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ORCID# 0000-0001-7157-2434

Reading Lists as Manifestos: Karla F. C. Holloway's Bibliomemoir *BookMarks*: *Reading in Black and White*

Mariya Doğan

Abstract

This article examines the genre of bibliomemoir as a type of autobiographical writing that focuses on an author's life story told through references to books and personal reading experiences. Until recently, bibliomemoirs have received little academic attention. This is, however, hardly an adequate response to the growing number of life narratives written within this pattern. Over the past few decades, memoirists have underlined the importance of reading practices, recounting and discussing literature that was formative in their writing career. Through such reading lists, authors can draw a bridge between their own beliefs, and tenets expressed by those whom they consider to be authority figures. Thus, with such allusions to literary colleagues, writers of bibliomemoirs are able to claim their place within the historical, cultural and academic continuity.

In the present study, I argue that African American authors attribute particular importance to descriptions of their literary backgrounds due to the role education plays in establishing an individual's social status. While some African American writers allude to the authority of white European literary tradition, others assert their racial heritage through stressing interest in religious oral texts of the Deep South. Using Karla Holloway's 2006 memoir *BookMarks: Reading in Black and White*, I analyze how writers' personal accounts of reading experiences allow them to affirm their place among the pantheon of literary personae and to prove connection to the wider racial legacy.

Keywords: Life Narrative, Biblio-Autobiography, Bibliomemoir, Karla F.C. Holloway, African American Literature, Racial Legacy

Okuma Listeleriyle Manifesto:
Karla F. C. Holloway'in Bibliyoanısı
BookMarks: *Reading in Black and White*

Öz

Bu makale bibliyoanı türünü, bir yazarın hayat hikayesinin yazarın okuduğu kitaplara ve kişisel okuma deneyimine dayanarak anlatıldığı otobiyografik bir yazı türü olarak inceler. Yakın zamana kadar bibiliyoanılar akademik çalışmalar içerisinde pek yer almamaktaydı. Bu durum, bu türde yazılmış birçok yaşam anlatısının yeteri kadar incelenmemesine yol açmaktaydı. Anı yazarları, bireysel okuma deneyimlerini söylemeye, edebi kariyerlerine şekil veren eserleri aktarmaya ve bunlar üzerine tartışmaya artık daha fazla vurgu yapmaktadır. Yazarlar, ortaya koydukları okuma listeleri sayesinde, kendi inançları ve alanlarında uzmanlaşmış diğer yazarların görüşleri arasında bağ kurabilmektedir. Bibliyoanı yazarları, edebi türlerde ürünler veren meslektaşlarına yaptıkları göndermelerle, kendilerine tarihi, kültürel ve akademik devamlılık sağlayabilecekleri bir alan belirlemektedir.

Bu çalışma, eğitimin bireyin sosyal statüsündeki belirleyici rolü nedeniyle, Afrikalı Amerikalı yazarların geçmiş edebi deneyimlerini dile getirmeye özel bir önem atfettiklerini savunur. Bazı Afrikalı Amerikalı yazarlar Avrupa edebi geleneğini temel alsa da, diğerleri ırksal miraslarını ABD'nin Güney'ine ait sözlü dini metinlere duydukları ilgiye vurgu yaparak ortaya koyar. Bu çalışma, Karla Holloway'in 2006 yılında basılan anı kitabı *BookMarks: Reading in Black and White* üzerinden, yazarların kişisel okuma deneyimlerini anlatan eserlerin, onların çok sayıda edebi figür arasında kendi yerlerini saptamaları ve ırksal mirasla bağlarını sağlamaları konusunda nasıl bir rol oynadığını inceler.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yaşam Anlatısı, Bibliyo-Otobiyografi, Bibliyoanı, Karla F.C. Holloway, Afrikalı Amerikalı Edebiyatı, Irksal Miras

Introduction

Karla Holloway starts her memoir *BookMarks* with an assertion that "blacks in the United States developed an intimate relationship to books because of the way books come to personify a story of race, whether or not their text told that story" (7). Conceptions of literacy inform African American history through the relation they bear to issues of power and powerlessness. In the past, and to some extent even now, access to education is a valuable commodity that some groups of population have limited opportunity to acquire. The privilege obtained through blood and enormous economic sacrifice becomes proclamation of resistance, authority and freedom. As it is expressed in Frederick Douglass' memoir, one of the most often quoted texts within the topic of Civil Rights history, "[reading] gave tongue to interesting thoughts of my own soul, which had frequently flashed through my mind, and died away for want of utterance. The moral which I gained from [it] was the power of truth over the conscience of even a slaveholder" (Douglass 45).

Therefore, references to reading lists that appear in memoirs of African American writers become an important comment on matters of identity and civil stance. For authors, who have made race their subject, booklists testify the effort to claim their place within the historical and literary spotlight, while at the same time asserting socially and self-consciously racialized identity. Seth Lerer in "Epilogue: Falling Asleep Over the History of the Book" calls such lists biblio-autobiographies as stories of "life shaped by acts of reading" ("Epilogue," 230), and "the chronicle of life told in terms of books read" (*Children's Literature*, 337). In other studies, this nonfiction writing, which expresses the narrator's experience with books is called bibliomemoir. Jonathan Lo, for example, defines bibliomemoir as "a necessarily subjective account of how [books] figure in the making of [the memoirist's] inner world" (27).

The emergence of bibliomemoir as a term is considered to be derived from Rick Gekoski's *Outside of a Dog: A Bibliomemoir* (2009). On his web-site, the author provides the following ironic explanation: "The subtitle—A Bibliomemoir—is a term and category I have made up, and do not wish to define. What is a bibliomemoir, then? It's one of these. Read it and find out." Further on in the review, however, Gekoski sheds more light on the subject of his life narrative:

> What I want to know is how my books have made me. To recall, to reread and to reencounter the books that filled my mahogany bookcase, and continue to fill my present self. What fun to pursue such a train of thought. To go into my (sparsely) book-lined study, turn that reading lamp inwards, and to reflect. To look at those (few) books in the dawning recognition that what they furnish is not a room, but a self. (Gekoski)

The term “bibliomemoir” was accepted and defined by the Collins English Dictionary in 2014 as “a memoir about the books one has read” (qtd. in Lo 27). Since then, the subgenre has gained popularity and recognition among readers and scholars alike. Joyce Carol Oates interprets it as “a subspecies of literature combining criticism and biography with the intimate, confessional tone of autobiography” (Oates). In her extended book review of Rebecca Mead’s *My Life in Middlemarch*, Oates argues that reading practice undertaken by bibliomemoirists is neither a structural analysis nor subjective assessment of the book’s aesthetic impact. Instead of “producing literary abstractions a step removed from the text,” the bibliomemoirist brings books “to life by envisaging its contents and vicariously experiencing the events and vicissitudes of the narrative world” (qtd. in Lo 28).

For the writers of African American descent, booklists signal emotional attachment to the narrative discourse of a literary tradition. Whether those lists point to white European authors or unequivocally represent racial heritage, readers are asked to draw a figurative connection between the narrators’ aesthetic background and their present position. Such accounts of reading experiences suggest that education is never merely about gaining knowledge, but about an individual’s selectivity in obtaining information. The difference between these two modes of learning thus appears as a proof of one’s growing up properly informed about matters of race and tradition.

Karla Holloway explores the booklists that appear in life narratives of black authors in the United States. In *BookMarks: Reading in Black and White* (2006), she analyzes life stories of twenty-five African Americans, paying particular attention to the references they make about books and reading. The authors that appear in the study range from Zora Neale Hurston to Octavia Butler, from Malcolm

X to Michael Eric Dyson, from Maya Angelou to Oprah Winfrey. The matter of books, writes the scholar, marks the experience of black American population in a way that is both political and deeply personal. "You knew the books that were passed on to you could be yours only after they were no longer good enough for the white children who held them first. You received them only after their pages were ripped and their covers too worn" (7). Holloway reads African American history in the manner that connects books and black bodies within a single narrative—the intersection that demonstrates tribulations in the society during early, mid-, or late twentieth century.

It is also important to note the representational role that booklists take on in life narratives. In other words, references to reading and literacy that memoirists make in their life stories are consciously strategic rather than coincidental. One might be surprised by apparent absence of African American tradition in some of the lists discussed in Holloway's study, while in other cases limited gender diversity and lack of references to non-racialized literature can similarly arise suspicion. Holloway draws attention to works which, despite having shaped the presence of race on the literary scene, appear affixed onto the end of personal reading lists, as an afterthought or a nod towards the audience's expectation. In other cases, authors choose to remember books not because of their substance but due to their revealing and provocative titles: consider, for example, Butler's *The Way of All Flesh*, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and d'Annunzio's *The Flame of Life* that appear in Langston Hughes's *The Big Sea: An Autobiography* (1940). Furthermore, certain titles may be deliberately altered within an autobiographical narrative to suit an author's particular intent, such as Joseph Gollumb's biography *Albert Schweitzer: Genius in The Jungle* (2007) which in Henry Louis Gates's personal memoir appears simply as *Genius in The Jungle*. Symbolism of these accounts is intended to draw the readers' attention to the passions and views shared by the authors, and to mark a kind of identity that they expect to be associated with.

This refers to an essential quality of the life writing genre, namely its nature as a constructed narrative. Makers of lists are especially selective and authoritative, claims Holloway. Through a number of textual strategies, authors of bibliomemoirs draw their readers into a particular way of reading personal accounts of their literary training. As a result, the writers' personalities and egos gain more exposure in their stories than the actual catalogues of authors and books provided within the text. The main principle of the genre of memoir lies in the trust shared by the narrator and the reader that the information provided in the narrative is valid. As is explained by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2001), "autobiographical truth resides in the intersubjective exchange between narrator and reader aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of life" (16). It is therefore important to analyze booklists in historical context of their creation, paying particular attention to the authors' intent in depicting their background. With Holloway's study, we are able to follow the changes in African American self-presentation within the twentieth century. Seemingly trivial remarks about books, education and reading spaces personify the story of race and become important confirmation of rights and freedoms of American population.

Affiliation by Resemblance: Creating Identity through the Authority of Others

Charles Sainte-Beuve, a French literary critic of the first half of the eighteenth century and the founder of the genre of literary portrait, which he described in his monograph *Portraits Littéraires* (1844), and discussed the elements of explained the very essence of autobiographical narrative. He specified an obvious paradox of literary biography as a type of non-fictional literature and claimed that a biographer, sets for himself the goal to understand and explain his character's story by understanding and explaining the logic of his own life. He says: "If I had to judge myself . . . I would say that Sainte-Beuve does not create a single portrait in which he would not be reflected; under the pretext that he is drawing someone else, every time he sketches his own profile" (51).

Holloway makes a similar claim asserting that individual statements about reading lists have often and effectively been used for publicity purposes. In fact, as Barbara Hochman explains in her article "The History of Reading and the Death of the Text," narratives about booklists are "not so much about reading books as about the implications of saying you have done so. The gap between reading and reporting on reading raises questions about evidence which are indispensable for any attempt to grasp what reading means, whether to an individual or a social group" (846).

In the matter of racial associations, the potential of the referentiality of books is particularly sharp. Holloway mentions a photograph of Bill Clinton taken at the height of his campaign in 1992, when the future president was shown with a copy of Walter Mosley's novel. The image that was apparently "a black-vote attention getter" allowed for the remarks that Clinton was "America's first 'black president'" (28). The same principle is at work in the memoirs of African American activists and writers. The authors have noticed that the judgments and proclamations about their readings speak more of themselves than of the actual subject of the books. Holloway believes that every booklist that appears in personal accounts of black activists becomes a political statement in itself.

Inclusions of booklists pursue two main goals regarding African American reading experience: to confirm authorial intellectual pedigree and, simultaneously, to advocate for a position among the more recognized literary colleagues. Michael Eric Dyson, as "a scholar and a hip-hop preacher . . . a Princeton Ph.D. and a child of the streets who takes pains never to separate the two" (Fletcher 74), provides a following list in his autobiographical novel *Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture* (1996):

> Paul Laurence Dunbar, Langston Hughes and Margaret Walker Alexander . . . Roland Hayes and Bessie Smith . . . Marian Anderson and Mahalia Jackson … Paul Robeson and Louis Armstrong. . . . We were taught to believe that the same musical genius that animated Scott Joplin lighted as well on Stevie Wonder. We saw no essential division between "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" and "I Can't Get Next to You." (qtd. in Holloway 158)

Almost a century earlier, W.E.B. Du Bois in his canonical collection *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (1903) includes a list of authors which despite having a distinctly different thrust from the one mentioned above, is aimed at the same target. Where Dyson underlines his mastery of cultural backgrounds related to opposing social classes, Du Bois clarifies his authority across the race line. "I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls. . . . I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension” (qtd. in Holloway 39). Apparently, with the citing of these significant names in the history of world culture, Du Bois aims to establish his authoritative membership in a company of European writers spanning classic literature’s ages.

The similar strategy can be found in almost every other memoir discussed in Holloway’s study. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, for example, Maya Angelou seems to assure her readers that she has received sufficient education both in European literature as well as in African American tradition. “During these years in Stamps, I met and fell in love with William Shakespeare. He was my first white love. Although I enjoyed and respected Kipling, Poe, Butler, Thackeray and Henley, I saved my young and loyal passion for Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson and W.E.B. Du Bois’ ‘Litany at Atlanta’” (qtd. in Holloway 95-96). Angelou then leaves her list open for interpretation, although making clear that her personal preference resides within her own cultural tradition.

The theme of belonging is the central idea throughout *BookMarks*, especially so since it is an analysis of racial affinity and legacy. In the part dedicated to the analysis of Zora Neale Hurston’s literary self-portrait *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), Holloway argues that the writers of biblio-autobiographies often acknowledge authority of acclaimed literati to establish their own position and competence:

> [Hurston] uses these authors as a way to give her reader a far more detailed image of herself. It is a method that she uses throughout the autobiography, remarking on a certain book or author, juxtaposing herself with or against them, and using the occasion to call attention, once again, to her iconoclasm. (175)

Beth A. McCoy, in “Race and the (Para)Textual Condition” demonstrates that even though “African American culture . . . cannot and should not be reduced to a set of responses to oppression or plight” (159), black authors hardly had a luxury of individualism (for example, the scholar explains, this is the reason behind the “overwhelming sameness” of fugitive slave narratives as a genre). The black authors felt the need to make symbolic and factual connections in order to structure their vision of the self and the other, and to add order to experiences often defined in terms of fragmentation and subjugation.

Holloway recounts a catalogue of "indispensable books" by and about African Americans which was published in the NAACP's national magazine the *Crisis* in 1931: "a good collection of Negro literature," a directory that would "consider meritorious works of any date about the Negro or written by Negroes" (qtd. in Holloway 36). The list was composed by Du Bois, then editor of the *Crisis*, and included over sixty authors who were meant to be most representative of the African American literary tradition. It is a particularly interesting reflection, writes Holloway, over racial heritage and a classification of black intellectuals due to its attempt to confirm who has a potential to be included, and who is left out. Notably, the list has sparked criticism and academic discussions due to its apparent biases. Hazel V. Carby in *Race Men* (2000) specifically notes Du Bois's failure to document contributions of contemporary women, such as his contemporaries Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Anna Julia Cooper who were excluded from the directory, while Jessie Fauset and Nella Larson were mentioned only in passing. At the same time, Du Bois includes three of his own books to the list: *Souls of Black Folk*, *The Negro* and *Darkwater*. Carby argues that:

> This gendered framework negates in fact the opportunity offered in words for black women to "make their lives similar"; the project suffers from Du Bois's complete failure to imagine black women as intellectuals and race leaders … Du Bois described and challenged the hegemony of the national and racial formations in the United States at the dawn of a new century, but he did so in ways that both assumed and privileged a discourse of black masculinity. (10)

Through his selective choice of authors, unquestionably informed by his own personality and ego, Du Bois constructs a list that speaks not so much of inclusivity as of kinship and affinity. In other words, despite selectiveness of their composition, book lists in African American memoirs become a sign of racial collective identity. In *Reading Autobiography*, such rhetorical claims of authors' relation to their shared history are explained as "a narrator's investment in the 'authority' of experience" (33). Smith and Watson argue that the very aim of an autobiographical narrative is to place its subject within a larger historical and interpersonal perspective. If we take into account that an individual is always a product of a number of material, economic and social factors, then autobiographical protagonists "know themselves as subjects of particular kinds of experience attached to their social status and identities" (31). In the case of authors who fall outside of the dominant culture—the so-called "voiceless" narrators belonging to communities that were previously not authorized to speak,—the need for explicit claims for legitimacy is especially high: "a narrator's investment in the 'authority' of experience … invites or compels the reader's belief in the story and the veracity of the narrator; it persuades the reader of the narrative's authenticity; it validates certain claims as truthful; and it justifies writing and publicizing the life story" (33).

In fact, Holloway's own memories which she incorporates within the academic study of African American autobiographical writing can be read as an attempt to connect her personal experience with the stories of famous activists. The scholar draws parallels between narratives analyzed in *BookMarks* and her family's life during and after the era of the Civil Rights Movement. In this way, tradition of African American memoiristic writing becomes a background and precondition for the emergence of Holloway's personal account; and, at the same time, the community of black authors is realized as an essential part of Holloway's narrative "I." By establishing connections to the authority of well-known public figures, Holloway manages to ground her observations in historical context and establishes her place within it by adopting agency to her own story. For example, in the part entitled "The Anchor Bar," the author discusses issues of cultural tradition and familial connections depicted in the life stories of Maya Angelou and James Baldwin as a metaphorical "anchor" which ties these authors to the legacy of their race, Holloway interweaves the memories of her early reading preferences with a study of Angelou's first autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. She makes the following comment: "My sisters' and my reading choices were often a negotiation between parents and teachers, who had one vision of our potential, and ourselves, who had practically none—or who, like Maya Angelou, had an interest in marking her difference from her mother's desire" (94-95). Here she underlines that, similar to Angelou, she had to negotiate between expectations established by her immediate community concerning her education, and her own interests towards reading material. She explains that in childhood, parents' advice tends to be perceived as an intrusion into freedom that books seem to guarantee. Much later, however, Holloway admits that her reading preferences have returned to those authors who were once recommended—like a symbolic anchor "on a road toward a certain maturity and independence . . . an appreciation and respect for the preferences my parents expressed" (103).

Holloway not only resembles her experiences to life stories of other African American authors, but also juxtaposes her memories with narratives of those whom she considers representatives of a different tradition. During the midcentury, the author explains, the segregated schools and the libraries of the South had an advantage of racial education as black teachers often shared, taught, and celebrated their own culture with students. In the North, where Holloway spent her early years, parents and teachers had to "improvise" and find material for the out-of-the-school tutoring. Holloway confesses that her exposure to African American heritage is therefore different from that of, for example, Ralph Ellison's and Angela Davis's, "writers who come out of a culture steeped in the eloquence of the Oral Tradition" (139). Nevertheless, connections between Holloway's upbringing and the lives of other black writers in America far outweigh the particularities of historical context, which allows the scholar to talk about collective identity and continuity of heritage.

Connectedness versus Disengagement: Looking for "Culture-Keepers"

At the outset of *BookMarks*, Holloway remembers an episode from her first year at Millard Fillmore Junior High School when she was given an assignment to list magazines she read at home. While carefully considering every choice in order to impress her English teacher, who happened to be white and male, she was particularly perplexed with the matter of the monthly *National Geographic.*

> That magazine dared to photograph people as objects, and the people often looked like me without my clothes on. Did I want him to associate those naked women with me? Did I want him to flip through the pages of that magazine to see why I might have listed it and then to confront bare-breasted brown-skinned African girl and think of me? No way. (3)

Holloway admits that if that task had been given by an instructor of the same race and gender as herself, the reasoning that informed the decision-making process would have been quite different: “as black women, they already knew me better than my cool white English teacher did” (5).

African American writers are haunted with the same ethical dilemma when composing their autobiographical narratives. Targeted towards predominantly white audiences, their life stories have to confirm the authors’ awareness of the common cultural tradition but, at the same time, emphasize their individuality, elite education, and distance from negative stereotypes. Consequently, the book selections included in their reading lists function as tokens of disengagement from the racialized image of “the uneducated folk.” One of the most eloquent examples of such withdrawal can be found in Richard Wright’s comments concerning literacy and reading habits of his people. In the second half of the 1920s he writes: “I knew of no Negroes who read the books I liked and I wondered if any Negroes ever thought of them. … My reading had created a vast sense of distance between me and the world in which I lived and tried to make a living, and that sense of distance was increasing each day” (qtd. in Holloway 50).

Wright is hardly alone in his attempt to disengage from the community he considers inferior in the matters of education, ambitions, and status. Eldridge Cleaver, who wrote essays for his autobiographical collection *Soul on Ice* (1968) while serving his sentence in Folsom Prison, complains about poor composition of the prison’s library. Being the leader of the Black Panther Party, he resents the decision of the prison authorities to withhold books that they consider provocative or otherwise improper for the community of inmates. Cleaver stresses that he managed to order some of the banned literary works and shared it with a few friends before the librarian confiscated it. What he was able to accomplish with this remark, explains Holloway, was “to distinguish himself from the rest of the population—*he* had ordered the book, and *he* had shared it” (79-81).

References to personal reading choices as evidence of the refined, unconventional and otherwise superior learning and intelligence often operated as strategic comments in African American life writing. Holloway admits that for the black writers “reading voraciously and reading a sophisticated, ‘high culture’ literature early and often were ways to indicate they were destined to and worthy of the roles they played as adults who were publicly acknowledged was writers and intellectuals" (150). bell hooks, for example, reflects on her love of the Romantic tradition; James Weldon Johnson writes about his fascination with *Pickwick Papers*, *The Waverly Novels*, *Pilgrim's Progress*, poetry of Sir Walter Scott and the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm; Nikki Giovanni remembers that poetry of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot "filled an empty spot in [her] head" (qtd. in Holloway 123).

This apparent tendency in African American life narratives is a sign of a person's need to establish identity through self-concepts of belonging to a particular group—and, consequently, distancing from other established categories of the public. As Susan Stanford Friedman notes in her inquiry into the geopolitics of identity, this dialectic of sameness and difference is essential to the notion of individuality. "Identity is constructed relationally through difference from the other; identification with a group based on gender, race or sexuality, for example, depends mostly on binary systems of 'us' versus 'them,' where difference from the other defines the group to which one belongs" (19). At the same time, the concept of identity also suggests sameness, loyalty to some shared category. Social identity theory offers explanation for this communal bias:

> Social comparison [is] a basic sociocognitive mechanism for gaining information about where one stands within the social context—in particular, humans compare their own in-group with other out-groups, preferably in such a way that the dimension on which the comparison is performed produces positive distinctiveness (i.e., a feeling of positive uniqueness). (D. Frey and F. Brodbeck 6411)

Writers of the African American tradition, then, have to deal with at least two vectors of comparison, which would connect them to the white literary heritage on the one hand, and segregated and underprivileged black community on the other. As argued above, it is beyond doubt that familiarity with acclaimed European books was considered a reference to the authors' intellectual difference and social prerogative. In the era when equal access to literacy and mainstream education was still being fought for by the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, competence outside of the racialized upbringing granted black men and women of letters credibility and authority. Conversely, these authors inevitably felt the need to also make evident their familial background, which could establish distinction from the mainstream literature and provide affinity with the African American population. Life narratives analyzed in Holloway's *BookMarks* contain multiple examples of the authors' engagement with both sides of their literary persona. Often, claims of racial identity are conducted through references to the narrators' knowledge of the Bible and/or African American oral tradition. Ralph Ellison recalls his exposure to the unwritten culture of the Deep South in his collection of essays *Shadow and Act* (1964):

> The places where a rich oral literature was truly functional were the churches, the schoolyards, the barbershops, the cotton-picking camps; places where folklore and gossip thrived. . . . long before I thought of writing, I was claimed by weather, by speech rhythms, by Negro voices and their different idioms, by husky male voices and by the high shrill singing voices of certain Negro women, by music. (qtd. in Holloway 139)

Chicagoan novelist Leon Forrest in *Relocations of the Spirit* (1994) comments on his familial, geographic and esthetic roots in the opening essay entitled "At Home in Windy City." After a brief note about the influence of Shakespeare, Faulkner, and Tennessee Williams on his work, Forrest confesses that he is "a writer who comes out of a culture steeped in the eloquence of the Oral Tradition" which was also reinvented and transformed by "the Negro preacher as the Bard of the race" (qtd. in Holloway139).

In autobiographical acts, narrators become interpreters in the discourse of the cultural heritage available to them. Various forms of the life writing genre offer insight into the authors' past, and invite readers to question legacy and continuity of tradition. Smith and Watson argue that "[i]dentities materialize within collectivities and out of the culturally marked differences" (38).

Judith Butler in *Giving an Account of Oneself* suggests philosophical explanation for this literary practice evident throughout autobiographical literary texts. As a scholar whose beliefs are firmly rooted in phenomenology and structuralism, Butler argues that the author's narrative "I" is always opaque to itself and can give an account of oneself only through its relation to a community of others. There is no identity, argues Butler, that can fully stand apart from the social conditions of its emergence; consequently, the narrative "I" is always inevitably connected with a set of contexts that trespass individual characterization.

> When the "I" seeks to give an account of itself, it can start with itself, but it will find that this self is already implicated in a social temporality that exceeds its own capacities for narration; indeed, when the "I" seeks to give an account of itself, an account that must include conditions of its emergence, it must, as a matter of necessity, become a social theorist. . . . the "I" has no story of its own that is not also the story of relation—or set of relations—to a set of norms. (Butler 7-8).

Holloway grants her mother Ouida Harrison Clapp, a nationally known textbook author and longtime English teacher and school administrator, with the role of a "culture-keeper" in the family as well as in the larger community. The author shares loving memories from the childhood, writing that Ouida's parenting was rooted in black culture and always informed by her deep loyalty to the traditions of the African American church. "My mother was a race woman," continues Holloway. "Even though she had neither the stature nor the podium of an icon like Ida B. Wells or Anna Julia Cooper, she was intimately connected to that tradition. My mother was attentive, purposeful, and focused on matters of race and representation" (58). Having taken on responsibility to raise her children with the sense of racial belonging, Ouida was frustrated by the limited images of race in the mainstream curriculum and particularly with the presence of profoundly negative stereotypes in classroom materials. In the early 1970s, as a consequence of her relentless confrontation with public schools' administrations and publishers of textbook series, Ouida H. Clapp together with James Pierce, Edmond Farrell and others, became the author of the first anthology of multicultural American literature—a forerunner in presenting a significant and representative number of ethnically diverse writers and characters in appropriate contexts, "a textbook that had a cultural flavor like none had ever had before that time" (73).

In *BookMarks*, the allegorical portrait of Ouida Clapp is provided in a photograph entitled "Arrangement in Literature." The illustration included in one of the chapters is composed of a display of scattered catalogue cards, books authored by Holloway's mother (anthologies *Arrangement in Literature* and *Patterns in Literature*: *America Reads*), and a nameplate that reads "Ouida, director of" (60). One of the catalogue cards conspicuously left in the center of the photograph belongs to a poem "One Wants a Teller in a Time Like This" by Gwendolyn Brooks, a Pulitzer Prize winning author of Harlem Renaissance. The poem emphasizes a woman's function of a "culture keeper"—the role that Holloway strongly associates with her mother.

This illustration also pays tribute to Holloway's memory of assisting her mother during selecting texts and compiling them for the anthology, evaluating everything from the suitability for the audience to copyright status of the chosen material. "I worked all that summer with my mother, compiling and indexing those cards, discussing the potential impact of one of Gwendolyn Brooks's poems versus that of another for inclusion, having wonderful conversations about the things we held in common—a love of literature and its words" (71). The process took place at the kitchen table, a symbolic image of conciliation, shared values, and sustainability of tradition. Notably, at the Clapp household the kitchen table was rarely used for cooking but was rather a place dedicated to studying and writing. The author then includes a poetic and profoundly symbolic description of the lemon meringue pie recipe, the only dish that her mother took pride in preparing and the one that she passed on to her daughters and grandchildren. Holloway explains that she "had organized the process by color—the white cornstarch, sugar, clear water; then the yellows . . . There was a gentle brown just barely skimming the top of the meringue . . . There were always just a few tiny teardrops of golden sugar, or was it vanilla, 'weeping' gently down the whipped peaks of pie" (72-73). The sweet and sour taste of the dessert is an allusion to the cultural heritage and communal memory of the African American people, who have to navigate between collective trauma of racism and their rich and authentic ethnic tradition. The history of oppression in all its forms and manifestations may be a factor, which obscures an individual's sense of belonging. It is essential, however, argues Holloway, to find true and valid reasons for the feeling of pride in the uniqueness of one's identity. It is therefore not a coincidence that Ouida used to call the light brown color of a meringue top which a pie turns when it is perfectly done "Karla's color" and the girl took joy in her mother's obscure praise: "how lovely to be meringue brown" (73).

Symbolism of Holloway's portrayal of her mother as a culture-keeper and an advocate for the race continues into the other chapters of *BookMarks*. The author remembers that one Christmas she and her sisters each received the same book, *Songs of Zion*, with an inscription "for my children, so that they might remember" (140). Not only is this hymnal an important artifact of African American church tradition, it is also a reference to the origins and evolution of black America and a manifestation of one of the most powerful unifying movements in the country. Holloway claims, however, that she did not need that songbook to remember her mother's singing in the church choir: "I still hear her voice in my heart every day, but sometimes it is my own song that emerges and I hear my daughter saying, you're singing Mom, and I will look at her surprised that what I thought was merely a lyric in my head was heard" (140-141). Holloway's allegiance to her racial identity has been firmly installed in her belief systems, so it is hardly unexpected that it manifests itself unconsciously through the assortment of written and non-written texts. Like a metaphoric song that finds its way from the narrator's heart to the outside world, the author imaginatively connects her mother's singing, the community of a church's choir, herself and, finally, her daughter as a continued line of succession within African American heritage.

"The Card Catalog": Polyphony of Voices in African American Life Writing

One of the most intimate and distressing episodes of *BookMarks* is depicted in the part titled "Prison Library" where Holloway shares memories of her son's last months spent in prison and his untimely death during an attempted escape. Even though the author does not provide details about Bem's trial and conviction, the little information that she shares is enough to give her readers a sense of sorrow and guilt that mother feels over the loss of her child. During these "terrible series of years … when [her] parenting was reduced to selecting books to send to him in prison" (77), Holloway pondered about the unifying nature of books and the ability of a written word to connect people. The author admits that even in his childhood Bem, who was adopted at the age of four, never enjoyed reading. She could not help but wonder if this trait marked his difference from the new family, if the tragedy that took her son's life was a sign of forces beyond their control: Holloway's biological daughter Ayana was a passionate reader and grew up to become a Professor of Physics at Duke University.

When her son was incarcerated, Holloway chose to believe that he could find his salvation and sanctuary in reading. “I know that I wanted, and desperately needed, to believe that he’d be left alone if he was reading, that it would occupy him and separate him, and that these books could be both an escape and a protection. I was fooling myself” (77). A rare “bookish moment of intimacy and desire” (89) happened when Bem lied to his mother about finally reading and enjoying a book she had times and again recommended to him. He later admits: “I just knew it would make you happy to think I did, and I wanted so much for you to be happy” (88).

Years after her son’s death, Holloway acknowledges that her attempts to engage Bem into the habit of reading were caused by her falling into the trap set by such acclaimed authors of prison narratives as Eldridge Cleaver, Malcolm X, and Angela Davis. Their memoirs gave her a possibility to consider “a good ending, or at least a better one, to a moment that seemed headed for the tragedy” (82). Life stories of these African American activists present reading as a conversion experience and credit prison to be a space where the true value of literature can be discovered. No wonder, then, confesses Holloway, that she was “too occupied” with trying to establish literary connection to Bem instead of paying attention to her son’s actual situation, when he had “to keep [his] eyes open at all times, or [he] won’t make it” (78). Even though Holloway seems to accept that she wished to reach her son in the only possible way she knew, the scholar nevertheless mourns the time that now seems to have been lost in vain: “I reread Malcolm’s autobiography at the time of horror in my life to convince myself again that someone like our son might emerge from that experience as a cautious and circumspect thinker, and to give me some hope that he might be safe. I should have considered then the end of Malcolm’s days as the rest of that text” (88).

Following her arguments about the consolidative role of reading lists, Holloway takes this moment to point out the vast diversity of experiences that informed creation of African American autobiographical narratives. It is hard to argue with a fact that conditions that influenced lives of Jessie Fauset and Sonia Sanchez, James Baldwin and Samuel Delaney, Du Bois and Henry Gates can hardly be compared. Although idea of race is a foremost subject of their literary and public activity, the essence of their work is formed by heterogeneity of specific historical and social contexts. Similar to booklists which function as reference to unity and coherence but in principle are collections of unrelated texts, African American cultural tradition is rich precisely due to its diversity and multifaceted nature.

Holloway writes, "Knowing a full complement of race literature is crucial to claiming a complete education" (177). However, as mentioned, autobiographers that are analyzed in *BookMarks* are particularly selective in their references to reading experiences and literary choices. Only those texts that suit the authors' intent in presenting a specific type of racialized identity tend to be included into their life narratives. Yet, there are few examples among the range of black memoirs that pay tribute to variety of experiences and show diversified literary tradition of African America. J. Saunders Redding in his autobiographical novel *No Day of Triumph* (1942) presents a list of books that not only celebrate the theme of racial belonging but are also filled with degrading stereotypes. "His is a curiously eclectic list that notably includes books both 'read and recited *and hated* and loved'" (176). The author talks about Walt Whitman's collection *Leaves of Grass* and Rafael Sabatini's historical novel *Scaramouche: A Romance of the French Revolution* alongside Booker T. Washington's autobiography *Up from Slavery* that narrates the author's coming of age during the Reconstruction Era. Redding also incorporates such controversial titles as Shakespeare's *Othello*, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and Thomas Dixon's *The Leopard's Spots: A Romance of the White Man's Burden* which all are examples of white supremacist fiction. He even mentions Charles Carroll's pseudo-scientific essay "The Negro, A Beast, Or in the Image of God" which uses vague concepts of evolution and biblical argument to justify racial prejudice against African Americans. Redding's booklist represents education and reading in a way that majority of other black writers strived to avoid. Whether positive or offensive, these literary portraits constitute integral part of American literature and imply the struggle ethnic minorities had to undergo. Holloway argues that Redding's booklist is the only example in the history of bibliomemoirs aimed to embrace the contradictions rather than signify the narrator's distance from one or another community. Redding's memoir, therefore, proves that "the formation of one literature, or even library, cannot fully explicate the situation and context of writing or reading about black or white folk without examining the social spaces in which these literatures are formulated" (178).

Holloway concludes her memoir *BookMarks* depicting two seemingly unrelated scenes that turn out to be synonymous in their symbolic reference. The scholar remembers her time in high school where she spent periods assigned for students' individual study at the library shelving books and arranging cards from the catalogue.

> The cards told the story of the book's borrowing history. And for each book, there was a reliable index in the card catalogue. There your skill came into being able to flip through the indexes to find the one book you wanted in the midst of the hundreds of cards held too precariously, it seemed, by the metal rod that joined book to book, author to author. You were always especially cautious when it became necessary to remove the entire file from its alcove in the cabinet . . . you then had to return the file to its place among the rows and columns of the cabinet . . . slipping it silently, as into a sleeve, restoring the order and visual wooden landscape of the card catalogue. (169)

The author confesses that shelving books is still her secret passion. In another episode at the end of the memoir, Holloway describes her personal library where "bookshelves reflect the mix and method that have emerged from the orders, and the disorders of [her] life" (192). It is obvious that connections between books have a special meaning for the writer who seeks in their order exhaustive answers for eternal questions. She notes that some bookshelves are dedicated only to books written by women or by men, others are arranged due to their subjects or titles. However, her "favorite shelves, those that feel most familiar, those that have been most carefully selected, are colored: blue greens fading to spare shades of azure and then to deeper tones—turquoise, sapphire, cerulean. There is a shelved series of red books and a black book shelf" (192-193). Collections of books create new contents that cannot be restricted to a single, separate narrative. Through their accidental or intentional interrelation, these texts are able to convey reference to their symbolic kinship, indicate underlying reasons behind conjunctions of individual narratives. Books are always loaded with meanings that proceed them in cultural discourse. Holloway is looking for contexts that unite writers of different backgrounds, like a metaphoric metal rod that connects book cards in a library catalogue, "book to book, author to author." Her interest firmly resides in the topic of race, thus she insists that it is essential to address the subject within the continuity of African American tradition and through the entire variety of publications by black authors.

Conclusion

In *BookMarks*, Holloway argues that "there is something public in a book" (6) and anyone who has ever handled a book in a public space would know that a book's referent attaches itself to the reader. In the academic study incorporated into the account of her personal life story, Holloway explains how African American writers and activists have noticed this potential and used it to speak about their own identity. In their memoirs, these authors included booklists that were intended as proofs of extensive education, profound experience in letters, connection to racial heritage and authority to speak on behalf of the black population of the United States. Whether they admitted interest in white European literary tradition or religious oral texts of the Deep South, whether they recalled obsession with comics or renowned examples of nonfictional narratives, writers of bibliomemoirs allude to the authority that these books represent. In other words, booklists are signs of authorial strategy to claim power of agency in the public domain. For black folk in America, argues Holloway, this intimate connection to books can be used to contradict stereotypes that are attached to African American experience.

Holloway then extends this argument to notice that her own memoir is no different from the assortment of autobiographies she researched as a literary scholar. She refers to well-known life narratives in order to understand her own experiences in life. In this sense, Holloway portrayed her identity through polyphony of voices, positioning her narrated "I" within the African American literary community. In an eclectic list of her reading collection, Holloway finds herself among the authors that preceded her in the African American tradition. She is made of, as well as by, the texts that find their way onto her bookshelves.

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