

## Constructing Self and History: An Autobiographical Reading of Arna Bontemps's Black Thunder

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### Abstract

This study examines Arna Bontemps's novel *Black Thunder*, which has an important place in the history of African American literature, in terms of autobiographical elements related to the author's life story. In his works, Bontemps writes about historical events based on her own experiences, to reconstruct both personal and social memory. The study reveals how Bontemps's life, shaped by economic, cultural, and political factors, is reflected in the novel's characters and events. Therefore, slavery, the search for identity, and the struggle for freedom are examined through the author's own experiences. The study argues that *Black Thunder* is not only a historical narrative but also a reflection of the individual self's process of self-construction within history. Consequently, the novel touches upon autobiographical elements shaped by the intersection of personal experiences and contemporary history.

**Keywords:** Autobiographical Elements, *Black Thunder*, Arna Bontemps, Afro-American Literature.

### Özet

Bu çalışma, Afro-Amerikan edebiyat tarihinde önemli bir yere sahip olan Arna Bontemps'in *Kara Şimşek* adlı romanını, yazarın yaşam öyküsüyle ilişkili otobiyografik öğeler açısından incelemektedir. Bontemps, eserlerinde hem kişisel hem de toplumsal hafızayı yeniden inşa etmek için kendi deneyimlerine dayanarak tarihsel olayları ele almaktadır. Çalışma, Bontemps'in ekonomik, kültürel ve politik etkenlerle şekillenen yaşamının, romanın karakterlerine ve olaylarına nasıl yansıdığını ortaya koymaktadır. Dolayısıyla kölelik, kimlik arayışı ve özgürlük mücadelesi, yazarın kendi deneyimleri aracılığıyla incelenmektedir. Çalışma, *Kara Şimşek*'in yalnızca tarihsel bir anlatı olmadığını, aynı zamanda bireysel benliğin tarih içinde kendini inşa etme sürecinin bir yansıması olduğunu savunmaktadır. Sonuç olarak roman, kişisel deneyimler ve güncel tarihin kesişiminden şekillenen otobiyografik öğelere değinmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Otobiyografik Unsurlar, *Black Thunder*, Arna Bontemps, Afro- Amerikan Edebiyatı.

## Introduction

Literary autobiography provides a fictional rather than purely imaginative account of an author's life tracing it from birth to the onset of narration. Beyond recounting personal experiences, autobiography provides historical insight, mirroring the cultural and social conditions of its time. The oppression, freedom struggles, and migrations experienced by Black Americans frequently appear as autobiographical and historical narratives in African American literature. This study explores the autobiographical and biographical elements in Arna Bontemps's novel *Black Thunder* to reveal the similarities and differences between the real-life story of Gabriel Prosser, an iconic figure in the history of Black resistance, and Bontemps's fictional protagonist. This study explores the autobiographical and biographical elements in Arna Bontemps's novel *Black Thunder* to reveal the similarities and differences between the real-life story of Gabriel Prosser, an iconic figure in the history of Black resistance, and Bontemps's fictional protagonist. In this respect, the study also draws upon Philippe Lejeune's concept of the "autobiographical pact," which defines the implicit agreement between author, narrator, and reader regarding the authenticity of self-representation. According to Lejeune, autobiography is a genre in which the author identifies with both the narrator and the protagonist, thereby blurring the boundaries between factual self and fictionalized self (Lejeune, 1989). Through this framework, Bontemps's narrative can be interpreted as a self-reflective act that reconstructs both his personal and collective identity within history.

Through the novel, Bontemps contributes to the art of autobiography by weaving aspects of his own life into the narrative while simultaneously bringing the historical realities of his era into literature. With his character Gabriel, Bontemps not only brings a historical figure back to light but also combines personal experience with history by constructing a narrative that intersects with his own identity and lived experiences.

As a significant Black writer of the Harlem Renaissance, Arna Bontemps brings historical events into literary form. His work reinforces the ties between identity and social conditions, giving voice to Black struggles for freedom and their painful experiences through literature. *Black Thunder* (1936) is one of the most prominent examples of this approach. The novel explores the events of Gabriel Prosser, the protagonist of a failed slave revolt in the 1800s. However, Bontemps portrays this historical event as a symbol of resistance and the search for Black identity.

From an autobiographical perspective, *Black Thunder* parallels the author's own life experiences. Bontemps, in turn, recounts the racial discrimination he experienced during his childhood in the American South, using the protagonist's own words. Gabriel symbolizes the author's ideals, quest for justice, and identity confusion. By combining historical events with events that influenced his personal life, Bontemps establishes a dialectical connection between his own experience and historical events. In this context, *Black Thunder* is both an autobiographical narrative and a literary representation of Black people's struggle to reassert themselves and their freedom within the historical process. The novel's structure intertwines historical events with the search for identity. Therefore, Bontemps not only recounts the past but also invites us to consider how Black identity is historically established.

## Black Culture in the Early 20th Century

The early twentieth century witnessed not only rapid economic transformation but also the rise of a new Black cultural identity. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, many agricultural workers from the urban black community in the South started looking for work. This movement, referred to as the Great Migration, marks the beginning of a transformation that has left its mark on history, both culturally and demographically. Black women worked as servants in the homes of the developing middle class, while men worked as agricultural workers. A few found jobs in the newly established Southern textile factories, tobacco factories, but most of these jobs were reserved for whites. Education at Harvard, Fisk, Atlanta, Hampton, and other Black colleges established during the nineteenth century attracted Black people. The increasing literacy rate of Black urban populations has encouraged cultural and mental activities. Blacks published magazines and newspapers in all major African-American communities. This cultural vitality laid the groundwork for Black writers like Bontemps to reflect historical experiences through literature. With the publication of magazines and newspapers such as *The Crisis*, *The Chicago Defender*, and *The Negro World*, which pioneered discussions on race, equality, and progress, communication within Black communities strengthened and accelerated. Despite social oppression, such movements helped to keep black consciousness together and foster collective consciousness. This social and cultural vitality laid the groundwork for the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, and writers such as Arna Bontemps, Zora Neale Hurston, and Langston Hughes began to voice the experiences of the Black community.

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Consequently, the early twentieth century was not only a period of economic development but also a period in which a cultural fabric emerged among African Americans. This transformation was not only an expression of artistic and intellectual independence but also a collective reclaiming of identity against systems of racial oppression. The emergence of a distinctive Black aesthetic and voice in literature, music, and intellectual production challenged dominant white narratives, laying the foundation for later civil rights and Black feminism movements. Writers such as Arna Bontemps, Langston Hughes, and later Zora Neale Hurston carried this cultural energy into the future, celebrating the dignity, beauty, and resilience of Black life through literature. The early twentieth century thus marked a turning point in African American history—a period when education, migration, and artistic innovation converged to forge a renewed sense of purpose. This was the era in which the Black community began to define itself not through the lens of oppression, but through the celebration of creativity, resilience, and cultural pride.

## Great Migration

The Great Migration marked a turning point in African American history, transforming not only demographic patterns but also social consciousness. During the first decade of the 20th century, with the invasion of Southern cotton crops by insects called *Boll Weevils*, production decreased, and the need for farm work was cut. As unemployment grew and racial brutality increased, many Blacks chose to leave the South. Between 1910 and 1930, approximately 1.5 million African Americans moved from the rural South to urban centers. This mass movement reshaped the cultural

and political structures of both the South and the North, giving rise to new forms of community and self-expression.

This movement can be read as both a physical and psychological journey towards freedom and self-definition. When World War I broke out in 1914, migration from Europe to America slowed, so Northern manufacturers used Southern Black workers to fill jobs in factories. This demand for industrial labor made Black workers an essential part of the Northern economy. However, this new order also brought with it various forms of discrimination and racial prejudice in housing and employment, demonstrating that economic opportunity did not always translate into social equality. Black migrants who settled in the North brought not only fresh vitality but also new challenges. Tensions arose between long-established Black residents and the newly arrived migrants, who were often poorer and unfamiliar with urban life. Yet neighborhoods like Harlem in New York became vibrant centers of art, literature, and political thought, laying the groundwork for the Harlem Renaissance. New black churches competing with the old ones were established. As the Black populations in Northern cities grew, the Black working class expanded its political and economic power and took a place in the business world. In the process, a new Black leadership challenged the traditional leadership, a social condition linked to white influence. New leaders were better suited to empowering black people. Under these circumstances, many social conflicts gradually allowed increasing social cohesion and racial dignity. Figures such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey were prominent voices of this era, advocating for racial pride, economic independence, and intellectual development. The shift from rural dependence to urban participation transformed African Americans' self-image and strengthened their sense of social belonging and agency.

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While Jim Crow laws and political terrorism continued to suppress Blacks voting in the South, African Americans in the North, emerged as a significant political force. Arna Bontemps's depiction of resistance in *Black Thunder* (1936) echoes the same yearning for liberation and self-realization embodied by those who migrated North. The early twentieth century represented a turning point in African American history—a time when education, migration, and artistic innovation converged to forge a renewed sense of purpose. The Great Migration thus became not only a geographical displacement but also a metaphor for Black resistance and dreams. The early twentieth century stood out as a defining period in African American life, when education, migration, and artistic innovation intersected, redefining purpose and identity.

### Harlem Renaissance

Emerging from the spirit of the Great Migration, the Harlem Renaissance represented the intellectual and artistic flowering of Black America. The Harlem Renaissance was an African American cultural movement that took place in the 1920s and early 1930s. This movement constituted the largest and best-known African American society in the world, centered in Harlem, a district of New York City. It was also known as the New Black Movement or the New Negro Renaissance. Emerging from the spirit of the Great Migration, the Harlem Renaissance represented the intellectual and artistic flowering of Black America. The Harlem Renaissance was an African American cultural movement that took place in the 1920s and early 1930s. One of the key

philosophical foundations of this movement was W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of "double consciousness." Du Bois's idea describes the psychological struggle of Black individuals who live with a divided awareness — being both African and American, yet belonging fully to neither. This divided consciousness is mirrored in Bontemps's protagonist Gabriel, who embodies the tension between personal identity and collective history (Du Bois, 1903: 3).

It was a movement that emerged towards the end of World War I, developed in the mid-1920s, and continued into the mid-1930s. It was the first time that African American critics and publishers took Black literature seriously, and henceforth, African American arts attracted significant national attention. This cultural awakening was not only aesthetic; it was a redefinition of Blackness—a reaffirmation of racial pride, intellectual equality, and cultural autonomy in a society still structured by discrimination. Although it was primarily a literary movement, it was also closely linked to music, theater, art, and politics. Jazz and blues, in particular, were key elements shaping the aesthetics of the period, blending oral traditions with modernist experimentation. Harlem nightclubs like the Cotton Club and the Savoy Ballroom became symbols of both creativity and contradiction; black artists shone on stage but were often barred from the audience due to racial discrimination.

Arna Bontemps was one of the key figures of this movement, collaborating with writers like Langston Hughes to express black identity through literature. Other literary figures such as Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, and Jean Toomer also led the way in contributing to the significant expansion of African American literature.

Harlem developed as the political and cultural center of Black America, and the movement became known as the "blossoming" of black literature. Several factors contributed to its decline in the mid-1930s. The Great Depression created economic pressure across all aspects of life, and many young artists who had emerged during the Harlem Renaissance either left Harlem or stopped writing. Furthermore, political tensions between those who viewed art as merely an aesthetic expression and those who ascribed it a social responsibility weakened the movement's unity. Despite this, the Harlem Renaissance left a lasting cultural framework that radically transformed the way African Americans expressed themselves.

The Harlem Renaissance thus provided Bontemps with a literary and ideological foundation for works like *Black Thunder*, where history and selfhood converge. Moreover, the movement's legacy inspired later writers such as Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright, who sought to explore black identity and history through fiction. The legacy of this movement profoundly influenced later Black writers like Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison. This period was not just a literary period; it was a cultural revolution that fundamentally reshaped what it meant to be Black and American. The Harlem Renaissance profoundly transformed the artistic and literary landscape of African Americans in the United States. It transformed silence into expression, exclusion into visibility, and suffering into beauty, paving the way for subsequent cultural and political movements.

### Biographical Elements In Arna Bontemps's *Black Thunder*

Among the many writers who portray the suffering of slavery, the Black quest for freedom, and acts of individual resistance, Arna Bontemps stands out for his clarity of feeling and moral restraint. The author did not remain indifferent to the historical events of his time; instead, he reconstructed these events in his writing, drawing on his own life experiences and observations. In *Black Thunder*, while narrating a real-life event, he also draws on the characters, impressions, and emotions of his own life, thus situating his personal experience within a historical context. In this way, the novel reflects both historical record and the author's inward reckoning with memory, motive, and meaning.

Many writers have attempted to capture the voices, gestures, and everyday language of men and women living under slavery; only few have been successful. Arna Bontemps is one of those few. He did not attempt to give anyone their due. His central hero is neither more intelligent nor has the same political or military skills as his fellow slaves. He is a man filled with ambition. His desire for freedom motivates his actions, and his strong character magnetically attracted other slaves who shares his desire. Bontemps has created a small miniature of slave life in the early 1800s.

The author was not indifferent to the events that occurred, and he revealed these events in his work by sharing his own life. He connected with the protagonist of a real-life historical event and, in the process, included and examined events and people from his own life within what was happening. Born in Alexandria, Louisiana, Bontemps entered the literary world by teaching and publishing poems. In 1926 and 1927, he won the Alexander Pushkin award in the magazine 'Opportunity' published by the National Urban League, and the poetry award from The Crisis in 1926. The 1930s were extraordinary times, and Bontemps's vision of the world shifted to the left and to a more radical understanding of the plight of blacks in America. At last, Bontemps was poised to compose the meditation on history, politics, race, and the dignity of the individual that became *Black Thunder*. All the major factors of Bontemps' life at this point are reflected in *Black Thunder*.

In 1936, he published his best work of all genres, *Black Thunder*. Based on historical research, *Black Thunder* tells the story of Gabriel Prosser's uprising near Richmond in 1800. It represents a fusion of historical facts and imaginative changes to suit Bontemps's concerns in the mid-1930s. Gabriel is a hero who seems to have some shortcomings that do not have all the characteristics of the people who shaped history. An ignorant field worker and coachman, Gabriel leads an army of slaves. The slave society he drew around in Richmond feels real. This is how the rebels, armed with old-style military rifles, would defend themselves against all attacks. With the betrayal of another slave and a strange storm, the rebels lose, and Gabriel is hanged. Whites gain success with great losses. They have to recognize the human power of the slaves. This historical record provides a vivid portrait of the main events in the rebellion and explores the logic of Gabriel's rebellion. This protagonist, Gabriel, is neither too clever nor too political or military tactics than his fellow slaves. He is a man full of ambition. His desire for freedom motivated his actions, and his powerful character attracted other slaves of the same desire like a magnet to him. Gabriel, who is 24 years old, has been regarded as a 'man of destiny' since he defeated another slave in a fight on his farm and gained a reputation. Like all African slaves, Gabriel Prosser wanted freedom. Bontemps states

in the book as follows: “Thinking about how I’d like to be free-how I’d feel” (*Black Thunder*, 1992:30). This statement represents not only Gabriel's individual desire for freedom but also the collective consciousness of all enslaved Black people. Through his character's inner voice, Bontemps voices the yearning for freedom of both his generation and his ancestors, thus connecting personal desire with a historical struggle. For all black people living at that time, freedom was the first goal, and Bontemps often expresses this idea with his protagonist Gabriel: “I don’t mind dying, but hate to die not free. I wanted to see y’all do something like Toussaint done. I always wanted to be free, powerful, bad” (*Black Thunder* 1992: 34). Farmworkers, domestic maids, and free blacks constitute the pages of *Black Thunder*. Some are good and some are bad.

In 1800, the neighborhoods in rural Richmond and Virginia seemed calm and peaceful. But beneath this silly appearance, a storm was about to erupt that would set the white population in motion. And peaceful belief in society was shaken. For Prosser and a few of his friends who intended to rebel, the recent successful American Revolution, the French and Haitian Revolutions were the inspiration and example for their revolt. Bontemps did not try to make slaves look any better than they are. The novel is about political and social problems. Arna Bontemps looks at these problems spectacularly, creates the characters, and sets the event. Bontemps wrote *Black Thunder* in the 1930s, based on the riots and slave riots he thought would be the future of America. Finally, *Black Thunder* emerged, formed by political, racial, and historical facts. In this novel, the author, known as a person with an interest in history, describes the leadership of a slave named Gabriel Prosser in the 1800s in a great slave revolt. According to Bontemps, in *Black Thunder*, Gabriel is a living symbol of the will of all people, white or black, who want to be free. It is not just Gabriel; all the slaves want it. He stated this expression by saying, “Thinking about how I’d like to be free-how I’d feel” (*Black Thunder*, 1992:36). Bontemps, in the introduction of *Black Thunder*, implies that the slave revolt took place before. “Time is not a river. Time is a pendulum” (*Black Thunder*, p.xxi). With this sentence, he shows that while writing *Black Thunder*, he reflects and takes an example from the rebellion of that period. Arna Bontemps expresses his intention to write the novel in to *Black Thunder's* Introduction to the 1968 Edition.

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*Discovering in the Fisk Library a larger collection of slave narratives than I knew existed, I began to read almost frantically. In the gloom of darkening Depression settling all around us, I began to ponder the stricken slave’s will to freedom. Three historic efforts at self-emancipation caught my attention and promptly shattered peace of mind. Imknew instantly that one of them would be the subject of my next novel (Black Thunder, 1992: xxvi).*

This statement demonstrates that, in writing *Black Thunder*, Bontemps aimed not only to recount a historical event but also to revitalize the enslaved people's will to freedom through literature. In this process, the author transformed the information he acquired from historical documents into a personal field of inquiry, transforming his novel into a kind of "reconstruction of memory." Thus, by reviving the suppressed voices of the past, Bontemps offers both historical and emotional testimony.

Among his friends, Arna Bontemps is a calm, smiling, contemplative man who lives with his wife and children, but he is a man of seclusion as a character and peaceful in his political views. He reflected this characteristic feature as the feature of Gabriel in *Black Thunder*. "A little rain won't hurt none, Gabriel kept saying. Let it rain, if that's what it's up to. A little rain won't hurt, and it might can help some" (*Black Thunder*, 1992:80). This quote demonstrates that Bontemps reflects his own personality and worldview through the character of Gabriel. Gabriel's calmness, patience, and harmonious attitude toward nature are directly related to the author's philosophy of life. These characteristics also reinforce the theme of "inner resilience" that runs throughout the novel. Bontemps emphasizes peace and determination as a silent yet profound form of resistance in the face of external pressure and violence. Thus, Gabriel becomes not only a historical figure but also a reflection of Bontemps' own spiritual stance. Better known as a poet, Bontemps mentioned more historical reality in his second novel, *Black Thunder*, with autobiographical elements. The protagonist of the novel, Gabriel, is the leader of a real slave revolt that lived in the 1800s. It is seen the characteristic features of the author on Gabriel. More importantly, with the character of Prosser, Bontemps revived his own libertarian, egalitarian, and leader character and felt the need to put it on paper with Prosser, who has similarities in his world. Even if their lives do not coincide exactly, the writer has identified himself with the protagonist in the context of thought, ideals, and intellectual level. Arna Bontemps is a literary writer known for his poetry, besides his novels. This feature also shows in the characters in his novel, "It didn't seem right. He was a sensitive writing man, a poet at heart" (*Black Thunder*, 1992: 146). Gabriel exemplifies most clearly the spirit of black slaves, but he stands also for a more universal determination toward freedom, a goal to which many men and women are committed. Arna Bontemps in *Black Thunder* has attempted a radical, revolutionary statement about oppression, human nature, the spirit of the black masses, and the future of America. Langston Hughes must have had the novel in mind when, in 1938, he founded his Harlem Suitcase Theatre; as its first production, he wrote a radical play called 'Don't you want to be free?' This question is asked directly at least three times in *Black Thunder*. Arna Bontemps has written about his experiences, the painful history of himself and his ancestors, to shed light on the future, albeit in one way or another, by writing this book:

*At the age of thirty, or thereabouts, I had lived long enough to become aware of intricate patterns of recurrence, in my own experience and in the history I had been exploring with almost frightening attention. I suspect I was preoccupied with those patterns when, early in Black Thunder (Black Thunder, 1992: xxii).*

With this statement, Bontemps draws attention to the recurring cycles of oppression and resistance in both his personal life and throughout history. This phenomenon, which he describes as "repeating patterns," is central to his understanding of the novel. The interplay of individual experiences and historical events in *Black Thunder* demonstrates the author's sense of both the burden of the past and his responsibility for the future. Bontemps interprets this cyclicity not merely as a historical phenomenon but as a literary symbol of humanity's unwavering quest for freedom. Thus, the work becomes a narrative where personal memory merges with social history, reminding the author's generation of the need to "consciously rewrite the past".

Bontemps' *Black Thunder* is definitely an autobiographical novel that possesses fully autobiographical elements, and he exposes his personal ideas and messages about almost everything by means of this specific literary form. He expresses his feelings through the protagonist Gabriel and the period of people's ideas. With its autobiographical elements, the work is also a historical novel. If we look at it from both sides, we can see many similarities between the hero and the author in the book, with elements such as lifestyle, pain, experiences, etc. Black writers frequently express that they lived their times in their works and protagonists. Arna Bontemps has expressed it most perfectly in his book *Black Thunder*. Gabriel, the protagonist, can be regarded as an inner voice, a cry of the writer and the society of that period. Bontemps was not indifferent to what happened and presented the book by presenting sections from his own life.

## Conclusion

Arna Bontemps's *Black Thunder* stands at the crossroads of history, autobiography, and collective memory. Written during a time shaped by the cultural vitality of the Harlem Renaissance and the political awakening of African Americans, the novel rereads the present through the recovered past. Through Bontemps's pen, the protagonist, Gabriel Prosser, becomes not only a historical figure but also a universal emblem of resistance to oppression. The novel reflects not only the author's connection to Black history but also the racial humiliations of his childhood, his intellectual pursuits, and his spiritual resilience. Blending historical reality with autobiographical elements, Bontemps weaves imagination and experience together. *Black Thunder* is thus not so much a narrative of a failed slave rebellion as it is a literary reflection of black freedom and resistance. Gabriel's voice, expressing his desire for freedom, dignity, and self-definition, reflects Bontemps's inner voice as both an artist and a person of slave origin. In this novel, autobiographical elements and historical realities merge with collective memory, showing how personal experience is braided into public history. *Black Thunder* models how individual life can be integrated with social struggle, and how earlier slave rebellions resonate with contemporary quests for freedom. Drawing on the author's lived experience and close observations, the narrative does not merely reproduce history; it reinterprets and re-signifies it. Bontemps channels the struggles for political liberation into literature through the lens of his own journey. Ultimately, *Black Thunder* can be considered both a historical document and a personal testimony, linking the social trauma of slavery to the individual search for meaning and demonstrating how personal and cultural memory can be intertwined within literature. Thus, Bontemps positions African American literature not only as a form of expression but also as a site of healing, remembering, and reclaiming. Ultimately, *Black Thunder* invites us to reconsider the relationship between art and history, reminding us that the personal is, in fact, historical, and that through narrative, Black identity persists in the face of silence.

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