they used religion and the Bible as a reason to legitimize the enslavement of African-Americans. According to the Book of Genesis, African-Americans were “were the

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<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

<sup>190</sup> Gordon, *Black Identity*, 59.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, 288-289.

<sup>192</sup> Washington, *Up From Slavery: An Autobiography*, 298.

<sup>193</sup> Bercovitch, *Studies in American Thought and Culture*, 19-21.

progeny of Cain and Ham,”<sup>194</sup> the ones who received a punishment of eternal slavery, so blacks were cursed to spend their lives in slavery. This is also the perception of one of Northup’s masters, Edwin Epps, who thought that the destiny of the slave was “to be whipped and kicked and scourged through life – to address the white man with hat in hand, and eyes bent servilely on the earth.”<sup>195</sup>

As represented in African-American jeremiad rhetoric, the Bible was central the forming of African-American identity, because it was imposed by the white colonizer during slavery, but was also used against whites in order to point out the sin of slavery and the need of changing African-Americans’ social and political situation. Northup revealed the influence of the white colonizer from the beginning of the narrative not as directly imposed on him, but on his family, as they were all victims of slavery. Although he presents his situation from the perspective of a free-born man, Northup’s religion and rhetoric was influenced by that of whites through his father, who was a slave: “He endeavored to imbue our minds with sentiments of morality, and to teach us to place our trust and confidence in Him who regards the humblest as well as the biggest of his creatures.”<sup>196</sup>

The paradox of religion comes back several times in *Twelve Years A Slave*, since Northup underlined the way in which slaves and their white masters prayed to the same God, but whites were the only ones empowered to be masters, according to the Bible. This shows how religion actually came to be reinterpreted by white Americans. For instance, after Northup arrived on William Ford’s plantation, one of his masters, his brother-in-law started to read from the Bible and pointed out that the servant who did not obey the orders of his master, will be punished: “That nigger that don’t take care – that don’t obey his lord – that’s his master – d’ye see? – that ‘ere nigger shall be beaten with many stripes.”<sup>197</sup> Furthermore, although committed to God, Northup was forced to whip Patsey, a woman on the plantation.

Another paradox is that although slaves were subjected to violence and brutality of their own masters, whites educated them to be kind to each other, because that is what Bible taught them. Northup wrote how one of his masters “sought to inculcate our minds, feelings of kindness towards each other, of dependence upon God – setting forth the rewards promised unto those who lead an upright and prayerful life.”<sup>198</sup> In contrast, although he was

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<sup>194</sup> David Brion Davis, “The Culmination of Racial Polarities and Prejudice” *Journal of the Early Republic* 19, no. 4 (1999), 761.

<sup>195</sup> Northup, *Twelve Years A Slave*, 175.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-26.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

himself enslaved, he kept describing his masters as being Christian men whose real behavior was not brutal, but only determined by the institution of slavery: “There never was a more kind, noble, candid, Christian man than William Ford.”<sup>199</sup> Another aspect of the way in which in Northup’s narrative is the fact that even white men themselves had different opinions about slavery. A different white interpretation of slavery is highlighted when Northup revealed his conversation with Bass, a white Canadian man who came to the plantation of Northup’s master, Epps, in order to help him build a new house, and who also sent Northup’s letters of liberation to his white Northern friends. Therefore, Bass told to Epps that slavery is a sin “that will not go unpunished forever.”<sup>200</sup>

Throughout the narrative, Northup remains humble not only because the Bible taught him to be, but also because he was aware of the position of his race in American society: “Thus far the history of my life presents nothing whatever unusual – nothing but the common hopes, and loves, and labors of an obscure colored man, making his humble progress in the world.”<sup>201</sup> During his captivity, he relied on his faith in God in times of despair, but also on his perspective of America as being the divine land: “Standing on the soil of the free State where I was born, thanks to Heaven, I can raise my head once more among men.”<sup>202</sup>

Booker T. Washington’s *Up From Slavery* used religion to promote the post-Civil War American utopian tradition, in which blacks were able to advance their collective desire for equality in social life and politics through using the Bible against whites. In the same measure, slavery showed that Christianity did not exclude African-Americans’ treatment, and Reconstruction did not eliminate the white hatred towards blacks either. In order to promote the hope for restoration of the American Dream and fit the American jeremiad, Washington underlined that “with God’s help, I believe that I have completely rid myself of any ill feeling toward the Southern white man for any wrong that he may have inflicted upon my race.”<sup>203</sup>

Washington associated the Bible with the moment when he started to receive education at Hampton Agricultural Institute, in Virginia. Therefore, Washington referred to the Bible in his autobiography, as it was also the first step in having a common voice with whites: “Miss Nathalie Lord, one of the teachers, from Portland, Me., taught me how to use and love the Bible. Before this I had never cared a great deal about it, but now I learned to

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<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>203</sup> Washington, *Up From Slavery: An Autobiography*, 181.

love to read the Bible, not only for the spiritual help which it gives, but on account of it as literature.”<sup>204</sup> Likewise, he still indirectly emphasized that his progress was the result of white Americans, who helped him rise above other ex-slaves.

The Bible also represented the blacks’ psychological escape from the trauma of slavery. Washington wrote that “the great ambition of the older people was to try to learn to read the Bible before they died,”<sup>205</sup> because having their mind at peace also eased their final moments in world where ‘going white’ was the only solution.

Furthermore, Washington also used the Bible to praise the opportunity “which God has laid at the doors of the South”<sup>206</sup> to speak at the Atlanta Exposition and advance the importance of African-Americans’ equality. The fact that this was made possible, was because of his destiny to be born in a utopian land, Washington emphasized. At the moment when he had to speech, he placed himself in the shoes of an American leader and evoked the religious myth that laid at the grounds of the founding of the American nation, such as: “let us pray God.”<sup>207</sup> He also did not start his speech “without asking the blessing of God upon what I want to say.”<sup>208</sup> This shows how Washington used religion as a tool of political activism in the struggle of blacks for representing their identities.

## **Conclusion**

In sum, the theme of the African-American Jeremiad has shown how the autobiographical rhetoric of Solomon Northup and Booker T. Washington, although adapted to the needs of African-Americans at that time, actually fit the Puritan discourse embedded in the formation of the American nation. This has pointed out how black identity never revealed just personal thoughts, but was intertwined with American political messages in which blacks had to show their support for white ideals, although their background and experiences were different than that of English Puritans who colonized America.

Although Northup and Washington had different backgrounds, they both fell in the discourse of the white dominant culture, as neither had the occasion to reflect his true black identity in the white world. Although Northup and Washington both used rhetoric that expressed white American ideals, the way in which they used that rhetoric was different. Washington is more directed to the collective needs of African-Americans and encouraged

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<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, 129

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*

them to use their agency, as they were already in a utopian land, trying to reach both black and white audiences in his writings. In contrast, Northup pointed at the American North as the salvation of African-Americans. Northup's rhetoric deviated from the way in which Washington used it, since Northup focused less on the collective needs of blacks as a result of his assimilation and transcendence of ideals to the American North. Additionally, Northup was not able to fully understand the fate of other enslaved blacks in the South. However, both authors showed that during or after slavery, blacks had to give up their real identity to assimilate and needed whites' recognition in order to advance ideals of the African-American race.

All in all, this chapter has shown how both before and after Emancipation, black middle-class authors had to adapt their rhetoric to changing American discourses, depending on the social and political context of that certain time. The next chapter will look at the way in which African-Americans struggled to find their psychological freedom through language and literacy. Subsequently, the next chapter will focus on blacks' attempt to reinvent their identities through life writing, but will also look at the limitations that they faced by giving up their oral tradition to writing.



## IV. Speaking Power: Manhood

### 4.1 Introduction

*“Black males may seek to adopt notions of masculinity that the dominant culture idealizes, and may experience psychological distress from becoming disavowed from their African worldview.”*<sup>209</sup>

This chapter will analyze to what extent the issue of language and literacy and their limitations, and by relation, of manhood, played a role in Northup’s and Washington’s development as free agents and what implications this had for their representations of the African-American identity before and after 1865.

Smith and Watson claim that in the pre-Civil War period, life writing was marked by a moment when “self-writing became self-making,”<sup>210</sup> as many autobiographies started to flourish both in the American and English colonies. In this sense, for African-Americans, literacy became a way to redefine their personhood in the white society and have a voice, but it was also a step towards self-emancipation and gaining agency. Similarly, by the time of Emancipation, most of the slaves lacked knowledge as they had been deprived of it during their captivity, while the accounts of literate slaves were usually “one-dimensional accounts dominated by the racist perspectives of the slaveholder,”<sup>211</sup> and thus did not represent accurate accounts of a real slave’s life.

#### 4.1.1. Representations of Identity

The issue of manhood has been central in the representation of black identity in autobiographical writing, since it illustrates the first step in gaining African-American freedom, and the development of blacks as free agents.<sup>212</sup> The aspect of black representation

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<sup>209</sup> Pierre, Martin R., et.al., “The Effects of Racism, African Self-Consciousness and Psychological Functioning of Black Masculinity: A Historical and Social Adaptation Framework,” *Journal of African-American Men* 6, no.2 (2001), 20.

<sup>210</sup> Smith, *Reading Autobiography*, 116.

<sup>211</sup> Mitchell, “Self-Emancipation,” 86.

<sup>212</sup> Herbert L. Sussman, *Masculine Identities: The History and Meanings of Manliness* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012), 104.

through manhood, as seen through a historical lens, also represented the roots of the latter black activist autobiographies and the Black Power Movement of the 1960s. In this sense, Herbert L. Sussman associated manhood with blacks' quest for their identities up until the present day, and underlined that "given the effects of enslavement and continuing racism after emancipation, from the seventeenth century to the present, for African Americans the ongoing achievement of black manhood becomes at its core the struggle to maintain a sense of self against the pressures of white society to dominate and dehumanize."<sup>213</sup>

Additionally, the American white society played a central role in shaping the way in which African-Americans used the idea of masculinity in order to represent their identity. Franklin's autobiography was an example of how the dominant gender vision in American society was that of the protestant white male, since Franklin's autobiography was "a prototypical narrative for America's myth of the self-made man and the entrepreneurial republican subject, specifically marked as male, white, propertied, and socially and politically enfranchised."<sup>214</sup> Therefore, black males were "expected to conform to the dominant culture's gender role expectations - success, competition, and aggression – as well as culturally specific requirements of the African-American community that may often conflict (e.g. cooperation, promotion of group, and survival of group)."<sup>215</sup> Similarly, Smith and Watson argued that while "the gendering of the representative life as universal and therefore masculine meant that narratives by women were rarely examined."<sup>216</sup>

Besides this, Sussman explained that masculinity has always been related to identity politics and gendered discourses of the white dominant culture. In this sense, autobiographical subjects defined themselves in relation to the other, by linking their "own being to other men within a collective social ideal or script that defines manliness."<sup>217</sup> Similarly, he supports Butler's argument that manhood is a social construction. Therefore, subjects were expected to perform a certain task and act in a certain way as a result of the construction of his or her body, which fit a set of social rules: "For men there is only a set of socially constructed rules for playing a role."<sup>218</sup> These examples show how black masculinity was emblematic for blacks' self-representation in life writing, but also how the lack of white understanding of the true African-American identity and the black struggles

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<sup>213</sup> Sussman, *Masculine Identities*, 109.

<sup>214</sup> Smith, *Reading Autobiography*, 116.

<sup>215</sup> Pierre et.al, "The Effects of Racism," 20.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>217</sup> Sussman, *Masculine Identities*, 9.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

for literacy have shown “how important the discourse of the autobiographical had become as a means to imagine another life and identity.”<sup>219</sup>

## **4.2 Language and Literacy**

*“In addition to the rich oral culture developed during enslavement, as slaves escaped from the Deep South and abolitionist sentiment grew in the North in the years before the Civil War, there flourished a powerful African-American literary form – the slave narrative, the genre of autobiography by former slaves relating their experience of slavery, their liberation, and their search for self-identity as free persons.”<sup>220</sup>*

The theme of language and literacy is common in black literary writing, since it is mostly related to the idea of freedom and self-representation or agency, but it is also associated with the idea of adapting to the ideals of the white colonizer in order for African-American writings to be accepted.<sup>221</sup> Language has always been a method to express thoughts and feelings in life narratives of whites as well, but in the case of African-Americans this meant that their voices remained formal, rational, and humble, no matter what.

To a larger extent, literacy and manhood are related to each other in the representation of black identity in autobiographical writing, since slave narratives have been the first form of proving the agency of blacks through writing. In this sense, Sussman claims that reading and writing have been the first proof to whites that blacks are capable to develop the notion of self-representation, since “the very act of writing an autobiography that records the development of the self is an assertion that the black is a man and not a beast: a person of consciousness and agency. The ability to write, in itself, proves the existence of an intelligent human self.”<sup>222</sup> Similarly, Kathryn L. Nasstrom underlines the wider role of slave narratives in the latter recreations of the African-American autobiographical self, since “in the African-American literary tradition, autobiography is one of the richest modes to of

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<sup>219</sup> Smith, *Reading Autobiography*, 117.

<sup>220</sup> Sussman, *Masculine Identities*, 104.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*

individual and collective expression, dating back to the slave era and continuing today.”<sup>223</sup>

Black literacy did not only imply using the whites’ language, but also represented a form of reacting against the white literary standards and intervening in white repression. Smith and Watson argue that “individual and groups deploy such tactics to manipulate the spaces in which they are constrained.”<sup>224</sup> This shows how oppressed groups develop a new form of creating identity: “Such modes of ‘re-use,’ then, are interventions that open a space of agency within constrained systems.”<sup>225</sup> For instance, James Olney emphasized the importance of literacy for black authors like Frederick Douglass: “Literacy, identity, and a sense of freedom are all acquired simultaneously and without the first, according to Douglass, the latter two would have never been.”<sup>226</sup>

By using themes such as individualism, independence, and objectivity in terms of emotions, Solomon Northup and Booker T. Washington attempted to show the existence of their agency through embodying the view of the male gender predominate in American society at the moment when their autobiographies were published.

Winifred Morgan argues that gender representation in black autobiographies is much related to the issue of language and literacy, in the sense that educated black males were usually in the position to voice the ideals of the entire community because they could use language to state their position in society.<sup>227</sup> Therefore, male autobiographies were “frequently stories of triumph in a public sphere.”<sup>228</sup> Likewise, both Northup and Washington expressed political messages, as their literacy also shaped their middle-class status and their position as leaders. For instance, Northup talked from the position of the abolitionist that he had become before the Civil War, while Washington represented the leader for black education after slavery. Thus, their heroic stories represented a top-down approach, in which masculinity and class became interrelated. As such, the way in which these two aspects are connected is important for understanding how Northup’s and Washington’s identities are constructed.

Gender-related distinctions in Northup’s and Washington’s autobiographies are

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<sup>223</sup> Kathryn L. Nasstrom, “Between Memory and History: Autobiographies of the Civil Rights Movement and the Writing of Civil Rights History” *The Journal of Southern History* 74, no.2 (May, 2008), 329.

<sup>224</sup> Smith, *Reading Autobiography*, 56.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>226</sup> James Olney, “I Was Born: Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature” *Callaloo*, no. 20 (1984), 46-73.

<sup>227</sup> Winifred Morgan, “Gender-Related Difference in the Slave Narratives of Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass,” *American Studies* 35, no.2 (1994), 90.

<sup>228</sup> Morgan, “Gender-related Difference,” 90.

depicted through the portrayal of women as never being free agents, since they were too emotional, attracted to family life, but also often financially dependent on their husbands and illiterate. Northup and Washington both represented the image of educated, independent, powerful agents, in contrast to their wives' domestic life. For example, Northup's self-empowerment was emphasized through the following passage: "Deprived of the advice and assistance of my father; with a wife dependent upon me for support, I resolved to enter upon a life of industry."<sup>229</sup> This shows Northup's manhood in the sense that he was the one who financially supported his family, but also the fact that his wife could only achieve domestic ideals: "Anne, also, during her long residence at the Eagle Tavern, had become somewhat famous as a cook."<sup>230</sup> Similarly, Washington pointed at his wife's qualities of being a good mother, when a pupil from the school where she was teaching had become ill, so she nursed him: "When she heard of this, she at once telegraphed the Mayor of Memphis, offering her services as a yellow-fever nurse, although she had never had the disease."<sup>231</sup>

If free black women were subordinated to their husbands, the ones that were captive were often the victims of their white masters. Patsey, a woman whom Northup meets on master Epps' plantation, was also additionally dehumanized by her master's sexual harassment: "Patsey walked under a cloud. If she uttered a word in opposition to her master's will, the lash was resorted to at once, to bring her subjection."<sup>232</sup> Moreover, she also had to cope with the anger of her mistress: "It had fallen to her lot to be the slave of a licentious master and a jealous mistress."<sup>233</sup> Similarly, Washington's mother was also the victim of her white master, since Washington never met his father but he assumed that he was white: "Of my father I know even less than of my mother. I do not even know his name. I have heard reports to the effects that he was a white man who lived on one of the near-by plantations."<sup>234</sup> Besides this, she also fulfilled a female role because she was the plantation cook, and she was also the one who sewed a hat for Washington, when he went to school.<sup>235</sup>

Washington's emphasis on manhood is revealed when he showed his desire to prove to his mother that he could become someone who could also legitimize her voice: "One of the chief ambitions which spurred me on at Hampton was that I might be able to get to be in

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<sup>229</sup> Northup, *Twelve Years A Slave*, 27.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>231</sup> Washington, *Up From Slavery*, 140.

<sup>232</sup> Northup, *Twelve Years A Slave*, 130.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>234</sup> Washington, *Up From Slavery*, 21.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

a position in which I could better make my mother comfortable and happy. She had so often expressed the wish that she might be permitted to live to see her children educated and started out in the world.”<sup>236</sup>

Whereas for Washington the figure of his mother was central, Northup took his father as an example for him, since he was a respected man: “He was accustomed to speak to us of his early life; and although at all times cherishing the warmest emotions of kindness, and even of affection towards the family, in whose house he had been a bondsman, he nevertheless comprehended the system of slavery.”<sup>237</sup>

Manhood is also emphasized in Northup’s narrative through the fact that he engaged in physical fights with his master. An example of this is when John Tibeats, the overseer of one of his master’s plantations ordered him to strip in order to be whipped, but Northup answered: “I will not.” Moreover, Northup was the one who whipped Tibeats: “putting one arm around his leg, and holding it to my breast, so that his head and shoulders only touched the ground, I placed my foot upon his neck.”<sup>238</sup> This shows the psychological impact of Northup’s limitation of agency on his identity and the fact that he rebelled against Tibeats, as Northup lacked freedom. Furthermore, it also shows how white brutality of the past determined the development of a tension between the two races, since Northup whipped Tibeats in order to escape being whipped.

Northup’s construction of manhood was also determined by his middle-class position. Even though he was a slave, Northup made the readers aware of his independence. Throughout his enslavement, he constantly tried to reach for people who could send his letters to his Northern friends in order to help him escape and searched for ways to make his way out of slavery: “My great object always was to invent means of getting a letter secretly into the post-office, directed to some of friends or family at the North.”<sup>239</sup> While Northup fell in despair a couple of times during his enslavement, he still assumed his free agency: “There was not a day throughout the ten years I belonged to Epps.”<sup>240</sup> He also did not identify with his new identity when he was renamed ‘Platt,’ by Mr. Freeman, the white slave trader who sold him into slavery: “I informed him that was not my name.”<sup>241</sup>

Similarly, Northup considered other slaves to be inferior, while he was proud of his

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<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>237</sup> Northup, *Twelve Years A Slave*, 25.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

own education and skills. An example of this is when during his enslavement, he was asked to play the violin at different events where white people were present, but he was also allowed to keep a part of the money that he earned: “Visions of cabin furniture, of water pails, of pocket knives, new shoes and coats and hats, floated through my fancy, and up through all rose the triumphant contemplation, that I was the wealthiest ‘nigger’ on Bayou Boeuf.”<sup>242</sup> All these examples show that the way in which Northup emphasized his independence, although enslaved, came from the fact that he was a free-born, educated man.

Additionally, Washington pointed at his independence and self-empowerment by having the occasion to name himself. Thus, by assigning himself an identity, he came out of his anonymous life as a slave on the plantation, by gaining a voice: “From the time when I could remember anything, I had been called simply ‘Booker.’”<sup>243</sup> Besides this, the fact that Washington adopted an orphan whom he named after his last name, also shows Washington’s desire to leave proof to the white world that he existed: “Soon after we moved to West Virginia, my mother adopted into our family, notwithstanding our poverty, an orphan boy, to whom afterward we gave the name of James B. Washington. He has ever since remained a member of the family.”<sup>244</sup> Sussman argues that “another step in becoming a man is through self-naming, a crucial move in fashioning one’s self by fashioning one’s ancestry, thereby becoming one’s own father in a society that denies knowledge of origins to a person defined as property.”<sup>245</sup>

Furthermore, Washington deployed the idea of manhood in his autobiography by connecting his discourse with American myths such as individualism and hard work, and he did so in order to strengthen his identity of a self-made man. For instance, important white figures, such as president McKinley, come back several times in Washington’s autobiography in his attempt to reconstruct his identity in such a way that it fit the white American tradition: “I have observed that those who have accomplished the greatest results are those who ‘keep under the body,’ are those who never grow excited or lose self-control, but are always calm, self-possessed, patient, and polite. I think that President William McKinley is the best example of a man of this class that I have ever seen.”<sup>246</sup> But also, the fact that Washington admired white personalities that he met along the way is shown in his portrayal of General Armstrong, the one who hired Washington as a teacher in Hampton.

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<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>243</sup> Washington, *Up From Slavery*, 52.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>245</sup> Sussman, *Masculine Identities*, 105.

<sup>246</sup> Washington, *Up From Slavery*, 196.

Therefore, Washington described him as “a great man – the noblest, rarest human being that it was ever been my privilege to meet.”<sup>247</sup> Therefore, Robyn Fivush argues that “as each individual constructs a narrative identity that defines an individual life story of the self, they seem to do so in relation to cultural expectations of what a typical life looks like.”<sup>248</sup> All in all, these examples show that the predominant idea of African-American identity was strongly shaped by white representations in autobiographical writing.

The interference of literacy and manhood in the autobiographical representation of Washington’s his identity is revealed when Washington pointed at his difficulty of not knowing how to act in school. An example is the moment when he named himself in order to not be excluded from the white world: “and so, when the teacher asked me what my full name was, I calmly told him ‘Booker Washington,’ as if I had been called by that name all my life.”<sup>249</sup> Moreover, the fact that his mother sewed him a hat shows that he did not want to be looked at differently. On the other hand, he still did not manage to be exactly like other children and still felt a sense of not belonging: “But, of course, when I saw how all the other boys were dressed, I began to feel quite uncomfortable.”<sup>250</sup>

In *Twelve Years A Slave*, Solomon Northup’s free-born Northern status was affected by white racism. Although he was literate, Northup was kidnapped into slavery by two white men, and despite his trust in the whites who liberated him, he still feared others: “A human face was fearful to me, especially a white one.”<sup>251</sup> Moreover, despite him being an accomplished violin player in the American North, he still remained humble in front of whites: “Thus far the history of my life presents nothing whatever unusual – nothing but the common hopes, and loves, and labors of an obscured colored man, making his humble progress in the world.”<sup>252</sup> Likewise, Washington underlined the difficulties that he encountered when he had opened the Tuskegee Institute, as many whites “questioned its value to the coloured people, and had a fear that it might result in bringing about trouble between the races.”<sup>253</sup>

After all, becoming literate did not mean that African-Americans were excluded from racism and hatred of the white dominant culture and did not guarantee their successful future

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<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>248</sup> Fivush, “Speaking Silence,” 93.

<sup>249</sup> Washington, *Up From Slavery*, 52.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>251</sup> Northup, *Twelve Years A Slave*, 42.

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.



either. Most slaves experienced a limited agency during slavery as they were forbidden by their slaveholders to become literate. However, although some managed to become literate in one way or another during slavery, their life after slavery still involved a continuous struggle to gain equal rights and fight racism, while they had to remain humble in front of whites. For instance, Booker T. Washington dedicated his life after slavery to educating other blacks by establishing the Tuskegee Institute, as he realized the importance of literacy for himself: “I recall that I had an intense longing to learn to read,”<sup>254</sup> but also for African-Americans’ future in white America: “I would be helping in a more substantial way by assisting in the laying of the foundation of the race through a generous education of the hand, head, and heart.”<sup>255</sup> Another example of blacks’ inferior status even in the American North is that of Solomon Northup, whose wage was still not equal to whites’, although he was literate. What brought him into slavery was trusting the two white men who promised him a better financial situation: “After supper they called me to their apartments, and paid me forty-three dollars, a sum greater than my wages amounted to.”<sup>256</sup>

Even so, African-Americans mostly kept their true lives hidden during slavery, as their white slaveholders did not want them to acquire literacy and education. That is why Northup did not assume his free status as soon as he became enslaved. Northup wrote: “Epps asked me if I could write and read, and on being informed that I had received some instruction in those branches of education, he assured me, with emphasis, if he ever caught me with a book, or with pen and ink, he would give me a hundred lashes.”<sup>257</sup> Nonetheless, Washington pointed out that during slavery, slaves were aware of the events that happened in America: “Often the slaves got knowledge of the results of great battles before the white people received it.”<sup>258</sup> This quote shows the way in which Washington and other blacks used oral language in the representation of his identity, against the colonial repression of whites. Therefore, this shows that although whites deemed blacks as inferior, Washington underlined that whites themselves were the ones who were too ignorant to figure out black intelligence.

Northup also pointed at the fact that slaves were not less intelligent, but that they had to play dumb in order to survive during slavery: “It is a mistaken opinion that prevails in some quarters that the slave does not understand the term – does not comprehend the idea of

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<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>257</sup> Northup, *Twelve Years A Slave*, 154.

<sup>258</sup> Washington, *Up From Slavery*, 27.

freedom.”<sup>259</sup>

Besides this, Washington added that his idea of understanding the outside world through becoming literate came from the time when he was on the plantation. As he was making trips to the schoolhouse and carried his young mistress’ books, he wrote: “I had the feeling that to get into a schoolhouse and study in this way would be about the same as getting into paradise.”<sup>260</sup> Here, he pointed at the idea of whites thinking about slaves’ dumbness by letting them carry their books, but it was actually not the case, since some, like Washington, became even more interested in literacy and having a voice. In Northup’s case, although he aimed to keep his literacy hidden, his masters did assume that he was literate, as he came from the North: “On all sides I heard Ford’s Platt pronounced the smartest nigger in the Pine Woods.”<sup>261</sup>

### **4.3 Limitations of Voice**

*“When silence is imposed, by self or by others, it can lead to a loss of memory and a loss of part of the self. Silence as loss of voice and loss of power is virtually always seen as negative. In fact, this kind of silencing can lead to both psychological and physical problems.”<sup>262</sup>*

African-American authors found their voice through writing and used it as a means to identify themselves in white American society. They also dealt with the limitations of their voices, as white discourse and language sometimes could not encompass the real struggles of black identity: “For some, language fails to capture, or engage, or mediate the horrors of the past and the aftereffects of survival.”<sup>263</sup> Meanwhile, blacks were also institutionally silenced, since they were dehumanized through slavery by the white dominant culture.<sup>264</sup> However, most black authors came to realize that slavery was also an enslavement of the black mind as a result of slavery’s traumatic experiences. Therefore, they focused on their quest for identity in life writings, in order to restore their psychological freedom.

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<sup>259</sup> Northup, *Twelve Years A Slave*, 173.

<sup>260</sup> Washington, *Up From Slavery*, 26.

<sup>261</sup> Northup, *Twelve Years A Slave*, 76.

<sup>262</sup> Robyn Fivush, “Speaking Silence: The Social Construction of Silence in Autobiographical and Cultural Narratives,” *Memory* 18, no.2 (2010), 92.

<sup>263</sup> Smith, *Reading Autobiography*, 28.

<sup>264</sup> Fivush, “Speaking Silence,” 91.

This quest for selfhood through finding psychological freedom is emphasized in *Up From Slavery* through the way in which Washington underlined his progress in white America and underlined that for him, education represented self-emancipation. Thus, understanding the way in which the white world functioned meant solving his interior conflicts that finally would lead to psychological freedom. Therefore, throughout his story, Washington emphasized that the road to success is more important than the outcome: “I have learned that success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by obstacles which he has overcome while trying to succeed.”<sup>265</sup>

Washington was also silenced by white institutions by having to depend on whites’ help in order to establish the Tuskegee Institute. Therefore, in his Atlanta speech, he mainly had to address white audiences in order to convince them of the importance of such a school: “I knew that the audience would be largely composed of the most influential class of white men and women, and that would be a rare opportunity for me to let them know what we were trying to do at Tuskegee, as well as to speak to them about the relation of the races.”<sup>266</sup> However, he had to do so by remaining humble and addressing white American ideals that did not incorporate Washington’s traumatic experiences in slavery: “Gentlemen of the Exposition, as we present to you our humble effort at an exhibition of our progress, you must not expect overmuch.”<sup>267</sup>

Besides this, limitations of Washington’s voice in the representation of his agency were illustrated in his rhetoric of compromise in the Atlanta speech. For instance, although he was aware of racism and white hatred, Washington tried to solve his interior conflict by accepting the reality of segregation: “So in the future, in our humble way, we shall stand by you with a devotion that no foreigner can approach, ready to lay down our lives.”<sup>268</sup> Moreover, he avoided the subject of politics in his Atlanta speech and underlined ideals that stood for cooperation between two races, such as the economic progress.<sup>269</sup> Similarly, Melbourne Cummings acknowledged that Washington:

*“Was aware that whites were not interested in openly socializing with black people, that they looked with bewilderment on*

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<sup>265</sup> Washington, *Up From Slavery*, 57.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>269</sup> Melbourne Cummings, “Historical Settings for Booker T. Washington and the Rhetoric of Compromise, 1895,” *Journal of Black Studies* 8, no.1 (1977), 79.

*allowing them their political rights, but they were not as averse to the idea of economic progress and industrial gains. Since whites were against social equality for blacks, Washington denounced it and held up economics as a reason for cooperative efforts.*"<sup>270</sup>

Therefore, Washington used his literate status in order to make a statement of his black identity, but at the same time, he had to use a language that pointed at the future of the friendship relation between the two races, without reminding them about the slavery past: "It is a recognition that will do more to cement the friendship of the two races than any occurrence since the dawn of our freedom."<sup>271</sup> Additionally, Cummings claimed that Washington "used ideas and material that seemed to cement relationships, that attempted to bring together two races, and most importantly, material that would not alienate whites any further from blacks."<sup>272</sup>

Subsequently, in order to create the idea of a good relationship between the two races, Washington's speech included words such as 'we' and 'you' and 'us.' In this sense, Washington captured the attentions of both black and white audiences, by making them feel addressed. For example, he said: "In conclusion, may I repeat that nothing in thirty years has given us more hope and encouragement, and drawn us so near to you of the white race, as this opportunity offered by the Exposition."<sup>273</sup>

For Northup, the moment when he experienced a limitation of his voice was when he encountered the brutality of slavery for the first time. During his captivity in William's Slave Pen, in Washington, before he was sold into slavery, Northup was whipped and reduced to silence by two white men because he admitted that he was a free man: "At last I became silent to his repeated questions. I would make no reply. In fact, I was becoming almost unable to speak."<sup>274</sup> This shows the psychological consequences of slavery and the fact that Northup had to admit that he was not free in order to survive: "All his brutal blows could not force from my lips the foul lie that I was a slave."<sup>275</sup> Moreover, this also shows Northup's limitation of his free agency, as he was forced to pretend something that he was

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<sup>270</sup> Cummings, "Historical Settings for Booker T. Washington," 80.

<sup>271</sup> Washington, *Up From Slavery*, 233.

<sup>272</sup> Cummings, "Historical Settings for Booker T. Washington," 77.

<sup>273</sup> Washington, *Up From Slavery*, 239.

<sup>274</sup> Northup, *Twelve Years A Slave*, 42.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*

not, and reveals the brutality of slavery as not only embedded in American institutions, but also in the white slaveholder's behavior: "If I ever hear you say a word about New-York or about your freedom, I will be the death of you – I will kill you; you may rely on that."<sup>276</sup>

The fact that literacy and language are related to agency, and thus identity, is revealed through Northup's representation as superior among other slaves from the plantation. While Northup used correct English language in the dialogue with his masters, although he was enslaved, he was able to maintain his free agency: "Master Tibeats, said I, looking him boldly in the face, I will not."<sup>277</sup> Other slaves had no agency over their lives as a result of their illiteracy. For instance, Patsey and Eliza used English slang, and were depicted as humble in front of their masters, without having any sense of agency. Patsey often begged her master to save her from whippings: "Oh, mercy, massa'! – oh! have mercy, do. oh, God! pity me."<sup>278</sup> Similarly, Eliza acknowledged her lack of agency in comparison to Northup: "you're goin' to be free – you're goin' way off yonder where we'll neber see ye any more. You've saved me a good many whipping, Platt; I'm glad you're goin' to be free – but oh! de Lord, de Lord! what'll become of me?"<sup>279</sup>

On the one hand, these examples add to the idea of whites not being capable of understanding the thoughts of blacks, as African-Americans' feelings lie beyond words. On the other hand, it also points at the political limitation of Northup's voice and the crisis of his identity during his enslavement, as his true feelings were excluded from the narrative, although he experienced the brutalities of slavery, just like other slaves. However, Northup's identity as seen in his narrative, had to match the traditional white discourse of the abolitionist propaganda. In this sense, Smith and Watson argue that identity is always subjected to change and reshaping, as it is actually "a 'production' which is never complete, always in process and always constituted within, not outside, representation."<sup>280</sup> This shows that in life writing, authors embody a model of identity that they present to their readers.<sup>281</sup>

Similarly, Washington's autobiography reflects social constructions accepted in the white world through the representation of women as institutionally silenced. For instance, Washington's wife and mother did not have a voice in his autobiography, but the reader gets an insight into their personality through the way in which Washington related to them.

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<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>280</sup> Smith, *Reading Autobiography*, 39.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*

Regarding his wife, Washington said: “This was Miss Olivia A. Davidson, who later became my wife. Miss Davidson was born in Ohio, and received her preparatory education in the public schools of that state.”<sup>282</sup> As for his mother, she never had the occasion to speak for herself either. Instead, Washington pointed at her limitations, together with other of slaves, when he recalled his slavery past: “Though I was a mere child during the preparation for the Civil War and during the war itself, I now recall the many late-at-night whispered discussions that I heard my mother and the other slaves on the plantation indulge in.”<sup>283</sup> The fact that slaves could only whisper illustrates the way in which slavery limited them as human beings. Of course, his wife’s and mother’s limitation in Washington’s autobiography were also constructed in such a way that they fit Washington’s self-empowerment story. Moreover, Washington’s examples also point at his representation of his identity as a newly constructed self, since he gained agency after slavery through his education.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has shown the complexities of the black race in terms of self-representation. The focus was on how black identity as represented in autobiographies was actually never homogeneous and was always subject to change, since African-American autobiographers developed a divided attitude, in order to speak both for the black community and to the white colonizer. Aside from this, African-Americans’ quest for an individual identity actually meant not only solving their inner psychological trauma, but also proving whites that they were somebody by trying to fit white literary standards.

Finding the means to express themselves in the white society did not mean that African-Americans’ voices were not limited by white institutional discourses in which they did not fit with their writings. Also, the continuous struggle of the black identity and finding one that actually fit the white society meant its constant renewal, according to different ideological standards available at certain historical moments. As Smith and Watson point out that “because of this constant placement and displacement of ‘who’ we are, we can think of identities as multiple and as ‘contextual, contested, and contingent.’”<sup>284</sup>

The two autobiographers, Solomon Northup and Booker T. Washington, were black middle-class educated men who used their public image and their status both to make the

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<sup>282</sup> Washington, *Up From Slavery*, 140.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>284</sup> Smith, *Reading Autobiography*, 38.

case for uneducated black communities that did not have a voice, and supported the Northern abolitionist propaganda that was supposed to restore the freedom of all races in America. The authors used literacy and language as a tool against whites, in order to make their voices heard, and thus represented their black identities through writings. By doing so, they were able to focus on the freedom of their minds.

The emphasis on gender and the way in which manhood and class shaped the representation of the black identity revealed the centrality of the dominant perspective of male gender in the white society. Therefore, both autobiographers remain stuck between their real identity as men, their traumatic past, and the cultural expectation of what their masculinity should look like according to white literary conventions. This effected on the representation of their identity, since the concept of manhood fit their written stories of self-empowerment.

## CONCLUSION

All in all, Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery* and Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years A Slave* revealed how life writing was a continuous struggle for the representation of their black identity. In order to affirm their identities, African-American authors used their agencies to resist the dominant ideologies of that time and to prove to their black and white audiences that they were successful.

Now that this study has discussed three essential themes in the black literary tradition and revealed certain aspects of black representations of identity, the limitations that this study encompasses differs in terms of readers' perspectives. For instance, the perspective from which we, as white readers, interpret certain messages, differs from that of a black author. Therefore, we cannot comprehend the complexities of the true black thought and cannot have access to the way in which their mindset is constructed. In this sense, Smith and Watson claim actually "how important the discourse of the autobiographical had become to imagine another life and identity."<sup>285</sup> That is to say that although autobiographies were a way of representing one's construction of identity, the reader can only imagine how that certain identity was constructed, without being capable to understand all the complexities that autobiographies incorporate.

The first chapter illustrated how Solomon Northup and Booker T. Washington dealt with different limitations of their agency depending on the available ideologies of a certain time. Therefore, in the attempt to re-create their identity, they had to embody different 'autobiographical I's' in their writings. This created an identity crisis as they were caught in between representing the needs of their community, of the white colonizer, and their own. This points out how fitting the conventions of an autobiographical representation actually had to embody dominant thoughts that conflicted with blacks'. However, having different agencies actually revealed the same pattern of white racism that contributed in the present black and white dichotomy.

Of course, racism and the slavery past could not be removed from black thought. Therefore, Booker T. Washington used memory and the 'politics of remembering' as a part of his newly constructed identity. Here, he used memory as a political tool in order to forge a collective black identity that was directed towards the future, but at the same he also wanted

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<sup>285</sup> Smith, *Reading Autobiography*, 117.



to show how blacks were collectively affected by racism and inequality. Smith and Watson emphasized the importance of memory in understanding different cultures' representations at a certain moment in history: "A culture's understanding of memory at a particular time moment of its history shapes the life narrator's process of remembering."<sup>286</sup> In other words, the way in which black authors' identities are shaped in life writing could change at other historical moments.

Another form of self-representation in the black literary tradition is manhood, and to a larger extent, literacy and language. These were the first forms that proved how Northup's and Washington's agency was not only related to white discourses but also used to reject white oppression. Moreover, through their masculinity, Northup and Washington fit the male gender view of the American society, and could thus claim more agency in their writings and emphasize their self-empowerment. However, Smith and Watson 'warn' the reader that language and literacy are often a sign that the subject's discourse is embedded in dominant ideologies of a certain time. This means that the author could give the impression that he is a free agent in his writings by using language, as he actually "becomes more 'spoken by' language than an agentic speaker of it."<sup>287</sup>

The way in which black authors used concepts which stood at the foundation of the American nation, such as the jeremiad, revealed their struggle to address a larger racial problem of the American society. Northup did so by pointing at the division of the American North and South because of slavery, and the urgency of its abolition. Washington instead, underlined the importance of economic equality for all races, in the common hope for the restoration of the American Dream. This is an example of how Washington managed to become part of American history, and thus showed agency by expressing his views without directing them against whites. To a wider extent, the way in which Northup and Washington constructed their identities through this rhetoric also points at the shift of the antebellum focus of a black identity embedded in past experiences, to the way in which blacks could find a way to represent themselves in the future.

The black literary tradition includes other different concepts, apart from these analyzed. The study does not incorporate an analysis of black representation in relation with the rest of the themes. This could have possibly led to other conclusions about the representation of black identity or given a better insight in what concerns black agency.

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<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

A further research could incorporate an emphasis of the present black struggles in the American society, by researching how recent black autobiographies deal with representations of identity centuries after their predecessors established a literary tradition in this field. Besides this, another perspective regarding representations of identity could also be revealed by analyzing other black literary themes, such as ‘double-consciousness’ and gender, in relation with Northup’s and Washington’s autobiographies. But one could also look at representations of identity and agency by comparing literature and film. Therefore, one could compare Northup’s first edition of *Twelve Years A Slave* to Steve McQueen’s film of the same name, and analyze whether identity is framed differently in movies and what does this say about black identity.

All in all, the study highlights how autobiographical writing has been an important way of self-representation for African-Americans, by acknowledging the continuous struggle to make their voices heard. Being an inspiration for other black literary works of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, Northup’s and Washington’s autobiographies revealed how white racism did not actually destroy the black identity, but made it grow stronger and prone to its constant renewal.

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