

THE COLLEGE LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION



Founded in 1937

SPECIAL ISSUE: The Legacies of Maya Angelou

Introduction

Maya Angelou: Toward a Criticism Worthy of Its Subject 2
Cheryl Wall

Angelou at the Algonquin: An Interview 10
Cheryl Wall

The Protocols of Wonder in the Enunciatory Narrative of Maya Angelou 20
Eleanor Traylor

Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and the Advantages of Pluralist Close Reading 36
Robert Evans

"The Voice of Melody": Healing and Transformation in Maya Angelou's Life Narratives 48
Lorraine Henry

"The Space between the Notes": Reclaiming Gender and Jazz in Maya Angelou's "Reunion" 65
Patricia Lespinasse

"When Great Trees Fall": The Poetry of Maya Angelou 77
Mary Jane Lupton

Healing the (Re)Constructed Self: The South, Ancestors, and Maya Angelou's *Down in the Delta* 91
Terrence Tucker

Come, Dine at My Table: The Enactment of Safe Spaces within the Cookbooks of Maya Angelou 105
Tosha Sampson-Choma

BOOK REVIEWS

Alexander, Simone A. James. *African Diasporic Women's Narratives: Politics of Resistance, Survival, and Citizenship* 118
Reviewed by Derayah Derakhshesh

CONTRIBUTORS 123

CLA JOURNAL

A Quarterly Official Publication of the College Language Association

EDITOR

Sandra G. Shannon, Howard University, Washington, DC

ASSISTANT EDITOR

Kendra R. Parker, Hope College, Holland, MI

MANAGING EDITOR

Warren J. Carson, University of South Carolina, Spartanburg, SC

BOOK REVIEW EDITOR

Kameelah L. Martin, Savannah State University, Savannah, GA

ADVISORY EDITORS

Sandra Adell, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI

Reginald A. Bess, Independent Scholar

Keith S. Clark, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA

Emma Waters Dawson, Florida A & M University, Tallahassee, FL

Derayah Derakhshesh, Howard University, Washington, DC

McKinley E. Melton, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, PA

Angelyn Mitchell, Georgetown University, Washington, DC

Kameelah L. Martin, Savannah State University, Savannah, GA

Dellita Martin-Ogunsola, Emerita, University of Alabama, Birmingham, AL

Maxine L. Montgomery, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL

Theri A. Pickens, Bates College, Lewiston, ME

Elisa Guadalupe Rizo, Iowa State University, Ames, IA

Shirley Toland-Dix, Tuskegee University, Tuskegee, AL

Reginald A. Wilburn, University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH

The *College Language Association Journal* or *CLAJ* (ISSN 0007-8549) is a peer-reviewed quarterly publication sponsored by the College Language Association. It is issued in September, December, March, and June of each year. *CLAJ* publishes critical essays on African Diasporan language, literature, and cultural studies; seminal interviews; and book reviews.

Authors must submit emailed manuscripts to editor@clascholars.org. Authors must prepare all manuscripts according to the *MLA Style Manual and Guide to Scholarly Publishing* (3rd edition). Manuscripts that do not meticulously follow MLA guidelines outlined herein may be immediately rejected. Authors must remove all identifying information from the manuscript submission—including cover pages, headers, and bylines. Manuscripts should be no fewer than 5000 words or 20 double-spaced pages and no more than 6000 words or 24 double-spaced pages—excluding Endnotes and Works cited.

CLAJ neither considers previously published material nor manuscripts submitted elsewhere. Book review submissions or queries to the *CLAJ* Book Review Editor must be forwarded to the *CLAJ* Book Review Editor at blifewater@aol.com.

CLAJ welcomes year round, mission-appropriate submissions yet limits publication of any work considered to only those authors who *have* or *will* satisfy prerequisite membership in the organization. (Click on <http://www.clascholars.org/membership> for membership details.) The subscription price for *CLAJ* to non-members and to libraries is \$80.00 yearly in the United States, \$82.50 in Canada, and \$93.00 in other countries. The price of current single copies is \$42.75. The price of current Special Numbers is \$43.75.

THE COLLEGE LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION

www.clascholars.org

A PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATION OF COLLEGE TEACHERS OF ENGLISH AND FOREIGN LANGUAGES

The college language association, founded in 1937 by a group of Black scholars and educators, is an organization of college teachers of english and foreign languages which serves the academic, scholarly and professional interests of its members and the collegiate communities they represent. Since 1957, the association has published the *CLA Journal*, a peer-reviewed quarterly featuring scholarly research and reviews of books in the areas of language, literature, linguistics and pedagogy.

The College Language Association . . .

- Fosters high professional standards for teachers of language and literature and promotes productive scholarship among its members;
- Publishes scholarly books of critical essays and bibliographical references;
- Encourages interest in creative writing;
- Holds an annual convention for presentation of scholarly papers, brought in by the association;
- Maintains a placement directory for its members.

AREAS

English Foreign language Other _____

MEMBERSHIP (JAN. 1-DEC. 31)

- | | | | |
|--|--|---|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Institutional \$200 | <input type="checkbox"/> Individual \$80 | <input type="checkbox"/> Life \$500 | <input type="checkbox"/> Student \$55 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Retiree \$45 | <input type="checkbox"/> Canada (add \$2.50) | <input type="checkbox"/> Other countries (add \$13) | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> New member | <input type="checkbox"/> Payment enclosed | <input type="checkbox"/> Renewal | |

Please print clearly.

Name _____

Mailing address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Country _____

Home phone _____ Business Phone _____

Institutional affiliation _____

Title or Position _____

Reply to: Yakini B. Kemp, CLA Treasurer • P.O. Box 38515, Tallahassee, FL 32315

CLA ARCHIVES

*To All Members
And Relatives of Deceased Members*

If you have in your possession any CLA records, minutes, correspondence, or miscellanea relating to the Association (especially during its early years, before it assumed its present name), PLEASE SEND OR BRING THEM to the chair of the CLA Archives, Dr. Dolan Hubbard, who will turn them over to the Special Collections and Archives Division of the Atlanta University Center Woodruff Library, which is now the official depository of the CLA Archives.

HELP US PRESERVE OUR HISTORY.

Dr. Maya Angelou



Photo by Dwight Carter © 2001

April 4, 1928 - May 28, 2014

Maya Angelou: Toward a Criticism Worthy of Its Subject

Cheryl A. Wall

Thirty years before her death, Maya Angelou told an interviewer, “When life is over with me, I want to say to it as you would say to a lover, or a friend, or a child: ‘Goodbye! It’s been a ball . . . truly. And thank you.’”¹ Those who mourned her passing on May 28, 2014, expressed profound gratitude for Angelou’s life and the élan and courage with which she lived it. Presidents and former presidents, writers and musicians, activists and actors, talk-show hosts and ordinary people around the world paid homage to her memory. Large public services were held in Wake Forest, North Carolina, New York City, and San Francisco. Visual images of Angelou circulated in mass media, and her voice, instantly recognizable and resonant, echoed across the airwaves. The Academy Awards, the Grammys, and the *New York Times* marked her passing in their annual memorial tributes. In April 2015, the U.S. Postal Service issued a commemorative stamp. Angelou was an indisputably iconic figure, but it was the depth of the personal connection people felt to her that was most moving. Admirers posted and reposted her poems in social media. Readers tweeted and testified to the power of Angelou’s example, the inspiration they took from her writing, the ways that reading her made them understand their own lives and inspired in them the sense of limitless possibility that characterized hers.

The overflow of tributes to the transformative power of Angelou’s art and persona contrasts sharply with the relative dearth of academic criticism devoted to her work. One of the most prolific and commercially successful black writers in history, she published thirty-six books in her lifetime.² Yet, there have been only a handful of critical volumes, devoted to her work – Mary Jane Lupton’s *Maya Angelou: A Critical Companion* (1998) and Dolly McPherson’s *Order Out of Chaos: The Autobiographical Works of Maya Angelou* (1990) are perhaps the best known of these.³ Angelou’s first book, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, which was recognized as a classic almost upon its publication, has been the subject of two critical casebooks, the first edited by Joanne Braxton and published in 1999, the second edited by Mildred Mickle and published in 2010. Most of the articles

¹ Stephanie Caruana, “Maya Angelou: An Interview,” in *Conversations*, 37.

² Information downloaded from www.mayaangelou.com/accessed 4.9.2015.

³ See also Claudia Johnson, ed. *Racism in Maya Angelou’s I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (Detroit: Greenhaven Press, 2008).

in academic journals appeared before the turn of this century and focused almost exclusively on *Caged Bird*. The spring 2005 issue of *Langston Hughes Review* focused attention on a broader corpus, but few articles have appeared since then. This special issue of *CLA Journal* initiates what we hope will be a renewed critical engagement with Angelou's writing, even as it gives witness to the imitable power of her presence.

When readers discovered Maya Angelou, she had already lived an extraordinary life. She lived in U.S. towns and cities in the West, South, North, and Midwest and spent sojourns in European and North African capitals, before finding what she called her first real home in Ghana in the early 1960s. At sixteen, she was hired as the first black fare collector on the street cars of San Francisco, beginning what became a long line of "firsts" in her life – first black woman to have a screenplay produced, the first to recite a poem at a presidential inauguration, to name just two. Before she became a household name, she earned her living as a cook, waitress, madam, dancer, singer, actor, journalist, administrator and activist. In the 1960s she demonstrated at the United Nations to protest the murder of Patrice Lumumba; she worked with Dr. King as the northern coordinator of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and was preparing to join the staff of the Organization of Afro-American Unity led by Malcolm X when he was assassinated. It seemed as if Angelou was good at everything. With the publication of *Caged Bird*, it was clear she was best at making art out of the incredible experiences of her life.

In so doing, she insisted, she was also writing about "the temper of the times."⁴ Angelou's times included key moments and movements in twentieth-century history: the Depression, World War II, the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, the Anti-colonialist struggle in Africa, and the women's movement in the United States and beyond. Maya Angelou was at the center of freedom movements on two continents. She was also at the center of the artistic upsurge that was part and parcel of those movements, working alongside Hanif Fathy in Egypt, Efua Southerland in Ghana, Abby Lincoln, Max Roach, and Paule Marshall in the U.S. As a performer she toured Europe with a company of actors in *Porgy and Bess*; she co-wrote a revue with Godfrey Cambridge as a fundraiser for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. With Marshall and Louise Meriwether, with whom she shared work at the Harlem Writers Guild founded by John Oliver Killens, she helped to lay the foundation for what became a renaissance among African American women writers that came to the fore around 1970.

⁴ See the interview, "Angelou at the Algonquin," in this issue.

The fusion of the public and the private, the personal and the political, was a hallmark of her work. African American women readers were immediately won over because they recognized themselves on the pages of Angelou's books. Many had grown up memorizing recitations like the one that opens *Caged Bird*. They identified with the protagonist, "Maya," the gangly girl who moved uneasily through the world and took refuge in books. They knew the self-doubt that was inevitable for girls who had no images of their beauty and worth. Angelou provided the missing mirror in which they could finally see themselves. Smart and feisty, but silenced by the strictures of society, they were also subjected to a harsh discipline by the people who loved them. If they had come of age in the segregated South, they recognized the portrait of Mrs. Annie Henderson and Mrs. Flowers, adults who were all-powerful within their homes and communities and powerless in the white world. Angelou spoke for generations of her readers when she wrote, "if growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat. It is an unnecessary insult."⁵

In a series of tightly structured episodes, Angelou revealed a keen awareness of the pain and insult as well as of the small victories that ensured survival. The scenes were so carefully observed they became accessible to readers from all backgrounds. Frequently anthologized, these episodes are familiar to even the most casual Angelou reader: the scene in which her grandmother is subjected to the insults and mockery of poor white girls as Maya looks on helplessly then understands that in the contest of wills the grandmother's dignity and reserve trumps the white girls' vulgarity and insolence; the Joe Louis boxing match that black people come to hear on the radio in Mrs. Henderson's store where they respond viscerally to every punch the champion gives and takes; the graduation ceremony at the Lafayette County Training School in which the white superintendent insults the black graduates until their valedictorian recites "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing" and Maya hears the words for the first time; and the visit to the dentist during which Maya draws on her reading of British and American fiction to fantasize a scenario more triumphant than reality allowed.

As critics including Selwyn Cudjoe and Mary Helen Washington noted early on, Angelou infuses these episodes with themes and tropes that thread through African American literary tradition. She represents spiritual strength that resists and overcomes oppression; the liberating power of words, both spoken and written; the relationship between the individual and the collective, and the use of biblical allusions as well as musical metaphors and quotations. Her protagonist refers to herself and is referred to by others by different names -- Marguerite,

⁵ Maya Angelou, *Caged Bird*, 3.

Ritie, Margaret, Sister, and Maya. Her anger at the white woman who calls her “Mary” because she finds “Marguerite” too hard to remember and her embrace of the name “Maya,” bestowed by her beloved brother, represent two instances of naming as a key trope. In these aspects, *Caged Bird* participates in traditions of black autobiography that go back to the narratives written by enslaved African Americans in pursuit of freedom for themselves and their kin.

Angelou’s titles reflect the influence of both written and oral African American traditions. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* comes, of course, from Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem, “Sympathy.” *The Heart of a Woman* alludes to Georgia Douglas Johnson’s 1918 poem and volume of the same title. But *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin Merry like Christmas and All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* evoke even they do not exactly quote floating lines from blues and spirituals. Such lines are constant motifs in Angelou’s prose; folktales, sermons, and adages are touchstones as well. This is true whether the setting is rural Arkansas, San Francisco, or West Africa. Momma Henderson is a repository of wisdom, of course, but her world is “bordered on all sides with work, duty, religion and ‘her place’” (47). Angelou’s mother, Vivian Baxter, whom one could only imagine in a city and who introduces her adolescent daughter to a wider world, has aphorisms for very occasion.

A scene in *The Heart of a Woman* emblemizes the manner in which the literary and oral fuse in Angelou’s corpus. Newly arrived in Cairo with Vusumi Make, a South African freedom fighter who has swept her off her feet, Maya discovers that she is in desperate need of a job. Make argues that African women do not work outside the home, but Maya fears that she and her son are on the verge of homelessness. Her friend David Du Bois helps her get a job with the *Arab Observer*, where she is responsible for reporting news from across the African continent. She gladly accepts, even as she realizes that she has no idea how to approach the task. As she will be the only woman in the office, she rightly anticipates her colleagues will greet her warily. Desperate and unsure, she reports to work. When she realizes that her office desk is located in the journal’s library with shelves of books in English, she feels “just like Brer Rabbit in the briar patch” (233). The author recounts the folktale and in doing not only closes the gap between oral and written tradition, but bridges the distance between Stamps and Cairo.

Angelou writes beyond African American literary tradition or carves out “a tradition within a tradition,” to use Braxton’s phrase, when she represents what the preface to Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, termed “delicate subjects.” In that nineteenth-century precursor text, Jacobs, under the cover of a pseudonym, depicts her abuse by her owner, the villainous Dr. Flint. Angelou represents the rape of a seven-year old child by her mother’s lover, a black man. The intimacy of the betrayal staggers the reader. So does the clueless response of

the child's fierce and fearless St. Louis relatives. They kill the perpetrator and ignore the victim. The girl Maya wills herself mute. At a time when crimes of incest and sexual violence were beyond the scope of polite and even impolite conversation, Angelou shattered the silence. Soon joined by fictional representations of similar crimes in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), *Caged Bird* helped to create the space for women and men to tell these terrible, necessary stories.

In later volumes, Angelou insists on her right to tell stories of healthy sexuality that were almost as rare to encounter in print. *Gather Together in My Name*, for example, represents Maya as a young woman becoming aware of erotic desire after the trauma of girlhood rape and the desperation of the one-night stand that resulted in pregnancy. When she meets Curly, whom she describes as a "tender man" and her first love, she remarks, "I became pleased with my body because it gave me such pleasure."⁶ Although her desire makes her vulnerable, she insists on owning it. Black women had rarely written about sexuality – except as a source of danger. Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is one of the few exceptions. Hurston's character Nanny represents the conventional "wisdom" that sexuality is the source of vulnerability for black women rather than a source of fulfillment. To be sure, *Gather Together* counts the costs as it depicts the ways that men exploit and even degrade Maya, but Angelou's memoirs represent sexual pleasure as a worthy pursuit.

Her autobiographies did more than lift the veil on subjects that had been hidden. They insisted that the protagonist's feelings were as important to the narrative as the events it describes. No black woman's autobiography before *Caged Bird* had revealed as much of its author's interior life. Angelou's honesty cemented the emotional bond between her and her readers. In the subsequent volumes of her "serial autobiography," as Lupton describes them, readers followed Angelou on her journeys across the globe, as she encountered famous and drylongso folk, began and ended romantic relationships, raised her son, and, time after time, reinvented herself. She continued to foreground her feelings. These feelings were of course alchemized through memory and art. They could not represent her reactions in real time to the situations she described. However, she wrote about them as if they did; readers responded in kind.

If readers imagined they had access to her raw feelings, Angelou insisted on the importance of her craft. "Learning the craft, understanding what language can do, gaining control of the language, enables one to make people weep, make

⁶ Maya Angelou, *Gather Together*. 23.

them laugh, even make them go to war,” she explained. To do so however, it was necessary to learn “how to harness the power of the word.”⁷ Her oft-stated goal was to write autobiography as literature. Eighteenth-and-nineteenth-century black autobiographers had written autobiographies that were belatedly recognized as literature, but their goal was not art; it was freedom. By the mid-twentieth-century, the novel was the prose genre that attracted authors with literary aspirations. Angelou set out to change that. A few black women followed in her footsteps, although neither Anne Moody nor Angela Davis, to cite two examples, foregrounded the literary value of their narratives. I would suggest that Alice Walker used the essay for her autobiographical writing and Jamaica Kincaid displaced the autobiographical impulse from author to subject in her novel, *The Autobiography of My Mother*. Two recent autobiographical works by the poets Elizabeth Alexander (*The Light of the World*) and Tracy K. Smith (*Ordinary Light*) build more directly on Angelou’s legacy.

In the interviews she gave, one of which “Angelou at the Algonquin,” is included in this issue, she went to great lengths to describe her writing practice. More than many writers, she had a specific routine that she followed that not only included a schedule but a ritual whereby she rented hotel rooms that became writerly retreats. Scholars will soon have access to her papers, located at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, where they can study her manuscripts, written in the longhand she described to interviewers, and they will be able to analyze her compositional process. This is work, I predict, scholars will be eager to do.

Although she usually described herself as an autobiographer and poet, Angelou published in a wide variety of genres. She published short stories, volumes of essays, children’s books, cookbooks, collections of quotations and advice; among her unpublished writing are plays and screenplays. Angelou candidly acknowledged that the quality of her writing was uneven. “Now, not everything you do is going to be a masterpiece,” she conceded. “But you get out there and you really try and sometimes you really do, you write that masterpiece, you sing that classic. The other times you’re just stretching your soul, you’re stretching your instrument, your mind. That’s good.”⁸ Here Angelou anticipates the suspicion of critics who doubt that any author who publishes so many books could write many good ones. Even in an era during which the function of the critic has shifted from judgment to analysis, professional readers are skeptical of the popular, prolific writer.

Angelou as poet is a case in point. Angelou was a poet first, before she started her autobiography. She recorded an album, *The Poems of Maya Angelou*, in 1969,

⁷ Claudia Tate, “Maya Angelou,” in *Conversations*, 149.

⁸ Beth Ann Krier, “Maya Angelou: No Longer a Caged Bird,” in *Conversations*, 51.

though she had written much of the material long before. Throughout her career she was lauded for her performances of poems, both her own and those of other poets. Although *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diiie* (1971) was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize, the critical reception of Angelou's poetry has been tepid. Yet school children around the nation recite "And Still I Rise" and "Phenomenal Woman" at assemblies and graduations. These poems circulate much as those of Paul Laurence Dunbar and James Weldon Johnson did for an earlier generation, except that the circuits of transmission are both oral and cyber. The quickest way to take a measure of their popularity is to click on You Tube. For that matter, the most passionate critics of the poetry are the readers who comment on-line.

Readers' affective responses account for the sustained popularity of Angelou's poetry and prose. At the beginning of her literary career, readers viewed Angelou as friend, sister, and mentor; by the end she assumed the status of elder, teacher, and guide. The social media posts confirm these responses. At the same time, they pose a critical challenge. What tools of formal analysis can critics bring to the task? What contexts are most helpful? What vocabulary do we use to analyze texts that elicit this level of engagement? For whom do we write? The articles that follow both employ proven strategies and open up new ways of reading a range of Angelou's writings.

In "The Protocols of Wonder in the Enunciatory Narrative of Maya Angelou," Eleanor Traylor offers keys to understanding the special relationship between Angelou's texts and her readers. Although it is not her primary purpose, Traylor suggests reasons for the ease with which Angelou's text cross boundaries of geography and generation. The autobiographies, Traylor argues, are wonder tales; their fabulistic plots and imagistic patterns recall stories readers have known from childhood. In Angelou's hands however, the wonder tale becomes the "emergent narrative" of which a black girl/woman is the hero. Banished from home, the female hero embarks on a quest which, with the aid of donors and helpers, ends in triumph. Lyrical and learned, the essay sets forth an argument that is supported by a theoretical interweaving of folkloristics, black feminism, deconstruction and African American cultural theory.

In "Maya Angelou's *Caged Bird* and the Advantages of a Pluralistic Close Reading," Robert Evans reads a single passage through a series of critical frames: formalism, feminist analysis, traditional historicism and new historicism, Marxist analysis, reader response criticism, structuralism, and deconstruction. The article does not single out any one approach; instead it demonstrates the values and limitations of each. Providing a vivid illustration of the textual richness of

Angelou's memoir, the article invites critics to purpose additional approaches to the open-ended catalogue it sets forth.

The articles by Lorraine Henry and Patricia Lespinasse show how fruitful it is to take the approach of "close listening" to Angelou's texts. In "The Voice of Melody': Healing and Transformation in Maya Angelou's Life Narratives," Henry surveys the ways in which music functions in these texts "to delineate character" and to "establish scenes corresponding mood." She ends her article with readings of three powerful scenes from different narratives that allude to Negro spirituals to score spiritual epiphanies. Lespinasse highlights the "jazz-literature correspondence" in her analysis of a little-known short story, "The Reunion," published by Angelou in 1992. As her readers know, Angelou was a longtime jazz aficionado with a particular affinity for bebop. "The Song Struggling to be Heard" depicts a meeting between two female characters, one of whom is a pianist with a style that reminiscent of Mary Lou Williams. But, as Lespinasse makes clear, the story does more than honor a specific musical genre, it represents the "confluence of race and gender, history and memory."

In "When Great Trees Fall: The Poetry of Maya Angelou," Mary Jane Lupton surveys the poetic legacy. She locates Angelou's poetry in multiple contexts: African American oral and literary traditions, the ballad, and the ode. She pays particular attention to poems that have not yet been collected, while noting that a definitive volume of Angelou's collected poems is forthcoming. Offering detailed readings and assessments of individual poems, Lupton's article ends with an argument for "On the Pulse of Morning," the poem written for the Inauguration of President Bill Clinton, as Angelou's greatest achievement in the genre.

Terrence Tucker looks at another facet of Angelou's career in "Healing the (Re) Constructed Self': The South, Ancestors and Maya Angelou's *Down in the Delta*," the film that she directed in 1998. He reminds us of Angelou's career as a film actor and shows how the themes of *Down in the Delta* resonate with the roles she played in earlier films, especially in John Singleton's *Poetic Justice*. Tucker argues that Angelou's personal decision to return to the South anticipated the reverse migration on which millions of African American subsequently embarked. Citing observations from the film's cast members and critics, he shows how *Down in the Delta* reflects Angelou's unique combination of historical knowledge and poetic sensibility. A key contribution of his essay is its illumination of the continuities in Angelou's oeuvre.

Those continuities also animate Tosha Sampson-Choma's essay, "Come, Dine at My Table: The Enactment of Safe Spaces within the Cookbooks of Maya Angelou." Angelou was famously willing to disregard the line between literary and popular culture. She was determined to speak to as wide an audience as possible.

In so doing, Sampson-Choma argues, she brought the insights of black feminist criticism to readers who might have disdained them in an academic or literary format. These readers might not have read Barbara Smith's rationale for naming a publishing house Kitchen Table Press, or Paule Marshall's "The Poets in the Kitchen," or Meredith Gadsby's *Sucking Salt*, or Patricia Hill Collins's theorizing of the kitchen as "a safe space" for black women in *Black Feminist Thought*. This essay makes use of their insights. Rather than theorizing, Sampson-Choma contends, Angelou enacts their feminist findings. She invites readers to share the "safe space" that she created for her family and friends.

Maya Angelou left multiple legacies as an autobiographer, poet, filmmaker, and playwright. The stunning quantity of her work as well as its enormous breadth and variety call on critics to develop strategies that are as various, as innovative, and incisive as the work to which they respond. It is our task to develop a criticism worthy of its subject.

Works Cited

- Angelou, Maya. *Gather Together in My Name*. New York: Random House, 1974. Print.
- . *The Heart of a Woman*. New York: Random House, 1981. Print.
- . *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. New York: Random House, 1969. Print.
- Braxton, Joanne, ed. *Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings: A Casebook*. New York: Oxford UP, 1999. Print.
- Elliott, Jeffrey, ed. *Conversations with Maya Angelou*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1989. Print.
- Lupton, Mary Jane. *Maya Angelou: A Critical Companion*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998. Print.
- McPherson, Dolly. *Order Out of Chaos: The Autobiographical Works of Maya Angelou*. New York: Peter Lang, 1990. Print.
- Mickle, Mildred R. *Critical Insights: I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings by Maya Angelou*. Pasadena, CA: Salem Press, 2010. Print.

Angelou at the Algonquin: An Interview by Cheryl A. Wall

Cheryl A. Wall

On December 1, 1981, I interviewed Maya Angelou at the Algonquin Hotel in New York City. The site of the fabled roundtable at which writers and wits Robert Benchley, Dorothy Parker, and Alexander Wolcott regaled each other in the 1920s, the Algonquin still had the air of bookish glamour. It was Angelou's home base in the city; later she purchased a brownstone in Harlem. Angelou was an important writer, while I was a barely-published assistant professor, yet she invited me to her suite and welcomed me warmly. She did, however, quickly inform me that because she was flying to Ghana the next day, she could give me only an hour of her time. I looked down at my rather long list of questions and realized that I would need to whittle them down as we spoke. I dove right in.

My focus was on the four autobiographies she had then published: *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), *Gather Together in My Name* (1974), *Singin' and Swingin' and Getting Merry Like Christmas* (1981) and *The Heart of a Woman* (1981). As she would remind me, Angelou had also published three books of poems, *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Die* (1971), *Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit me Well* (1975), and *And Still I Rise* (1978). She spoke about her determination to excel at the art of autobiography, which she noted as a genre was "little used." Keenly aware of its demands, she detailed the process of "enchantment" by which she recovered events in her past. She fully subscribed to her own dictum: "a good autobiographer seems to write about herself and is in fact writing about the temper of the times."

Whether as an autobiographer or poet, Miss Angelou was remarkably insightful about her creative process. She described the physical and psychological conditions she required to write with great precision. Impressively, she had poems and passages of prose from her work and that of other authors and committed to memory. At one point, she counted out the metric patterns in her prose. As all who ever heard her speak can attest, Miss Angelou's voice was mesmerizing. It was easy to get lost in her words. I could not write as fast as she spoke. Fortunately, I had a tape recorder. When I listened to the interview, I realized that she spoke in paragraphs that were as eloquent as those in her published work. Still, there were moments when things were rushed. Most disappointing to me at the time: a telephone call interrupted Miss Angelou's reflections on the community of black women writers, and she did not return to the subject.

I was nevertheless eager to see the piece in print. To my dismay, the published version omitted two pages of the interview. It dropped an answer in the middle

of one of those perfectly formed paragraphs. I called the editor in a fury; she attributed the deletion to a printer's error and said that nothing could be done. Too embarrassed to send it to Miss Angelou, I hoped that the piece would disappear. It did. I greatly appreciate the opportunity to publish the complete version now.

C.W. You have just published *The Heart of a Woman*, the fourth volume of an autobiography that began with *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* in 1969. Yet from many passages in all four books, a reader may infer that Maya Angelou is a private person. If this inference is correct, how difficult has it been to relinquish that privacy in order to share your experiences with readers?

M.A. The difficulty is met early on by making a choice. I made a choice to become an autobiographer. You know the saying, "you make your bed and do whatever you want to do in it." I find autobiography as a form little used. I know no serious writer in the United States who has chosen to use autobiography as the vehicle for his or her most serious work. So as a form, it has few precedents. But I decided to use it. Now, I made that choice, I ain't got no choice. Unless I found it totally untenable – if it was running me totally mad or if I lost the magic – then that would be a different matter. I would start to look at fiction or go back to plays. But having said I'm going to write autobiography as literature and to write history as literature, then I have made that agreement with myself and my work and I can't be less than honest about it. So I have to tell private things, first to remember them, and then, to so enchant myself that I'm back there in that time.

C.W. I love teaching *Caged Bird* because the voice of the child from the very beginning is so authentic. I understand that as a part of the PBS series, *Creativity*, you returned to Stamps [the town in Arkansas, where Angelou spent much of her childhood] and once there, you said, "became twelve years old again." Did you revisit the scenes of your childhood before writing that book? How did you reawaken that part of your past?

M.A. It's kind of enchantment. It's a scary one, whether it was in that book or in *Gather Together in My Name*. I go to work every day about 6:30 in the morning. I keep a hotel room and I go to the same room each day, and it takes about a half hour to shuffle off this mortal coil and all that. Before I go—it's like a trip in a time machine—my concern, my hesitation, in fact, is that I won't be able to come out. It is truly strange. But to write it so that the reader is there and *thinks* he's making it up, to make the reader believe that she is the one who is doing that, is the one to whom it is being done, you have to be there in that place. Ohh!

C.W. Can you elaborate on the process? When you have finished, it is easy then, or it is even possible to put the past aside, to leave it in the hotel room?

M.A. I always stay there at least until 12:30, even when the work is going poorly; if the work is going well, I'll stay until 1:30. Then I leave the hotel and go shopping for my food. And *that's* real. And I'm six foot tall and my face is somewhat known. In a little town (and I always manage to live in small towns), people will have maybe that day or the day before seen me on the Merv Griffin show, but since I operate in the town, I'm not a celebrity from whom people feel separate. So people see me and they say, "Hello, Miss Angelou. I saw you on the so and so." But they have also seen me in the gardening shop and in the old folk's home and playing with children, so I'm kind of a celebrity with honor. But it means that when I come out of that hotel room and go to the market, suddenly my feet get the familiarity of the place. I'm encouraged back into the time in which I live and it's real again.

Then I go to my home and have a drink or two or however many and prepare dinner. I love to cook. I am a cook. I write, cook, and drive. Those are my accomplishments.

C.W. All of which you started early.

[Laughter]

M.A. That's true, too true. After I've put dinner on and showered, then I read the work. So by 4:30 or 5 o'clock in the afternoon, I read what I have written that day. Start then to cutting, cutting extraneous "ands," "ifs," "toos," "fors," "buts," "howevers" – all those out! Any repetition of description, out. Just cut, cut, cut. And then I leave it and set the table and sit down to dinner. And about nine o'clock, I pick up the work again, now with all those cuts, and look at it again and start making marginal notes. And I'm finished with that yellow pad. The next morning I take a fresh yellow pad and go out and start the thing all over again. And I do that five days a week.

In about a month, when I've got stacks of yellow pads, I will pull all the pages off and put them in order and I will take one day to read it all. Then I start to write again. As I write it the second time, I see how cavalier I have been with the language, with the craft, so I try to make that one really clean, hot, terse. And then when I've finished that, I go back to work. But at least in the period, I'm not doing that going down inside, and it's a lot like a vacation in a way.

C.W. How long does the entire process take, for instance with this last book?

M.A. About a year and eight months.

C.W. Autobiographies by black women have been exceedingly rare, and to my knowledge, none of the few before yours has probed personal experience very deeply. Why and how did you select the form?

M.A. The form is intriguing. Maybe a third, certainly half into *Caged Bird*, I realized that a good autobiographer—whatever that means, and I don't know what

that means *yet*—I’m learning the form. I am molding the form and the form is molding me. That’s the truth of it. A good autobiographer seems to write about herself and is in fact writing about the temper of the times. A good one is writing history from one person’s viewpoint. So that a good one brings the reader into an historical event as if the reader was standing there, bridled the horse for Paul Revere, joined Dred Scott, actually there. What I’m trying to do is very ambitious, very ambitious, because I am trying, I hope, to lay a foundation for a form. And I know it’s ambitious, it’s egomaniacal. I know all that; I don’t mind. There it is. I mean, I do mind. I’d love to be nice and sweet and loved by everyone, but there it is.

There are writers now and coming who will develop that form. And it is important to remember how new the novel as a form is. So somebody in the next twenty, thirty, five years, next year, will write autobiography through the door I have opened, or cracked anyway, and really show us what that form can be. One has to see it stemming from the slave narrative and developing into a new American literary form. It’s ambitious, I told you; it’s ambitious.

C.A. You say that slave narratives are one model for your work: are there any other literary influences? In *Caged Bird* you list a number of writers, including Shakespeare, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, and James Weldon Johnson, whose work you came to love are a child. Are these useful influences, or have they remained “loves”?

M.A. I’m sure they were influences, but you can’t really tell. I can’t tell. Paul Laurence Dunbar, more than anybody else of the older writers, and Shakespeare, when I was young. The Russian writers mean the world to me; I fell like a schoolgirl for Gorki. I believed at one point that if Dunbar and Shakespeare and Gorki had known me, they would have loved me. I would be a friend to sit around with, drink and laugh and argue with. I really believed that, and I’m not disabused of it. I’m much older and should be ashamed maybe.

[*Laughter*]

C.W. When they read *Caged Bird*, my students invariably wonder who that girl could have been reading Shakespeare in grade school.

M.A. They would have to see the village in which I grew up. By the time I was five, because my grandmother was old and Uncle Willie was crippled, I knew how to read. I mean, I had to be of help, you see? Momma and Uncle Willie taught us how to weigh sugar and a quarter pound of this and that. I don’t think they thought they were making people who were unusual. We, Bailey [her brother] and I, were of use. Also Uncle Willie used to take me and Bailey by the back of our clothes and stand us in front of the pot-bellied stove and say, “All right, now do your times tables.” And of course we did them. Now in the middle of the night you can awaken me and say, do your nines.

About six years ago, my uncle died and I went to Little Rock and was met by Daisy Bates [the civil rights activist]. Daisy and I know each other for all these millions of years. Anyway, Daisy met me in Little Rock. She said, "Girl, I'm coming to your hotel tonight; I'm going to bring someone who wants to talk to you." She came with about nine people. There was one man in a huge Texas hat and a good suit. He hugged me. He said, "You know, you're coming down here because Uncle Willie is dead." Now, Little Rock is a big city, hundreds of miles from Stamps. He said, "Because of your Uncle Willie, I am who I am today." So, I said, "Oh." As he explained in the 'twenties, he was the only child of a blind mother, and my Uncle Willie gave him a job in the store that paid him 25 cents a week. When things went well it would be 35 cents a week, and he was able to support his mother on that money. And, he said, "Because Uncle Willie made me study and learn to do my times tables, I went on to become somebody." I asked, how did Uncle Willie teach you, and he answered: "he would grab me by the back of my clothes and stand me in front of the pot-bellied stoves and say, "All right, now do your times tables." In the 'twenties! When the man finished he said, I guess you want to know who I am today. I'm the vice mayor of Little Rock.

[Vice Mayor Charles Bussey] then told me to look up a lawyer in Stamps who would look after my affairs. To my surprise, the lawyer turned out to be young white man. He told me how Mr. Bussey had done for him what Uncle Willie did for Mr. Bussey in the twenties.

C.W. A chain. . .

M.A. Exactly. There's my Uncle Willie crippled, never leaving the town – left Stamps, Arkansas, twice in his life—and my Lord.

Let me tell you another story about Daisy Bates. Daisy and I were here in New York in 1960. I was working for Martin King, and she was speaking for the students at Central High School. We came to my apartment with some scotch and started talking. She said, "Girl, coming out of Arkansas, who besides your grandmother influenced you?"

I replied, "A lady named Mrs. Flowers. When I had problems talking, Mrs. Flowers introduced me to reading and because of Mrs. Flowers I started talking again."

She said, "You don't mean Beulah Flowers?"

I said, "Yes."

She said, "Girl, she lives right down the street from me."

I said, "You're kidding. When you go home, tell her I thank her very, very much." About a week later, I got a letter from Mrs. Flowers. She wrote, "My dear, I was so certain you were going to do something wonderful."

C.W. That's a lovely story. As you speak, it seems obvious that even before you began to write, you must have been a terrific storyteller. Was there a tradition of storytelling in your family?

M.A. No. Well, Momma would tell us stories, mostly Brer Rabbit stories There's a scrapbook in my papers at Wake Forest which I did at nine years old. It's incredible, even to me. It was during that period when I was a non-talker, when I was a volunteer deaf mute, and I think I really just loved making up stories.

C.W. You recall the story of Brer Rabbit in the briar patch in a scene in *The Heart of a Woman*. You are standing in a newspaper office in Cairo.

M.A. That's Momma.

C.W. Do you consider folklore an important resource for your art?

M.A. Oh, yes. Not just for my art, but for the pantheon of moral values: how to act, how to behave, how to interact. By the time I left Momma, I knew what was right and what wasn't. I have a painting now by Phoebe Beasley called "Sister Fannie's Funeral." It depicts women sitting on fold-up chairs, and it reminds me of all the women in my grandmother's prayer meeting group. There's one empty chair that for me is Momma's. Whenever I have a debate within myself about right action, I just sit down and look at that and think now, what would Momma say? So, morals and generosity, good things, I believe I got at Momma's lap.

C.W. Your grandmother and her teachings seem always to have been an anchor. Many black children coming of age today don't have that link to their past. Is there anything that can replace it?

M.A. Nothing. I see nothing. It's tragic. There is no substitute for parental and/or family love. And by love, I do not in any way mean indulgence. I mean love . . . that quality so strong it holds the earth on its axis. The child needs that carrying over of wisdom from the family to the child directly, and there is no substitute. Society cannot do it, despite the 1984 concepts of Big Brother and a larger society caring for a child and imbuing the child with values. One needs it from someone to whom one is physically attached.

C.W. The centrality of the maternal figure is a theme in the work of many black women writers and white women writers as well. That leads me to wonder, is there a community of writers of which you feel a part: Afro-American writers, women writers, particular individual writers?

M.A. That's a question I'm a member of the community of writers, serious writers; I suppose much like a drug addict is a member of a community. I know what it costs to write. . . as soon as that it so, one is part of that community.

I'm part of the Afro-American writing community, because that is so. I'm writing out of my own background, but it is also the background of Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, Nikki Giovanni, Carolyn Rodgers, Jayne Cortez. All the black women who are writing today and who have written in the past: we write out of the same pot.

C.W. I know that the title *Caged Bird* is taken from a poem by Paul Laurence Dunbar. Does the new book's title allude to the poem by Georgia Douglas Johnson, the poet of the Harlem Renaissance?

M.A. It certainly does. "The heart of a woman goes forth with the dawn. . ." I love that woman. I have *Bronze* [Johnson's second book, published in 1922]. It's in my nightstand. I will not put it even in my own private bookcases. Let alone in the library. It's in my nightstand, and there it will stay.

C.W. How long have you known of her work?

M.A. Since I was a very young person. I love Anne Spencer too. So different. . . born a year apart. . . but so different.

C.W. Many Afro-American writers cite music as a primary influence on their work. References to music recur in your prose and poetry. In fact, you begin *Singin', Swingin', and Gettin' Merry like Christmas* with the statement: "Music was my refuge." Do you believe Afro-American music in particular has shaped your work as well as your life?

M.A. So much. I listen for the rhythm in everything I write, in prose or poetry. And the rhythms I use are much like the blues and the spirituals. So that more often than not they are in 3/4 or 4/4 time. For example: [Angelou reads from *The Heart of a Woman*] "The drive to the airport was an adventure in motoring and a lesson in conversational dissembling" (76). "His clear tenor floated up over the heads of the already-irate passengers. The haunting beauty of the melody must have quelled some of the irritation, because no one asked Liam to shut up" (77). "It seemed to me that I washed, scrubbed, mopped, dusted and waxed thoroughly every other day. Vus was particular. He checked on my progress. Sometimes he would pull the sofa away from the wall to see if possibly . . ." (141). It is *always* there; wherever, it seems to me that there is the rhythm. And the melody of the piece, I work very hard for that melody.

A young woman told me that I had it easy because I have the art which Graham Greene has of making writing, a complex thing, seem so simple. So I said, 'yes, it's hard work,' and she replied, 'yes, but you have the art.' But "easy reading is damned hard writing."

C.A. Until I read *The Heart of a Woman*, I had not realized how very much involved you had been with the Civil Rights Movement. In this book you really capture the incredible sense of momentum, vitality, and hope. How important were your experiences as catalysts for your art?

M.A. I suppose it's so important for me in my life that it must come through in my work. Despite living in the middle of murk, I am an optimist. It is *contrived* optimism; it is not pollyanna. I have to really work very hard to find that flare of a kitchen match in a hurricane and claim it, shelter it, praise it. Very important. The challenge to hope in a hopeless time is part of our history. And I take it for myself personally, for me, Maya. I believe somewhere just beyond knowing now, there is knowing, and I shall know. *This* I shall overcome. There is a light, no larger than a pinhead, but I shall know. When I say I take it personally, I take that tradition of hoping against hope, which is the tradition of black Americans, for myself.

C.W. That may perhaps be defined as a spiritual quality. Do you see you writing as political as well as spiritual?

M.A. Well, yes. In the large sense, in that everything is political. If something I write encourages one person to save her life, that is a political act. I wrote *Gather Together in My Name* – the most painful book until *The Heart of a Woman*. In the book I had to admit, confess; I had to talk about prostitution, and it was painful. I talked to my son, my mother, my brother, and my husband, and they said, “tell it.” I call the book *Gather Together in My Name*, because so many people lie to young people. They say, “I have no skeletons in my closet. Why, when I was young I always obeyed.” And they lie like everything. So I thought all those people call gather together in my name. I would tell it.

I had a lot of really ugly things happen as a result right after the book's publication. Then I arrived in Cleveland, Ohio, and I was doing a signing in a large department store. Maybe one hundred-fifty people were in line. Suddenly I looked and there were black fingers and long fingernails that had curved over in the Mandarin style. And I looked to follow those, and the woman had a wig down to here, a miniskirt, a fake fur minicoat, which had been dirtied – it might have been white once --, false eyelashes out to there. She was about eighteen, maybe twenty. She leaned over and said, “Lady, I wanna tell you something, you even give me hope.” If she was the only person. . . The encouragement is: you may encounter defeats, but you must not be defeated.

C.W. Apart from your grandmother, can you identify that the source of that belief?

M.A. My mom, my mom is outrageous. And I'm a Christian, or trying to be. I'm very religious. I try to live what I understand a Christian life to be. It's my nature to try to be larger than what I appear to be, and that's a religious yearning.

C.W. Although all your books give insight into a quintessentially female experience, *The Heart of a Woman* seems to explore the most explicitly feminist themes. For example: your treatment of single motherhood and the portrayal of your marriage to a South African freedom fighter. Has the feminist movement influenced your reflections on your past?

M.A. No. I am a feminist; I am black; I am a human being. Now those three things are circumstances, as you look at the forces behind them, over which I have no control. I was born a human being, born as a black, and born as a female. Other things I may deal with, my Americanness, for example, or I may shift political loyalties. But, these three things I *am*. It is embarrassing for a woman to hear another woman say, “I am not a feminist.” What do you mean?! Who do you side with?

This book is about a woman’s heart, about surviving and being done down. If I were a man, I hope I would have the presence of mind to write “The Heart of a Man” and the courage to do so. But I have to talk about what I see, what I see as a black woman. I have to speak with my own voice.

C.W. One of the most moving passages in *The Heart of a Woman* involves a conversation among women married to African freedom fighters. You and the other women – most of whom are African, one of whom is West Indian – forge a powerful common bond. Is there a broader message in that scene: are there bonds linking black women on several continents?

M.A. If you have the luck to encounter women who will tell. That experience had to do in particular with African women. In Egypt, through the poet Hanifa Fathy, I met a group of Egyptian women involved with the Arab Women’s League. They were at once struggling against the larger oppressor, colonialism, and against a history of masculine oppression from their own men. I understood it. Unfortunately. I would like to say it’s such a rare occurrence that it was exotic. Unfortunately, I understood it clearly. It would be the same if I were in Vietnam and talked to the Vietnamese women. It is one of the internationally pervasive problems, and women today are choosing to take courage as their banner. Courage is the most important virtue because without it you can’t practice any of the other virtues with consistency.

C.W. Do you see alliances being formed among women in various societies who are facing like problems?

M.A. I haven’t seen them yet. It must happen. But you have to consider that certain movements are very new. One of the many American problems built into the fabric of the country, beyond the woven-in lie of “we hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal,” beyond the inherent lie that the people who were writing those statements owned other human beings, one of the serious

problems has been looking at the idea of freedom as every human being's inherent right. Just by being born, you've got it. It is ridiculous as a concept. It is wishful, wistful, and foolish. Freedom and justice for a group of animals is a dream to work toward. It is not sitting on every corner waiting to be picked up with the Sunday newspaper.

As a species we have not evolved much beyond the idea. Now that's fabulous, and for that we need to salute ourselves. But to say that we have conceived the idea and the next moment it is in our laps is ridiculous. We have to work diligently, courageously, without ceasing, to bring this thing into being. It is still in the mind. It will take us hundreds of years, if not thousands, to actually bring it so that we can see it. We need to tell our children that this quality which been conceived of most recently by human beings is something wonderful to work for. And your children's children and your children's children's children and everybody will be working to pull this order out of disorder.

C.W. The joy then is in the struggle.

M.A. Yes, yes, then you being to understand that you love the process. The process has as its final end the realization, but you fall in love with the process.

We are new as a species. We just got here yesterday. The reptiles were on this little ball of spit and sand three hundred million years. We just grew an opposing thumb—I think it was last week—and grew it by trying to pick up something to beat somebody down.

The terrifying irony is that we live such a short time. And it takes so long for an idea to be realized. Can you imagine the first person who had these fingers and saw this little nub growing and said, "got the nub, pretty soon we're going to be able to hold on to the whole hatchet?" Not to know that it was to be another three million years. You see?

Thomas Wolfe calls us "dupes of time and moths of gravity." We're like fireflies—lighted by an idea and hardly any time to work at it. Certainly no time if we don't realize it has to be worked for. At least in this brief span, we can try to come to grips with how large an idea it is and much work it demands, and try to pass it on to one other person. That's more than some people can achieve in a lifetime.

C.W. Thank you, Ms. Angelou.

The Protocols of Wonder in the Enunciatory Narrative of Maya Angelou

Eleanor W. Traylor

In November, Winston Salem, North Carolina, celebrates the wonder of autumnal glory crowning summer splendor, as does the cyclical movement portrayed on the canvas, “Nature Morte Aux Geraniums,” of Lois Mailou Jones. There, geraniums in the opulence of bloom sit tall, slightly leaning in a vase on a table surrounded by bowls of plump harvest apples, ablaze in russet-golden-scarlet skins hinting the slightest wrinkle. The landscape showing through the window framing them is a sunny, first-flowering scene. In memory, Thanksgiving eve at twilight in Maya Angelou’s kitchen is an ebullience of seasonal abundance. A riot of boxes sits on a kitchen table below the approving eyes of Momma Henderson in the portrait above. Each box owns a fat turkey ready for the roasting, bunches of after-frost collard and mustard greens, ham hocks, a dozen pick-of-the-harvest sweet potatoes, five pounds of flour, a large can of Crisco, nutmeg and spices covered over with granny apples and amber oranges. The boxes are stacked by the door with care, for the van from Mount Zion soon will be there. Remembering these boxes focuses my mourning for the loss of vitality. Gone is the one who adopted me, and I her, as sister; gone is a ritual of Thanksgiving we had shared in her bright yellow house encircled by crimson bourgainvillia (she said, “They’re roses, kid”). Gone is that intimation which had assuaged the still fresh, still full longing for my mother, gone; the faintest smell, a sound, a brown flat leaf on wet ground can produce *soldage*—memory of a joy not to be repeated in the same way again. But, brooding often summons the trickery by which the mind produces “a succession of trivial and apparently insignificant feelings” (Jameson 135)—things such as boxes on a table that displace a mood, and, in this case, inspire a thought. The thought occurred to me that the gift of the boxes configures *the protocols of wonder* informing the life and art of Maya Angelou. These protocols involve: *a gift*, some magical agency, enabling a *sojourner* whose *departure* from home caused by some villainy or some misfortunate lack embarks upon a *journey* leading to the *discovery* of something needed or wished for; the journey impels *combat* with an *adversary*, the positive outcome being entirely dependent upon a *donor* and *helpers*, who forecast the venturers *return* and *pursuit*.¹ Memory of these strategies, as I thought about the boxes, left me *wonderstruck*.

¹ The terms defining the wonder tale are elaborated by Vladimir Propp in *The Morphology of the Folktale*, 25-65.

Maya Angelou's "magnificent poetry of life"² begins on Easter day as it reinscribes the protocols of wonder evoked by the season. The story of her life, unfolding in *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* and crescendoing through six narratives, performs its first miracle as it enters the realm of "Autobiography and African American Women's Literature"—a planet identified and explored by Joanne Braxton accompanied by a core of brilliant explorers through its immense space in *The Cambridge Companion to African American Women's Literature* (2009). Their discoveries lead the fortunate reader to experience that moment when the morning stars rise and sing together. From rags to riches is not the celestial movement of this vast singing space; the movement is from more to more. "That more of wisdom in us dwell" is the span of its apparent orbit. And, with the publication of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), a big bang, like the rock that struck the head of Oris-n'la, created a "love for what happens to the air."³ The abundant planet of Black Women's life stories becomes accessible to the Universe, and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* opens the way. In the spring of this expansion, the voice of story chimes what Cheryl Wall calls an obligato.⁴ Liltng and trebbling, the voice of Toni Cade Bambara rising from the "Preface" to her landmark collection of stories entitled, *Gorilla My Love* (1972), sings: "the least you can do is spin off half the royalties to me...I deal in straight up fiction myself and mostly 'cause I lie a lot anyway" (Bambara ix). *Lie* is the word for story coined by Zora Neale Hurston, the anthropologist *Baba Yaga* who mined and continues to guard the welter of African American story. The confluence of Black Women's autobiography and story is the literary planet that bursts into global view, during the 1970s, and *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* is its inflammatu.

The enunciatory narrative of Maya Angelou's autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, sold more than one million copies before it appeared and yet remains, on high school, college, and now graduate reading lists. According to Random House publicity, the book is presently translated into seventeen languages attracting "tens of millions of readers." As to the fate of story, Toni Morrison's debut novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), gradually sold one million, nine hundred eighty five thousand, four hundred ninety-nine copies, and still counting. It remains on reading lists of high schools, college, and university syllabi directing pedagogical discourse in matters of literature, social studies, America, culture, the Humanities,

² From Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* quoted as the epigraph of Cheryl Wall's "1970: Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker."

³ I borrow Cheryl A. Wall's term "obligato" from her illumination of Toni Cade Bambara's place in the African American Literary tradition in "Toni's Obligato: Bambara and the African American Literary Tradition."

⁴ Claudia Tate's well-turned phrase "protocols of race" engenders my appellation, protocols of wonder. See her encyclical discussion of "the protocols of race" as it represses what she calls the "surplus," the undertext of African American Narrative, in *Psychoanalysis and Black Narrative*.

and related studies. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells* (1970), *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), and Louise Meriwether's *Daddy Was a Number Runner* (1970), like astronauts, liberate a wonder tale before the startled and unsuspecting eyes of a reading, listening public. As Cheryl Wall has indicated, "their plots, characters, and prose... changed the script" (Wall, 968). They also changed the custom of reading through the lens of what Claudia Tate discusses as "the protocols of race."⁵ A displacement occurs. Geographies, environments, subjects, customs, behaviors, personalities, unveiled in the woman's story, inflamed a desire to comprehend the *protocols of wonder* in the world where the caged bird sings.

Maya Angelou tells us the literal story of how she entered this world in *A Song Flung Up to Heaven*, the *finale* of her lyrical Autobiography, where the desire and quest of her storied journey is fulfilled. She records a telephone call that begins: "My name is Robert Loomis, and I am an editor at Random House...I am calling to ask if you'd like to write an autobiography" (206). The change in atmosphere from "What White Publishers Won't Publish," forecast in Zora Neale Hurston's autobiography *Dust Tracks On A Road* (1942), to an invitation calling *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* to print indicates a climate change illuminating Maya Angelou's words, "the gift my ancestors gave" ("Still I Rise"). This climactic event recalls creative production, scholarship, activism, and enterprise prevailing before and resounding through the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. But that is the outside story and climate surrounding Maya Angelou's commemorative emergent narrative.

Mindful of Clyde Taylor's vision of "the emergent narrative," in his recuperative, comprehensive exploration, *The Mask of Art*, I have argued elsewhere that emergent narratives enunciate contemporaneity.⁶ Such a concept interrogates the "post" prefixes that subvert the continual evolution of creative production and related enterprises of Black invention. I propose, then, that the emergent woman's narrative, as in Maya Angelou's autobiography, evolves in 1969 within the traditional or classical wonder tale, rupturing its finished surfaces "like a thirsty undertext," erupting through its protocols to "self-motivated expressiveness" (Taylor 261).

Like the canonical wonder tale, as defined by its analysts, the "emergent narrative" also begins in a world rife with misfortune. Some "villainy" has precipitated a rift in experience, and, most of all, has assaulted personality which

⁵ Eleanor W. Traylor, "Henry Dumas and the Discourse of Memory." *Black American Literature Forum*. Ed., Eugene B. Redmond. Volume 22. 2, (1988): 365-377.

⁶ The commemorative narrative that I argue here interrogates Harold Bloom's literary history in *The Anxiety of Influence*.

may be glossed as humanity. This circumstance has dis-lodged the personality, figured in the classical story as the hero, from his home and set him adrift upon a perilous journey in search of redress or re-establishment. Along the way, the hero must destabilize adversaries who threaten his existence. The outcome of this dubious battle is entirely dependent upon his encounter with a *donor* who provides him with a magical agent, and magic helpers (a person, a spirit, an amulet, or animal) who enable the hero's combat with adversaries and guide his return and pursuit. In *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales*, JoAnn Conrad, recognizes "the fundamental imperative of orality to mark the tale's authenticity." She recalls "the *contes de fées*, of the primarily female writers of the seventeenth-and-eighteenth century French nobility [which are] concerned with aspects of the marvelous -- transformations and wonder." Yet just as these stories were receiving wide audience, Conrad notes that "wonders were losing ground at court. In fact, tales of wonder had shifted from being constitutive of the elite classes in Europe to being seen as that which define the 'folk' and were relegated to the margins" (Conrad 1041). What Conrad emphasizes here is worthy of full quotation:

Fallen from favor in the courts, however, the marvelous became a marker of authenticity to those folklorists engaged in cobbling together not only a new discipline but new nations. According to this view, the ...folk, the purveyors of these tales of wonder, were in their vulgar fascination with the marvelous, the bearers of authenticity. The logic of this conceptualization of the vulgar underscores much of folklore scholarship today and is certainly [still] critical to it historically: into the vulgar were dumped a host of characters – women, the old, peasants, illiterates, and children – the stock characters in the folklore about folklore; and these constituted the ideal informants (Ibid).

Although she highlights folkloric scholarship in the structural approach of Vladimir Propp, the typological approach of Tzvetan Todorov, and the political approach of Frederic Jameson, she emphasizes the findings of Jack Zipes, who combines structural, typological, and political approaches, concluding that "all contribute to induce wonder and hope for change" (Zipes 50). Zipes also concludes that the "earthy, sensual, and secular sense of wonder and hope that distinguishes the wonder tales from other oral tales such as the legend, the fable, the anecdote, and the myth" moves us "to marvel about the working of the universe where anything can happen at anytime" (*Ibid*).

Through the looking glass of the generational wonder tale, we meet little Marguerite of the many names as she emerges from the wings to approach center stage of the "Colored Methodist Episcopal Church" in Stamps Arkansas. Here she begins a drama of identity unfolding from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* [CB] through five acts transgressing the scaffolding of a tale of wonder. This awkward

child has not yet encountered the epiphany of puberty that begins Janie's tale in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), nor is she housed in the brownstone memories of Selina Boyce in Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl Brownstones* (1959). Marguerite is stunned as she struggles to tell her story which, as she muses, "I hadn't so much forgot as I couldn't bring myself to remember" (CB 1). She does not know herself as a meta-narrative casting light on all those *she's* before, becoming, and continuing to re-form concepts of the iconic hero of the canonical tale. Convinced that she is a sight, she bawls her bemusement and wonderment to "the wriggling and giggling children sitting in the children's section of the ... church" (ibid) and also to the startled "minister's wife" whose "face full of sorry" tries to coax the child to memory of her lines (CB, 5). Marguerite cries, "What you looking at me for" diverting her listening audience from the truth of what is troubling her mind (CB 1). She is thinking of "Other things...more important" (ibid). The "Other things" worrying her involve how she looks standing there "in a plain ugly cut-down from a white woman's once-was-purple-throwaway. It was old lady-long too, but it didn't hide my skinny legs" (CB 4). When the child had first seen the dress "[h]anging softly over [her grandmother's] black Singer sewing machine, it looked like magic." Now conscious of what the audience outside her inner landscape would see, she begins her recitation in an interrogative mood: "What you looking at me for?"

Marguerite, an "emergent narrative," appears as a "clown," enacting a dance "of orchestrated clumsiness" (Taylor 235). In her liminal stage, "the impulse of positive imaging gives rise to desire" (ibid 235). Marguerite is besotted. She is thinking, "...I was really white and ... a cruel fairy stepmother, who was understandably jealous of my beauty, ... turned me into a too-big Negro girl, with nappy hair, broad feet and a space between her teeth that would hold a number-two pencil..." (CB 4-5). Her bemusing dream promises "[w]hen one day I woke out of my black ugly dream and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn't let me straighten...my light blue eyes were going to hypnotize them" (ibid). The deluded child, Marguerite, is unable to interpret or interpolate her befuddling dream, but the woman, her reproving guardian, a magical helper, in the cast of characters of the wonder tale, like the prodding minister's wife, can. In this case, the helper exposes the "cyclopean eye" (Taylor 165) of a universalizing standard of beauty that represses Marguerite's ability to imagine beauty, especially that of her own enunciation. She is struggling with "other" things.

In his penetrating essay on *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, Selwyn R. Cudjoe finds that "one of the shortcomings of the text revolves around the manner in which the story is told from the point of view of an adult who imposes the imagination, logic, and language of an adult upon the work and thus prevents the reader from participating in the unfolding of childhood consciousness..." (*Black*

Women Writers 16). Yet, through the looking glass of the wonder tale, stories, such as Marguerite's, or Cinderella's, Goldilock's, or Little Red Riding Hood's may be told by kindly helpers such as the minister's wife, or by narratological deceivers in the case of Goldilocks. Wonder tales may be told by snakes, wolves, witches, or rabbits. In these tales, children's voices peep through as fledglings. Marguerite, in the stage of liminality, awaits her initiation into clarity. "I didn't come to stay," she mumbles, like the babbling Alice who, on the run from the Jabberwocky, voices the strange hieroglyphics of Wonderland. Marguerite's language must be midwifed to expression by the *mystères*, the helpers, the adult guardians who assist the coming-of-age tale.

Marguerite's story is also an "imperfect narrative" (Taylor 255). It personifies Clyde Taylor's vision of the "ironic....depending on a double meaning twinned with the concept of the perfect that those with the privilege of power/knowledge are eager to impose." Further, "the concept of 'imperfect' culture acknowledges this power to define at the same time that it rejects the substance of the definitions" (ibid). As subject of her story, Marguerite stands before her audience as the living spectacle of the "unofficial, unorthodox, indiscrete, undisciplined, chaotic, methodologically incorrect, vulgar, or in a word imperfect" (ibid). She is bursting with desire "for the sweet release, still the greater joy...not only from being liberated from the silly church but from the knowledge that I wouldn't die from a busted head" (CB 5-6). After all, she has fulfilled the prompting of her midwives and managed to enunciate her liminal deliverance, mumbling "I justcometotellyouit's Easter Day" (ibid).

Marguerite, the emergent, imperfect narrative, now runs, "peeing and crying," to the house of "Baba Yaga." She is not suffering "the anxiety of influence."⁷ She is running to the rescue and correction—"I'd get a whipping to be sure" (CB 105)—in the house of the Baba Yaga of her story. In the wonder tale, the Baba Yaga is an author and editor of story. Her house "sits on a border defined by the presence of two kingdoms ... the one we live in opposed to another, located beyond thrice nine lands" (*Russian Folktale* 157-164).

Marguerite is headed for the Store-house of her grandmother, Momma Henderson, owner of "The WM. Johnson General Merchandise Store" (CB 7), her "favorite place to be" (CB 16); the place where... "just before bedtime... the promise of magic mornings returned to the Store and spread itself over the family in washed waves" (ibid); a fun house (CB 8) where "all of childhood's unanswered questions must finally be passed back to the town... the experience shared by the unknown majority (it) and the knowing minority (you)" (CB 19). Momma

⁷ The "imperfect narrative" questions the "narrative of victimization" elaborated in Charles Johnson's "The End of the Black American Narrative: A New Century Calls for New Stories Grounded in the Present, Leaving Behind the Painful History of Slavery in its Consequences."

Henderson's Store is a house where abundance is preserved. "In Stamps the custom was to can everything that could possibly be preserved" (CB 23). So, "after the first frost, all neighbors helped each other to slaughter hogs" and cure the meat (CB 23-24). As "from the smoke house, [in] the little garden that lay cousin-close...were choices that could set a child's mouth to watering...There were [g]reen beans... collards, cabbage, juicy red tomato preserves that came into their own on steaming buttered biscuits, and sausage, beets, and every fruit grown in Arkansas" (CB 24).

Moreover, the Store is a gathering place for the citizens of the town "where we live." "Farmers and maids, cooks and handymen, carpenters and all the children in town" (CB 87) ... and "Mrs. Flowers," a sister Baba Yaga, come to trade the stories that they inhabit and create. These discourse-making people "...Mrs. LaGrone, Mrs. Hendricks, Momma, Reverend Sneed, Lillia B, and Louse and Rex" (CB 25) were to Marguerite the definition of people. For Marguerite, "People were those who lived on my side of town. I didn't like them all, or, in fact, any of them very much, but they were people. These others, the strange pale creatures that lived in their alien unlife [on the other side of town], weren't considered folks. They were whitefolks" (ibid). Mystifications cloud the heretical mind of "the imperfect narrative" as she runs toward her initiation rites to the storied house of her grandmother, the Baba Yaga of her story. She does not dilly-dally, slip, or fall into "the kingdom of thrice nine lands." She runs to the place where two poetics wed -- the poetics of vulnerability with the poetics of power.

Once the "imperfect narrative" arrives at the abundant house of story, which is also the house of Baba Yaga's correction, her initiation rites begin. In the wonder tale, the Baba Yaga is the traveler's first and indispensable *donor*. "Go wash your face, sister" (CB 32), the commanding but benevolent voice of Momma Henderson greets Marguerite. Momma Henderson is protective, supervisory and loving—"a deep brooding love hung over her" (CB 55)—but, she is not indulgent. As a task mistress, she issues non-self-serving chores. Unlike the step-mothers or false Babas who populate wonder tales, Momma Henderson issues chores that ensure agency and avoid "a narrative of victimization."⁸

For Marguerite the chores are instructive: ". . . scrubbing the floors, raking the yards, polishing our shoes for Sunday (Uncle Willie's had to be shined with a biscuit)" (CB 109) and

⁸ I borrow Édouard Glissant's title *Poetics of Relation* where he theorizes the Antilles "as enduring an 'invalid' suffering imposed by history, yet also as a place whose unique interactions will one day produce an emergent global consensus" (cover).

Weighing the half pounds of flour”; ...depositing them dust-free into thin paper held a simple kind of adventure for me. I developed an eye for measuring. When I was absolutely accurate our appreciative customers used to admire: `Sister Henderson’s sure got some smart grandchildren. If I was off in the store’s favor the eagle-eyed women would say `put some more in that sack, child. Don’t try to make your profit offa me” (CB 15).

Some of Momma Henderson’s chores are tests of strength, endurance, accuracy and self-examination. They are the storied skills of laborer, artisan, and artist embroidered in the African American archive of story informing *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*. Momma Henderson embodies the skills that she passes on.

But, the genius of competence, imagination, and self-awareness displayed by the smart children growing up in the “relational poetic”⁹ of the wondrous house of Baba Yaga is not enough to avert a narrative of victimization. In this house where “family matters”¹⁰ reign, the children are, nevertheless, beset by “other things.” They are not distressed by Momma Henderson’s gospels: “Thou shall not be dirty and Thou shall not be impudent” (CB 26), and “Waste not, Want not,” even though Marguerite knows “my grandmother had more money than all the powhitetrash. We own land and houses” (CB 48). The children, Marguerite and Bailey, are not humiliated by her imposition of the protestant work ethic of Booker T. Washington. They are not wracked by the wraith-like Mr. Taylor’s ghost stories full of “white laughing baby angels with blue, blue, blue eyes” (CB 159). Family troubles do not daunt them: their terror of Uncle Willie’s deformity is dissolved by his unwillingness to be crippled, and his valiant stand without the help of straight legs. Even the voracious Reverend Thomas who ate the biggest, brownest, and the best parts of the chicken at every Sunday meal” (CB 34) or “the skin of despair” (CB 119) seeming to drape the bone-tired laborers coming into the store from the fields, do not disorient the children. In this house the children are readers, slowly contesting ideas of myriad identity. And in their neighborhood, Marguerite has found Louise -- a friend with whom she tests the law of gravity, and, together they discover how to “fall up and not down” (CB 138).

The angst of the grand children, Marguerite and Bailey, growing up in Momma Henderson’s house is caused by their discovery of “other things.” They have inadvertently met the snake whose bite has destroyed the edenic myth of America. Just as the seeming *pastorale* where they live is not the enchanted forest of Hansel and Gretel. Like Eden and the forest, their domain is also an abundant place, “spendthrift of beauty” (Taylor 275), rife with pleasure inhabited by people

⁹ Deborah McDowell’s “Family Matters” is an engaging discussion evoking ideas regarding narratology that I have outlined.

who enrich the imagination of these children. Their world is what *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* launches and what Clyde Taylor calls “terreiro” (281-282).

The *terreiro* is that place represented in the classical wonder tale as the Bear’s house, invaded by the vandalizing, thieving, privacy-threatening, imperious Goldilocks. Dolly McPherson’s book-length study, *Order out of Chaos: The Autobiographical Works of Maya Angelou* (1986), enhances the meaning of *terreiro* in its discussion of “interiority” in the Angelou narratives. “My side of town” is how Marguerite defines *terreiro*, as she explains that, with Bailey, “crossing the Black area of Stamps...seemed a whole world...” as, on an errand, they cannot resist playing with friends (CB 24). *Terreiro* is the site of a polyphonic community, displaying its “freemasonry,”¹⁰ where a summer picnic “shows off the individual artistry of each member” (CB 134) to receive the approval or correction by the citizenry. It is abundant, delicious, scolding, playful, sometimes violent, and sometimes silly. But, this community, an emblem of actualized democracy, as polyglossic, heteroglossic, dialogic as a summer picnic, is the prey of false consciousness, the pathology of a surrounding “Kingdom” whose gospel is democracy. “The pleasure fled,” says Marguerite “when we reached the white part of town” (CB, 24). *Terrero* is forever in danger of physical or psychic victimization.

Nevertheless, in this narrative place, a sister and a brother assuage the bogey monsters that plague their childhood. Bailey, the brother, exorcises the monstrous “double consciousness,”¹¹ the Duboisian “sense of two souls striving in one body,” affecting Marguerite as she struggles to remember her speech at church. “Bailey was the greatest person in my world... Where I was big, elbowy and grating, he was small, graceful and smooth...when I was described by our playmates as being shit color, he was lauded for his velvet-black skin. His hair fell down in black curls, and my head was covered with black steel wool. And yet he loved me” (CB 21). It was Bailey who “could count on very few punishments for his consistently outrageous behavior, for he was the pride of the Henderson /Johnson family (CB 22); it was Bailey “who created the most daring and interesting things to do” (CB 23); it was Bailey who “finished chores, homework, read more books than I and played the group games on the side of the hill with the best of them”; it was Bailey who “could even pray out loud in church and was apt at stealing pickles from the pickle barrel that set on the fruit counter under Uncle Willie’s nose” (CB 22).

This princely brother whose velvet-black skin displaces Marguerite’s yearning for whiteness, rekindling her response to beauty and awakening in her a new desire

¹⁰ James Weldon Johnson’s term for degrees of knowledge and special nobility of skill within a hermeneutic called the freemasonry of race. *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. 1912. (New York: Dover P, 2010) 34.

¹¹ W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. 1903. Eds. David W. Blight and Robert Gooding-Williams. (Boston and New York: Bedford Books, 1997) 4.

is a “surplus”¹² yielding “the brother narrative” emerging in the life of story. But the amazing Bailey also meets a life-threatening monster who invades the children’s world. This monster is, for them, too stark a reality to comprehend. Its horror appears to Bailey, and not in a dream, as a “man...dead and rotten... all rolled up like a mummy...he was bloated like a ball...then a white man walked over and pulled the sheet...He said, ‘Okay...this here’s one nigger nobody got to worry about no more’” (CB 192). Bailey had met the villain “of inequality and hate,” the “enigma” that causes “young Southern boys to start to unravel, start to *try* to unravel from seven years old to death” (CB 193). When Bailey meets this “horror,” Marguerite rides shotgun while “his soul just crawled behind his heart and curled up and went to sleep” (CB 191).

Marguerite becomes her brother’s keeper in combat to preserve the good, the beautiful, and the valuable. But as wonderfully emergent as are the “sister narrative” and the “brother narrative” in the coming-of-age story of Marguerite, neither are able to avert a narrative of victimization. Only the gift of the donor, the Baba Yaga, who provides the gift of magical agency is sufficient to the task of overcoming.

Through the spy glass of the wonder tale, the encounter with the Baba Yaga is transformative. Vladimir Propp explains that “[t]he wonder tale’s composition is defined by the presence of two kingdoms... one kingdom is the one we live in... this kingdom is opposed to another located ‘beyond thrice nine lands.’ Baba Yaga... is the guard at the border: she guards the entrance into that distant world.” Further, “the entrance passes through her hut...Baba Yaga guards the boundary of the other world and the entrance to it. She lets only the worthy pass through.” Consequently, “in the long tale, where the hero will encounter a multitude of adventures, the style of the tale changes at the moment when he reaches the little hut” (*Russian Folktale* 157). There “the tale’s” [realistic] beginning: peasant men and women... family life and family troubles and other kinds of work is forgotten.” Baba Yaga “is a complex, far from monosemantic personage” (ibid). In the yard of Baba Yaga, Momma Henderson’s store house, another dimension of human experience takes place: a “Cognitive Model.”¹³

The other dimension emerges in a scene of epiphany on a bright sunny morning, when Marguerite has swept clean the yards fronting the store house of Momma Henderson. The chore has inspired her to create a design in the dirt. She had “made half-moons carefully, so that the design stood out clearly and mask-like...Momma didn’t say anything but I knew she liked it” (CB 28). Momma Henderson, the Baba Yaga is standing on “the front porch in her big, wide apron.

¹² Claudia Tate’s encyclical discussion of what she calls “surplus,” as it represents the undertext of *African American Narrative in Psychoanalysis and Black Narrative*.

¹³ Tate’s discussion of DuBois’ critical vision is the basis for what she calls a “Cognitive Model” in *Psychoanalysis*.

The apron was so stiff by virtue of the starch that it could have stood alone” (ibid). Marguerite, standing beside her, is about to receive the gift – the magical agency – that is enough to address and overcome “the other things” that distress the children of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

The gift both attracts and deflects. It deflects a narrative of victimization as it attracts donors and helpers in behalf of the ceremony of being. Its radiance may be blinding, so it must be received within “the screen door” (CB 29) of consciousness.

“Sister, go on inside” (ibid) instructs Momma Henderson. “Then she looked up-toward toward the school... we saw a troop of the powwhite-trash kids marching over the hill and down by the side of the school” (ibid). Momma Henderson, standing alone on the porch of the store house where the trading of stories takes place, “...began to moan a hymn. Maybe not to moan, but the tune was so slow and the meter so strange that she could have been moaning” (ibid). Three girls (like the step daughters of the *Cinderella* tale) approach the store and “stand on the ground in front of Momma” (ibid). In the classical wonder tale, false consciousness is represented, for example, by the blood daughters of a cruel stepmother. “They react to the donor’s action’s not as the hero does, but negatively...when they find their way to Baba Yaga, [they] cannot and do not do anything” (*Russian Folktale* 160). The three girls who stand before Momma Henderson cannot and do not accomplish Baba Yaga’s chores.

Marguerite sees “the dirt of the girl’s cotton dresses [continue] on their legs, feet, and faces to make them all of a piece. Their greasy uncolored hair hung down, uncombed, with grim finality” (CB 30). Moreover, like the step-daughters of the classical tale, these girls, according to Vladimir Propp, represent “reluctance to work, laziness, rudeness, lack of self-control, impatience, arrogance, self-love, egotism” (*Russian Folktale* 162). The girls who “finally...stand...in front of Momma... pretend seriousness. Then they begin to mock her.” They begin the *danse macabre* of aping “that strange carriage that was Annie Henderson.” One “crossed her eyes, stuck her thumbs in both sides of her mouth and said, ‘Look here, Annie’”—the ugly drawl of derision. She has called the revered grandmother out of her proper name. “Grandmother hummed on and the apron strings trembled.” Another girl “did a puppet dance while her fellow clowns laughed at her...But the tall one who was almost a woman...bent down and put her hands flat on the ground ... shifted her weight and did a hand stand.” Then, “her dirty bare feet and long legs went straight for the sky. Her dress fell down around her shoulders and she had on no drawers. The slick pubic hair made a brown triangle where her legs came together. She hung in the vacuum of that lifeless morning for only a few seconds, then wavered and tumbled”... While, “[t]he other girls clapped her on the back and slapped their hands” (CB 31).

Now, Momma, the Baba Yaga, unmask a code of being suggestive enough to embrace the relational poetic of wonder actualized in the life stories of African American expressivity. She unveils before the watchful, tearful, and enraged Marguerite the magical agency of the self. Standing alone on the front porch of consciousness, Momma Henderson faces a spectacle of scalawag, dirty, imperious, impudence, as it performs a *danse macabre*. Its fascistic choreography plots the humiliation of humanity but, inadvertently, displays its own de-classification. Momma's humming sound is not spectral; it rises from within a magical realm. Its steady beat, an uninterrupted cadence, moves Marguerite to "praying" as it moves the "stone" of Momma's silence. Momma begins her song of being. This song projects *herself* beyond the naturalistic origins of a codified DNA and beyond social contracts of limitation. The "Bread of Heaven," invoked in Momma's magical realm, is actualized in an engagement that weds vulnerability and power. The steady rhythm of the song disorients the dance of mockery that signifies only an errant mimesis, doomed to fail.

As the "other things," the imperial narrative, backs out of the yard, Momma opens the screen door of Marguerite's consciousness. What Marguerite sees in Momma's face is "a brown moon that shone on me. She was beautiful...I could see that she was happy." What Marguerite heard was Momma humming, "Glory, Glory, Hallelujah." What she understands is "whatever the contest has been out there, I knew Momma had won" (CB 32). As the model that Momma has revealed transforms her consciousness, Marguerite walks out to the yard of revelation where she works on her "new" design. She, then, re-enters the store and "took Momma's hand and we both walked outside to look at the pattern" (CB 32). Marguerite has drawn a "narrative of commemoration" in the yard of wonder, consecrating her grandmother's gift:

It was a large heart with lots of hearts growing smaller inside, and piercing from the outside rim to the smallest inside heart was an arrow (ibid).

Momma's response, "Sister that's right pretty," and her return to the store singing "Glory, Glory, Hallelujah, when I lay my burden down" (ibid) records her acknowledgement that agency, her magical gift, has been properly received. The good Baba Yaga's work has been well done. After all, Marguerite, the imperfect narrative, however timidly emergent, has announced Easter Day.

In the wonder tale, when the hero has received the gift of Baba Yaga, he departs her house on a journey to redress his trouble-in-mind or to recover the lack in his dialogical community or to combat the monstrous incursion of "other things." In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, when Marguerite leaves Momma's house, she begins a winnowing journey that will change her name many times before the name achieves its fullest consequence. She journeys through "the thrice-nine

lands” where she might meet death. She is transported there by a wastrel father whose patriarchal “cultural script” (Froula 17) she will battle. In “a paternalistic “cultural script,” as Hortense Spillers has observed, “a daughter must disappear deconstructing into wife and mother of his children” (“The Politics” 127). Marguerite’s successful emergence from this battle augments her achievement as “sister narrative” to become “daughter narrative.” This occurrence as Christine Froula reads it, exemplifies Marguerite as “breaking...women’s forbidden stories into literary history -- an event that reverberates far beyond their heroes’ individual histories to reshape our sense of a cultural past and its possible future directions“ (“The Daughter’s” 13). As “the daughter narrative,” Marguerite will face the monster, *Rape*, tearer of the body, paralyzer of the voice, disrupter of the psyche. Marguerite screams: “I know that I was dying, and ... I longed for death ... I had to stop talking” (CB 80-85).

Through the ages of literary history, as Froula reminds us, through Ovid’s Philomela, Shakespeare’s Lucrece, and Freud’s denial of the cultural daughter’s story, Marguerite’s victory, as she barely survives the monster’s assault, is to, finally, call out his name and regain her speech. Mercifully, this sister-cum-daughter is able to stand as her grandmother stood: “...in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used ... for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy....”(“Criteria” 287). Marguerite’s perilous journey, guided by the Baba’s magical gift, has led her to fill the lack in her, so far, adventurous life. She has retrieved her mother whose “beauty made her powerful and her power made her unflinchingly honest ... I was struck by the wonder of her,” (CB 200) she exclaims. This discovery, amending the lack in Marguerite’s consciousness also bridges discontinuities in her community’s literary epic. The wonderful mother fulfills the dream of an historical foremother of African American autobiography. Having accomplished the amazing journey to Freedom, Harriet Jacobs’ Linda expresses a desire:

Reader, my story ends with freedom;
Not in the usual way, with marriage.
I and my children are now free!
We are as free from the power of
slaveholders as are the white people of the
North; and though that, according to my
idea, is not saying a great deal, it is a vast
improvement on *my* condition. [But] The dream of
my life is not yet realized (201).

Joy—a property which can neither be bought nor sold, whipped or seduced, or humiliated into slavery—the dream of four hundred years of life and story is realized in Marguerite’s design drawn in the soil of the testing yard where she comes of age. Joy, the wondrous discovery of multiple narratives of being, is the epiphany of her Baba Yaga’s gift of magical agency. It is the gift ensuring the birth that explores clauses in the endless syntax of identity through a literary imaginary in the life of story rising in a new millennium.

Now called Maya, her narratives of incremental identity continue a perilous journey to address a related need announced by a young woman who lives within her provenance of wonder. Paule Marshall’s “Reena” is bearer of the announcement of a lack. She explains:

The most critical fact of my existence [is] that definition of me, . . . and millions like us, formulated by others to serve out their fantasies, a definition we have to combat at an unconscionable cost to the self and even use, at times, in order to survive; the cause of so much shame and rage as well as oddly enough a source of pride; simply what it has meant what it means to be a black woman in America (“Reena” 20).

In joyous combat, filling this lack, Maya Angelou’s narratives of identity, *Gather Together in My Name* (1974), *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas* (1976), *The Heart of a Woman* (1981), *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986), through *A Joy Flung Up to Heaven* (2002), inhabit the literary planet -- black as a star lit midnight “gaining confidence in the ecstasy of air” (*God*, 169) -- that burst into global view during the 1970s. The abundance of that planet “humming in the night. . . humming” (“I Am A Black Woman” 11) and named “rememory” by Toni Morrison, its Nobel laureate, is the magical gift of ancestral agency. Its commemorative design displaces the protocols of race as it situates the protocols of wonder. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* beamed its entry.

...it is a wonder what the memory of a riot of boxes can jolt.

Works Cited

- Angelou, Maya. "Still I Rise." 1978. *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou*. New York: Random House, 1994. 163-164. Print.
- Angelou, Maya. *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*. 1969. New York: Random House, 1970. Print.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Austin and London: U of Texas P, 1981. Print.
- Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence: a Theory of Poetry*. New York: Oxford, UP, 1973.
- Conrad, JoAnn. "Wonder Tale." *Greenwood Encyclopedia of World Folktales and Fairy Tales, Volume Three: Q-Z*. Ed. Donald Haase. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2007. 1041-1042. Print.
- DuBois, W.E.B. "Criteria for Negro Art." *Crisis* 32 (October 1926). Rpt. In *W.E.B. DuBois: The Crisis Writings*. Ed. Daniel Walden, 279-89. Greenwich: Fawcett Publications, 1972. Print.
- Evans, Mari. "I Am A Black Woman." 1964. Rpt. *I Am A Black Woman: Poems by Mari Evans*. New York: William Morrow and Co., 1970. Print.
- Froula, Christine. "The Daughter's Seduction: Sexual Violence and Literary History." *Signs* 11.4 (Summer, 1986): 621-944. Rpt. *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 155: 12-23. Print.
- Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation*. Trans. Betsy Wang. 1990. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan. 2010. Print.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. 1937. Reprint. New York: Harper Perennial, 1990. Print.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. "What White Publishers Won't Print." *Dust Tracks on a Road*. New York: J.B. Lippincott, 1942. Print.
- Jacobs, Harriet A. *Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl*. 1860. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1987. Print.
- Jameson, Fredric. "Magical Narratives: On the Dialectical Use of Genre Criticism." *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. 1981. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1982. 103-150. Print.
- Johnson, Charles. "The End of the Black American Narrative: A New Century Calls for New Stories Grounded in the Present, Leaving Behind the Painful History of Slavery in its Consequences." *The American Scholar* 77.3 (2008): 32-38. Print.
- Jones, Lois M. "Nature aux Geraniums." 1952. Oil on Canvas. Collection of Camille O. and William H. Cosby.
- Marshall, Paule. *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. New York: Random House, 1959. Print.
- Marshall, Paule. "Reena." 1962. Rpt. *The Black Woman: An Anthology*. Ed. Toni Cade Bambara. New York: Signet Books, 1970. Print.
- Maurois, Andres. "Biography as a Work of Art." *Biography as High Adventure*. Ed. Stephen Oates. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1986. Print.

- McDowell, Deborah E. "Reading Family Matters." *Changing Our Own Words*. Ed. Cheryl A. Wall, New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1989. Print.
- McPherson, Dolly. *Order Out of Chaos: The Autobiographical Works of Maya Angelou*. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1986. Print.
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987. Print.
- Morrison, Toni. *God Help the Child*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015. Print.
- Propp, Vladimir. *Morphology of the Folktale*. 1958. First Edition. Trans. Laurence Scott. Austin: U of Texas P, 2003. Print.
- Propp, Vladimir. *The Russian Folktale*. Ed. and Trans. Ian Forrester. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1984. Print.
- Spillers, Hortense. "The Politics of Intimacy." *Sturdy Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women in Literature*. Ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall. Garden City: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1979.
- Tate, Claudia. *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels: Desire and the Protocols of Race*. New York: Oxford UP, 1998. Print.
- Taylor, Clyde R. *The Mask of Art: Breaking the Aesthetic Contract—Film and Literature*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1998. Print.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1975. Print.
- Wall, Cheryl. "1970: Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker." *New Literary History of America*. Eds. Marcus Greil and Werner Sollors. Cambridge: Belknap P, 2012. 968-972. Print.
- . "Toni's Obligato." In Linda Holmes and Cheryl Wall, eds. *Savoring the Salt: The Legacy of Toni Cade Bambara*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008. 27-42. Print.
- Zipes, Jack. *Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre*. New York: Routledge, 2006. Print.

Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* And the Advantages of a Pluralist Close Reading

Robert Evans

When Maya Angelou's most noted autobiographical work, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, was first published in 1969, the style of literary analysis known as "formalism" (or "New Criticism") had been dominant for several decades but was now beginning to fall out of fashion. Formalism, of course, had never been accepted with enthusiasm by all (or even most) professional students of literature. There had always been resisters and dissenters, especially among those who felt that literature should be studied relative to various "extrinsic" contexts, such as the life of the writer, the history of the writer's times, or the nature of the writer's or the audience's psychology. Formalists, by contrast, had tended to focus most of their attention on the patient, painstaking analysis of what they liked to call "the text itself," treating the literary work less as a personal, social, historical, or psychological document than as a piece of carefully crafted art.¹ Formalism had arisen in the 1930s and 1940s as a protest (often led by writers themselves) against more traditional methods of literary study, which had tended to stress exploration of the biographies of authors and the value of placing literature in its historical contexts. Students of literature (according to formalists) tended to examine everything but literature itself, and so the "New Critics" wanted to shift attention to the skill and artistry with which literary works were crafted.

Throughout the 1940s and 50s, formalism became increasingly influential, but by the late 1960s its dominance had begun to diminish. It never completely lost its appeal to many literary analysts and teachers, but it now came under regular and repeated attack from practitioners of a wide variety of other approaches. Structuralism, for instance, which began to gain adherents in the 1960s and early 1970s, seemed a more "scientific" method of literary study, while deconstruction (which rose to prominence in the 1970s and 1980s and began to supplant structuralism) seemed more rigorously philosophical. Meanwhile, Marxism and Freudianism, which had long had adherents both inside and outside the academy, continued to develop, often in new ways, while thematic approaches to literature (which tended to emphasize the ideas literary works explored and expressed) and archetypal approaches (which tended to emphasize the way "myths" appeal to some deep-rooted "human nature") continued to exercise great appeal. In addition, in

¹ For a classic discussion of these issues from a formalist perspective, see Wellek and Warren, *Theory of Literature*, first published in 1949 and revised several times afterwards.

the 1960s and 70s, the women's movement rose hand-in-hand with the rise of feminism in literary study, and the civil rights movement helped encourage a new attention to matters of race and ethnicity in approaches to literary texts. By the same token, "queer studies" eventually developed (especially in the late 1980s and early 1990s) as gays and lesbians gained greater rights and visibility, and indeed gender issues of all sorts became especially prominent in the study of literature in the closing decades of the twentieth century, as did "multiculturalism" of practically every variety imaginable. Meanwhile, more traditional methods of historical study were now supplemented (or supplanted) by the so-called "new historicism," and other approaches (such as reader-response criticism and postmodernism) also won their share of converts and advocates.²

In short, by the opening decades of the twenty-first century, any reader of literature in general, and of Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, in particular, had a smorgasbord of analytical options available—options both surveyed and on display in the volume dealing with Angelou's book recently edited by Mildred Mickle. (See especially the overview of criticism offered by Pamela Loos, and see also Jacquin.) In the last decades of the twentieth century (especially in the 1980s and early 1990s), conflict among these various approaches was often heated and intense; the term "culture wars" was invented to describe the frequently biting debates that often arose among advocates of diverse and seemingly contradictory positions. By the turn of the new century, however, a kind of exhaustion seemed to have set in, and a sort of de facto truce seemed to have been established. Analysts went about their varieties of business, choosing the theory or approach that most appealed to them individually, without feeling (for the most part) the need to insist that the chosen approach was necessarily the only correct way to study a literary text. In short, a kind of pragmatic inclusiveness seemed (or seems) to have settled down upon the academic study of literature. If not quite a generous-spirited philosophy of "live and let live," it nevertheless seems a sort of weary and practical attitude of "I won't bother you if you don't bother me." People seem much more content than they did in the 1980s and early 1990s simply to go about their own business and leave others to their own devices.

One way to justify and defend the current state of affairs is to make a case for the theory known as critical pluralism, an approach long advocated by Wayne Booth (among others, such as Paul Armstrong, James L. Battersby, Ronald Crane, Eugene Goodheart, Stanley Edgar Hyman, and James Phelan) and an approach that might have prevented much unnecessary conflict if it had been adopted much more widely and much earlier.³ Even today few professional students of literature

² For a recent and fairly typical account of these developments, see Habib.

³ See, for instance, Booth's book *Critical Understanding*.

identify themselves as pluralists *per se*, even though many of them seem to be abiding by a kind of pluralistic philosophy in their practical attitudes toward other theories. This is not the place to describe or defend pluralism at length; suffice it to say, simply, that pluralists assume that there is no single or “correct” way to read a work of literature and in fact that many different approaches can be justified. One approach is not necessarily superior to another; instead, each approach is treated by pluralists as a particular kind of tool, useful for doing a highly specific job and therefore not necessarily better than any other tool. To pursue the tool analogy a bit further: anyone who wants to drive a nail would be advised to use a hammer, not a screw-driver; anyone who wants to turn a screw would be advised to use a screw-driver, not a hammer. Anyone who wants to extract a nail would be advised to use the claws of the hammer, not its head; anyone who wants to make sure that the nail is efficiently driven would be advised to use the head of the hammer, not its claws. Or again: anyone who wants to view the moon should use a telescope, not a microscope, while in attempting to study a microbe, a microscope is obviously preferable. The basic tenet of pluralism, then, is that students of literature should choose the kind of tool that is most appropriate to the kind of study they seek to perform. Anyone interested in a literary text as a carefully crafted and coherent work of art might be advised to use a formalist approach; anyone interested in the work as a reflection of its writer’s life might be best advised to practice biographical criticism; anyone interested in how the work reflects its time might be best advised to use some kind of historical approach. And so on.⁴

Pluralism is not, however, either slack or lax in its attitude toward the use of different theories. It argues, in fact, that the practitioner of any particular approach has a responsibility to use that theory in as rigorous, thoughtful, and self-critical a way as possible. Thus a Marxist is obligated to be as aware as possible of both the strengths and the potential weakness of his theory and should strive to avoid or repair those weaknesses when offering a Marxist analysis; the same is true of Freudianism, deconstruction, and any other theory, and in fact one advantage of a pluralistic orientation is that it helps make any critic more aware of both the advantages and disadvantages of any particular method of analysis he happens to adopt or practice. Thus a formalist who is aware of all the potential alternatives to formalism is less likely to practice simple-minded formalism, and the same would be (ideally) true of the practitioner of any other specific approach. To use the tool analogy again: it helps, when assessing the advantages and disadvantages of any particular tool for any particular job, to have an entire box of tools readily visible

⁴ For a fuller discussion of these matters, see the two articles by Evans and the various sources cited there.

and readily at hand. One is then less likely to assume that a wrench (say) is the best of all possible tools and that there is nothing good to be said on behalf of a saw. The “best” tool is the one most appropriate to the particular task one is trying to accomplish.

When pluralism is combined with the fundamental analytical method known as “close reading”—that is, detailed attention to the minute particulars of a text's phrasing—the benefits can be abundant. Although “close reading” is a method that is often associated with formalism in particular, it can be (and frequently has been) used by adherents of many different kinds of theories, often with great profit.⁵ In the rest of this essay I hope to demonstrate the usefulness of combining pluralism with close reading by using a number of different critical perspectives to look in detail at one particular passage from Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. My purpose will not be to show that all these various kinds of approaches can be reconciled (often they cannot); rather, my purpose will be to demonstrate that using a number of different approaches when examining one isolated passage can help make us more fully aware of the complexity and richness of any text. Just as open and spirited dialogue about a text in a classroom benefits all participants by making them aware of the diversity and often the strengths of others' insights (not to mention the complications and nuances of the text being examined), so the method of “pluralist close reading” offers the potential for the fullest and most varied possible understanding of any text being studied. By running any particular text through a variety of critical “wringers,” one is likely to elicit a fuller sense of that text's complexities than if one uses a single method in isolation. That, at least, will be the working assumption of the rest of this essay.

In a passage that appears about two-thirds of the way through Chapter 26 of *Caged Bird*, Maya remembers her mother, with whom Maya and her brother Bailey were living in Oakland, California in the 1940s:

Mother's beauty made her powerful and her power made her unflinchingly honest. When we asked her what she did, what her job was, she walked us to Oakland's Seventh Street, where dusty bars and smoke shops sat in the laps of storefront churches. She pointed out Raincoat's Pinochle Parlor and Slim Jenkins' pretentious saloon. Some nights she played pinochle for money or ran a poker game at Mother Smith's or stopped at Slim's for a few drinks. She told us that she had never cheated anybody and wasn't making any preparations to do so. Her work was as honest as the job held by fat Mrs. Walker (a maid), who lived next door to us, and “a damn sight better paid.” She wouldn't bust suds for anybody or be anyone's kitchen bitch. The good Lord gave her a mind and she intended to use it

⁵ See, for instance, the anthology edited by Lentricchia and DuBois.

to support her mother and her children. She didn't need to add "And have a little fun along the way."

In the street people were genuinely happy to see her. "Hey, baby. What's the news?"

"Everything's steady, baby, steady."

"How you doing, pretty?"

"I can't win, 'cause of the shape I'm in." (Said with a laugh that belied the content.)

"You all right, momma?"

"Aw, they tell me the whitefolks still in the lead." (Said as if that was not quite the whole truth.)

She supported us efficiently with humor and imagination. Occasionally we were taken to Chinese restaurants or Italian pizza parlors. We were introduced to Hungarian goulash and Irish stew. Through food we learned that there were other people in the world. (Angelou 159-60)

Since formalist critics are interested in the skill with which a text is written and in the subtle craftsmanship of its design, they would find much to admire in this passage. The opening sentence, for instance, is skillfully balanced; it is divided into two halves by the word "and," with each half of the sentence stressing a different aspect of the mother's attractiveness. Some of the same words and much of the same syntax are used in each half of the sentence: "beauty made her powerful" is balanced by "power made her . . . honest," while the addition of the adverb "unflinchingly" in the second half of the sentence gets all the more emphasis precisely because it violates the expected pattern. Formalists admire literary complexity because they think it mirrors the complexity of reality itself, and so formalists would appreciate the ways in which this opening sentence captures the complex character of Maya's mother, who combines three attributes—beauty, power, and honesty—that are often considered in isolation. The mother's beauty does not make her shallow but contributes directly to her integrity; it does not make her the plaything of others but contributes directly to her own autonomy. In one relatively brief sentence, then, Angelou manages to suggest much of the richness of her mother's character. A formalist would admire both the economy and the complexity of this opening sentence.

Many other aspects of this passage would also attract a formalist's attention and win a formalist's respect. Thus a formalist would admire the colloquial clarity

of the phrasing; the evocative use of precise images (such as those that appear in the second half of the second sentence); the vivid but unobtrusive use of metaphor (as in the description of bars and shops that “sat in the laps of storefront churches”); the convincing specificity of the details (such as the reference to “Raincoat’s Pinochle Parlor”); and the oxymoronic irony of the reference to a “pretentious saloon.” A formalist would admire Angelou’s use of colorful slang (such as “bust suds” and “kitchen bitch”) as well as the paradox that the mother’s reference to a “kitchen bitch” immediately precedes her invocation of the “good Lord.” Meanwhile, the final sentence of the opening paragraph once again suggests the complexity of the mother’s character: she is a hard-working woman, but she also intends to enjoy herself. In short, anything in this passage that exhibits Angelou’s skill as a writer, and anything that contributes to our sense of the complexity of the characters and milieu presented, would win a formalist’s applause. Formalists are interested first and foremost in any work as a work of *art*, and they would find a good deal of artfulness and craftsmanship in Angelou’s writing, both here and elsewhere.

Feminists, however, would also find this passage intriguing, although for very different reasons. Since feminists are interested in the ways women are depicted in literature and are also interested in the ways literature can either retard or promote positive social change (especially for women), they would be immediately attracted to the ways in which this passage presents a powerful, self-confident, self-assertive woman, who thus provides a valuable role model, especially for her daughter. Instead of being exploited because of her beauty, she (in this passage, at least) uses her beauty to enhance her social power. She walks, speaks, and acts with the kind of authority usually attributed to men during the 1940s; she plays “pinochle for money” (not merely for amusement, or to seem amusing), and she runs a “poker game” at the significantly-named “Mother Smith’s” (a name that itself implies that women were beginning to exercise some independent economic power). She drinks like a man, swears like a man, and supports her family independently of any male’s assistance, and she refuses to adopt a more traditionally subservient female role by finding employment as anyone’s maid. Her self-respect seems to win her the respect and admiration of her community, and in general she sets a winning example of a powerful woman—an example as important, in some ways, to her son as it obviously is to her daughter. For all these reasons, feminists would find (and have found) such passages from Angelou’s book especially praise-worthy.⁶

Traditional historical critics, who examine literary texts with an eye toward the ways in which they reflect the eras in which (and about which) those texts are written, would also be intrigued by this passage from Angelou’s most famous work.

⁶ For recent examples of feminist approaches to Angelou’s text, see the essays by Barnwell and Manora. See also Lupton 70-73, 93-95, and 135-37.

Traditional historical critics would see the passage (and the book as a whole) as reflecting the growing influence of both feminism and the civil rights movement in the 1960s. *Caged Bird* was first published at a time when the struggle for civil rights had already made significant gains and when feminism was fully coming into its own, and this passage—with its memorable depiction of a strong, self-confident black woman—was not only an outgrowth of both social trends but also helped contribute to them. A traditional historical critic would also want to examine the ways in which this passage may reflect actual historical conditions in the 1940s—a decade in which women were gaining increasing social and economic independence (partly as a result of World War II) and a decade in which African Americans were also beginning increasingly to think of themselves as a self-respecting (if still enormously oppressed) minority. This one brief passage from Angelou's book already implies the richness and vivacity of life in a single black "ghetto," and a traditional historical critic would want to do as much research as possible to provide as much hard factual information as possible about the actual conditions that existed on "Oakland's Seventh Street" in the 1940s. Did the specific businesses mentioned in the opening paragraph of the passage really exist? How typical would have been the attitudes and lifestyle Maya attributes to her mother? These are just a few of the kinds of questions a traditional historical critic would want to answer after reading the quoted passage.⁷

A "new historicist" critic, on the other hand, might approach this passage with a different set of concerns in mind. Although the "new historicism" obviously shares, with more traditional forms of historical criticism, an interest in the historical details of a literary text, new historicists tend to be much more explicitly interested in issues of social power and in issues of social and personal conflict. The fact that power is so strongly and explicitly emphasized in the opening sentence of the quoted passage would probably intrigue a new historicist, and indeed the entire passage can be read as one that reflects the jostling and negotiations associated with power struggles, both within and between communities. Maya's mother is in competition not only with whites but with men and with other women; her beauty is a kind of weapon that allows her to assert herself and that also allows her to feel superior to such other blacks as "fat Mrs. Walker." Maya's mother jokes that "'whitefolks [are] still in the lead,'" but when she makes such a statement, she speaks "as if that was not quite the whole truth." Yet despite her appealing self-confidence, Maya's mother is still undeniably a member of two oppressed social groups (blacks and women), and indeed her need to assert herself partly reflects her realization that life is especially competitive, and especially hard, for people in her

⁷ For a recent example of an historical approach to the Angelou's book, see, for instance, the essay by Sickels.

position. Matters of power, in short, are both explicitly and implicitly important in this passage—a fact that would not surprise any new historicist.⁸

Marxists would also find this passage intriguing, although for different reasons than would the kinds of critics already mentioned. Marxists, with their strong interest in conflict between different economic classes and with their focus on the ways the poor are oppressed by the rich, might express real skepticism about the kind and degree of power that Maya's mother really possesses. Her beauty, after all, is merely temporary, and by relying so much on her attractive physical appearance as a source of her social power, she is setting herself up (or is being set up by society's prevailing capitalist, materialist values) for inevitable frustration and disappointment. Despite her apparent success and popularity, she is still relatively poor, and her living conditions are never likely to change substantially as long as she acts and thinks of herself as an isolated individual who competes with other people of her own race and class. Her superior attitude toward Mrs. Walker, for instance, will ultimately prove self-defeating; a Marxist would hope that persons such as Mrs. Walker and Maya's mother could make common cause and could unite with other poor people to combat the dominant class that oppresses them all. However, instead of adopting an explicitly political outlook and openly proletarian allegiances, Maya's mother thinks in terms of bourgeois individualism and even takes refuge in religion, that "opiate of the masses" (in Marx's famous formulation). For Marxists, her strong work ethic would seem admirable (and would seem typical of people of her class), but as long as she works mainly for herself, in isolation from her potential comrades, she is unlikely to contribute to the real, larger, and much-needed social change that Marxists (like feminists) seek to promote.⁹

However, whereas many of the theorists already discussed might view Maya's mother in terms of her differences from other people (whether as a woman, a black, or a member of the lower class), archetypal critics, who emphasize a commonly shared "human nature" rooted in a "collective unconscious," might see her as an archetype of the ideal mother figure—a figure likely to win admiration and respect (especially from her children) in all eras, societies, and economic classes. Maya's mother is beautiful; she is strong; she is resourceful; and she is self-confident, and in all these ways (as well as many others) she is the sort of mother almost any child would wish to have. She embodies traits that have helped sustain the human race since time immemorial, and she lives (an archetypal critic might argue) according to a set of personal values that is never likely to lose its potency and appeal. She is, in fact, almost a kind of ideal, mythic "goddess" figure, and she is recognized as

⁸ Issues of power figure, for instance, in the essay by Vermillion.

⁹ See, for example, the essay by DeGout. For such an approach to a contemporary of Angelou, see, for instance, the essay by Hughey.

such both by her own children and by the community at large. It hardly seems a coincidence that people call her “baby” (even though that term was and is, of course, a part of the conventional slang of her culture), since she seems the embodiment of a continually youthful sort of authority, power, and vitality. She is (at least in this passage, and at least according to an archetypal critic) the sort of mother who would be appreciated almost anywhere by almost anyone. For an archetypal critic, the race, class, and even the sex of Maya’s mother are ultimately less interesting than the ways she embodies many of the ideal mythic traits of the Parent as Hero.¹⁰

Reader-response critics, who stress the distinctive individual reactions of specific readers (or kinds of readers) to literary texts, might argue that any reader’s response to Maya’s mother would be highly personal. Readers who had (or who have) this kind of mother themselves might especially admire the portrait Angelou paints of her own mother here, while readers who had have had (or who have) weaker, less appealing, less attractive mothers might find this portrait all the more appealing. Over-weight persons might resent the passing reference to “fat Mrs. Walker”; atheists might be skeptical of the reference to the “good Lord”; persons with a strong sense of social propriety might resent the vulgarity and obscenity of some of the mother’s phrasing; and persons brought up in similar social circumstances might enjoy the ways Angelou vividly re-creates a whole era and milieu in a few skillful paragraphs. Obviously this list of potential and highly personal responses could be extended almost indefinitely (urban blacks and assertive women might find this passage especially appealing, for instance), since for reader-response critics there are almost as many distinctive possible responses to a work of literature as there are individual readers themselves.

Structuralist critics, on the other hand, might be more interested in the “binary oppositions” built into this passage, since these kinds of critics tend to emphasize the ways in which literary texts, like societies themselves, are structured in terms of codes rooted in such oppositions. Thus, Maya’s mother seems beautiful, powerful, honest, independent, resourceful, plain-spoken, religious, and full of good humor, which automatically means that all these traits are partly defined in terms of their opposites: she is *not* ugly, weak, dishonest, dependent, uninventive, grandiloquent, atheistic, and solemn. The fact that all the positive traits associated with Maya’s mother are associated with a *black* woman is significant, since all these positive associations imply that blackness itself is a positive trait—an implication that flew in the face of prejudices that were widespread not only at the time Angelou wrote but especially during the era about which she was writing. The excerpted passage is thus built around a series of structured opposites that affirm the value of one

¹⁰ For a very brief application of this sort of criticism to a different work by Angelou, see Rochman.

black woman in particular and thereby imply the value of other black people in general.¹¹

A deconstructive critic, however, might suggest that the kind of structure just outlined is much less stable than it might at first appear. Thus, because the mother's power depends so crucially on her beauty, and because her beauty is inevitably ephemeral and fleeting, her power is far less firm than it seems. And, since her honesty depends on a power that depends on an impermanent beauty, her honesty itself is not nearly as solid as it might initially appear. Indeed, perhaps the person with whom she is being least honest is herself, since she fails to appreciate the real limits to her social power as a poor black woman living in a profoundly racist society. She announces that she has never cheated anyone and never intends to cheat anyone, but perhaps she fails to recognize the ways in which she cheats herself (and risks being cheated by others) by thinking of herself as such an autonomous, independent agent, when in fact the limits to her autonomy are significant and when her position is, in some ways, as dependent as that of the maid for whom she feels such contempt. A deconstructive critic, in short, would undermine our sense of the various certainties suggested by many of the other kinds of critics (especially the structuralist), leaving us with a sense of the numerous unresolved (and irresolvable) complexities latent within the excerpt. Nothing, for a deconstructive critic, is as plain and simple as it initially seems; there are gaps and paradoxes and ambiguities to be found in any piece of language, and none of them is as neat or tidy or harmonious as a formalist might hope or assume.¹²

To the wide variety of analytical methods already cited, many more might easily be added. By now, however, the main point should be clear: a pluralist approach to this single excerpt from Angelou's book is valuable not only because of the insights provided by each particular perspective but because of the way each perspective illuminates the others by calling attention both to their special strengths and to their inherent blind spots. Reading Angelou's text (or any other) from a variety of points of view helps display both the value and the limitations of each individual viewpoint. Most significantly, however, it helps illuminate the multiple complexities of the primary text itself.

¹¹ See, for instance, the essay by Walker.

¹² For a deconstructive approach to a different text by Angelou, see Lupton 112-14.

Works Cited or Consulted

- Abrams, M. H. *Doing Things with Texts: Essays in Criticism and Critical Theory*. Ed. Michael Fischer. New York: Norton, 1989. Print.
- Angelou, Maya. *The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou*. New York: The Modern Library, 2004. Print.
- Armstrong, Paul B. *Conflicting Readings: Variety and Validity in Interpretation*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1990. Print.
- Barnwell, Cherron A. "Singin' de Blues, Writing Black Female Survival in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*." Mickle, ed. 219-36. Print.
- Battersby, James L. *Paradigms Regained: Pluralism and the Practice of Criticism*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1991. Print.
- . *Reason and the Nature of Texts*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1996. Print.
- Booth, Wayne C. *Critical Understanding: The Powers and Limits of Pluralism*. Chicago: University of Chicago P, 1982. Print.
- . *Now Don't Try to Reason with Me: Essays and Ironies for a Credulous Age*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1970. Print.
- . "Pluralism in the Classroom." *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1986): 468-79. Print.
- Crane, Ronald S. *The Languages of Criticism and the Structure of Poetry*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1953. Print.
- DeGout, Yasmin Y. "The Poetry of Maya Angelou: Liberation Ideology and Technique." *Langston Hughes Review* 19 (2005): 36-47. Print.
- Eagleton, Terry. *The Eagleton Reader*. Ed. Stephen Regan. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998. Print.
- Erlich, Bruce. "Amphibolies: On the Critical Self-Contradictions of 'Pluralism.'" *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1986): 521-49. Print.
- Evans, Robert C. "Literary Theory and Literary Criticism: What's the Use?" *Short Fiction: A Critical Companion*. Ed. Robert C. Evans, Anne C. Little, and Barbara Wiedemann. West Cornwall, CT: Locust Hill P, 1997. xv-lxxvi. Print.
- . "'What Is Truth?': Defining and Defending Critical Pluralism." *Fault Lines and Controversies in the Study of Seventeenth-Century English Poetry*. Ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth. Columbia: University of Missouri P, 2002. 10-21. Print.
- Goodheart, Eugene. *The Skeptic Disposition: Deconstruction, Ideology, and Other Matters*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1991. Print.
- Graff, Gerald. *Teaching the Conflicts: Gerald Graff, Curricular Reform, and the Culture Wars*. Ed. William E. Cain. New York: Garland, 1994. Print.
- Habib, Rafey. *A History of Literary Criticism, from Plato to the Present*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005. Print.

- Hughey, Matthew W. "The Sociology, Pedagogy, and Theology of Huey P. Newton: Toward a Radical Democratic Utopia." *Western Journal of Black Studies* 29:3 (2005): 639-655. Print.
- Hyman, Stanley Edgar. *The Armed Vision: A Study in the Methods of Modern Literary Criticism*. New York: Knopf, 1948. Print.
- . *Iago: Some Approaches to the Illusion of His Motivation*. New York: Atheneum, 1970. Print.
- Jaquin, Eileen O. "Maya Angelou (1928-)." *African American Autobiographers: A Sourcebook*. Ed. Emmanuel S. Nelson. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2002. 10-28. Print.
- Kermode, Frank. "Changing Epochs." *What's Happened to the Humanities?* Ed. Alvin Kernan. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997. 162-78. Print.
- Lentricchia, Frank and Andrew DuBois, eds. *Close Reading: The Reader*. Durham, NC: Duke University P, 2003. Print.
- Loos, Pamela. "The Critical Reception of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*." Mickle, ed. 35-51. Print.
- Lupton, Mary Jane. *Maya Angelou: A Critical Companion*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1998. Print.
- Manora, Yolanda M. "'What You Looking at Me For? I Didn't Come to Stay': Displacement, Disruption, and Black Female Subjectivity in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*." Mickle, ed. 192-210. Print.
- Mickle, Mildred, ed. *Critical Insights: I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Pasadena, CA: Salem, 2010. Print.
- Phelan, James. "Pluralism, Politics, and the Evaluation of Criticism." *Rhetoric and Pluralism: Legacies of Wayne Booth*. Ed. Frederick J. Antczak. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1995. 119-34. Print.
- Rochman, Hazel. "Review of *Life Doesn't Frighten Me*." Booklist 90.9 (1 Jan. 1994): 829. Rpt. in *Children's Literature Review*. Detroit: Gale. Literature Resource Center. Web. 14 Feb. 2015. Print.
- Sickels, Amy. "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings: African American Literary Tradition and the Civil Rights Era." Mickle, ed. 19-34. Print.
- Vermillion, Mary. "Reembodying the Self: Representations of Rape in Incidents in the *Life of a Slave Girl* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*." Mickle, ed. 128-48. Print.
- Walker, Pierre A. "Racial Protest, Identity, Words, and Form in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*." *College Literature* 22:3 (1995): 91-108. Print.
- Wellek, René and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949. Print.
- Zhang, Longxi. "Epilogue: Toward Interpretive Pluralism." *The Tao and the Logos: Literary Hermeneutics, East and West*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1992. Print.

The “Voice of Melody”: Healing and Transformation in Maya Angelou’s Life Narratives

Lorraine M. Henry

And then I try to enchant myself into that particular situation I want to write about,
just cover myself in it, and keep listening for the rhythm
(“*Maya Angelou: Resolving the Past, Embracing the Future*”)

“...music was my friend, my lover, my family.”
(*Gather Together in My Name*)

“Music was my refuge.”
(*Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas*)

Part of Maya Angelou’s genius is to view the world as a musical palette. She intuits that there is a deep and abiding connection between poetry and bird song. She, like Paul Laurence Dunbar, knows “why the caged bird sings” (“Sympathy”). She, like Percy Bysshe Shelley’s skylark, knows the ecstasy of song (“To a Skylark”). Just like Ray Charles, she apprehended that all the world is sound. Did not Ray hear the hummingbird when others were unaware of it? That is why my reading of Angelou’s autobiographies (hereafter referred to as life narratives) suggests to me that she wholly agrees with Mahalia Jackson who said, “Music speaks a language to individual souls that cannot always be expressed by the spoken word. There is something about music that your soul gets the message. No matter what trouble comes to a person music can help him face it (Jackson 267). “There is a Balm in Gilead” and Angelou demonstrates that music -- a manifestation of that balm-- liberates, heals and transforms. Indeed it is the liberating, healing, and transformative power of music that becomes a narrative formula and thematic force in Angelou’s life narratives: *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), *Gather Together in My Name* (1974), *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas* (1976), *The Heart of a Woman* (1981), *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986) and the collected essays in *A Song Flung Up to Heaven*. In these works music functions to delineate character, to establish scenes and corresponding mood, and to precipitate and/or accompany epiphanies.

Music animates the descriptions of Angelou’s family, friends, and acquaintances who appear in her life narratives. For example, her paternal grandmother Annie Henderson was Angelou’s ‘rock of Gibraltar.’ She told Lawrence Toppman, “I grew up with my grandmother who was 6-2, and I thought maybe she was God, with her mental repose, her serenity, her deep voice and great love” (qtd in Elliot’s

Conversations 144). In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* Annie Henderson is described in terms of her singing.

People spoke of Momma as a good-looking woman...
I saw only her power and strength. She was taller than any woman in my personal world, and her hands were so large they could span my head from ear to ear. Her voice was soft only because she chose to keep it so. In church, when she was called upon to sing, she seemed to pull out plugs from behind her jaws and the huge, almost rough sound would pour over the listeners and throb in the air (38).

Much like Dunbar’s Malindy, Annie Henderson mesmerized audiences with her voice. The minister would invite her to sing every Sunday without fail. Once assured of the invitation, “she leaned on the bench in front and pushed herself to a standing position, and then she opened her mouth and the song jumped out as if it had only been waiting for the right time to make an appearance (38). No one ever tired of hearing her sing for Angelou recalls, “I don’t remember anyone’s ever remarking on her sincerity or readiness to sing” (39).

Angelou’s only sibling her brother Bailey was her confidant and defender. He, too, is associated with singing.

Playing hide-and-seek, his voice was easily identified, singing,
‘Last night, night before, twenty-four robbers at my door. Who all is hid? Ask me to let them in, hit ‘em in the head with a rolling pin. Who all is hid?’ (CB 18)

This image of Bailey as a child is measured against the image of Bailey as a young adult when he and Angelou were drifting apart. She states:

[t]he air between Bailey and me had coarsened with our growing up and thickened with his cynicism. He could no longer see me clearly and I could not distinguish his black male disappointment in life. . . . His fast speech which used to stumble into a stutter with excitement, had slowed, and a songless monotone rasped out his meanings. (*Gather Together* 88)

Angelou’s father Bailey, Sr., and mother Vivian Baxter were in and out of her life when she was young. She describes her father’s comings and goings as “all of one piece” (CB 50); her mother’s gaiety is captured by her perpetual singing and dancing. When Bailey and Angelou come to live with Vivian Baxter in California,

she sings “When the Swallows Come Back to Capistrano” (CB 172). To foster their budding relationship, Vivian Baxter awakened Bailey and Angelou in the middle of the night to invite them to a party for just the three of them. She apologized for the absence of an ‘orchestra’ and provided the entertainment herself. “She sang and did the Time Step and the Snake Hips and the Suzy Q” (CB 174) and was utterly irresistible. Angelou and Bailey were completely enthralled.

Family friends are also spoken of in terms of music. The most important of these was Mrs. Flowers whose tender ministrations coaxed young Maya out of her self-imposed silence. When Mrs. Flowers read the opening lines from *A Tale of Two Cities*, Angelou’s reaction was immediate: “Her voice slid in and curved down through and over the words. She was nearly singing. I wanted to look at the pages. Were they the same that I had read? Or were there notes, music, lined on the pages, as in a hymn book?” (CB 84). Mrs. Flowers was a friend from Stamps, Arkansas, but Mr. Red Legs was a family friend whom Angelou met while she and Bailey were living with their mother in California. A story that he told her was remembered “like a favorite melody” (CB 187).

A young single mother, Angelou strikes out on her own *In Gather Together in My Name*, but her life was fraught with difficulty. Once she acquires steady employment and finds a reliable babysitter for her baby son Guy, she says her “life began to move at a measured tempo” (34). Notably Angelou conveys the function of music to express the feelings of one who is without words. Her baby Guy provides this example that is told from his perspective. “A baby’s love for his mother is probably the sweetest emotion we can savor. When my son heard my voice at the downstairs door he’d begin to sing, and when I arrived in his view he’d fall back on his fat legs, his behind would thud to the floor and he’d laugh, his big head rocking up and down” (90).

When Angelou committed to a show-business career with R. L. Poole, she was consumed by dancing. Charlie Parker’s “Cool Breeze” was a metonymic device and her ‘practice piece.’ The rhythm is felt and almost audible in her description of a rehearsal:

Flash, slide through the opening riff, then stash during Bird’s solo;
keeping soft-shoe time by dusting the boards with the soles of my
feet, then breaking during Bud Powell’s piano wizardry. Break, cross
step. Chicago. Fall. Fall. Break, crossover. Apple. Break. Time step.
Slap crossover. Then break and Fall off the Log, going out on the
closing riff (100-101).

Practice paid off, and she and R. L. Poole achieved a degree of success. Angelou’s jubilation is disclosed in a series of metaphors: “Each time I danced near R. L., I laughed out loud at the perfect glory of it all. The music was my friend, my lover, my family” (*Gather Together* 112).

Angelou’s penchant for music has not gone unnoticed. Speaking, in particular, about *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas*,” Mary Jane Lupton posits that Angelou leaves “no doubt in the reader’s mind about the importance of music and points out that Angelou’s use of opposition and her doubling of plot lines is similar to the polyphonic rhythms in jazz music (Lupton 109-110). Dolly McPherson postulates that Angelou is like a blues musician who utilizes the sorrows, tribulations, and triumphs of her life as the nexus of art (McPherson, 18). Both assessments are correct. However, I would add that *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas* is exceptional because there are more allusions to music in this work than in any of her life narratives, including those that preceded it and those that follow. Moreover, *Singin’ and Swingin’* is also distinctive because it most fully reveals her repertoire of music in a single volume. Therefore, *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry like Christmas*” continues to demonstrate the importance of music in Angelou’s literary oeuvre and augurs its indispensability in the works that follow, namely *The Heart of a Woman* and *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes*.

Fittingly, Angelou’s musical odyssey begins in *Singin’ and Swingin’* when she accepts a position at the Melrose Record Shop, a fortuitous happenstance that aided and abetted her passion for music.¹ “Early mornings,” she related “were given over to Bartok and Schoenberg, [m]idmorning[s] ...to the vocals of Billy Eckstine, Billie Holiday, Nat Cole, Louis Jordan and Bull Moose Jackson” followed by lunch and “the giants of bebop”, such as Charles Parker and Max Roach, Dizzy Gillespie, Sarah Vaughan and Al Haig and Howard McGhee. Blues belonged to late afternoons.... (12-13).

Angelou also became even more familiar with songsters like Jo Stafford, Helen O’Connell, Margaret Whiting, Dinah Shore, Frank Sinatra, Bob Crosby, Bing Crosby and Bob Eberle, Ted Beneke, Anita O’Day, Mel Torme, as well as the Big Bands and musicians like Stan Kenton, Neal Heft, and Billy May. Other references to music in *Singin’ and Swingin’* are numerous and extensive and run the gamut of those genres from the African American musical tradition, namely spirituals, gospel, blues, and jazz. A sampling of these references follows:

¹ Angelou met her first husband Tosh Angelos at the Melrose Record Shop.

- Jazz: “Well You Needn’t” - Thelonius Monk
“Night in Tunisia” - Dizzy Gillespie
“Cheers” - Charlie Parker
“Dexter’s Blues” - Dexter Gordon
“Lester Leaps In” - Prez
- Blues: “Mean Old Frisco Blues” - Arthur Crudup
“In the Dark” - Lil Green
- Spirituals: “Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho”
“Go Down Moses”
“Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel”
“Ezekiel saw the wheel, up in the middle of the air”
“Little David Play On Your Harp”
- Calypso - “Stone Cold Dead in de Market”
“Run Joe Run” - by Louis Jordan
“Rum and Coca-Cola”
Angelou danced to “Alice Blue Gown”
“Tea for Two”
“Smoke Gets In Your Eyes”
“Besame Mucho”
“Lady in Red”
“Blue Moon”
“Caravan”
“Night in Tunisia” - listed previously
“Babalu”

Other songs and singers mentioned in *Singin’ and Swingin’* include “Love for Sale,” sung by Jorie Remus, the star Angelou replaced at the Purple Onion nightclub in San Francisco; “Monotonous” sung by Eartha Kitt and “Boston Beguine” crooned by Alice Ghostly at the Purple Onion. Then there is “Little Girl from Little Rock” sung by Ketty Lester at the Purple Onion; songs from *Porgy and Bess*, namely “Summertime,” “Strawberry Song,” “Go way from my window/Go way from my door; airs from *Madame Butterfly* or *Cavaleria Rusticana*, all rendered by the *Porgy and Bess* singers; and the song “I Can’t Give You Anything But Love” that Angelou sang for an audition, and “Saint James Infirmary,” just to name a few. Angelou’s knowledge of music is broad.

In addition to revealing that Angelou is a music aficionado, *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry like Christmas* marks the first time Angelou opens with the chorus from a song, a pattern that she would repeat in subsequent life narratives:

“Don’t the moon look lonesome shining through the trees?
Ah, don’t the moon look lonesome shining through the trees?
Don’t your house look lonesome when your baby
pack up to leave?” (3).²

Those lyrics are immediately followed by this meditation on the palliative powers of music.

Music was my refuge. I could crawl into the spaces between the notes
and curl my back to loneliness.
In my rented room (cooking privileges down the hall), I
would play a record, then put my arms around the shoulders of
the song. As we danced, glued together, I would nuzzle into its neck,
kissing the skin, and rubbing its cheek with my own (3).

Hence, music is an antidote to loneliness. It also feeds Angelou’s fantasy life. When Billy Eckstine sang these lines from “A Cottage for Sale, she felt he was singing exclusively to her;

‘Our little dream castle with everything gone
Is lonely and silent, the shades are all drawn
My heart is heavy as I gaze upon
A cottage for sale’ (20).

As she opined, “[t]hat was my house and it was vacant. If Mr. Right would come along right now, soon we could move in and truly begin to live” (20).

The employment of musical tropes noted in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *Gather Together in My Name* continues in *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas*, a title that proclaims a music mission and affirms Dolly McPherson’s description of it “as a praise song to *Porgy and Bess*” (85). Angelou travels overseas with the musical company of *Porgy and Bess* as its premiere dancer. She also had a limited singing role. Characteristically, she relies on music to paint a memorable picture of the cast members closest to her. Thus, “Martha Flowers was as delicately made as a Stradivarius. Her complexion was the rich brown of polished mahogany and her hands fine and small” (167). If Martha was a violin, Lillian Hayman was a cello” (167). Rhoda Boggs, “who had the lyrical voice and artistic temperament of almost every classical soprano” (276) is involved in an

² This was the chorus for “Sent for You Yesterday and Here You Come Today” a song popularized by Jimmy Rushing, featured singer of the Count Basie Orchestra.

argument. In the heated altercation, Boggs' indignant voice "sounded like a flute player in anger" (219).

The tendency to make use of music to describe those she encounters during her lifetime is also apparent in *The Heart of a Woman* and *A Song Flung Up to Heaven*. No respecter of persons, Angelou presents both the celebrated and the less well known in musical terms. Malcolm X's voice is "black baritone and musical" (*Heart*, 176). Angelou recalled Malcolm's fiery brand of public speaking about racism and social and political unrest, but remembered how [h]is voice "would soften and take on a new melody" whenever he spoke of his wife Betty Shabbazz (*Song*, 10-11). A member of the Cultural Association of Women of African Heritage (CAWAH), Angelou is involved in organizing a demonstration to protest the killing of Patrice Lumumba. She and fellow members solicit the help of Mr. Micheaux, the owner of an Afro-centric bookstore in Harlem in publicizing the event because "he could pass the word around Harlem faster than an orchestra of conga drums" (*Heart*, 149). Mr. Micheaux spoke fast; "his short staccato sentences popped out of his mouth like exploding cherry bombs" (*Heart*, 149).

Just as music serves Angelou's description of characters, she also uses music as a means to conjoin setting and mood. For example, a community picnic fish fry in the clearing (in *Stamps*) is enlivened by the interplay of the children's ring games and the harmonies of the adults. The scene opens with the children chanting

"Acka Backa, Sody Cracka
Acka Backa, Boo
Acca Backa, Sody Cracka
I'm in love with you."

Nature joins in the celebration as "[t]he sounds of tag beat through the trees while the top branches waved in contrapuntal rhythms" (*CB* 115). The picnic/fishfry was an ecumenical and democratic event involving all of colored *Stamps*. "Musicians brought cigar-box guitars, harmonicas, juice harps, combs wrapped in tissue paper and even bathtub basses" (115). The air is alive with music: "On one corner of the clearing a gospel group was rehearsing. Their harmony, packed as tight as sardines, floated over the music of the county singers and melted into the songs of the small children's ring games" (116).

Also of interest as a setting is Annie Henderson's store in *Caged Bird*. Formally named the Wm. Johnson General Merchandise Store, it was the central meeting place in the *Stamps* community. "On Saturdays, barbers sat their customers in the shade on the porch of the Store, and troubadours on their ceaseless crawlings through the South leaned across its benches and sang their sad songs of The

Brazos while they played juice harps and cigar-box guitars” (CB 5). Oddly enough, Angelou does not identify the songs or the singers; however, knowledge of the Brazos broadens the meaning and implications of this passage in important ways. First, the Stamps community is a relatively stable rural hamlet inhabited by rigidly separated black and white communities. Now Angelou introduces transients, “the troubadours... [who] sang their sad songs of the Brazos.” This reference to ‘the Brazos’ and ‘sad songs’ takes on special significance when one realizes that in this time period - the thirties- most of the prisons in Texas were located near the Brazos River which was named by Spanish explorers Rio de los Brazos de Dios (The Arms of God). One of the songs that these wandering troubadours, perhaps newly released prisoners, may well have sung is “Ain’t No More Cane on the Brazos,” a popular prison work song of the period.

Ain’t no more cane on the Brazos
It’s all been ground to molasses

You shoulda been on the river in 1910
They were driving the women just like they drove the men.

Go down Old Hannah, don’cha rise no more
Don’t you rise up til Judgment Day’s for sure

Ain’t no more cane on the Brazos
It’s all been ground down to molasses

Captain don’t you do me like you done poor old Shine
Well ya drove that bully til he went stone blind

Wake up on a lifetime, hold up your own head
Well you may get a pardon and then you might drop dead

Ain’t no more cane on the Brazos
It’s all been ground down to molasses

This conjecture, when considered, adds another segment of the population to the Stamps community by increasing the number of its musicians.

Angelou does not miss the opportunity to focus on church services and revival meetings that are certainly rife with music; these are a regular part of community rituals in Stamps and contribute to the social and cultural milieu. At one such service, Sister Monroe gets ‘caught up in the spirit’ at the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, Angelou’s home church, and puts the minister under particular duress. In her essay “Shouting” Zora Neale Hurston Hurston outlines the general principles of this behavior and contextualizes Angelou’s comic vignette. Hurston

defines shouting as “an emotional explosion responsive to rhythm... (1) sung rhythm; (2) spoken rhythm; (3) humming rhythm; (4) the foot-patting or hand-clapping rhythm imitative of a tom-tom” (237). Then Hurston classifies shouters as of two kinds, the silent and the vocal.

The silent type take with violent retching and twitching motions. Sometimes they remain seated, sometimes they jump up and down and fling the body about with great violence. Lips tightly pursed, eyes closed. The seizure ends by collapse. The vocal type is the more frequent. There are graduations from quiet weeping while seated to the unrestrained screaming while leaping pews and running up and down the aisle. Some, unless restrained, run up into the pulpit and embrace the preacher. Some are taken with hysterical laughing spells (qtd in Huggins 237-238).

Sister Monroe was the vocal kind of shouter. She wreaked havoc during the service by charging into the pulpit and manhandling the minister who continued to preach all the while trying to free himself from Sister Monroe’s clutches. Others jumped up into the pulpit and joined in the effort to extricate the beleaguered minister. Then one member ‘accidentally’ punched another member and a slugfest ensued. Sister Monroe who had caused all of the brouhaha finally settled herself down and sang, “I came to Jesus, as I was, worried, wound, and sad. I found in Him a resting place and He has made me glad” (32-33). In this instance Angelou uses music for ironic effect.

In the *Heart of a Woman*, Angelou’s visual and aural skills recreate the dissonance of a faraway place, for example Cairo. Upon seeing Cairo for the first time, Angelou reflects:

The shiny European cars, large horned cows, careening taxis and the throngs of pedestrians, goats, mules, camels, the occasional limousine and the incredible scatter of children made the streets a visual and a tonal symphony of chaos. (212)

A few pages later, we find this description; “[c]ar radios, nearly turned to their highest pitch, released the moaning Arabic music into the dusty air” (216).

Nevertheless, notwithstanding characterization and the blending of setting and mood, Angelou’s most compelling use of music, in my opinion, is as handmaiden to the epiphanic moments that occur in her life narratives. These revelatory

moments are always precipitated and/or accompanied by the singing of a spiritual and reveal the power of music to strengthen and heal, to inspire, to cut across time and place to link the past and the present. I make reference, arguably, to three of the best of these.

The capacity of music to steady the soul in the face of danger and to overcome the ferocity of looking a lion in the mouth, or in this case a pride of young lions is best represented in the description of the confrontation between Annie Henderson and ‘the poor white trash children’ who lived on her land in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The pack of girls approach Momma and Maya who had been admiring the front yard that Momma had just landscaped. Their shared joy and tranquility is shattered by the group of girls hell-bent on trouble.

I looked to Momma for direction. She did an excellent job of sagging from her waist down, but from the waist up she seemed to be pulling for the top of the oak tree across the road. Then she began to moan a hymn. Maybe not moan, but the tune was slow and the meter so strange that she could have been moaning. She didn’t look at me again. When the children reached halfway down the hill, halfway to the Store, she said without turning, “Sister, go on inside.” (24)

The girls mock Momma’s stance and carriage, and young Maya is enraged and considers grabbing the gun stationed nearby and using it. The distraught child cries profusely almost succeeding in impeding her vision.

The tears that had slipped down my dress left unsurprising dark spots, and made the front yard blurry and even more unreal. The world had taken a deep breath and was having doubts about continuing to revolve. (25)

During this attack Momma Henderson had continued to hum and stand stock still so much so that Maya thought her grandmother had turned to stone. When they could not defeat her one way, the girls tried another. One of them “pushed out her mouth and started to hum...aping” Momma Henderson (24). Another “crossed her eyes [and] stuck her thumbs in both sides of her mouth...” (25). When that did not succeed, one described as ‘almost a woman’ did something even more outrageous. This ‘almost a woman’ did a hand stand and revealed her naked behind.

Her dirty bare feet and long legs went straight for the sky.
Her dress fell down around her shoulders and she had on no drawers.
The slick pubic hair made a brown triangle where her legs came together.
She hung in the vacuum of that lifeless morning for only a few seconds,
then wavered and tumbled. The other girls clapped her on the back and
slapped their hands. (26)

At this point Momma Henderson stopped moaning and started singing, “Bread of Heaven, feed me till I want no more” as Maya worried about her grandmother’s staying power and wondered what the girls would do to vex her next.

“Then they were moving out of the yard...[t]hey bobbed their heads and shook their slack behinds and turned, one at a time” to bid Annie Henderson leave. All of this time Mrs. Henderson never turned her head or unfolded her arms, but she stopped singing and said goodbye to each of them affording them the respect they should have given her: “Bye, Miz Helen, ‘ Bye, Miz Ruth, Bye, Miz Eloise” (26).

Needless to say, Maya is enraged, confused, and perplexed about her grandmother addressing each of the girls as ‘Miz.’ When her grandmother comes inside, she finds Maya crying. And then the beautiful liberating, healing, restorative, and transformative moment recorded below occurs:

She stood another whole song through and then opened
the screen door to look down on me crying in rage. She looked
until I looked up. Her face was a brown moon that shone on me.
She was beautiful. Something had happened out there, which
I couldn’t completely understand, but I could see that she was
happy. Then she bent down and touched me as mothers of the
church ‘lay hands on the sick and afflicted and I quieted’ (CB 26).

The scene ends beautifully with Momma humming “Glory, glory, hallelujah, when I lay my burden down” twice--once when she entered the Store and the second time after Angelou had erased the girls’ footprints and designed a new pattern--“...a large heart with lots of hearts growing smaller inside, and piercing from the outside rim to the smallest heart was an arrow” (27). Angelou came to understand that “[w]hatever the contest had been out front ...Momma had won” (27). Angelou’s gift was Annie Henderson’s laurel wreath. Good had prevailed over evil.

What the young Maya fails to apprehend at the time is that in the moment her grandmother started to moan, to hum, and then to sing, she was communing with God prayerfully in song. Just as the slaves who had endured humiliation

and beaten down death, Annie Henderson clung to the faith that Jesus Christ, the ‘Bread of Heaven’ was there protecting her as she sang the chorus of “Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah,” a hymn assuring that God will guide, deliver, and sustain as long as the penitent trusted in Him. The victory does not always come in this life, but in the life to come. Thus, Annie Henderson could joyfully sing “Glory, glory, hallelujah when I lay my burdens down.” Annie Henderson, like the generations of brutalized Africans and African Americans before her, had this kind of faith, a mantel that she was passing on to her granddaughter by example. The adult Angelou would follow in her footsteps.

In “Symbolic Geography and Psychic Landscapes: A Conversation with Maya Angelou,” Joanne Braxton, queries Angelou about the sexual dynamics in this scene involving only females. Angelou explicates and unpacks what might be missed. The white girls, she explained, were really a threat to her Uncle Willie directly and indirectly to Bailey because their bedroom window faced the aggressive hellcats.

Whenever Momma or anybody saw white girls coming,
they’d call Uncle Willie and tell him to hide. Because these girls,
or women for that matter, could come in the store and say, ‘I’ll have
two pounds of this . . . I’ll have ten pounds of this . . . I’ll have so
and so.’ And then they would say, ‘Put it on my bill, Willie.’
And my uncle could not say, ‘You don’t have a bill,’ because all
they would have to do is say, ‘He tried to touch me’ (10).

This explanation unveils the enormous import of the white girls’ challenge. Although Angelou was still very young, she was aware of two truths: the moral indictment against killing, a core biblical tenet, and to borrow from Richard Wright, ‘the ethics of living Jim Crow.’ She goes on to say,

I knew that killing was a sin.I knew that you weren’t
supposed to do anything to whites, not speak to them or
even look them in the eye. I also knew that whites could
and did do anything to us. (11)

She added this indictment: “...you couldn’t be black in the South past five years of age and not know threats implied and overt” (11).

In another epiphanic moment Angelou provides an example of the power of music to eliminate racial, cultural and language barriers evaporating distances and transforming relationships in *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry like Christmas*. Significantly, this incident takes place in a small store in Yugoslavia during the Cold War (in the 1950’s). As previously stated, Angelou was the premiere dancer of the

fabled African American cast of *Porgy and Bess* who were “guests of the country and the first American singers to be invited behind the iron curtain” (211). Both the Yugoslavian and American governments had given the cast members strict orders. The company was not permitted to freely roam the country; they could only walk “within a radius of four square blocks of the hotel” (211). Fraternalization between the Yugoslavians and the Americans was *verboden*. When Angelou attempted to engage a hotel employee in the most perfunctory conversation, she was instantly rebuffed. It became obvious to her that the staff had “undergone intensive indoctrination” prior to the cast’s arrival, for “[t]he desk clerks and porters, waiters and bartenders, acted as if the sixty black American opera singers roamed the halls and filled their lobby every other week. I was certain that we were the only authentic guests in the establishment” (212).

The polite but icy air of the hotel staff was completely off-set by the bemused, excited citizenry who would gawk at the cast members and jostle to get a better look at them. Their reactions were equally unwelcome. One member of the cast remarked, “...they think we’re monkeys or something. Just look at them” (213). Another concurred saying [t]hey think we’re in a cage. I wouldn’t be surprised if they threw peanuts at us” (213).

Ever undaunted by mere politics, governments, or icy individuals, Angelou chose to brave life outside of the sterilized climate of the hotel and venture into the streets. Alone but armed with some knowledge of the Serbo-Croatian language (It was her habit to learn the language of whatever country she visited), she fearlessly broke through both the crowds of on-lookers who gaped at her and the passersby who “stiffened in their tracks” (214) at sight of her.

Angelou found a small store and discovered that musical instruments were sold there. She expressed interest in purchasing a mandolin. The salesman was more excited by the unexpected and novel presence of the six-foot black woman who stood before him than he was at the potential sale. He hastened to call his wife and children to come and share this experience. His wife and many children all chattering at once tumbled out of a backroom. Angelou greeted them but got no response. She made another attempt to communicate but that too failed. After a little but undoubtedly awkward time elapsed, the mother said two words: “‘Paul Robeson’” (215). Angelou’s reaction was immediate. “It was my turn to be stunned. The familiar name did not belong in Byzantium. The woman repeated, ‘Paul Robeson,’ and then began one of the strangest scenes I had ever seen” (215).

What follows is the family’s rendition of “Deep River” led by the mother, with the children and father joining in a manner reminiscent of call and response, a marker of the African American sacred musical tradition. Angelou adds her voice to the singing of the spiritual and describes this revelatory moment in moving evocative language:

I stood in the dusty store and considered my people,
our history and Mr. Paul Robeson. Somehow, the music
fashioned by men and women out of an anguish they could
describe only in dirges was to be a passport for me and their
other descendants into far and strange lands and long unsure
futures.

“Oh don’t you want to go
To that gospel feast?”
I added my voice to the melody:

“That promised land
Where all is peace?”

I made no attempt to wipe away the tears. I could not claim a
forefather who came to America on the Mayflower. Nor did
any ancestor of mine amass riches to leave me free from toil.
My great-grandparents were illiterate when their fellow men
were signing the Declaration of Independence, and the first
families of my people were bought separately and sold apart,
nameless and without traces--yet there was this:

“Deep River
My home is over Jordan.”

I had a heritage, rich and nearer than the tongue which
gives it voice. My mind resounded with the words and my blood
raced to the rhythms.

“Deep River
I want to cross over into campground.” (216)

After an embrace, Angelou left the store.

Taking place far from Yugoslavia, the next incident that demonstrates the capacity of music to completely eviscerate cultural and language barriers is described in *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*, Angelou's depiction of her life in Ghana in the 1960's. Whereas her travels throughout Europe were always tempered by her 'otherness,' "the Ghanaian experience was singularly different. For one, she was no longer separated from her seventeen-year-old son Guy as she had been during her European travels with *Porgy and Bess*. For another, she and Guy "were Black Americans in West Africa, where for the first time....the color of (their) skin was accepted as correct and normal" (3). Yet despite the sameness of color and the fellowship of a small but tenuously thriving largely African American expatriate community, the cultural differences between West Africans and the Americans were real and palpable. These differences dissipated, however, at the residence of dear friends, Liberian diplomats stationed in Cairo. Angelo had traveled to Cairo from Accra. She was to experience another insightful moment brought about by means of a spiritual.

At the request of her Liberian hosts, Angelou was asked to sing for President William V. S. Tubman at a formal dinner held in his honor. She nervously did so and sang a traditional blues song that the audience warmly received. But then President Tubman requested that she sing "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and added his baritone as she did so. Immediately others joined in "[picking] a harmonic path into the song" (183) singing, "If you get there before I do, coming for to carry me home, Tell all my friends I'm coming too, Coming for to carry me home" (183). Deeply moved by the emotion with which they sang the spiritual, Angelou "dropped her voice and gave them the song" (183).

Mindful of the linkages between the Liberians and her own people, Angelou summed up the experience in this way:

They were Americo-Liberians. Possibly five generations before, an ancestor--an American slave--had immigrated to Africa to marry into one of the local tribes. Now, after a century of intermarriage, they sat in beribboned tuxedos in this formal salon...In their own land they owned rubber plantations and rice and coffee farms, and in their homes they spoke Bassa and Kru and Mandinke and Vai as easily as they spoke English. Still, their faces glowed as they picked up the melody.
See that host all dressed in red,
Coming for to carry me home.
It looks like a band that Moses led,
Coming for to carry me home.

Much like Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. DuBois, and James Weldon Johnson who revered the spirituals and marveled at the genius of their unschooled creators, Angelou also acknowledges the tremendous power of the sorrow songs to unify, lift up, embolden and restore the dispirited soul by transcending human limitations. In a coda to the scene, Angelou writes, “In the absence of my creative ancestors who picked [“Swing Low, Sweet Chariot”] out of cotton sacks, I humbly bowed my head” (184).

Truly the longing for expression—whether it be of sorrow or celebration and the full range of emotions between—is uniquely human. Angelou’s life narratives validate that. Moreover, her appropriation of music suggests that she completely understands the power of music and recognizes, as did Alphonse de Lamertine, that music is “the literature of the heart” (Clement Antrobus Harris 476). Her life narratives confirm that. Moreover, scrutiny of Angelou’s musical opus has led me to assert that Angelou also shares the sentiment of famed musicologist Hall Johnson who contemplated the triad of thought, speech, and music and concluded: “The only thing that cannot be chained is human thought unexpressed . . . [S]peech only releases the thought, in singing the same thought gives it wings” (qtd Eileen Southern, 269).

Works Cited

- Angelou, Maya. *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes*. New York: Random House, 1986. Print.
- . *Even the Stars Look Lonesome*. New York: Random House, 1997. Print.
- . *Gather Together in My Name*. New York: Random House, 1974. Print.
- . Maya. *The Heart of a Woman*. New York: Random House, 1981. Print.
- . *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. New York: Random House, 1970. Print.
- . *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry like Christmas*. New York: Bantam, 1977. Print.
- . *A Song Flung up to Heaven*. New York: Random House, 2002. Print.
- Braxton, Joanne M., and Maya Angelou. “Symbolic Geography and Psychic Landscapes: A Conversation with Maya Angelou.” *Maya Angelou’s I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings: A Casebook*. New York: Oxford UP, 1999. 3-20. Print.
- Harris, Clement Antrobus. “Musical Allusions of Great Writers.” *The Musical Quarterly* II.3 (1916): 465-76. Web.
- Hill, Esther. “Maya Angelou: Resolving the Past, Embracing the Future.” *Conversations with Maya Angelou*. Ed. Jeffrey M. Elliot. Jackson: U of Mississippi, 1989. 109-15. Print.
- Hurston, Zora N. “Shouting.” *Voices from the Harlem Renaissance*. Ed. Nathan Irvin Huggins. New York: Oxford UP, 1976. 237-39. Print.

- Jackson, Mahalia. From *Movin' on Up* [1968.] Ed. Eileen Southern. *Readings in Black American Music*. Ed. Eileen Southern. New York: W. W. Norton, 1971. 261-67. Print.
- Johnson, Hall. *Notes on the Negro Spiritual* [1965]. *Readings in Black American Music*. Ed. Eileen Southern. New York: W. W. Norton, 1971. 268-75. Print.
- Lomax, Alan. "Ain't No More Cane On This Brazis." Alan Lomax. 1958. Vinyl recording.
- Lupton, Mary Jane. *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* (1976). *Maya Angelou: A Critical Companion*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1998. 109-10. Print.
- McPherson, Dolly Aimee. *Order out of Chaos: The Autobiographical Works of Maya Angelou*. New York: P. Lang, 1990. 85. Print.
- Toppman, Lawrence. "Maya Angelou: The Serene Spirit of a Survivor." Ed. Jeffrey M. Elliot. *Conversations with Maya Angelou*. Jackson: U of Mississippi, 1989. 140-56. Print.

“The Song Struggling to Be Heard”: Reclaiming Gender and Jazz in Maya Angelou’s “The Reunion”

Patricia G. Lespinasse

Maya Angelou’s jazz short story, “The Reunion,” recalls the life of Philomena Jenkins, a virtuosic black female piano player reminiscent of jazz pianist Mary Lou Williams. Through memories and ritualized dialogue, Philomena narrates the possibility and actuality of a reunion between herself and “Beth Ann Baker of the Baker Cotton Gin.” Through Philomena’s first person narrative, we learn that their contentious past is steeped in the racial politics of servitude and segregation. Set in 1958, during the tail-end of the Bebop Era, the narrative is structured like an evolving jazz tune, circular in nature, highlighting the music of the era and using it as a vehicle to detail the social history of black female resistance and its relationship to jazz. Philomena ultimately learns how to channel the essence of bebop in a piano solo that results in her transformation from object of denigration to subject of improvisation. “The Reunion,” with its insertion of jazz music and improvisation, suggests not only a meeting between two women but also the confluence of race and gender, history and memory, and at its most fundamental level, jazz and literature.

Angelou’s narrative participates in what Robert G. O’Meally terms, “the jazz-literature correspondence.”¹ O’Meally defines the jazz-literature correspondence as “the continuing effort of writers to use what they hear in jazz to give their words a jazz like quality.” Based on the premise that jazz music is “styled to tell the story,” he notes: “The long-standing aspiration of writers in general to capture some of the power of music in poetry and prose is evident in the vocabulary of literary analysis, much of which is derived from music” (O’Meally, 535). I would like to suggest that the jazz-literature correspondence is inherent in many of Angelou’s jazz texts that use music as a medium (literal, figurative, or spiritual) to allow characters to gain agency and/or subjectivity through improvisation.

From her autobiographical jazz text, *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry like Christmas*,² to her jazz short story “The Reunion,” the lyrical writings of Maya Angelou are a testament to her reverence for conjoining music and literature. Written in 1976, *Singin’ and Swingin’* serves as a foundation for later writings

¹ For a detailed discussion of the jazz-literature correspondence see *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture* ed. Robert G. O’Meally (1998).

² Angelou, Maya. *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Getting Merry Like Christmas*. New York: Random House, 2009.

that draw our attention to her own relationship with music and more broadly, the influence of music on black women. In the beginning of *Singin' and Swingin'*, Angelou describes an intimate moment with music in the first few lines: "Music was my refuge. I could crawl into the spaces of the notes and curl my back to loneliness." This passage, which relates the influence of music to Angelou's life, highlights Angelou's memory of the way music protected her, embracing both her emotional and psychological state of solitude. For Angelou, music serves as a barricade to a hostile world. Music provides comfort and protection that allows her access into a safe space/place within the notes.

Further, Angelou describes her affinity for the music, as if it were a lover: "In my rented room, I would play a record, then put my arms around the shoulders of the song. As we danced, glued together, I would nuzzle into its neck, kissing the skin, and rubbing its cheek with my own" (*Singin' and Swingin'*, 3). It is significant to note that although music is personified, it is also disembodied. With music's shoulders to wrap her arms around, legs to dance, body to be glued to, neck to kiss, and cheeks to rub against it, music becomes the embodiment of desire. Although described as having many characteristics of the human body, music lacks a mouth and therefore we are unable to literally and figuratively hear it. The narrator seems to suggest that although we can see the music, we cannot hear the song due to the literary medium. Thus in this particular scenario the record becomes, like Philomena Jenkins in "The Reunion," the "song struggling to be heard." Although ripe with some of the same musical venerations as *Singin' and Swingin'*, "The Reunion" suggests the historical tension between unsung women and jazz music.

"The Reunion" is a revisionist narrative that attempts to reclaim a space for black women in the jazz literary tradition. Angelou's literary re-vision can be read as what Cheryl Wall describes as "worrying the line." In *Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition*, Wall notes that the popular blues trope, "worrying the line," is a technique applied "for purposes of emphasis, clarification and subversion." In appropriating the trope for critical purposes, Wall demonstrates that "black women's writing works similar changes on literary traditions" (Wall 8). I apply Wall's compelling critical framework to my reading of "The Reunion" to suggest Angelou's subversive attempts to "worry the line" of jazz literary tradition. I argue that "The Reunion" explores the Bebop Era, bereft of the presence of African American women improvisers, in order to provide a counter-narrative that places the black female as central, rather than on the periphery of the jazz literary tradition and more broadly, jazz discourse.

The Bebop era, roughly spanning the mid 1940's through the 1950's, produced a culture of resistance represented by the music, individual style, and language of African Americans. Bebop has been described as both an evolution as well as a

revolution from the jazz tradition. Indeed, it can be viewed as both, as it evolved from swing music in a revolutionary way. Historically, the Bebop revolution is noted as a reaction to render jazz music inaccessible through a coded musical language that represents the interiority of African American life and culture. In *Black Music*, Amiri Baraka underscores the significance as well as the interrelationship between African Americans and the music borne from their experiences when he writes, “the song and the people is the same” and “Bop was, at a certain level of consideration, a reaction by young musicians against the sterility and formality of Swing as it moved to become a formal part of the mainstream American culture.”³ Further he notes, “People made Bebop” and there was a “psychological catalyst that made that music the exact registration of the social and cultural thinking of a whole generation of black Americans.” The social and cultural factors associated with the Bebop era are usually accompanied by a masculine sensibility evidenced in the music, history, and images of the period.

In the Bebop anthem “In Walked Bud,” the lyrical depiction of the creation of Bebop, women are absent. When reading the jazz history surrounding the Bebop era, we are most likely to encounter the narratives of notable male musicians such as Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Thelonious Monk, to name a few. The images of the Bebop era detail a masculine sense of style which included the fashionable berets, horn rim glasses, and the goatee.⁴ In *Life* magazine, a popular photographic image of the Bebop movement provides further evidence of a male dominated era. The image is filled with private rituals such as the depiction of a fictitious “secret handshake” between Gillespie and Benny Goodman and the coded language of Chano Pozo as he shouts “incoherently” in a “Bebop transport.”⁵ Culturally and socially, Bebop exuded a “cool” masculinity supported by masculine images that detailed the uber-masculine style, language, and culture of the era.

Unsurprisingly, most narratives that concern the birth of Bebop exclude a female presence. The most common myth identifies Minton’s as the place where Bebop was born through the virtuosic performances of Thelonious Monk and Dizzy Gillespie, among other male musicians. This particular narrative detailing the genesis of the music, like most narratives about Bebop, silences the role of black women within this era and the influence women had on the music as well as the way in which the music impacted their lives. If there was indeed a “psychological

³ Baraka, Amiri. *Black Music*. New York: Akaschic Books, 2009. Print.

⁴ In *Giant Steps: Bebop and the Creators of Modern Jazz 1945-65*, Kenny Mathieson notes: “According to Mary Lou Williams, it was Monk who first began to wear a beret and horn rim glasses but it was Dizzy who turned them into Bebop’s trademark image” (161).

⁵ The quoted language is taken from Scott Deveaux’s analysis of the photo spread in *Life*. See Deveaux, Scott. *The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

catalyst,” as Baraka notes, for the creation of Bebop, a music that precisely reflected the social and cultural ideology of an entire generation, then the questions that beg answers are: was the psychological catalyst exclusive to the African American male experience? What is the relationship between this revolutionary modern jazz sound and the black female experience? If “the song and the people is the same” and modern jazz was procreated by the people, what role did the Black woman play? Who really gave birth to modern jazz?

Significantly, a few counter-narratives that posit black women as co-founders of the music exist. The first narrative has been recounted by musician Lillian Carter (Wilson) who posits Josephine Boyd, a saxophonist in the all-girl band the Darlings, as a co-creator of the new sound that would eventually be known as Bebop. According to Sherrie Tucker’s interviews with Wilson, Wilson is adamant about the fact that Boyd “set the egg for Bebop.”⁶ Despite Dizzy Gillespie’s inability to remember Boyd, Wilson “insisted that Boyd helped Dizzy Gillespie invent Bebop” (Tucker, 206). Another counter narrative suggests the presence of a “Mother” figure, Mary Lou Williams, as a major contributor to the construction and formation of modern jazz.

In *Soul on Soul: The life and Music of Mary Lou Williams*, Williams is not only a female presence at the site of Bebop’s conception, but according to her own narrative, she helped mold and shape the sound of the music by serving as a mentor to many Bebop musicians, including Charlie Christian, Bud Powell and Thelonious Monk:

After her nightly performances at Café Society, Mary would head uptown to a club called Minton’s Playhouse on West 118th Street. It was there that this new jazz was being conceived, through the experimentations of the pianist Thelonious Monk, Trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, the drummers Kenny Clarke and Max Roach, the trombonist J.J. Johnson, and others...Thelonious Monk was one of the first Beboppers to be associated with Minton’s, while the other musicians, Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie and Max Roach supported themselves with work for swing bands. Monk set the stage for Bebop with his complex chord changes, which few could play with him. But those who could follow Monk, such as the guitarist Charlie Christian, fed this experimentation. Mary who had befriended Christian in the late 1930s...would spend countless nights with the guitarist working on compositions that explored these new approaches to jazz.... Of the Boppers Mary was closest to Monk, Powell, and Gillespie. But Monk, more than the others, frequently asked Mary for her musical opinion (Kernodle 112-114).⁷

⁶ See Sherrie Tucker’s *Swing Shift: “All-girl” Bands of the 1940’s*. Durham: Duke UP, 2000.

⁷ Kernodle, Tammy. *Soul on Soul: the Life and Music of Mary Lou Williams*. Boston: Northeastern UP, 2004.

Williams was more than a female presence at the club, she became the “matriarch of the modern jazz movement when she opened her apartment and ears to the musical and personal concerns of the bebop musicians” (Kernodle 114). Despite the fact that Williams played a significant role in the Bebop movement, and even produced her own compositions, “she would never be viewed as an innovator in the style” (Kernodle 116). As a black female musician within the male dominated discourse of jazz, her dissonant narrative becomes a footnote in the historical trajectory of the revolutionary sound of bebop.⁸ Williams’s life and to an extent that of many black female improvisers inspires the story of a fictional counterpart, Philomena Jenkins. Theirs is “the song struggling to be heard.” Moreover, “The Reunion,” if read through a jazz lens, highlights jazz music as the catalyst that enables Philomena to improvise and push the boundaries of the song in order to gain agency and ultimately find her voice.

The jazz lens is comprised of three motifs that are interrelated with the formal and social characteristics of the Bebop Era— oral tradition, improvisation, and the soloist. The jazz lens offers alternative rhetorical modes within African American discourse such as “cry and response”; as well as constructs “spaces” for agency by means of spontaneous action in what I term the “jazz moment of improvisation”⁹; and focuses on the Wild Woman, a demoralized blues-based character who is a product of the historical trauma of slavery and the perpetual effects of racist and sexist ideology. The jazz lens ultimately highlights the way in which writers use music and jazz’s quintessential element, improvisation, to expand on, and substantially revise, the role of black women in jazz discourse.

Throughout “The Reunion”, jazz music figures prominently. Angelou underscores jazz standards from 1931 to 1958 and there seems to be a distinctive interplay between Swing and Bebop. “DB Blues,” sets the tone for the reunion that will take place between Philomena and Beth Ann. The narrative details how the

⁸ In *The Masters of Bebop*, Ira Gitler briefly comments on Williams role in Bebop: “Mention must be made of Mary Lou Williams who, like Hawkins and Johnson, came from the previous era, but who not only encouraged the modern musicians but participated actively in the movement with such compositions as *Kool*, *In the Land of OO-bla-dee*, *Knowledge*, and for Benny Goodman, *Lonely Moments*” (277).

⁹ Borrowing from Ralph Ellison, I define the jazz moment as a moment of individual assertion where one’s identity is created: an improvisational moment where history and memory collide to form a temporal space for agency and subjectivity. According to Ralph Ellison, “jazz is an art of individual assertion” and the “true jazz moment is as distinct from the uninspired commercial performance: spring[ing] from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest, each solo flight, or improvisation, represents (like the successive canvases of a painter) a definition of his identity: as individual, as member of the collectivity, as a link in the chain of tradition.” See Ellison, Ralph. *Shadow and Act*. New York: Random House, 1964.

sounds of Lester Young envelops the club atmosphere as Philomena and the Cab Callen Band begin to play and “[take] off on that tune like [they] were headed for Birdland in NYC” (“Reunion” 222). In *Being Prez: The Life and Music of Lester Young*, Dave Gelly describes DB Blues as: “secure and purposeful and packed with the surprising twists and turns that mark all of [Young’s] best work. It summed up, in its quiet way a spirit of ease and freedom, of getting mellow in some little dive, of not having to wear uniform or jump out of bed at the crack of dawn” (106).¹⁰ DB Blues with its “spirit of ease and freedom” bookends the narrative. The majority of the narrative, which details the reunion between Philomena and Beth Ann Baker, is recounted in between the DB Blues “kickoff” and the DB Blues “release.” Although the reunion is couched in between freedom and ease it is wrought with tension. Lester Young’s famous “detention barrack blues,” inspired by his imprisonment in 1944, forebodes the tension that exists between the two women. Like the “ironic edge”¹¹ of DB Blues, the irony of the reunion between Philomena and Beth Ann is that it occurs in the moments of disjuncture or in the breaks found throughout the narrative.

In “Improvisation and the Creative Process,” Albert Murray defines the break as a “disruption of the normal cadence of a piece of music.” He claims that it is “on” the break that a musician does “his/her thing.” This “disjuncture” that Murray calls the moment of “truth” is similar to what Ralph Ellison describes as the “jazz moment.” It is within the jazz moment that identity is achieved and notions of individual freedom and agency are asserted. Throughout the narrative there are multiple “breaks:” linguistic breaks in language indicated by the ellipses; musical breaks characterized as an interlude and jazz moment/solo; literal breaks marked by the term “intermission.” It is in the break that Philomena recognizes Beth Ann; has her “jazz moment”; confronts Beth Ann; and finally, at the end of the short story, has a breakthrough. Further, the title of the short story, “The Reunion” implies that there was a “break” prior to the reunification of Philomena and Beth Ann. Philomena details her break with the Baker’s:

I had lived with my parents until I was thirteen, the servants’ quarters. A house behind the Baker main house. Daddy was the butler, my mother was the cook, and I went to a segregated school on the other side of town where the other kids called me the Baker Nigger. (“Reunion” 225)

Years later when she finally sees Beth Ann with a black man in 1958 at the Blue Palm Café, she is incredulous.

¹⁰ Gelly, Dave: *Being Prez: The Life and Music of Lester Young*, 106.

¹¹ In *The Swing Era: The Development of Jazz, 1930-1945* by Gunther Schuller, he states: “On D.B Blues (short for detention Barrack) his tone is a little harder and narrower than before...with an “ironic edge.”

The first line of “The Reunion” states, “Nobody could have told me that she’d be out with a black man, out, like going out” (“Reunion” 222). During the interlude, Philomena has doubts that the young blond woman is indeed “Beth Ann Baker of the Baker Cotton Gin” but takes a second look and recalls her features: “I remember too well the turn of her cheek. The sliding way her jaw goes up to her hair. That was her” (“Reunion” 223). The interlude allows for Philomena to gain awareness and recognition of Beth Ann and in turn, Beth Ann becomes aware of Philomena’s presence through the bandleader’s introduction: “Our Piano man is a lady and what a lady. A cooker and a looker. Ladies and Gentlemen, I’d like to introduce to you Miss Philomena Jenkins. Folks call her Meanie” (“Reunion” 223). Indeed it is by no coincidence that Philomena is a piano player. Angelou attempts to posit Philomena as the architect of a new sound by paralleling her presence with that of Mary Lou Williams and channeling the music of Thelonious Monk in her solo. If Williams was known to “play like a man,” Philomena is a descendent of that tradition. Although Philomena can be read as a distinguished member of the jazz era, like Williams, she is in the precarious position of being a woman in a man’s world. Cal’s disparaging language describes Philomena as an interloper of the jazz tradition of male piano players. Furthermore, he denigrates her on the bandstand by relegating her body to the domestic sphere, “a cooker,” and reducing her to an object of the gaze, “and a looker.”

It is significant that the interlude creates a space for recognition between Philomena and Beth Ann. Philomena states: “she heard my name and she looked right into my eyes. Her blue ones got as big as my black ones. She recognized me, in fact in a second we tipped eyelids at each other. Not winking. Just squinting to see better” (“Reunion” 254). We can read this moment of recognition as the actual reunion between Philomena and Beth Ann, rather than the imagined reunion that much of the narrative explores. I am suggesting that the reunion between jazz and women in Cal’s intro is related to the reunion between Beth Ann and Philomena. Both of these reunions allow for the confluence of history and memory. Sitting on the bandstand, Philomena remains preoccupied with the physical presence of Beth Ann until the next song, “Round ‘Bout Midnight,” compels her to remember her own subjectivity:

[Round ‘Bout Midnight] used to be my song, for so many reasons. In Baker, the only time I could practice jazz, in the church, was round ‘bout midnight. When the best chord changes came to me it was generally round ‘bout midnight. When my first lover held me in his arms, it was round ‘bout midnight. Usually when it’s time to play that tune I dig right in it. But this time I was too busy thinking about Beth and her family...and what she was doing in Chicago, on the South Side, escorted by the grooviest looking cat I’d seen in a long time. I was really trying to

figure it out, then Cal's saxophone pushed its way into my figurings. Forced me to remember "Round 'bout Midnight ("Reunion" 224).

It is the music that moves Philomena to remember her past. As Cheryl Wall notes, "music is at once the container and transmitter of memory" (10). It is noteworthy that the title of the song is mentioned three times and used literally which suggest Angelou's play on language. The repetition of "Round 'Bout Midnight" suggests two musical references and one personal reference. Musically it can be read as referring to the song "Round Midnight," a jazz standard popularized by Thelonious Monk in 1944. Alternatively, one can read it as a play on Miles Davis' debut hard bop album, released in 1957. Lastly, its personal reference suggests the narrator's own revision of not only the title but also the way in which she improvises on the tune.

Philomena's jazz moment takes place within her solo performance of the fictionalized Bebop tune, "Round bout Midnight." Her jazz moment of improvisation is rooted in both history and memory as the song reminds her of the "years of loneliness, the doing without days, the C.M.E church, and the old ladies with hands like men and the round 'bout dreams of crossing over Jordan" ("Reunion 224). This memory propels her to action:

Then I took thirty-two bars. My fingers found the places between the keys where the blues and the truth lay hiding. I dug out the story of a woman without a man, and a man without hope. I tried to wedge myself in and lay down in the groove between B-flat and B-natural. I must of gotten close to it, because the audience brought me out with their clapping. Even Cal said, 'Yeah baby, that's it.' I nodded to him then to the audience and looked around for Beth ("Reunion" 255).

Here, the phrase "then I took" suggests an appropriation as well as possession of the music. Philomena's identity can be said to hide in between "the blues and the truth." Her attempt to reach that place and in effect assert her own identity and subjectivity is found in this moment of improvisation. Improvisation surrounds the solo as her hands are described as disembodied, "finding" their place in the ephemeral covert space where the blues and truth exist. This space tells the story of historical trauma rooted in the days of slavery as black women and men were denied hope. Digging deeper into the music and descending like Ellison's Invisible Man into the "depths of the music," Philomena attempts to lay down in the groove between "b flat and b natural." Far into the music, suspended in an otherworldly and out of body experience, the sound of applause takes Philomena out of her trance. Cal's affirmation, "Yeah baby, that's it" confirms that she indeed became one with the music, achieving her own sound and "saying something." It is within this jazz moment of improvisation that Philomena asserts her identity and subjectivity by responding to Beth Ann's gaze and showing her that she is no longer her "flunky"

but rather a creative innovator with the ability to improvise and “say something nobody else can say” (225). By virtue of her ability to improvise, she becomes a jazz woman of the tradition- resisting the boundaries set forth for female musicians at the time. However, Philomena’s solo, serving as a response to Beth Ann, falls on deaf ears as “Beth was gone. So was her boyfriend” (“The Reunion 224).

Beth Ann’s absence compels Philomena to dig deeper into her past. Through Philomena’s interior monologue the reader is made aware of the hostile past the two women share. Here we find the oral tradition of storytelling as Philomena recounts her memories. Philomena’s (re)memory of Beth Ann is both specific and painful. Philomena remembers “shak[ing] farts out of her sheets, wash[ing] her dirty drawers and pick[ing] up after her slovenly mother...” Philomena was still “aching from the hurt Georgia put on [her]” (“The Reunion” 224). Growing up in the segregated south Philomena lived with her parents in the servants’ quarters behind Beth Ann’s house. The memory of a segregated school on the “other side of town” and enduring the taunts of school aged children calling her the “Baker Nigger,” and being forced to wear Beth’s “hand-me -down” cloths, remains emblazoned in her mind. Philomena remarks: “I had a lot to say to Beth, and she was gone” (“Reunion” 225). The language that is overheard by the reader in Philomena’s interior monologue is contrasted with Philomena’s musical conversation with the band.

Philomena is only capable of articulating the complexity of her feelings through the music. As the band continues with the rest of the set, Philomena performs some of her “favorite” tunes, “Sophisticated Lady,” “Misty” and “Cool Blues,” which suggest the range of her virtuosic capabilities. Yet she doesn’t “get back into the groove until...When your lover has gone.” Here, the musical language of the solo and the subsequent songs within the set are contrasted with actual conversational language. Philomena’s ability to articulate herself through the music is paralleled with her silence when Beth Ann returns to the club during intermission and approaches her. Philomena recalls, “I couldn’t think of anything to say. Did I remember her? There was no way I could answer the question” (“Reunion” 226).

Philomena’s silence as well as her gaze serves as an inarticulate response. Angelou uses the inarticulate gaze as a literary convention that serves as a substitute for a verbal response. Thus Philomena spends the majority of the conversation looking at Beth through the “mirror over the bar.” For Philomena, interacting with Beth through the mirror is “not threatening at all” (“Reunion” 226). She listens to Beth Ann go on about her relationship with her black male companion, Willard, and how Beth Ann’s parents disapprove of their pending marriage. Beth Ann states: “Willard is the first thing I ever got for myself. And I’m not going to

give him up” (“Reunion” 227). Philomena says nothing until she is moved by the sound of the band getting ready for the next set, “the musicians were tuning up on the bandstand. [She] drained [her] glass and stood” (“Reunion” 227). After Beth Ann invites her to her wedding for which she doesn’t have a date or a place, Philomena retorts: “Good-bye Beth. Tell your parents I said go to hell and take you with them for company” (“Reunion” 228).

Philomena then proceeds to the bandstand and contemplates the reality of their encounter as she sits at the piano. She thinks of “everything” that Beth has by virtue of her race and economic status; yet, “halfway into the DB Blues release” she remarks that although Beth Ann had the money, she possessed the music. For Philomena, the music becomes the more valued treasure, priceless even as it has the ability to bring her to new heights “up high above them.” The “DB Blues Release” anticipates her breakthrough as she comes to the conclusion that: “No matter how bad times became I would always be the song struggling to be heard” and begins to cry: “the piano keys were slippery with tears. I know, I sure as hell wasn’t crying for myself” (228). Her tears are a form of emotional release, a physical sign of her emotional power to mourn her past yet move beyond it toward her future. In this final scene, she is crying for Beth Ann as well as the black female collective she represents. For Philomena, the black woman will always be the song struggling to be heard, until she comes to voice.

The song struggling to be heard is the female narrative in jazz discourse. Although this song began within a male dominated matrix that silenced the black female voice, Angelou allows us to hear Philomena’s resounding cry throughout the jazz text. Thus Philomena’s assertion that she “will always be the song struggling to be heard,” is challenged by means of her narrative and our critical engagement with it. If “the song struggling to be heard” is indeed the story of black women improvisers within jazz literary tradition, then “The Reunion,” read as a jazz text, becomes a “site”¹² or a repository for the cultural memory of African American women and jazz music.”

The jazz text speaks to the disjuncture where jazz music conjoins with gender and black female resistance becomes a by-product of the revolutionary Bebop era. Thus within the jazz text, what remains true to form is Ralph Ellison’s contention that “this familiar music demanded action.” This statement speaks to the end goal of these revisionist jazz texts as music serves as the catalyst for the various improvisational acts of assertion. The moment of improvisation in the text,

¹² I am referring to Sherrie Tucker’s claim that black women’s fiction is a “site in which Black women have long written with authority.” See Tucker, Sherrie. “Where the Blues and the Truth Lay Hiding: Rememory of Jazz in Black Women’s Fiction.” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (1993), pp. 26-44.

because it is couched within a moment of hostility or violence, can thus be read as a moment of protest that allows individual assertion and ultimately leads to freedom. The effect of the jazz moment of improvisation debunks our traditional romanticized view of improvisation and redefines it, within the context of the jazz text, as a cultural form of resistance. Angelou’s narrative exemplifies the “action” demanded by the familiar music: to reclaim the past and give hope for the future by uncovering the “power and the pain of historical memory” (Wall 22). In essence, Philomena’s narrative song, like other female narratives both past and present, improvise a space within the jazz literary tradition as an alternative melody that resounds within, as it unsettles, jazz discourse.

Works Cited

- Angelou, Maya. *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Getting Merry Like Christmas*. New York: Random House, 1976. Reprint. 2009. Print.
- . “The Reunion.” *The Rough Road Home: Stories by North Carolina Authors*. Ed. Robert Gingham. Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1992. 9-15. Print.
- Baraka, Amiri. *Black Music*. New York: Akashic Books, 2009. Print.
- Deveaux, Scott. *The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. Print.
- Ellison, Ralph. *Shadow and Act*. New York: Random House, 1953. Print.
- . *Invisible Man*. New York: Vintage Books, 1952. Print.
- Gabbard, Krin. Ed. *Jazz among the Discourses*. Durham: Duke UP, 1995. Print.
- Gelly, Dave. *Being Prez: The Life and Music of Lester Young*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. Print.
- Gittler, Ira. *Masters of Bebop: a Listeners Guide*. New York: Da Capo Press, 2001. Print.
- Griffin, Farah. “It Takes Two People to Confirm the Truth: The Jazz Fiction of Sherley Ann Williams and Toni Cade Bambara.” *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies*. Durham: Duke UP, 2008. Print.
- Kernodle, Tammy. *Soul on Soul: the life and Music of Mary Lou Williams*. Boston: Northeastern UP, 2004. Print.
- Mathieson, Kenny. *Giant Steps: Bebop and the Creators of Modern Jazz 1945-65*. Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 1999. Print.
- Murray, Albert. “Improvisation and the Creative Process.” *Stirrings of Culture*, Ed. Robert J. Sardello and Gail Thomas. Dallas: Dallas Institute Publications, 1986. 191-193. Print.
- . “The Function of the Heroic Image” Lecture, Wesleyan University, May 17, 1985. *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, Ed. Robert O’Meally. New York: Columbia UP, 1998. Print.
- O’Meally, Robert. Ed. *Living With Music: Ralph Ellison’s Jazz Writings*. New York: Modern Library, 2001.

—. *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*. New York: Columbia UP, 2004.

Schuller, Gunther. *The Swing Era: The Development of Jazz, 1930-1945*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989.
Print.

Tucker, Sherrie. "Where the Blues and the Truth Lay Hiding: Rememory of Jazz in Black Women's Fiction." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (1993). Print.

Wall, Cheryl. *Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2005. Print.

“When Great Trees Fall”: The Poetry of Maya Angelou

Mary Jane Lupton

As a child growing up in Stamps, Arkansas, Maya Angelou (born Marguerite Annie Johnson in St. Louis, Missouri in 1928) developed an early love for the music of African American poetry and for the rhythms of the Negro spiritual.¹ She loved to recite the poems of James Weldon Johnson, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Langston Hughes for her paternal grandmother, Annie Henderson. These recitations were in a small sense preparations for what I consider to be her greatest poetic achievement: the composition and performance of “On the Pulse of Morning,” written for the Inauguration of President William Clinton in 1993.

During her childhood she memorized the works of white poets as well—Shakespeare, Emily Dickinson, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Matthew Arnold—although her grandmother forbade her to recite them. In a spirited public interview at the Young Men’s Hebrew Association in Manhattan in 1990, Angelou confessed to George Plimpton that she and her brother Bailey did not dare to perform a scene from Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*, despite having assured Mama Henderson that the author, although indeed white, had been dead for centuries. Her grandmother answered, “No Ma’am, little mistress you will not.’ So I rendered James Weldon Johnson, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes.”²

Allusions to works by black poets and to the black musical tradition—the blues, spirituals, gospel—appear in her poems and were incorporated into the titles of five of her six autobiographies. Her noted image, the “caged bird,” dominates the title of her first and most famous autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970) and is the title of the poem “Caged Bird,” published in the volume *Shaker, Why Don’t You Sing* in 1983 (*CP* 194).³

The image of the trapped bird originated in Paul Laurence Dunbar’s 1896 “Sympathy,” a poem whose third stanza begins and ends with “I know why the

¹ Mary Jane Lupton, *Maya Angelou: A Critical Companion*, First Edition (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1998) 47, 53.

² Plimpton, “The Art of Fiction 119: Maya Angelou,” *Paris Review* 32: 119 (1990) 145-67:

³ “Maya Angelou, “Caged Bird,” *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou* (New York: Random House, 1994) 194. Unless otherwise indicated, references to the poetry are to the 1994 edition, abbreviated CP and appearing parenthetically in the text.

caged bird sings.”⁴ In Angelou’s “Caged Bird” one finds a similar use of repetition and an intense longing to be free; in both poems the caged bird is a symbol for the enchained slave and for his/her constrained descendants. However, in “Caged Bird” Angelou does not repeat Dunbar’s “I know why” refrain. Nor does she present as brutal or emotional a portrait of the creature’s pain or scars as Dunbar does in “Sympathy;” his battered bird beats “his wing / Till its blood is red on the cruel bars.”

In *The Heart of a Woman*, her fourth autobiography (1981), Angelou again take her title directly from African American poetry, adopting it from Georgia Douglas Johnson’s first published volume (1918).⁵ Johnson’s title poem is an eight-line lyric in which she contrasts Dunbar’s caged bird to “the heart of a woman” flying away at dawn but returning to her cage at night. The heavily anapestic rhythms of Johnson’s “Heart of a Woman” have an up-beat that tends to capture Angelou’s mood in the fourth autobiography; by the end of the book she has escaped the entrapments of her troubled relationship with a charismatic African freedom-fighter, Vus Make. Thus both Angelou and Johnson specifically address the issue of gender, as Dunbar does not.

In the fifth autobiography, *All God’s Children Have Traveling Shoes* (1986), Angelou returns for her title to the rhythms of the black musical tradition. The “traveling shoes” refer to the Negro spiritual, “I’ve Got Shoes,” from which she sang a few lines during our 1997 interview, conducted on June 16, 1997, at her home in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. During the interview Angelou did not always distinguish among genres: “If they are songs about the spirit, then they are gospel songs. Some they call gospel and some spirituals. But those are just titles which help people to codify the Dewey Decimal System or something. The people who wrote them and sang them, they thought they were all spirituals.”⁶ In a similar tone I would suggest that spirituals, which usually rhyme and use the device of repetition for their structure, can be called spirit/poems or people/poems or Heaven/poems.

In the sixth volume, *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* (2002), the word *song*, which appears in the up-lifting religious title, repeats the “sings” and “singing” of earlier books in the series. It seems clear that poetry and song were inextricably connected in her mind with the autobiographies, to the point that she would first publish in one form and then immediately in the other. In the 1997 interview, her answers to the questions I asked about the art of autobiography were constantly disrupted by spontaneous responses, often interspersed with song.

⁴ Paul Laurence Dunbar, “Sympathy,” *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, eds. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997) 900.

⁵ Georgia Douglas Johnson, *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, 971.

⁶ Angelou, cited by Lupton, pp. 47-48.

Angelou reportedly wrote her first poem when she was fifteen.⁷ She was still writing commemorative poetry until the year before her death. Maya Angelou published more than four individual volumes of poetry, two collections, and a number of separately published ceremonial poems following her maiden venture with Random House in 1971. Yet literary critics and editors of specialized anthologies have paid her poetry scant attention.⁸ To my knowledge only one critic, Lyman B. Hagen, has adequately dealt with Angelou’s poetry. In “Chapter 4: Poetry about Everything,” Hagen gives a balanced account of Angelou’s poems, which “go from the excitement of love to outrage over racial injustice, from the pride of blackness and African heritage to suffered slurs.”⁹ He discusses her line length (usually short), her sensitive rendering of rhythm and of emotion, and establishes her roots in the black oral tradition. In language as succinct as Angelou’s, he summarizes her technique: “Angelou’s poems are dramatic and lyrical. Her style is open, direct, unambiguous, and conversational. The diction is plain but sometimes the metaphors are quite striking.”¹⁰

Of the topics treated in her poetry, I have found the most consistent to be love fulfilled or unfulfilled; black men and black women, together or separate; memory; drugs; religion; and slavery. Often these inter-related themes are held together by references to *song*, as in “Worker’s Song” (CP 223); or in “The Singer Will Not Sing” (CP 149); or in “A Georgia Song” (CP 187-88). She once told Oprah Winfrey that “all poetry was music written for the human voice.”¹¹ Like the Protestant hymn and like the blues, Angelou’s poem/songs often introduce a major clause that is repeated throughout the subsequent stanzas in a refrain. This mnemonic technique enables the congregation to sing a standard hymn without knowing all of the words, and it helps the blues singer through her or his many interlocked choruses. LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) discusses blues as a “verse form” having social meaning: “Love, sex, tragedy in interpersonal relationships, death, travel, loneliness, etc., all are social phenomena.”¹²

⁷ Lyman B. Hagen, *Heart of a Woman, Mind of a Writer, and Soul of a Poet: A Critical Analysis of the Writings of Maya Angelou* (Lanham MD: U P of America, 1997) 19. The reference will hereafter be abbreviated as *Heart*.

⁸ *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* includes only two poems by Maya Angelou, “Still I Rise” and “My Arkansas.” *The Prentice Hall Anthology of African American Literature* contains none of Angelou’s poetry. *The Prentice Hall Anthology of African American Women Writers* contains only one poem by Maya Angelou, “Still I Rise.”

⁹ Hagen, *Heart*, 119.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 130.

¹¹ *Hallelujah! The Welcome Table* (New York: Random House, 2004), 202.

¹² *Blues People*, 50.

Although Angelou utilizes blues themes throughout her *Collected Poems*, she does not use the specific twelve-bar blues structure of three rhyming lines (AAA). However, she approximates this form in a delightful early poem “No Loser, No Weeper” (CP 12) by concluding the standard AAA rhyme scheme with a fourth unrhymed line that varies slightly in each stanza.¹³ The poem lists in the first three stanzas three examples of losing something—a dime, a doll, and a watch—and ends with a fourth stanza:

Now if I felt that way ‘bout a watch and a toy,
What you think I feel ‘bout my lover-boy?
I ain’t threatening you, madam, but he is my evening’s joy.
And I mean I really hate to lose something.

As early as 1971 Angelou was experimenting not only with African American musical and speech patterns but also with the invention of a *persona* through whom she could express basic feelings. The “I” of “No Loser, No Weeper” is not Angelou but a jealous woman who is meticulously quoted throughout as she addresses a rival. Similarly, her famous “phenomenal woman” is not necessarily the poet but a universal woman whose emotions are displays of overwhelming pride and not, as in this early poem, of potential loss. At their most effective—for example in “Phenomenal Woman” (CP 130-31) and in “Still I Rise” (CP163-64), the techniques of repeated phrasing and conscious narration give the poems their framework, strength, immediacy, and voice.

“Phenomenal Woman” is one of Angelou’s most endearing poems. The *persona* is a large, hip-swinging, unbowed female of unspecified race. Structurally, the poem consists of four stanzas ranging from thirteen to sixteen lines, with each stanza divided by the words “I say,” followed by a litany of female attributes: flashing eyes, riding breasts, arching back, clicking heels, and so forth. The words and images pile one upon another, bringing to mind the frenzied Male Poet’s response to the song of the “Abyssinian maid,” the Ethiopian singer in Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan”: “And all who heard should see them there, / And all should cry, Beware! Beware! / His flashing eyes, his floating hair.”¹⁴ Like Coleridge’s Abyssinian maid, Angelou’s “Phenomenal Woman” works her magic when we overhear her voice, hear the poem in the “mind’s ear,” as if listening to a boisterous recitation. Angelou had in fact recited and recorded “Phenomenal Woman” so often that critics assume her to be the subject, the “I” of the poem. I would argue on the contrary that as in her

¹³ According to Jones, the twelve-bar blues is structured so that “each verse is of three lines, each line about four bars long,” *ibid*, 68.

¹⁴ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Kubla Khan,” *Samuel Taylor Coleridge--The Major Works*. Revised Ed. (New York: Oxford U P, 2008), 102-03.

childhood recitals for Mama Henderson and in her televised public poems, these lyrics are aspects of her amazing oratory.

In “Still I Rise” the first seven stanzas are written in ballad form (ABCB, alternating iambic tetrameter/trimeter) with many anapestic and spondaic substitutions. These variations give the poem a taunting or “sassy” effect as she addresses a “You” who one assumes to be white. The poem changes its rhythm in the eighth and ninth stanzas, becoming a series of couplets punctuated by the words “I rise”—a two-word, two-syllable line that is repeated three times at the end of the ninth and final stanza. Clearly, Angelou had a genuine concern for poetic patterns, although too many readers might see only the anger as the narrator rises above adversity.

The images reveal that the *persona* is black (“I’m a black ocean”) and female, as in the vulvic stanza:

Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I’ve got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?

The word *rise* appears ten times in the poem and is a frequent rhyme word, as in the stanza above. The accumulation of rising sounds creates an upward cadence, a kind of secular resurrection.

Like the moon, like the tides, like the air, like the slave, so the narrator rises outside of a painful past: “Into a daybreak that’s wondrously clear / I rise” (*CP* 164).

Both in her poetry and in her prose Angelou seemed captivated by the notion of rising, reflected in the title of her sixth autobiography, *A Song Flung Up to Heaven*. On the final page of that final autobiography, *rise* becomes the major verb and *Hamlet* the major allusion: “I thought that if I wrote a book, I would have to examine the quality in the human spirit that continues to rise despite the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.” The reference to *Hamlet* looks backwards to the childhood that she is getting ready to recreate as she embarks on her autobiographical series. “Rise” appears three more times on this final page. While Maya Angelou makes her own individual use of the concept of rising, she is also echoing the New Testament (“But now is Christ risen from the dead”); the *Baptist Standard Hymnal* (“Christ Arose”); and the Negro spiritual (“Climin’ Jacob’s Ladda”).¹⁵

¹⁵ These references to rising are to 1 Corinthians 15:20; to *The Standard Baptist Hymnal*, ed. Mrs. A. M. Townsend (Nashville, TN: Townsend Press, 1973) 108; and to LeRoi Jones, *Blues People* 47. See also *rise* in James Strong, *The Strongest Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 290.

At times Angelou combines the black oral tradition with the lyric form popularized by British poet Robert Browning in the nineteenth century: the dramatic monologue. In a dramatic monologue a narrator, someone not the poet, speaks aloud to an intended listener in order to convey “the speaker’s temperament and character.”¹⁶ As she had briefly assumed the voice of her forbidding grandmother in the Plimpton interview, so Angelou assumes the voices of various speakers in her poetry: the slave, the junkie, the prostitute, the “phenomenal woman.” She speaks through their words and in their language and in their spirit--much as Browning had articulated the voices and characters of Fra Lippo Lippi or Andrea del Sarto.

In one of her most effective dramatic monologues, “*Why Are They Happy People?*” (CP 237), a narrator, most assuredly white and more than likely an overseer, gives orders to three people—an old black man, a black boy, and a black girl—in three short, separate stanzas:

Skin back your teeth, damn you,
wiggle your ears,
laugh while the years
race
down your face.

Pull up your cheeks, black boy,
wrinkle your nose,
grin as your toes
spade
up your grave.

Roll those big eyes, black gal,
rubber your knees,
smile when the trees
bend
with your kin.

In each of the five-line stanzas a single syllable or foot occupies the fourth line: “race,” “spade,” and “bend.” These verbs stand out, not only for their brevity and positioning but also for their harsh meanings: *race* signifies both downward movement and blackness; *spade* is both a shovel and a colloquial term for Negro;

¹⁶ M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, eighth edition, with Geoffrey Galt Harpham (Boston: Thompson Wadsworth, 2005), 50.

bend represents not only the girl’s rubber knees but also the heavy pull of a tree during a lynching.

Sadly, not all of Angelou’s poems have this kind of impact. Some are mere word games or childhood chants that take a wide-eyed delight in the rhythms of song, as in “Harlem Hopscotch” (WP 510) and “Times-Square-Shoeshine-Composition” (WP 34-35). The latter is a worker’s song that depends heavily on the repetition of the words “pow wow.” Jacqueline A. Thursby states that the rhythm and repetitious sounds “reflect the pace of his work and keep his tedious polishing of leather shoes stimulating and alive.”¹⁷ Still, these internal repetitions are often jarring and limited in meaning, like the “pow wow” refrain, above, or the “Whoppa, Whoppa / Whoppa, Whoppa” of “Worker’s Song” (WP 223). Although she may be using nonsense sounds to capture the weary syncopations of the shoeshine cloth or the carpenter’s hammer, the contrived repetition does little to enhance the poems’ effectiveness.

A few of Angelou’s word games suffer from what might be called the Roget’s Syndrome; reportedly, she took Roget’s Thesaurus, the Bible, and a bottle of Sherry for her early morning writing sessions.¹⁸ Too often Angelou employs large words in an inappropriate context, for example in “California Prodigal” (CP 141-42), in which words like “antiquitous,” “gelid,” “nestle,” “phantasmatalities,” and “fulminant” have no rhyme or reason. Such an abundance of pedantic language contrasts sharply with some of Angelou’s more direct and poignant lyrics, my two favorites being “The Traveler” (CP 157), an eight-line ballad that addresses the theme of loneliness, and “When Great Trees Fall” (CP 266-67), a poem that could fittingly serve as her epitaph.

“The Traveler,” with its stanzas of four lines each, is a variation of the ballad form:

Byways and bygone
And lone nights long
Sun rays and sea waves
And star and stone

Manless and friendless
No cave my home
This is my torture
My long nights, lone

¹⁷ *Critical Companion to Maya Angelou* (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 2011), 247.

¹⁸ See Angelou’s interview with Carol Sarler, “A Life in the Day of Maya Angelou,” in Jeffrey M. Elliot, ed., *Conversations with Maya Angelou* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1989), 214-17.

The fairly unusual rhyme scheme of *aaba*, altered in the second stanza to *cada*, is complemented by the use of off-rhyme (*bygone, long, stone, home*). The lines are very short--two feet instead of the anticipated longer lines of the standard ballad. The narrator is "friendless" and "manless"; the emptiness of the "-less" suffixes emphasizes her absolute isolation. The poem has no punctuation other than a comma in the eighth line, followed by the key word *lone*, which marks both the final signal of separation and the abrupt end of the poem. This brief and agonizing lyric is probably the best of Angelou's many poems dealing with the theme of unrequited love.

"When Great Trees Fall" (*CP* 266-67), the penultimate work in *The Complete Collected Poems*, immediately precedes "On the Pulse of Morning." Like many of Angelou's lyrics it is structured through the repetition of a major clause--"When great trees fall"-- which again appears at the beginning of the second stanza. In the third stanza the image shifts from "trees" to "souls": "When great souls die, / The air around us becomes / Light, rare, sterile." After the death of great souls, "Our minds, formed /and informed by their / radiance, / fall away." Images of trees, rocks, lions, and elephants appear in the two opening stanzas. With the introduction of the soul theme in stanza three, the words become nebulous, vague, relegated to the mind and to memory. The tone becomes somber, elegiac. There are no rhymes. The famous verb *to rise* is replaced by the verb *to fall*. The poem ends in past tense: "They existed. They existed. / We can be. Be and be / better. For they existed."

"When Great Trees Fall" was published in Angelou's last individual volume of poetry, *I Shall Not Be Moved* (1990). Angelou was sixty-two years old. Her political heroes, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. had fallen more than two decades earlier. Her failing mother, Vivian Baxter, was to die in Winston-Salem during the following year.¹⁹ Yet at the age of sixty-two Dr. Maya Angelou's life and career were on the rise. She had begun to earn honorary degrees. She had a dedicated following, especially among college audiences, where she would wow the crowd with her sharp witticisms and her vibrant poetry, as she most certainly did the first time I heard her perform in 1995 at Towson State University in Baltimore, Maryland. Numerous appearances on television, at national conferences, and on university podiums gave Dr. Angelou a visibility rare among American poets.

She received her greatest visibility, however, when, at the age of sixty-five, she read "On the Pulse of Morning" for the Inauguration of President William Clinton on January 20, 1993.²⁰ Before Angelou, only one other American poet, Robert Frost, had read an inaugural poem, at the 1961 ceremony honoring John F. Kennedy.

¹⁹ *Maya Angelou: Her Phenomenal Life and Poetic Journey* (New York: Essence Books, 2014), 106.

²⁰ I am forever indebted to the late Dolly McPherson for having provided me with an early video tape of that reading for my personal use.

Maya Angelou was the first African American and the first woman to share the Presidential stage. When she read “On the Pulse of Morning” (CP 270-73) she, like the untarnished president, offered the dream of hope to the world, whose citizens she lists one by one:

You, the Turk, the Arab, the Swede
The German, the Eskimo, the Scot,
The Italian, the Hungarian, the Pole,
You the Ashanti, the Yoruba, the Kru, bought,
Sold, stolen, arriving in a nightmare,
Praying for a dream.

“On the Pulse of Morning” is a long poem, more than one hundred lines, basically unrhymed, televised on satellite around the world and still available on YouTube.²¹ Because of its length and its gravity, I tend to think of it as an ode, which M. H. Abrams defines as a “long lyric poem that is serious in subject and treatment, elevated in style, and elaborate in its stanzaic structure.”²² It resembles the informal, irregular pattern of the English ode, popularized by the British Romantic poets during the nineteenth century. It is also an *aubade*, a lyric poem about the morning, since it is dedicated to the “pulse of this new day,” to the dawn of a new administration. The final words of the poem are “Good morning.”

The Inaugural Ode consists of sixteen stanzas of irregular length. Its structure depends on three major images, all introduced in the first line: “A Rock, A River, A Tree.” Each of these images immediately evokes a host of Judeo-Christian associations: Saint Peter; the river Jordan; the true cross; the Forbidden Tree of *Genesis*. The symbols may also suggest the triad of images—star/lilac/bird—in “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed,” Walt Whitman’s elegy to another American president, Abraham Lincoln.²³ But Angelou’s audience includes many nations and many creeds: the Muslim, the Ashanti, the Apache. The poet is very careful that her homage to Peace is not limited to a Western vision. A rock, a river, and a tree are dominant images in all known cultures, from Asia; to South America; to West Africa, where Angelou had resided from 1961 through 1964.

“On the Pulse of Morning” was influenced by African American poetry, especially the Langston Hughes poem, “A Negro Sings of Rivers” (1921), which resembles Angelou’s ode in its broad geographical focus and its celebration of the

²¹ You Tube, clintonlibrary42, 174946. Web. Video.

²² Abrams and Harpham, 206-07.

²³ “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomd,” *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, Fourth Edition, ed. Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, and Jon Stallworthy (N.Y: Norton,1996), 978-84.

“ancient, dusty rivers” of the world.²⁴ It also recalls a poem by Jean Toomer, “Brown River, Smile” in its symbolic use of the river; in its praise of other races; and in Toomer’s cry for a “new America / to be spiritualized by each new American,” a plea that seems to summarize the ideology of “On the Pulse of Morning.”²⁵ Like Hughes and Toomer before her, Angelou speaks for all African Americans in their universal quest for peace and freedom, but she speaks through the voice of the sacred river: “Come, clad in peace, / And I will sing the songs / The Creator gave to me when I and the / Tree and the Rock were one.”

In a feat of extraordinary ventriloquism, Angelou has each of these natural objects—the Rock, the River, and the Tree—address a transfixed international audience while the new President of the United States listens a few feet away. Her dramatic reading marks the culmination of the African American oral tradition, for Dr. Maya Angelou is the direct descendent of those freed slaves who stood on platforms at abolitionist gatherings to express their concerns about one of the country’s vilest institutions. The ode also echoes the rhetorical elegance of the African American sermon, as practiced by her heroes Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X.

It is also important to remember Angelou’s sojourn in Ghana, where she was a friend of poet Kwesi Brew and of folk specialist Efua Sutherland, artists who helped her make contact with African oral tradition and with contemporary African poetry.²⁶ These connections are most dynamic in the animistic undercurrents of the ode. Many traditional West African religions claim that the elements of nature are part of a spiritual life in which skulls, trees, masks, and drums are capable of speech and cognition. One finds such concepts in contemporary African poems—Leopold Senghor’s “Prayer to Masks;” David Diop’s “Africa, to My Mother;” Birago Diop’s “Vanity.”²⁷ The speaking objects in “On the Pulse of Morning,” the Rock, the River, and the Tree, underscore the ancient West African belief that Angelou had described in *Wouldn’t Take Nothing for my Journey Now* (1993): “All things are inhabited by spirits which must be appeased and to which one can appeal. So, for example, when a master drummer prepares to carve a new drum, he approaches the selected tree and speaks to the spirit residing there.”²⁸ Angelou’s breadth of references to the African and African American traditions, epitomized by the oral

²⁴ *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 4.

²⁵ Toomer, *Black Voices*, ed. Abraham Chapman (New York: New American Library, 1968), 378-81.

²⁶ Angelou, in Lupton, 152-54.

²⁷ These three poems are anthologized in *The African Assertion: A Critical Anthology of African Literature*, ed. Austin J. Shelton (New York: The Odyssey Press), 1968.

²⁸ Angelou 33.

elements of speech-making and elocution inherent in both, contributes to the vigor and credibility of the Inaugural Ode.

Of Angelou’s other public or occasional poems, only “On the Pulse of Morning” was written early enough to be included in the Random House 1994 *Complete Collected Poems*, although Angelou’s publisher has announced that a new edition of *The Complete Poetry* will be released on March 31, 2015.²⁹ The other occasional poems are: “A Brave and Startling Truth” (June 1995), read in San Francisco to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations; “Million Man March Poem” (October 16, 1995), read before a large gathering in Washington, D.C.; “Amazing Peace” (December 1, 2005), a poem read in Washington to celebrate the lighting of the National Christmas Tree; a poem/statement honoring Hilary Clinton, published in the *London Observer* on January 20, 2008; an elegy, “We Had Him,” written for the funeral of Michael Jackson (July 7, 2009); and an elegy “His Day is Done: A Tribute Poem for Nelson Mandela” (December 10, 2013).

“A Brave and Startling Truth” is similar to “On the Pulse of Morning” in its length, its elevated style, and its message of world peace as viewed from a multicultural perspective. Its opening phrase “We, this people,” recalls the first lines of both the Preamble to the United States Constitution and the first line of United Nations Charter.³⁰ The repetition of the phrases “We, this people” and “When we come to it” lends a chant-like quality to the ode. Also effective are the numerous geographical references: the Gardens of Babylon, the Pyramids, the Danube, the Mississippi. “A Brave and Startling Truth” is a hopeful poem and a fitting tribute to an organization aspiring to world unity.

When Angelou spoke three months later at the Million Man March in Washington, she recited a poem quite different in tone from the earlier ones. It is an energetic, rhymed account of the hardships of black men, with a repeated chorus: “The night has been long, / The wound has been deep. / The pit has been dark, / And the walls have been steep.”³¹ In preacher-like fashion she calls for a clapping of hands: “Clap hands, let us come together and reveal our hearts.” This spirited public poem ends with a modification of Angelou’s favorite aphorism: “And still we rise.” *Amazing Peace: A Christmas Poem* was performed during the Holiday season of 2005 and was immediately published by Random House as a mini-book. The title is a reference to the great hymn “Amazing Grace.” The poem opens with a thundering avalanche, which gradually “ebbs to silence” as hope is

²⁹ <http://www.randomhouse.com/book/248215/the-complete-poetry-by-maya-angelou>. Web. 6 Dec. 2014.

³⁰ Mark Leon Goldberg, “Maya Angelou’s Ode to the United Nations,” <http://www.undispatch.com/maya-angelous/>. May 28, 2014. Web. 11 Aug., 2014. This site contains the entire text of the poem.

³¹ The text is available from PoemHunter.com and other web sources.

“born again in the faces of children.” Although these children are of all races and ethnicities—“the Jew, and the Jainist, the Catholic and the Confucian”—Angelou’s celebration of Peace has a primarily Christian orientation, which is not surprising given her subject. A year later Random House published another small book, *Mother: A Cradle to Hold Me*. The rather formless poem is a tribute to all mothers but especially to Vivian Baxter. It ends with the lines “I thank you, Mother / I love you.”

Angelou’s 2008 tribute to Hillary Clinton was written for the *London Observer* and printed in paragraph form in the *Guardian*.³² Angelou was supporting Hillary Rodham Clinton in her bid for the 2008 Democratic nomination; when *The Observer* asked her for a praise-poem, she responded with a surprisingly empty, flat and specious celebration of Hillary “the woman.” The poem begins with four lines from Angelou’s “Still I Rise” and ends with an imperative: “Rise Hillary. / Rise.” After her candidate lost the nomination, she switched her drawing power to the young African American candidate, Barack Obama, who awarded Dr. Angelou the coveted Presidential Medal of Freedom Award in 2011,

“We Had Him,” her elegy to singer/dancer Michael Jackson, was read at his memorial service in 2009 not by the author but by the dynamic black actress Queen Latifah. The poem, which consistently repeats the simple rhythmic title, is, like her odes to the Inauguration and to the United Nations, international in scope. It recalls Jackson’s effect on audiences not only in the United States but also in Tokyo, France, Ghana, and South Africa. And above all it celebrates Jackson’s enormous achievements in dance and song, arts so very close to Angelou’s heart and to her life.³³ To my knowledge her final notable public poem was a tribute to South African leader Nelson Mandela, whom she compared to the Hebrew King David for having defeated the mighty Goliath.³⁴

Dr. Maya Angelou died on May 28, 2014. Of the many mourners who paid homage at the funeral held June 7, 2014 at Wake Forest University, one was former President Clinton, there to bid one final “Good Morning.”³⁵ Another was Maya Angelou’s son, Guy Johnson, who talked about his mother’s suffering and her

³² The text and commentary can be found in Vanessa Thorpe, “Maya Angelou’s Poem in Praise of Hillary,” *The Observer*, 19 January, 2008. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/jan/20/usa.poetry> Web. 6 Dec, 2014.

³³ Michael Jackson’s Funeral, You Tube <http://www.mtv.com/news/1615416/maya-angelous-poem-about-michael-jackson-we-had-him/> Web. 6 Nov. 2014. Video.

³⁴ “His Day is Done: A Tribute Poem for Nelson Mandela,” State Department, <http://youtu.be/PqQzjit7b1w>. December 10, 2013. Web. 12 Dec. 2014. Video.

³⁵ Funeral of Maya Angelou. <http://new.livestream.com/wfu/angelou>. Web. 6.Nov., 2014. Video.

courage during her final ten years. The formal program contained his poem “The Last Oasis,” composed in 1991, two years prior to Angelou’s reading of “On the Pulse of Morning.” “The Last Oasis” celebrates a gifted and beloved traveler who had “drunk deeply / from sweet water that rises from sandstone beds.” When he spoke on stage Johnson concluded his remarks with another of his poems, a sonnet that ends with the image “This star, this nova, is my mother.” They are phenomenal poems. His mother would have been proud both of the poems and of the performance.

Works Cited

- Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Eighth Edition. With Geoffrey Galt Harpham. Boston: Thompson Wadsworth, 2005. Print.
- The African Assertion: A Critical Anthology of African Literature*. Ed. Austin J. Shelton. New York: The Odyssey Press, 1968. Print.
- Angelou, Maya. *Amazing Peace*. New York: Random House, 2005. Print.
- . “A Brave and Startling Truth.” In Mark Leon Goldberg. “Maya Angelou’s Ode to the United Nations.” <http://www.undispatch.com/maya-angelous/> May 28, 2014. Web. 11 Aug., 2014. Video.
- . *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou*. New York: Random House, 1994.
- . *Even the Stars Get Lonesome*. New York: Random House, 1997.
- . *Hallelujah! The Welcome Table*. New York: Random House, 2004.
- . “His Day is Done: A Tribute Poem for Nelson Mandela,” State Department, <http://youtu.be/PqQzjit7b1w>. December 10, 2013. Web. 12 Dec. 2014. Video.
- . “Million Man March Poem.” PoemHunter.com. Web. 12 Aug. 2014.
- . “On the Pulse of Morning.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=59xGmHzxtZ4> Dec. 18, 2012. Web. 10 Nov. 2014. Video.
- . *Phenomenal Woman; Four Poems Celebrating Women*. New York: Random House, 1995. Print.
- . “In Praise of Hilary Clinton.” In Vanessa Thorpe, *The Observer*, 19 January, 2008. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/jan/20/usa.poetry>
- . *A Song Flung Up to Heaven*. New York: Random House, 2003. Print.
- . “We Had Him.” <http://www.mtv.com/news/1615416/maya-angelous-poem-about-michael-jackson-we-had-him>. 7 July, 2009. Web. 6 Oct. 2014. Video.
- . *Wouldn’t Take Nothing for My Journey Now*. New York; Bantam Books, 1994. Print.
- The Baptist Standard Hymnal*. Ed. Mrs. A. M. Townsend. Nashville, TN: Townsend Press, 1973. Print.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. “Kubla Khan.” *Samuel Taylor Coleridge – The Major Works*. Revised Ed. New York: Oxford U P, 2008, 102-03. Print.

- The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay. New York: Norton, 1997. Print.
- Plimpton, George. "The Art of Fiction CXIX: Maya Angelou." *Paris Review* 32:116 (1990): 145-67. Print.
- The Poetry Foundation. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/glossary-term/occasional%20poem> . Web. 31 Aug. 2014.
- The Prentice Hall Anthology of African American Literature*. Ed. Rochelle Smith and SharonL. Jones. Saddlewood, NJ: Prentice Hall PTR, 2000. Print.
- The Prentice Hall Anthology of African American Women Writers*. Ed. Valerie Lee. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall 2006. Print.
- Sarler, Carol. "A Life in the Day of Maya Angelou," in Jeffrey M. Elliot, ed. *Conversations with Maya Angelou*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989, 214-17. Print.
- Strong, James. *The Strongest Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001. Print.
- Thursby, Jacqueline S. *Critical Companion to Maya Angelou: A Literary Reference to Her Life and Work*. New York: Facts on File, Inc., 2011. Print.
- Toomer, Jean. "Brown River, Smile," *Black Voices: An Anthology of Afro-American Literature*. New York: New American Library, 1968. Print.
- Wake Forest University Funeral. <http://new.livestream.com/wfu/angelou>. Web. 8. Nov, 2014. Video.
- Whitman, Walt. "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed." *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*. Fourth Edition. Ed. Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, and Jon Stallworthy. New York: Norton, 1996. Print.

Healing the (Re)Constructed Self: The South, Ancestors, and Maya Angelou's *Down in the Delta*

Terrence Tucker

Maya Angelou's presence in films like *Poetic Justice* (1993) and *Madea's Family Reunion* (2006) embodies the ancestral voice who advises the younger characters to sustain a deep commitment to history, family, and legacy. Specifically, Angelou's film presence demands an intimate connection with one's past and with one's cultural and familial roots. While we see these elements in the characters Angelou plays in films, in her directorial debut *Down in the Delta*, Angelou extends the need for cultural and historical knowledge for individual characters and for the family and community as a whole. The story focuses on Loretta Sinclair's (Alfre Woodard) return to the South to spend the summer with her uncle Earl (Al Freeman, Jr.) as a way for her and her two children to escape a crime-filled, poverty-stricken Chicago. Sent to the dry county by her mother Rosa Lynn (Mary Alice) as a way to avoid relapsing into alcohol and drug abuse, Loretta must earn enough money to buy back the family heirloom, a sterling silver candelabrum that has been part of the family's legacy since slavery. As she and her children adjust to life in the South, Loretta moves from a woman objectified by the urban environment of poverty and drugs to a (re)constructed self-built around a fuller understanding of her heritage and the development of a reciprocal relationship between herself and her community.

Angelou's film fits within a tradition of African American works that reject the myth of the urban North as a promised land or that cast the rural South as a site from which blacks must always escape. Instead, Angelou's film, like Alice Walker's *Meridian* (1976) and Ernest Gaines's *A Lesson before Dying* (1993), find African Americans carving out a life for themselves by directly engaging the stories of their ancestors' survival as a means to garner strength in their inevitable confrontations with white supremacy. As the characters move towards agency for individuals and the collective body, a connection to their history of activism, resistance, and community helps move them towards a vibrant, dynamic subjectivity. By contrast, the North becomes a space where meaning and tradition are lost as African Americans discover an urban space filled with violence, poverty, and alienation. Even Atlanta, a consistent site used in representations of modern black life in the South, threatens to alienate Earl's son Will (Wesley Snipes) and his family whose commitment to a bourgeois status and privilege Angelou casts as potentially harmful as the poverty in Loretta's Chicago. This paper argues that Maya Angelou's *Down in the Delta* sees the South as an important regenerative space for African

Americans, a place where blacks can re-establish connections to their roots and encounter a supportive community that pushes back against the crushing isolation and nihilism of Northern, urban spaces. In a moment that finds many African Americans returning home to the South, Angelou's film remains consistent with her casting of the South as a critical space where African Americans confront the changing cultural and political realities of the South by refusing to abandon the traditions survival and expression that have been vital to black life since slavery.

In his remembrance of Maya Angelou director John Singleton proclaimed, "She was a dancer, a singer, she was the first renaissance person I ever met. She had done it all" (Kidlay, "John Singleton on Maya Angelou"). Singleton's incomplete reference to Angelou, who was also a writer, activist, teacher, and filmmaker, nonetheless lauds her for her willingness to expand the boundaries of what an artist, especially an African American woman, can achieve. Indeed, Angelou's appearance in *Poetic Justice* popularized her to a new generation of African Americans, but also obscured a life filled with a variety she detailed memorably in her multiple autobiographies, beginning with 1969's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Yet one of the few experiences to elude Angelou by the time she met Singleton was that of a feature film director. Though her Pulitzer Prize-nominated screenplay *Georgia, Georgia* (1972) was the first filmed screenplay written by an African American woman, it was not until she was seventy that she made her directorial debut, *Down in the Delta* (1998). Although Angelou's *Georgia, Georgia* takes on issues like miscegenation and racial hatred, *Down in the Delta* stands as a project consistent with the subjects that dominate Angelou's autobiographical and poetic works. In particular, Angelou's need to confront the legacy and history of the South, especially in the last three decades of her life, makes her presentation of the South important for our understanding of the complex relationship African Americans continue to have with a region that has consistently been associated with violent, racist oppression from slavery through the end of legal segregation.

Angelou's interest in the project comes as no surprise given how important the South has been to her own work, as both a place of refuge and a site of oppression. As Carol E. Neubauer points out, "For Angelou, as for many black American writers, the South has become a powerfully evocative metaphor for the history of racial bigotry and social inequality, for brutal inhumanity and final failure. Yet the South also represents a life-affirming force energized by a somewhat spiritual bond to the land itself" (116). Indeed, with the memory of the racist oppression she faced at the center, Angelou once vowed never to return to the South. In her autobiographies, Angelou consistently cast the South as a site of trauma and hate where she lived literally in silence for five years. However, she would eventually move to Winston-Salem, North Carolina and would reside in the South until her death. Angelou's

return to the South – in 1981 to teach at Wake Forest – anticipates the remigration to the South by millions of African Americans. As she writes in an essay for *Ebony* entitled “Why I Returned to the South,” despite her desire to “pretend the South was far behind,” she confesses that wherever she lived, “It appeared to me that the South was everywhere I went and there would be no escape” (132-133). Angelou explains that her trip South in 1971 to speaking engagements in West Virginia and North Carolina was necessary because “The more I tried to ignore it, the more it intruded into my life” (133). By contrast Loretta, in the *Down in the Delta*, views the South through the lens of the assumed superiority of the urban North. The South then becomes an obstacle to Loretta’s goal of making enough money to retrieve the candelabrum, named Nathan, and return to the North. Regardless, the South is seen as a site that must be traversed by African Americans before they can achieve full subjectivity. Angelou confesses that her travel South became necessary in order, as she says “to face the fear/loathing at its source or it would consume me whole” (133). At the end a trip to the South in 1971, Angelou reveals “I knew that morning, that one day that one day, I would return to The South in general, and North Carolina in particular. I would find friends, join a church and add my energy to the positive movement to make this country more than it is today” (134). The impact of the return of so many African Americans has been most keenly felt in the 2008 and 2012 Presidential elections in African American turnout, particularly in Virginia, North Carolina, and Florida. So just as the South has continued to be filled with moments of incredible fear and repression, the South remains a crucial site in the development of African American expressive traditions and the forging of a distinct African American perspective on America and its democratic promise.

As a character, Loretta is often unlikable, disrespectful to her mother, negligent with her children, and uninterested in improving her own life. She can easily be dismissed by some as “ghetto,” held up as an example of black pathology, and considered unredeemable by much of society. Yet Woodard, who most reviewers celebrate as giving a stand out performance in humanizing Loretta, has suggested that the reasons she would be dismissed are the very ones that made the role attractive to her. Woodard believes, “When you look at another human being, you’re looking at somebody’s cousin, daughter, brother. If people passed Loretta on the streets of Chicago, they would draw all kinds of assumptions about her. But we get to do a movie about her so they can see how magnificent she is” (*Ebony*, “*Down in the Delta*”). While Stephen Holden’s review of the film suggests that Angelou “softens” the scenes of crime and poverty in urban Chicago, what we see in the place of the expected (“real”) black male angst and violence are Angelou’s attempts to establish the forces that threaten to swallow the Sinclair family as a whole and Loretta specifically. Instead of the lives of the drug dealers/anti-heroes featured in the black street films of the early 1990s (Snipes’ 1991’s *New Jack City*, 1992’s *Juice*,

and 1993's *Menace II Society*), the film chronicles the impact of violence and drugs on the members the community – consistently women and children. Loretta's rejection of the importance of the candelabrum and its meaning leave her, in a phrase Angelou used in *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* (1976), "unanchored," making her a target for the physical and psychological damage caused by easy access to drugs and alcohol coupled with the creeping nihilism of a community caught in the cycle of poverty and violence. More importantly, Loretta's feelings of dislocation and hopelessness have been passed down to her children, who are essentially unprotected, as her son Thomas attempts to find alternative ways to make money and her autistic daughter Tracy languishes without the care and treatment that she needs. As Joe Leydon informs us, Thomas, "is a bright kid who earns money by photographing tourists. But he's in danger of becoming a product of his environment, and already talks about getting 'strapped' like his gun-toting classmates" (Leydon, "*Down in the Delta*"). The film makes clear that Thomas may be unable to avoid beginning life as the type of drug dealer that tempts Loretta and that Rosa Lynn confronts when retrieving her from a crack house. Rosa Lynn's threat to call child services to have the children removed, while significant in getting Loretta to accept the move South, becomes almost secondary to the larger concern of the psychological and emotional damage the family's unanchored status regarding the stories and traditions of the family will have.

In "Maya Angelou: The Autobiographical Statement Updated," Selwyn R. Cudjoe rightly points out, "Afro-American liberation must contain both an internal and external dimension; the former must be our exclusive concern. It is this internal probing that characterizes [*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*] and marks the writing of the contemporary Afro-American woman writer" (289). Similarly, *Delta* is a story unconcerned with a direct confrontation with whites. We bear witness to a story in which African Americans wrestle with the "internal dimensions" even as the film makes clear the presence of external forces impinging on their lives. For example, when Loretta attempts to secure a job as a cashier at a grocery store in Chicago, it is not a white racist who prevents her from getting a job, but her inability to do basic math. Similarly, whites in the South do not bar the Sinclair family from retrieving Nathan or from hearing the story of the family. The family's problems are the result of the division within the family and the younger generation's ignorance of or disinterest in integrating the story of Nathan into their notions of selfhood. When Loretta begins work at Uncle Earl's popular restaurant, Just Chicken, she is relegated to the back of the restaurant struggling at the most basic tasks. Not surprisingly, the film begins to turn as she moves up to waitress, cashier, and eventually manager. These moves are facilitated through Thomas who helps tutor his mother and begins to reverse the erosion of the bond between them. Here the film depicts a family healing itself from within, specifically by

reconnecting to its history and looking towards each other in regaining collective and individual agency.

In his review of the movie, famed movie critic Roger Ebert suggests, "Angelou's first-time direction stays out of its own way; she doesn't call attention to herself with unnecessary visual touches, but focuses on the business at hand. She and [screenplay writer Myron] Goble are interested in what might happen in a situation like this, not in how they can manipulate the audience with phony crises" (Ebert, "*Down in the Delta*"). Both Angelou and Goble rely on the cultural memory of its African American audience, particularly its understanding of the complex history blacks have with the South. In this way, *Delta* differs from other films where characters are reborn in the pastoral space. In both prose and film, we find characters sometimes successful, sometimes disillusioned with the modern, urban space that, through a series of events, find themselves turning – or returning – to a rural space that they initially despise. Eventually they discover, through the charm of small time life, the salt-of-the earth people, or the strengthening of romantic/familial connections that the pastoral space provides them with a peace or wholeness that cannot be replicated elsewhere. *Delta* is not one such film, in large part due to the South as a site of collective trauma for African Americans, as opposed to the individual trauma that characters face and drives them from the pastoral space. In *That Ain't Chicago: Race, Class, and Regional Identity in the Post-Soul South*, Zandria F. Robinson argues, "*Down in the Delta* is not a critique of urban disinvestment and structural racism. Instead, the film utilizes Chicago to critique the entire Great Migration project, and the non-South and urban life more generally" (51). It represents Loretta's return to the rural South, then rejects the individualist self-discovery that underlies the pastoral narrative, by linking her redemption and selfhood to the rescue of the Sinclair heirloom and the future of the family, embodied through her children. The (re)connection of the story of the candelabrum adds an urgency to the film that moves beyond Loretta's own individual needs and desires. While her work at the restaurant, her friendship with the housekeeper and caregiver Zenia (Loretta Devine), and the repair of her relationship with her family are necessary moments for individual agency, the film also links that agency to a re-energizing of the family's bond and legacy and, by extension, the African American community.

Perhaps Angelou's greatest contribution lies in that, as her cast claimed, "she blends a historian's insight with a poet's vision. 'Maya will stop you in the middle of the most tedious, most mundane days and make you realize that all your moments are actually historic,' says Woodard... 'She made everybody focus on what our task is, technically in the scene but also on the historical time line. She was wonderful in weaving that atmosphere to produce the kind of picture that she

did” (“*Down in the Delta*,” 100). Angelou’s interest in imbuing the “most tedious, most mundane” with a historical and symbolic resonance mirrors their presence in her poetry. While the film addresses universal themes of family, history, and nature, as in her literature Angelou grounds those themes in the specific history of American slavery and racism as African Americans attempt to forge a familial legacy as an avenue toward selfhood and in opposition to slavery’s frequent rupture and devaluing of the black humanity. The strongest and most consistent example of historic and symbolic importance that Angelou depicts is, of course, the sterling silver candelabrum which links the family to its history and its intersection with slavery and white supremacy. More importantly, it stands as a symbol of the family’s resistance to the dehumanizing impact of slavery and white supremacist oppression. Rosa Lynn not only pawns the candelabrum to pay for the trip to Mississippi, but she leverages Loretta’s knowledge of the story of Nathan to enlist her compliance with the trip to the Sinclair hometown. In his *New York Times* review of the film, Stephen Holden argues that the story of the candelabra gives the film “a resonance that transcends mushy family drama and lends it the aura of a folk tale. Family legends that connect us to our past, the movie suggests, are necessary for the care and feed of our souls” (Holden, “Healing Power”). The symbolism surrounding the candelabrum recalls August Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson* (1990), a story that finds a brother and sister fighting over the fate of the family piano with the faces of the family’s ancestors carved into it. Like the candelabrum, the piano was traded in the negotiation over slaves, rendering human life akin to property; like the candelabrum, the piano was stolen by later generations and passed down through the family. Finally, the fate of the piano and the candelabrum rely on a synthesis between the past, present, and future generations, rejecting linear fixed notions of time in favor of the simultaneous experience of the past, present, and future. They demand fluidity across generational and ideological lines as opposed to simplistic and exclusive dichotomies that have characterized white mainstream culture in the United States.

Carol Neubauer argues that displacement sits as a central theme in Angelou’s multiple autobiographies, a displacement borne out of the search for comfort and protection that she received when she lived with grandmother. Despite her grandmother’s inability to completely shield Angelou and her brother Bailey from instances of racist oppression in Stamps, Arkansas, she does provide an important communal stability and an individual model for survival and independence. Yet both Angelou and Bailey are sent away from Stamps, first to St. Louis and then to San Francisco, decisions that, while they remove her from the South’s racist oppression, also separates the children from the stabilizing parental force their grandmother had become. The sense of alienation that Angelou feels asserts itself at various moments throughout her autobiography, particularly as she confronts

white supremacist oppression in America and around the world. Just as troubling, after her marriage to the Greek-American Tosh Angelos disintegrates, she comes to realize, as Neubauer points out that, “her son distrusts her and wonders whether she will stop loving him and leave him behind to be cared for by others” (124). Angelou’s constant traveling erodes the trust between the two of them, but also transfers the alienation she feels to her son. In her discussion of Angelou’s *The Heart of a Woman* (1980), Neubauer smartly notes that “[Angelou’s] overwhelming sense of displacement and instability is, ironically, her son’s burden too” (126). That Angelou cannot recreate the protection and comfort for her son that her grandmother provided exacerbates her sense of displacement, leaving both of them vulnerable to racist, misogynist hegemonic forces. In *Delta*, we see a similar tension between mother and son, as Loretta’s absentee parenting, alongside her drug and alcohol use, have left her son so vulnerable that he hides money in a prized toy so that his mother will not use it to buy drugs even as the lure of being a drug dealer continues to linger as an to avoid abject poverty. More disturbing, Thomas has accepted the violence of Chicago as normative, particularly in the casualness that belies his discussions of the pervasive presence of violence and death in his life. As they watch a news story detailing a violent murder Loretta and Thomas almost gleefully speculate on the caliber of weapon used in the crime. While Uncle Earl expresses grief and outrage over the loss of human life, Loretta and Thomas seem virtually unconcerned, a fact met with horror and concern by Earl. When Uncle Earl attempts to demonstrate the material costs of violence, allowing Thomas to shoot at a target that hides the toy filled with money. Thomas’ shock and anger expose his seeming indifference to the value of life and the normativity of violence as essentially performances meant to shield him from the more natural responses of grief and fury over the lives of so many African Americans in Chicago. It also reveals his resentment towards his mother for her inability not only to protect him from those external forces, but for participating in the very activities that foster the cycle of violence and death from which they have escaped.

Angelou’s autobiographies reveal a vibrant woman who traveled the world and who was dedicated to confronting injustice whether in the United States or abroad, even as she danced and sang, acted and wrote. Simultaneously we see someone stunningly vulnerable who fought off the impact of rape, abandonment, failed marriages, and racial and gendered oppression. Transitioning easily into the role of elder and ancestor to a younger generation of poets and artists, Angelou has served as a constant reminder of the importance of maintaining a connection to one’s roots during the crucial transition into the post-integration era. A similar ease informs Angelou’s praise of Singleton’s historical film *Rosewood* (1997), according to Singleton: “Later after she’d seen my movie *Rosewood*, she said ‘Baby, now you’ve done it, you’ve really done.’ You know, in that voice” (Kidlay, “John

Singleton on Maya Angelou”). Angelou’s presence and poetry challenge the oncoming nihilism that characterized the urban black community at the end of the twentieth century. In one of the more famous stories from the set of *Poetic Justice*, Angelou confronted Tupac Shakur during an argument with another cast member, reducing Shakur to tears by asking him “When was the last time anyone told you how important you are? Did you know our people stood on auction blocks, were bought and sold so that you could stay alive today?” Here Angelou demands that Tupac consider his actions within the larger context of African American history, especially the sacrifices of the slaves who endured the myriad instances of dehumanization in order to survive. Angelou’s belief that the past should be a primary factor in the decisions that those in the present make mirrors the expectation the film employs on the Sinclair family. As John Singleton confesses, “On the set of *Poetic Justice*, everyone was enamored of her. We had grown up with her work...She was the grandmother most of us had never met” (Kidlay, “John Singleton on Maya Angelou”). *Delta*, not surprisingly, extends the significance of the elder/ancestor beyond Angelou’s own roles in the films by Singleton and Perry. In *Justice* and *Family Reunion* Angelou provided important historical and cultural context, uncovering the lies of the younger female protagonists or expressing disappointment in the unanchored state of the larger family. So, while the film certainly invests itself in the recovery and maintenance of the selves of the younger generation, *Delta* showcases the elders as active participants in the resolving their own conflicts as well as those of their younger counterparts. We see connections to Angelou’s grandmother throughout, as Rosa Lynn becomes the true constant attempting to hold the external forces and internal tensions at bay. Additionally, Rosa Lynn worries that she cannot continue to protect the family and, in response, sends the family away. However, instead of the sending the children to the assumed promised land of the West (San Francisco) as “Momma” did with Angelou, *Delta* casts the rural South as a space in contemporary America where Loretta and her son can heal the wounds in their relationship. Just as Angelou’s eventual ability to reconcile her past in the South in order to gain agency and participate in its transformation, Loretta and children must confront their failure to exercise agency and the damage done by the internal and external forces impinging on them in Chicago. The film makes clear, however, that they will only be able to achieve their reconstructed selfhood unless they are ushered into it by the elders.

Holden points out, “The film lavishes equal amounts of love on the bucolic Mississippi landscape and on the kind, careworn faces of Earl and his wife, Annie (Esther Rolle), who is suffering from Alzheimer’s disease. Mr. Freeman’s Earl is a man of infinite patience and tenderness, and the scenes of his gently, painstakingly helping his wife around the house and comforting her when she is afraid are among the rare moments to be found in a contemporary movie in which

you see older people caring for one another” (Holden, “Healing Power”). Like Angelou’s grandmother, Earl is a hardworking, respected figure in the community and a business owner. Like Angelou’s grandmother Earl takes primary care of his spouse, and like her own relationship to her grandmother, whom she calls Momma, Loretta establishes a clearly parental relationship with Earl. Earl provides an alternative vision of masculinity, possessing characteristics and responsibilities traditionally associated with female characters. The use of Uncle Earl as the figure of community reverses the traditional gender dynamics in African American works that cast the woman as the keepers of communal spirit and cultural history. For instance, Earl takes Thomas to the cemetery where the Sinclair family is buried and explains to him the importance of the rings on a tree trunk there. The tree stood as a marker for the family, the embodiment of the family’s survival and resiliency despite the presence of slavery, war, lynching, and segregation. Here, in his description of the family’s continued ability to persevere, Uncle Earl counters the nihilism that Thomas started to adopt with an understanding of his family’s sense of hope and communion. While the reduction of the tree to a trunk represents the potential severing of the family’s bond – with Loretta’s father and Will moving away from the Sinclair home – the tree that Uncle Earl informs was planted around the Thomas’s birth stands as the promise of a new tradition, a new covenant for the family’s commitment to each other and to its history. Similarly, the (re)turn of African Americans to the South signals a new tradition and stands as an opportunity to reconfigure a South still wrestling with its slave past as well as its response to the Civil Rights Movement over the last fifty years. Although Annie seems a minor character, functioning as a way to demonstrate Earl’s commitment and facilitate Loretta’s friendship with Zenia, the routine the family establishes provides the stability the Chicago Sinclairs lack and leads to Tracy’s first words. More importantly the late Esther Rolle as Annie stands as a crucial choice in her final role, not only because of her ability to portray the tragedy of her Alzheimer’s, but to Angelou the director. Like Woodard, Rolle starred with Angelou in the film *How to Make an American Quilt* (1995), portraying the great-aunt/elder in the life of Angelou’s character. Similarly, in the film version of her celebrated *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Rolle plays Angelou’s grandmother, the central figure in Angelou’s early upbringing and life. If Rolle does not act as a stabilizing force in the lives of the Chicago Sinclairs, we can easily see how she might be an important presence for Angelou who, like many first-time directors, uses actors with whom they have worked and whom they trust implicitly to convey their vision.

On the other side of the collection of elders Angelou assembles, if for no other reason than her chilly relationship with Earl, sits Rosa Lynn, who has individually navigated the transition to the urban space successfully, but must risk the future of the family on a gambit dependent on Loretta’s transformation. Her uneasy

relationship to Earl stems from Earl's anger that Rosa Lynn took Nathan to Chicago after the death of her husband and Earl's older brother. For him, the candelabrum represents a covenant that demands the family never separate from each other as their ancestor Jesse was separated from his father Nathan when the latter was sold into slavery. Yet Earl often overvalues place and finds himself at odds with family members who leave. For Earl, the world in which he has existed has slowly begun to shift. His failure to recognize and accept the diminishing opportunities or the desire of family members to move away leave him blind to the realities of deindustrialization that cause the potential closure of the chicken-processing plant on which his restaurant relies. Loretta and Will's attempt to save the restaurant by empowering the residents to take control of the plant take advantage of Will's legal expertise in Atlanta alongside Loretta's ability to think beyond the traditions that Earl holds sacred, but which must be reinvigorated by a younger generation.

Will's presence disrupts the dichotomy of the urban North and the rural South that Loretta and Earl embody. Annie's deteriorating condition drives Will's ambivalence about visiting. Not only does she not recognize him, but she mistakes his light-skinned wife Monica (Anne-Marie Johnson) for a white woman, recoiling in fear when she approaches to speak. Living in Atlanta remains a marker of success for Will, one that subsequent African American films uncritically celebrate. Building on its self-proclaimed status as "The City Too Busy to Hate" Atlanta has perhaps been *the* key metropolitan site in the move of African Americans from the North to the South. While the South at large has been a space for older African Americans like Angelou to return to confront their pasts or reconnect to family, the remigration South has also been driven by Southern urban areas with Atlanta as a hub for younger African Americans – as well as post-Civil Rights generation whites – to reshape our larger notions of what should be considered the South. It is the possibility of what the younger generation of Southerners can achieve that interests Angelou in returning after years intentionally avoiding the South. However, *Delta* reveals that even Atlanta disrupts the connections African Americans have to their roots. Robinson contends, "The film condemns post-civil rights generation black middle classes and New South southern cities, like Atlanta and Charlotte. Will, troubled by the emptiness of middle-class questioning the broader purpose of his work as an attorney, represents disconnection from family, urban alienation, and alienation from a proper racial identity" (53). While Will retains a clear appreciation for the culture of which he and his parents were a part, he confesses to his father that his sons are more interested in the modern technology associated with the big city. His children demonstrate no interest their father's hometown or the culture their grandfather celebrates. Spending much of their time on electronic devices or teasing Thomas, their sense of class entitlement and cultural superiority produces the same alienation and nihilism that we see with Loretta

and Thomas. The cousins become two sides of the same coin. In both cases, the ideals and traditions of their ancestors are marginalized or discarded in favor of the embrace of the urban spaces assumed sophistication and promise. However, as Loretta helps Will reconnect to his mother and Will encourages Loretta's self-confidence with brotherly affection, the two discover the possibility of bridging the generational divide across rural and urban spaces that re-center their roots as a primary component in their individual and collective agency. The manifestation of their individual and collective journey back emerges once the threat of the chicken plant closing emerges, which not only threatens Earl's restaurant but will economically devastate the town itself. Building on their own journeys of self-realization and reconnection, Will and Loretta initiate a community effort to fight the plant's closure and extend the film's larger theme of reclaiming self by forging bonds within the larger community.

So, when Earl chastises his son for his rare visits, claiming, "Your roots are here, son," Will responds by pointing his heart and saying, "You always taught me that my roots are here" (*Down in the Delta*). Will's statement resonates not just in the film but across a multitude of works in the African American literary and cinematic canon in which characters struggle or characters to retain a connection to their roots and traditions once they have left the physical site of their home. While we see similar struggles in immigrant literature, African American literature often contains the realization that its characters are not interested or able to assimilate into mainstream culture because of white supremacy's attempt to restrict black bodies, commodify African American culture, and erase African American history. So while I agree that the film celebrates the rural South and its potential in the post-Civil Rights moment to act as a regenerative space, the film also moves beyond a simplistic dichotomy of North-bad, South-good. The implicit and often explicit critique of the urban North encourages a re-examination of the assumptions that have governed our conceptions of African American life in the United States. However the assumption, particularly by Earl, of the primacy of the geographic South over the diasporic South ignores the impact of Will's experience in Atlanta in helping the town resist the closing of the chicken plant. The expectation that Rosa Lynn and her family would stay in rural Mississippi, and his resentment at their decision to leave, smacks of parochialism and marginalizes the centrality of oral tradition in African American culture. The film introduces the possibility that the candelabrum binds the family together beyond their physical location, so long as the story of its significance continues to pass from one generation to the next and is used as a counter to the external, hegemonic forces as well as providing a foundation for the construction of a complex, fully constructed selfhood.

African Americans have historically survived, and indeed resisted, the impact of white supremacist hegemony through the creation and maintenance of African American cultural and expressive traditions. Perhaps itnessa Thorpe, “Maya Angelou’s P-options s most important and enduring quality remains the portability of the elements that have characterized African American traditions since before slavery. One of the major traditions, of course, remains oral storytelling. The story of the candelabrum feels unsurprising: at the end of the Civil War, Loretta’s great-great grandfather Jesse steals the sterling silver candelabra that had been used as payment in the selling of his father Nathan, a moment that Jesse witnesses at six and always remembers. Before his death, Jesse passes the candelabrum on to his eldest son, telling the story of its significance in front of the entire family. With each successive generation, the candelabrum continues to be passed down to the eldest child and comes to represent the binding of the family and its commitment to each other. Uncle Earl interprets the absence of the candelabra as a betrayal of the covenant the candelabrum represents, perhaps leading to what he sees as a slow disintegrating of the family’s connection to each other and the land. His anger at Rosa Lynn animates the tension in their relationship and risks transforming Earl’s fears into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

However, I contend that the story of the candelabrum becomes just as important as the item itself. The family’s ties are reaffirmed through the communal act of storytelling. Angelou herself valued the importance of performance, both as a singer and a writer. Indeed many of her poems, like “Phenomenal Woman” and “Still I Rise,” possess a performative quality. In the film storytelling emerges as perhaps the most critical element in the recovery of a constructive and distinct African American subject. The act of passing down history turns into a public, participatory event. One could in fact argue that a significant part of Loretta’s struggle can be traced to her ignorance of the entire story of the candelabrum. She thus lacks a significant piece central to the construction and maintenance of her selfhood. When she returns to Chicago to retrieve the candelabrum from the pawnshop, Rosa Lynn finally tells Loretta the full story, confessing that she had not told her the story because of Loretta’s descent into drug and alcohol abuse and negligent motherhood. Her alienation from the family embodies Earl’s fear of the removal of the candelabrum from the Sinclair home. Robinson points out, “*Down in the Delta* situates family, community togetherness, and history as especially important for black southerners, and implicitly for non-southerners who may, too, need to come down to the Delta to be healed of their urban ills” (52). So, despite Earl’s protests to the contrary, the return of Loretta to the Mississippi Delta – and the reconstruction of her selfhood – becomes more important than that of the candelabrum. Perhaps just as important, her desire to take responsibility and control for her life initiates her move towards self-realization and an understanding

of where she fits within the family and the community. The decision of where the candelabrum falls to Loretta, its rightful heir, who places it on the mantelpiece of the Sinclair house, a sign of its return “home.” The physical site of the candelabrum however has been relegated to a secondary concern. Unlike the candelabrum, which only one sibling can possess, the story of Nathan, Jesse, and the candelabrum can be shared by the entire clan simultaneously and passed down to the children at multiple times throughout their lives and in multiple spaces.

In his review for *Variety*, Joe Leydon contends, “*Down in the Delta* avoids many of the more predictable contrivances. Loretta doesn’t find a Mr. Right who straightens up her life, Thomas doesn’t evolve overnight into an accomplished photographer, and, while Tracy manages to speak her first word, her condition remains essentially unchanged” (Leydon, “*Down in the Delta*”). The film avoids making Loretta’s selfhood contingent on establishing a romantic relationship with a man. Instead, the film’s (re)construction of an autonomous black subjectivity centers around a full understanding of her family history and a commitment to the resistance of dehumanizing attempts white supremacist culture has employed since slavery. Despite the painful history that animated the Great Migration of the early twentieth century, the deep connection her ancestors forged with the South, and that Loretta rediscovers, has made their ability to return to it and its multiple, sometimes contradictory impulses easier to navigate. As Angelou points out when discussing the importance of the South to African Americans: “Black people, on the other hand, comprehend the South. We understand its weight. It has rested on our backs. We recognize its violence. We have been its victim. We acknowledge its history. It was first written with our blood” (130). Angelou encouraged young blacks to talk with their elders in order to confront their individual and collective legacies. Angelou’s own return to the South becomes important because of the hope she sees in the possibility of the South a hope grounded in the white and black youth of the South, a hope shared by Ernest Gaines, who has consistently said the audience of his novels has been the white and black youth of the South. Angelou would help facilitate the dialogue between black and white youth when she became a professor at Wake Forest. Their conversations enabled them to participate in the transformation of the South. The hope that Angelou expresses becomes a vital element in *Delta*. Instead of casting the South solely as a site of racism and trauma, as parts of her autobiography do, Angelou shows her audience a Southern landscape and community that can act as a regenerative, transformative space.

Works Cited

- Angelou, Maya. "Why I Moved Back." *Ebony*. February 1982. 130-134. Print.
- Cudjoe, Selwyn R. "Maya Angelou: The Autobiographical Statement Updated." *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Meridian, 1990. 272-306. Print.
- Down in the Delta*. Dir. Maya Angelou. Perf. Alfre Woodard. Miramax, 1998. VHS.
- "Down in the Delta." *Ebony*. February 1999. 96-100. Print
- Ebert, Roger. "Down in the Delta." Rev. of *Down in the Delta*, dir. Maya Angelou. rogerebert.com. Sun-Times News Group, 25 December 1998. Web. 10 January 2015.
- Holden, Stephen. "The Healing Power of a Delta Family's Roots." Rev. of *Down in the Delta*, dir. Maya Angelou. *New York Times*. New York Times, 25 December 1998. Web. 10 January 2015.
- Leydon, Joe. "Down in the Delta." Rev. of *Down in the Delta*, dir. Maya Angelou. *Variety*. Variety Media, 23 September 1998. Web. 10 January 2015.
- Kilday, Gregg and John Singleton. "John Singleton on Maya Angelou: 'She Was the First Renaissance Person I Ever Met.'" *The Hollywood Reporter*. The Hollywood Reporter, 13 June 2014. Web. 10 January 2015.
- Neubauer, Carol E. "Maya Angelou: Self and a Song of Freedom in the Southern Tradition." *Southern Women Writers: The New Generation*. Ed. Tonette Bond Inge. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1990. 114-142. Print.
- Robinson, Zandria F. *This Ain't Chicago: Race, Class, and Regional Identity in the Post-Soul South*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2014. Print.

**Come, Dine at my Table:
The Enactment of Safe Spaces in the Cookbooks of Maya Angelou**

Tasha Choma-Sampson

Dr. Maya Angelou has journeyed beyond this present life, yet she has left us with a tangible presence in her complete oeuvre, including the production of two cookbooks: *Hallelujah! The Welcome Table* (2004) and *Great Food, All Day Long: Cook Splendidly, Eat Smart* (2010). Angelou's artistry is once again illuminated in this newest genre. Intersecting brilliant writing with appetizing pictures, unforgettable stories, and sage advice, Maya Angelou's cookbooks represent the confluence of ideologies, strategies, and memories, which coalesce in the form of various levels of safe space. Angelou beckons readers into the "safe space" of her kitchen, a site identified by Patricia Hill Collins as a place of refuge where Black women can authentically be themselves and affirm one another's right to exist. Angelou uses the literal space of a kitchen to invoke a motif utilized in Black women's writings as a site to discuss personal matters that impact Black communities, but if discussed openly bear relevance for all readers. Signifying on multiple levels, Angelou invites readers to dine at her table, where she erects her own kitchen, makes us her honored guests, shares her stories, offers advice, and then encourages us to act on the information given.

As we open the pages of Angelou's first cookbook, *Hallelujah! The Welcome Table*, we are greeted by the invitation to come and partake, "I dedicate this book to every wannabe cook who will dare criticism by getting into the kitchen and stirring up some groceries." Cooking, much like writing, is a deeply personal and intimate act, predicated on the acquisition of approval. In recognition of the vulnerability cooking induces, Angelou seeks to allay anxiety by telling us that this book is precisely for those of us who desire to cook, even though we lack confidence and assurance. She implores readers to relinquish fear of criticism and in its place to manifest boldness by entering the kitchen and trying new feats. Implied in this invitation is Angelou's recurring mantra to "have courage," a theme that runs throughout all of her life's work. Cited as early as 1983 in an interview with Claudia Tate and again in 2008 in her commencement address at Cornell University, Angelou often reiterates that courage is essential. One week prior to her death, she stated, "I think courage is the most important of all the virtues. Without courage you can't practice any other virtue consistently" (From the Editors of *Essence*, 111). Cooking takes courage. In mimicking her skills we learn to create beautiful, scrumptious, byproducts of mutual collaboration. In this safe space, we are free

to be vulnerable, to try the recipes, experiment, succeed, but also potentially fail. What matters most is that she is there with us, coaching us along the way.

Angelou's collaborative process is one of several links to the traditions of African diaspora women. In her kitchen she is not in competition with her sisters but instead forges a space where unity, acceptance, love, and encouragement flourish. In honor of this tradition, it is befitting to utilize a theoretical approach that centralizes the experiences and values of Black women. In her seminal text, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, scholar Patricia Hill Collins creates the ideal lens through which we may analyze the strategies employed by Angelou. Emerging from a history in which Black women's voices are not only silenced but their lives and societal images are constructed as incapable, immoral, simplistic, monstrous "other," Black female scholarship such as Collins' asserts itself in ways that are meaningful and applicable to the study of Black women.

In discussing the importance of locales where Black women may thrive and achieve a clearer understanding of themselves, Collins writes about the importance of self-definition, which includes spaces where Black women are uninhibited in their expressions:

While domination may be inevitable as a social fact, it is unlikely to be hegemonic as an ideology within social spaces where Black women speak freely.

This realm of relatively safe discourse, however narrow, is a necessary condition for Black women's resistance. Extended families, churches, and African-American community organizations are important locations where safe discourse potentially can occur. (101)

When Black women are among their extended families and close friends or gathered in churches and organizations where they are uninhibited, these spaces are deemed "safe." There is freedom of expression, which produces exhilarating results. They are listening to one another, being truly heard—understood and are uninhibited. Not only do women find, use, unmute or claim their voices, their sounds become amplified in the company of one another. There is freedom but there are also empathetic listeners who affirm and inspire one another towards further creative acts. Women are free to invent and reinvent themselves. They are less likely to be forced into someone else's perception of who and what they are. The safe-space setting is reflected in Maya Angelou's two cookbooks. Rather than assert her domination in the kitchen, Angelou invites us to draw close, learn, and co-create in a safe space.

Immediately following her general dedication, Maya Angelou directs her attention to her dear friend, Oprah Winfrey, as she writes, “To O, who said she wanted a big, pretty cookbook. Well, honey, here you are” (vii). The safe space of the loving relationship she shares with Oprah Winfrey has resulted in the creation of a cookbook. Angelou has frequently commented on the close-knit relationship she shares with Oprah. Acknowledging her as a daughter (in the text, *Letters to My Daughter*) as well as an intimate friend, Angelou has frequently commented on her intimate connection with the cultural icon. Specifically in *Hallelujah! The Welcome Table*, Angelou titles one of her recipes “Oprah’s Suffocated Chicken” because Oprah immensely enjoys it but more importantly, Oprah’s first experience with the chicken marks the first time Oprah visited Angelou’s house. In this concluding section of the cookbook, Angelou describes when and how she came to be acquainted with Winfrey, and when Winfrey visited her home. On the second day of her visit, “[Oprah comes] pajamaed into the kitchen]...and Oprah shares, “Your house feels like home.” Indicating that their friendship and bond will be a lasting one, Angelou says, “I hope you will always think that...Robert Frost [says] ‘Home is where when you go there, no one can put you out.’ I offer you this home whenever you need it or even if you just want it” (202). In this moment of defining home, their mother-daughter bond is indelibly sealed and forever memorialized by smothered chicken.

Although Angelou had long been an accomplished cook, Winfrey’s friendship and request precipitate the creation of the book. In the company of her confidant, Angelou is free to share her recipes and her stories. She could choose to provide Winfrey with the recipes in a private setting, giving her a personal cookbook. Instead, she produces the coveted information in the form of a well-publicized book, shifting the private sphere to a public space. Angelou’s choice can be interpreted as the amplification of her voice in the company of another Black woman. The dedication implies that Winfrey has been a partaker of Angelou’s savory meals and a witness to their quality, and the request she made for “a big, pretty cookbook” is an act of support for Angelou. The request inspires Angelou towards the creative act of writing the cookbook. Although Angelou achieved enormous success as a writer, she had never worked in the cookbook genre before, and her dedication makes plain that the private support of her Black female friend played a crucial role. The dedication is evidence that the book is itself the result of loving work performed in a safe space; Angelou shared herself with readers and held true to her mission to enable others to find courage—in this case, the courage to cook. Maya Angelou has taken the privilege of her safe space and extended it to a broader company of people.

This shifting of power or authorial control is exhibited in the African American trope: call and response. On a basic level, Angelou invites Winfrey to eat her food—the symbolic call—and Winfrey not only eats her food—the response—but she asks Angelou to pass on her recipes—resulting in another call—to which Angelou responds in the form of a cookbook. Not only are the women centering a Black womanist approach, but they are operating within the sphere of African American traditions and ultimately maintaining a legacy of the African diaspora. In an article entitled, “Call and Response as Critical Method: African-American Oral Traditions and *Beloved*,” Maggie Sale discusses Toni Morrison’s principles of Black art and expounds on the relationship between call and response and artistic expression:

The characteristics listed [by Morrison] are aspects of African-American oral traditions, and are interrelated rather than discrete. Antiphony or call and response, function, improvisation, and audience performance can all be thought of as part of the group or communal nature of art. This theory of art is interactive, process-oriented, and concerned with innovation, rather than mimetic, product-oriented, or static. Call-and-response patterns provide a basic model that depends and thrives upon audience performance and improvisation, which work together to ensure that the art will be meaningful or functional to the community.

(41)

Sale’s explanation is useful in analyzing the processes in which Angelou engages. Maya Angelou does not see her creation of savory meals as something for herself alone. Instead, it necessitates audience participation, which is central to call and response. She invites readers to cook and eat of her recipes because they are in a safe space in which they can find the courage to attempt meals they would not otherwise attempt. By sharing with readers the fact that Oprah Winfrey made this request while in a private, safe space, Angelou invites us into her safe space and wants us to respond. We may not be as close as she and Winfrey but Angelou beckons us—the “wannabe cooks”—into her kitchen.

The kitchen is an important signifier in the African American literary tradition. In 1980, Barbara Smith and Audre Lorde established Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, which served as a metaphor for one of the locations for women to communicate and work with one another. In her essay, “A Press of Our Own Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press,” Barbara Smith explains, “On the most basic level, Kitchen Table Press began because of our need for autonomy, our need to determine independently both the content and the conditions of our work and to control the words and images that were produced about us” (11). As Smith reiterates, self-definition is an intricate component of safe space and what better location to discuss and affirm notions of selfhood than the safe space of the metaphoric kitchen.

In 1983, Paule Marshall published an autobiographical essay in *The New York Times* entitled, “From the Poets in the Kitchen.” Her landmark essay brought to the forefront the concept of the kitchen as a location for Black women to freely express their insights, provide therapy, release creative energy and embody the African tradition in which “art and life are one” (Marshall). Marshall describes the significance of the location, “The basement kitchen of the brownstone house where my family lived was the usual gathering place. Once inside the warm safety of its walls the women...talked endlessly, passionately, poetically, and with impressive range. No subject was beyond them.” (Marshall). Identifying the kitchen as place of importance in the discourse of her female family members, Marshall contributes to our understanding of this important signifier. She goes on to explain, “there was no way for me to understand it at the time, but the talk that filled the kitchen those afternoons was highly functional...it restored them to a sense of themselves and reaffirmed their self-worth.”

The kitchen is an important locale in Black women’s writings in particular, as it serves as a safe space in which to gather, converse, laugh, love and support one another. Marshall and other scholars have discussed the significance of the kitchen, particularly for Caribbean women. In “Poets in the Kitchen,” Marshall explains, “There was no way for me to understand it at the time, but the talk that filled the kitchen those afternoons was highly functional. It served as therapy, the cheapest kind available to my mother and her friends. Not only did it help them recover from the long wait on the corner that morning and the bargaining over their labor, it restored them to a sense of themselves and reaffirmed their self-worth. Through language they were able to overcome the humiliations of the work-day.” In the safe space of the kitchen, Marshall’s mother and her friends were able to be themselves and to remind one another of their worth.

To further illustrate the significance of kitchen scholarship, Meredith M. Gadsby has written an important text, *Sucking Salt: Caribbean Women Writers, Migration, and Survival*. In it Gadsby explains, “the kitchen space can be read as a storehouse of creativity; a space in which women, while creating works of culinary art, feed their children and one another with a language of resistance” (6). The kitchen bears a multiplicity of functions. In addition to a space for creating art, it serves as a location for feeding, as well as a site for the impartation of survival skills and instruction in the ways of life. Through innovative rereadings of the kitchen [presented by Paule Marshall and Dionne Brand], we remove “[the kitchen space] from the realm of the merely domestic prison as it is often described in mainstream feminism. From the perspective of the kitchen, ‘sucking salt’ signals creativity—creative responses to difficult circumstances via language and culinary ingenuity” (6). Gadsby discusses the kitchen’s function as a method of “sucking

salt,” an approach to licking one’s tears and taking difficult situations and refashioning them into tools of survival. She explains that “Black feminist theorists such as Barbara Smith have reclaimed the kitchen as a space of women’s power and creativity” (123). As an extension of that creativity, Maya Angelou goes beyond the theoretical discussion of the kitchen in order to enact its power as a safe space.

One instance in which the power of the kitchen becomes evident revolves around a recipe created by Angelou’s paternal grandmother, Momma Henderson. In the 1930s when Maya Angelou resided in Stamps, Arkansas, segregation was the order of the day. In part one of her six-volume autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou explains, “In Stamps, the segregation was so complete that most black children didn’t really, absolutely know what whites looked like. Other than that they were different, to be dreaded, and in that dread was included the hostility of the powerless against the powerful, the poor against the rich, the worker against the worked for and the ragged against the well-dressed” (25). The world of blacks and whites was so disconnected that a child could easily grow up without interacting with a white person until it was time to seek employment. As Angelou attests, black southerners were ever cognizant of the racial hierarchy and their own subjugation. Momma Henderson, however, did not allow the system of oppression to weigh her down. In *Hallelujah! The Welcome Table*, Angelou shares one of many powerful moments when Momma Henderson would subvert the authority of the white power structure.

In an act of resistance, Momma refused to subscribe to the local newspaper, *The Democrat*, because as she said, “It is written by white folks, about white folks, for white folks” (51). Instead, she supported newspapers that provided greater racial representation, in spite of those papers being published in northern cities and not arriving immediately. Each month the racist *Democrat* newspaper would feature a page dedicated to women, which contained pieces relevant to its white female readership, ranging from local announcements to recipes. As a well-respected cook, Momma enjoyed making interesting and savory dishes. While she would not spend her money on the newspaper, she nonetheless found a way to retrieve the proscribed, white-only recipes. Each month she selected a different black maid whom she would ask to bring her the women’s newspaper page. Once received, Momma and Maya would carefully copy the recipe onto paper, thereby building up a repository of guarded information provided by whites for whites. Angelou includes a recipe for “Wilted Lettuce,” which her grandmother contentedly made. In the retelling, Angelou describes how Momma laughed to herself throughout the process while Maya, on the other hand, contemplated the power of this moment. “I ate the silken side dish and wondered about the white woman who lived in the white part of town about a mile from the black area,

which was still called the Quarters. Would she think that a black grandmother was feeding her grandchildren the same dish she was offering to her privileged family? Would she resent the grandmother or just shrug her shoulders and say, ‘Let them help themselves?’ I’d like to think she shrugged” (52). Angelou is hoping for the common good in society, as she considers the ways in which racism and prejudice are so deeply entrenched in people’s psyche. And yet, Momma defies the system by taking something that whites wish to bar her from and recreating it in a different location and form.

In interpreting this moment, Gadsby’s insights regarding kitchen space illuminate Momma’s actions. To reiterate Gadsby’s position, “the kitchen space can be read as a storehouse of creativity; a space in which women, while creating works of culinary art, feed their children and one another with a language of resistance” (6). Not only does Momma recreate the recipe, which serves as a work of culinary art, but she feeds her grandchildren and teaches her granddaughter creative approaches to subverting the power structure in order to gain access to what she wants or needs. In spite of the overbearing and inescapable racism, Momma is powerful enough to resist her own subjugation. Here in the safe space of her kitchen, she can prepare and enjoy what was intended for a white audience. She creatively reinvents an experience.

Drawing upon her Caribbean family’s experiences, Gadsby explains, “As a young girl, I never thought that being in the kitchen with the women in my family gave me an edge...But it was between my mother and her sisters that I learned our family history lessons on living life as a woman. The ordinary speech of the kitchen space was instructional” (142). Through her own life, Gadsby is able to see the performativity of theory. Building upon Marshall’s important contributions, Gadsby is able to reassess her own experience and to articulate a theory that comes out of her life. To echo Collins, “a recognition of this connection between experience and consciousness that shapes the everyday lives of individual African-American women often pervades the works of Black women activists and scholars” (24). Gadsby’s testament is an affirmation of this ideology, for in safe spaces there is love, encouragement and improvement.

Great Food, All Day Long: Cook Splendidly, Eat Smart provides insight into Maya Angelou’s own journey towards growth and improvement as it relates to her health. She shares, “some years ago I found my health in danger because I was overweight. My doctors warned me that I was dangerously close to diabetes, hypertension, and high blood pressure...I made some changes and lost thirty-five pounds. I diminished my portions, and ate more frequently. The title of this book, *Great Food, All Day Long: Cook Splendidly, Eat Smart*, came from that exercise” (xiv). Although she could choose to withhold this information, Angelou draws

us close and then in the safe space of her cookbook reveals personal and sensitive information. Traditionally, African Americans have been private about their health concerns, to the point that medical histories are sometimes withheld even from family members. Obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and other diet-related illnesses are tied to the foods that people eat. Angelou uses the safe space of her cookbook to talk about portion control, healthy selections, and the creation of savory meals.

Taking this convergence of experience and consciousness to another level, Angelou provides the perfect example of this theory. She instructs her readers on how to create her treasured recipes, but she also intertwines narrative and family stories that are often used to instruct, caution, and admonish. The cooking reflects a sense of consciousness. Angelou illuminates her consciousness by explaining her choice to incorporate her insights into the cookbook. In a Twainian understatement, she highlights her infusion of advice:

You will note in this cookbook that from time to time I will deliver philosophical announcements. I don't think there is an excuse for that. However, there is an explanation. At one time, I described myself as a cook, a driver, and a writer. I no longer drive, but I do still write and I do still cook. And having reached the delicious age of eighty-one, I realize that I have been feeding other people and eating for a long time. I have been cooking nearly all my life, so I have developed some philosophies. Maybe some are high flown, but at least I have tested them and found them to the point. I believe that a bowl of savory clear soup served with a corn stick or a slice of irresistible corn bread can be filling and fulfilling. I believe if you will try these dishes together and wait two or three hours before another serving, you will be fulfilled. (*Great Food* 61)

In this passage, Angelou articulates the idea that her experience has heightened her consciousness as a person. She establishes her age and experience as qualifications for her impinging philosophies. Underscoring the intersection of the practical and the theoretical, she supports her argument by stating, "at least I have tested them and found them to the point." The proof is in the proverbial pudding. She authenticates herself as speaker and elder and therefore can caution us to heed her advice. Not only does she recommend the recipe that follows, but she has earned the right to tell us how to eat it as well. We have no business overindulging, but instead we should eat a small portion and wait the given period of time before returning for seconds. Not only are we in her kitchen to cook, but she creates a safe space where "the ordinary speech of the kitchen space [is] instructional" (Gadsby).

In intimations reflective of a mother-daughter paradigm, Angelou calls us close to her bosom in order to teach us important life lessons. Collins elaborates on the mother-daughter relationship as a safe space relationship: "As mothers, daughters,

sisters, and friends to one another, many African-American women affirm one another. The mother/daughter relationship is one fundamental relationship among Black women. Countless Black mothers have empowered their daughters by passing on the everyday knowledge essential to survival as African American women” (102). In the spirit of what I call a Black Mama’s approach, Angelou directly informs us that she has every right to tell us what to do and how to do it. Prior to establishing her authority, she writes, “I have noticed that many people eat long after they are filled. I think they are searching in their plates not for a myth, but for a taste, which seems to elude them” (61). Here she theorizes about why people overeat. And if we do not see her as a valid authority figure, she redirects us to the authority of the Holy Bible. “...in the Book of Proverbs in the King James Version of the Holy Bible...we are advised to ‘put a knife to thy throat if thou be a person given to appetite.’ I do not quite agree that one has to be quite so harsh, but I do know that if you want to be svelte and remain that way, control your appetite in the eating of bread. So, I would advise you to eat one piece of bread with the first serving of a dish, and none when you go back for snacks” (117). In the safe space of our mother’s kitchen, we are advised not to overindulge, but to eat in moderation and to extract this “everyday knowledge essential to survival” (Collins).

Using this same Black Mama’s discourse, Angelou directly (though politely) advises us to not only be hearers of her words, but doers. When it comes to her recipes, she is explicit in the fact that she not only wants us to read and admire them but her purpose for writing is to infuse us with the courage to cook. In *Great Food, All Day Long: Cook Splendidly, Eat Smart* Angelou intimates that some readers have no intention of cooking the recipes when they read a cookbook. They read for the sake of reading. The implication is that they stop the creative process when they choose not to perform the tasks in the book. “Some people buy cookbooks just to read, with no intention of trying the recipes. I hail their discipline, because it is impossible to put on weight just reading about food, even if the accompanying photographs cause the salivary glands to dance wildly in the mouth” (xiii). In this instance, Angelou uses humor to point out the fact that some people will not actually make her recipes. Rather than accuse her guests of being rude because of their lack of participation, she uses humor to set them at ease because they are in a safe space. Collins explains, “in the comfort of daily conversations, through serious conversation and humor, African-American women as sisters and friends affirm one another’s humanity, specialness, and right to exist” (102). By saying she “hail[s] their discipline,” Angelou chooses a lighthearted approach to discussing people who read cookbooks but do not prepare the recipes. Her humor affirms and assures readers of their “right to exist” as mere observers and not audacious, collaborative co-creators. Instead of indicting readers who stymie the creative process, she embraces them and fosters a spirit of inclusion.

At the same time, she candidly shares how she would feel if the reader did in fact continue the creative process of call and response:

There are those who say they would cook if they had the time, or the skills, but since they don't, they delight in reading what serious cooks are able to create.

Only a few readers buy cookbooks to really cook the recipes. If this book finds its way into the hands of bold, adventurous people, courageous enough to actually get into the kitchen and rattle the pots and pans, I will be very happy. (xiii)

In the spirit of safe spaces, Angelou shares her honest feelings. She is hoping her readers understand the nature and code of this space, as “one important location where Black women’s friendships are taken seriously” (103). The expectation is that we will take her seriously when she asks us to cook, to engage, and to be courageous. As Collins further contends, “This issue of Black women being the ones who really listen to one another is significant, particularly given the importance of voice in Black women’s lives” (103). In writing these cookbooks, Angelou is giving voice to her memories, her talents in the kitchen, and the wisdom descending from her age. Now it is up to readers to respond to her call.

Signifying both a symbolic call and a literal call, Angelou subsequently activates a third dimension through what I call our “audile consciousness.” Characteristic of the poet she is, Angelou uses lyricism and evokes the sounds of the images she wishes to convey. Much like Big Joe Turner’s 1954 rhythm and blues song, “Shake, Rattle and Roll,” Angelou’s words appeal to our senses and invoke imagery to which our minds and ears respond with the sounds of music and the vision of a kitchen populated by bold, adventurous, courageous people.

Maya Angelou is writing to a general audience, but she is masterfully painting a picture of African American life and culture. She is committed to the strategies of African American literary traditions, which employ—to use Morrison’s phraseology—“recognized and verifiable principles of Black art” (389). Angelou, like Morrison, upholds a tradition in which her literature speaks to and coincides with African American music traditions, such as blues, jazz, and rhythm and blues. In particular, Big Joe Turner’s song lyrics literally parallel Angelou’s implications in this portion of her cookbook.

Get outta that bed,
Wash your face and hands
Get outta that bed,
Wash your face and hands
Well, you get in that kitchen,

Make some noise
With those pots and pans
I said, shake, rattle and roll
Shake, rattle and roll
Shake, rattle and roll
Shake, rattle and roll
Well, you won't do right
To save your doggone soul

The speaker in the song lyrics wants the woman to get out of the bed, wash up and cook. He repeatedly enjoins her to take her place by stirring up something in the kitchen. When she fails to fulfill the speaker's obligation, he declares her to be stubborn because she refuses to do "right," even if it will save her soul.

In evoking the audile consciousness, Angelou is subversively addressing, "those who say they would cook if they had the time, or the skills, but since they don't, they delight in reading what serious cooks are able to create." She appeals to their auditory sensibilities by insisting that they "shake, rattle and roll." Unlike the song, however, Angelou does not criticize the reader or prophesy that she will never do right. She takes the voice of the male persona in the song, uses it, but then in an act of creation she changes it to suit her Black female perspective. In the location of this safe space, she takes a negative image of Black female identity and transforms it. To use Collins' words, "Blues was not just entertainment—it was a way of solidifying community and commenting on the social fabric of working-class Black life in America" (105). In drawing our attention to this song, Angelou is configuring the telescope to bring into focus working-class women who may not have the time to cook. According to the boundaries of safe spaces, Angelou protects our right to exist as we are. She chooses not to attack her cook-less readers, but to provide safe spaces where, "in creative ways, [women]" respond to one another in affirming ways, knowing "only another Black woman could fully understand how it felt to be treated" negatively (103-104). While she celebrates the rhythm and blues art form, she privileges the safe space of a Black female approach cooking, which entails collaboration and a response to one's call.

Maggie Sale's analysis of call and response has further relevance to Angelou's cookbooks. "The assumption [implicit in the function of call and response] is that a story will be repeated and will change with every telling, and that the success of the telling, and so of the particular story, resides not so much in its similarity to the original as in its individual nuances and its ability to involve others" (42). As highlighted in this passage, call and response is strengthened and reinforced when the process continues and each contributor adds her or his own unique perspective

to the artistic work. In this way, safe spaces are sites of creativity. Within safe spaces, “Black women intellectuals could construct ideas and experiences that [infuse] daily life with new meaning. These new meanings offered African-American women potentially powerful tools to resist the controlling images of Black womanhood” (112). Safe space analysis encourages self-definition and respect instead of mimetic practices predicated by rote behaviors. Admittedly, Angelou confides, “I rarely follow recipes from one cookbook at a time. I will study three recipes for the same dish to see how three different cooks would prepare the ingredients. I might select ideas from one, and then add my own innovation. The end results are not always successful, but the chances and changes, more often than not, offer a wonderful dish that I doubt any of the original cooks would recognize” (91). Privileging experimentation and innovation over careful adherence to her instructions, Angelou reinforces call and response. She anticipates change in the use of recipes and places value on the individual cook’s involvement and contributions. Angelou’s approach reflects the idea that “such a theory of art demands and values change over continuity, within a given, agreed upon structure” (Sale 42). The end result is wonderful and dissimilar from the original. Likewise, “the act of insisting on Black female self-definition validates Black women’s power as human subjects... In a society in which no one is obligated to respect African-American women, we have long admonished one another to have self-respect and to demand the respect of others” (Collins 114-115). In her kitchen, Angelou creates a safe space where women are respected and encouraged to define themselves through their original cooking creations. She walks us through recipes that require courage to perform. She reveals that even she must have courage in cooking items about which she is less confident. Two sections of *Great Food* are titled, “Cooking Vegetarian with Courage” I and II. Remaining by our side as she walks us through the recipes, she reassures us of her presence through stories and reminders to eat smaller portions and return for second servings hours later.

By standing in her own kitchen and inviting us to become fellow chefs, Angelou is erecting a kitchen for her readers. She is taking a principle that applies to Black women and their usage of the kitchen space and she is bringing that concept into her ethnically diverse reader’s kitchens and ultimately their lives. Gadsby argues, “it is my contention that theoretical interventions are as much performative as they are ideological” (13). Angelou brings this contention to fruition. Not only is the kitchen a safe space in terms of ideology, but in performing this act of construction, Angelou demonstrates the performativity of this theory. She is actually creating new theoretical spaces that take traditional, African American female approaches and repurpose them, which carves out new spaces for further analyses such as the enactment of safe space.

Works Cited

- Angelou, Maya. *Great Food, All Day Long: Cook Splendidly, Eat Smart*. New York: Random House, 2010. Print.
- . *Hallelujah! The Welcome Table*. New York: Random House, 2004. Print.
- . *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. New York: Random, 1970. Print
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. 2nd ed. 1990. New York: Routledge, 2000. Print.
- From the Editors of *Essence*. *Maya Angelou: Her Phenomenal Life & Poetic Journey*. New York: Essence Books, 2014. Print.
- Gadsby, Meredith. M. *Sucking Salt: Caribbean Women Writers, Migration and Survival*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006. Print.
- Marshall, Paule. "From the Poets in the Kitchen." *New York Times*. 9 January 1983: BR3. Print.
- Sale, Maggie. "Call and Response as Critical Method: African American Oral Traditions and *Beloved*." *African American Review*: 26.1 (1992): 41-50. Print.
- Smith, Barbara. "A Press of Our Own Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press." 10.3 (1989): 11-13. Print.

Book Review

Alexander, Simone A. James. *African Diasporic Women's Narratives: Politics of Resistance, Survival, and Citizenship*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014. 252 pp. ISBN 978-0-8130-4982-3 Hardcover: \$74.95

With impressive scholarship, lucid and elegant style, and an independent-minded analysis, Simone A. James Alexander's book, *African Diasporic Women's Narratives: Politics of Resistance, Survival, and Citizenship*, presents a critically engaging and in-depth study of race, gender, sexuality, and identity as a lived and contested reality. Here she argues that, entrenched in slavery, patriarchal, hegemonic institutions and white supremacy or what she alludes to as the nation-state have relegated the black woman to a position of subjugation and silence. They delineate boundaries, keep her in the margins, and control her sexuality by imposing their normative standards on her and by denying her acceptance or citizenship into their world. Thus, according to Alexander, the ideal citizen is one who conforms to the codes and rules enforced by the nation-state—one who represents the ideal woman (modeled after the Victorian white woman) who is self-effacing rather than self-promoting, enclosed rather than exposed, concealed rather than visible, mute rather than vocal.

Using the female body as a site of migration, Alexander draws from feminist/womanist theory to identify the interconnectedness of race, class and gender to show how they all play an important role in articulating women's experiences. The book examines selective works by four migrant women writers: Audre Lorde, Maryse Condé, Edwidge Danticat, and Grace Nichols. It is divided into six chapters. The writers studied rely significantly on the body as an empowering instrument to express and redeem one's subjectivity and desires. According to Alexander, the body becomes an agent that reflects social, political, and economic implications in women's lives, attesting to those circumstances that contributed to the formation of their identities. At the same time, she demonstrates how the body is used as an act of resistance, and how it facilitates cross-cultural and transnational alliances between women. Alexander constructs a social history of women in which their embodied experiences are more than just an individual matter; the body itself mobilizes and destabilizes the meaning of race, class, and gender. It becomes a presence asserted and inserted, and an empowering space that rewrites the writers' (and their characters) lived experiences.

Chapter 1, "Captive Flesh No More: Saartjie Baartman Quintessential Migratory Subject" chronicles the migratory journey of Saartjie Baartman from South Africa to England and France. As a woman, the masculinist value system eliminated

her from social and active life, denying her the attainment of citizenship. In her forced migration to Europe, as Baartman is exploited and relentlessly objectified in the colonial spaces—mirroring the colonial exploitation and violation of Africa—her existence and experience are interpreted as a criticism of patriarchal political structures, uncovering social, racial and gender injustices and inequalities. Alexander eloquently argues, “Her captors functioned both as the impenetrable border and the border patrols that restrict her movement” (23). Baartman’s condition, however, challenges the traditional boundaries and ultimately engages a reordering of values, acknowledging the limitations and failure of those norms: her exploitation caused outrage and led to the formation of a transnational feminist agenda in which women globally “forged a new diaspora of empowered citizens” (32). Finally, her posthumous return to her motherland 187 years later as a celebrated stateswoman constitutes a tribute to women, representing a visible shift in the national discourse. South African and African national discourses have long possessed a predominantly masculine character. Conspicuously absent from them has been the presence of women as markers of those traditions.

Chapter 2, “Crimes against the Flesh”: Politics and Poetics of the Black Female Body” is a signal contribution to the question of black women’s struggle in pursuit of their health, and consequently, their quest for social, economic, and political rights. In her examination of the specific case of Audre Lorde, through a reading of *The Cancer Journals* (1980), Alexander explores its roots in the discriminatory policy of the medical/state establishment and traces its developments to a hegemonic masculinity and nationalism and their treatment of women. In her memoir, Audre Lorde writes about her struggle with breast cancer, bringing her personal experience to the national attention and discourse. Alexander reminds us that the nation-state “criminalizes” the queer body, depriving it from citizenship. Lorde not only shows the impact of cancer on a black, feminist, lesbian’s life, but her “queer, deviant,” and diseased body becomes a platform that allows her to challenge the medical industry and to unmask its oppression of women. Furthermore, Alexander argues, her “body text” reveals Lorde’s transnational sensibility as she uses her personal experiences to draw a parallel with the oppression of black female diaspora (namely South African women and “Third World Women”), thus creating relationships and reinventing a shared identity politics in their quest for black liberation (47).

The third chapter, “Framing Violence: Resistance, Redemption, and Recuperative Strategies in *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*” at once uncovers and vocalizes the exploitative and oppressive effects that colonial and masculinist systems have wrought in the black woman’s existence. By interrogating her sexual and racial abuse, and exposing the enduring pain of colonization and slavery, Maryse

Condé's *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* (1986) echoes pervasive violence as a representation of black women's lived experiences that "becomes encoded on their bodies," (68) and results in their silencing. Alexander contends, however, that Tituba transgresses the culturally prescribed expectations on many levels as she resists any confinement: she is dehumanized and demonized as a witch; she is regarded an outcast. Consciously or not, Tituba also dispenses with existing sex roles and creates new ones when denouncing motherhood and mothering. On the other hand, Tituba refuses to become complicit with patriarchy, which explains her relinquishing citizenship as defined by the nation-state. Instead, she returns to her motherland, Barbados, and becomes the embodiment of the localized folk figures. This act reinstates her as a desirable citizen, her dignity is restored. Thus Tituba emerges "renewed, redeemed, and recuperated" (95).

Alexander's skillful analysis of Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) in chapter 4, introduces us to women who are being repressed/oppressed and muffled by being erased from the public scene and privatized. Arguably, men are given easy access to power and privilege. Along these lines, men control women sexually, and linguistically using a language and a discourse which are articulated by an inevitably masculine speaking subject. Alexander's reading reveals how Danticat decodes this nationalist language (reflected in the phrase "mothers of the nation") by defying both patriarchy and the rigid concepts of identity and language that it creates. She gives her female characters the power to rewrite their bodies' narratives, in Alexander's estimation. Their response to this linguistic and sexual abuse is to counter violence with violence. Using "their bodies" as "deadly weapons," they resist and rebel against masculinist, nationalist discourse (125). The suicide committed at the hands of the female protagonist, Martine, serves as a perfect example. Her death does not deny or diminish her pain; instead, it gives her the power to act/react; literally reclaiming her flesh from patriarchy. Indeed Martine "literally and allegorically travers[es] borders and triumphantly negotiat[es] terrains of torture and pain into a platform for action" (125). Finally, the question of migration, identity, belonging, and home, is also what emerges from chapter 4. Studying the case of gender-specific migration in Danticat's novel, Alexander uncovers the dissonances between a woman's (Martine) migration and a man's (her lover, Marc). In her host country as in her home country, the nation-state erects its barriers against Martine. In contrast, Marc finds himself an ever-changing reality in which he is given easy access to activate his powers and potentialities.

In Chapter 5, "Performing the Body: Transgressive Doubles, Fatness and Blackness," Alexander examines the Guyanese-born poet, Grace Nichols's *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* (1984), and *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman* (1989). Nichols evokes three social stereotypes: being fat, being black, and being a woman. To all these

socially generalized exclusions are added the concepts of “laziness” and “vulgarity”. Alexander’s stance, however, is that such definitions remain controversial insofar as her poems constitute an overt attempt to interrogate conventional (white) male definitions of black women, as well as redefine black female identities in new and unexpected ways. Alexander reads the poet’s employment of language itself—Creole—as an agent of resistance and identity. Linguistically, the poems violate norms that define proper language for a woman. Nichols’s deliberate use of “the discourse of the grotesque,” for instance, is to challenge Standard English as norm (156). For too long, the black woman’s body has been demonized and devalued as vulgar, deviant, outcast, othered, grotesque. Alexander’s analysis shows that, by exposing and opposing these age-old and fixed definitions, not only does Nichols abruptly break down the definition of ideal citizenship, but she cross-examines “the politics of identity and belonging... collapsing enforced boundaries and borders” (130). Alexander concludes that, in this sense, Nichols’s poems signal a response to Saartjie Baartman’s exploitation in the hands of colonialists. As such, her poetry navigates borders and boundaries, and promotes “transnational citizenship (and attendant diasporic communities)” (130).

Based on his study of AIDS in Haiti, Paul Farmer recognized the connection between this illness and the patients’ social and economic status. Thus, Farmer ascertains that to address this ill “we need to erase social inequalities” (Kidder 99, cited by Alexander 161). Furthermore, he discovered the importance of nontraditional medicine. Drawing upon Farmer’s theorization, in her concluding chapter, “Bodies and DisEase: Finding AlterNative Cure, Assuming AlterNative Identity,” Alexander studies the health disparity between whites and blacks, exploring its roots in their racial, social, and economic divide. Through a close reading of texts by Toni Morrison, Edwidge Danticat, Maryse Condé, Jamaica Kincaid, and Paule Marshall, particular attention is given to women’s illnesses, and how female characters deal with diseases. A black woman’s diseased body is considered “deviant” and different, thus, becoming an undesirable body, Alexander claims. In this way, the black immigrant woman is more poignantly targeted, as her diseased and undesirable body makes her a “lawless” and an undesirable “citizen”. This explains, voices Alexander, the mistrust of blacks in western medicine. The struggles and triumphs of these women writers who are skeptical of modern medicine for its inability to diagnose or cure are marked by “crisscrossing boundaries and borders.” They find the strength to reject/migrate from conventional models of medicine in favor of a blending of medicine and beliefs and engagement in alternative cures and homeopathic remedies (19).

In *African Diasporic Women’s Narratives*, Simone James Alexander’s thought-provoking analysis allows us to rethink the relationships between women’s

literature and women's bodies, and to discover writers who employ their existence and experiences to explore new territories, construct new lines, and create their own persona without any help from men. Their female protagonists work with conflicts from within, and sociopolitical, racial and sexual contradictions from without. They struggle and resist subjugation, emerging from their social conditioning, and achieving self-realization and self-affirmation. Using the body as a site/sight of resistance and protest, these writers take charge, claiming their own (and woman's) space and becoming their own (and woman's) public interpreter—a body with a voice and a voice with a body.

Thus, Alexander offers a multifaceted perspective and initiates new conversations on the representation of black women's writings in a transnational context. In drawing our attention to the convergence of race, gender, embodied experiences, and cultures, she shows the ways in which these writings re-negotiate the question of female identity and subjectivity within a masculinist system.

—Derayah Derakhshesh, Ph.D.
Howard University

Contributors

Robert C. Evans is I. B. Young Professor of English at Auburn University at Montgomery. He earned his Ph.D. from Princeton University in 1984. In 1982 he began teaching at AUM, where he has been named Distinguished Research Professor, Distinguished Teaching Professor, and University Alumni Professor. He is the author or editor of more than thirty books and of numerous essays, including recent work on twentieth-century American writers.

Lorraine M. Henry is a Master Teacher in the Department of English at Howard University. Her area of interest is twentieth century American Literature. She received her Ph.D. from the Catholic University of America. Her most recent publication is “Mr. Jones’s Neighborhoods: The Triad of Place, History, and Memory in *Lost in the City* and *All Aunt Hagar’s Children*” in *Edward P. Jones: New Essays*.

Patricia G. Lespinasse is Assistant Professor of African American and African Diaspora Literature at Binghamton University. She received her Ph.D. in English and Comparative Literature from Columbia University. She is currently completing a monograph on women and jazz in twentieth century African Diaspora Literature.

Mary Jane Lupton is Professor Emeritus from Morgan State University. She is the author of *Menstruation and Psychoanalysis* (University of Illinois Press, 1993), *Lucille Clifton: Her Life and Letters* (Praeger, 2006), and four other books. She is presently revising and updating her 1998 book, *Maya Angelou: A Critical Companion* (Greenwood, 1998). The second edition will be published in 2016.

Tosha Sampson-Choma is an Assistant Professor of English at Kansas State University. Her research focus includes African American literature and women writers of the African diaspora. She is currently working on a book-length project on Maya Angelou.

Terrence Tucker is an Assistant Professor of English and Coordinator of the African American Literature Concentration at the University of Memphis. His work focuses on post-1945 African American literature and drama, particularly late-Twentieth and Twenty-first Century American literature, and Popular Culture. He has published essays and book chapters on subjects from Richard Wright and Ernest Gaines to black superheroes and *The Boondocks*. He is currently finishing his book, *Furiously Funny: Comic Rage in Late 20th Century African American Literature*.

Eleanor W. Traylor, Graduate Professor Emerita of English in the College of Arts and Sciences at Howard University, is an acclaimed scholar and critic of African-American literature. She has published groundbreaking work on such major writers as James Baldwin, Toni Cade Bambara, Amiri Baraka, Henry Dumas, Toni Morrison, Larry Neal, Richard Wright, and, of course, Maya Angelou. She counts among her host of honors the Alumni Achievement Award in Literary Criticism from The Catholic University of America; an Excellence in Teaching Award, the Amoco Foundation; and the George Kent Award for Literary Criticism from The Gwendolyn Brooks Center of Black Literature and Creative Writing, Chicago State University. She was awarded the Doctor of Humane Letters from her *Alma Mater*, Spelman College.

Cheryl A. Wall, Board of Governors Zora Neale Hurston Professor of English at Rutgers University, is the author of *Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition* (2005) and *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* (1995) and the editor of the *Writings of Zora Neale Hurston* in two volumes published by the Library of America (1995), and *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women* (1989), among other books. She is completing a study titled “The African American Essay: On Freedom and the Will to Adorn.”

Call for Book Reviews and Book Reviewers

The *CLAJ* is currently considering unsolicited book reviews for publication and sending books out to qualified members for solicited reviews. If you wish to submit a book review or receive a review assignment, please follow these guidelines:

To send a query:

If you would like to submit an unsolicited book review, suggest a book for review, or request to become a reviewer, please send an email to the *CLAJ* Book Review Editor, Kameelah Martin, at martink@savannahstate.edu. If, after a week, you have not received an acknowledgment of your query or submission, please query again or write to the senior editor of the *CLAJ* at editor@clascholars.org. Please write “Book Review Query” or “Book Review Submission” in the subject line of the email as applicable.

To write a book review:

The book review should include a brief summary of the book’s central argument and an assessment of its contribution to the existing literature in its field. *CLAJ* expects our reviewers to provide a frank evaluation of the book’s strengths and weaknesses; *CLAJ* also expects reviewers to maintain a collegial and constructive tone. Book reviews should adhere to MLA style guidelines and should be 500-2000 words in length. Send completed book reviews as a .doc file in Times New Roman, 12-point font.

Please include a brief bio at the end of your review. The bio should list your name, your highest degree completed or in progress, and your academic affiliation.

We at *CLAJ* look forward to working with you to keep our scholarly community apprised of new, cutting-edge publications in language, literature, and cultural studies.

—Kameelah L. Martin
Book Review Editor, *CLAJ*

CLA 2014 STANDING COMMITTEE CHAIRS

Archives - Chair: Dr. Dolan Hubbard, Morgan State University

Awards - Chair: Dr. Emma Waters Dawson, Florida A & M University

Black Studies - Chair: Dr. Thabiti Lewis, Washington State University-Vancouver

CLA & Historically Black Colleges and Universities - Chair: Dr. Paula Barnes, Hampton University

CLA & Historically White Colleges and Universities - Dr. Xavia Harrington-Chate, University of Southern Indiana

Constitution - Chair: Dr. Warren J. Carson, University of South Carolina Upstate

Creative Writing - Chair: Dr. Ramona Hymon, Loma Linda University

Curriculum: English - Chair: Dr. Aaron Oforlea, Washington State University

Curriculum: Foreign Languages - Chair: Dr. Leroy T. Hopkins, Millersville University

Membership - Chair: Dr. Yvonne McIntosh, Florida A & M University

Research - Chair: Dr. Venetria Patton, Purdue University

Nominations: - Chair: Dr. Geneva Baxter, Spelman College

OFFICERS OF THE COLLEGE LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION (2014-2016)
HUGH M. GLOSTER, FOUNDER

DANA A. WILLIAMS, *President*

Howard University
Department of English
2441 6th Street, N.W.
248 Locke Hall
Washington, DC 20059
202-806-6730/ 5371 (office)
202-806-6731
d_williams@howard.edu

CLEMENT A. AKASSI, *Vice President*

Howard University
Department of World Language and Cultures
2441 6th Street, NW,
330 Locke Hall
Washington, DC 20059
202-806-4590 (office)
240-481-3978 (cell)
202-806-6760 (fax)
cakassi@howard.edu
animancement@yahoo.com

REGINALD A. BESS, *Secretary*

605 Winslow Way
Columbia, SC 29229-8582
Bess_reginald@yahoo.com

YVONNE McINTOSH, *Assistant Secretary*

Florida A & M University
Department of English and Modern Languages
214 Tucker Hall
Tallahassee, FL 32307
850-599-3430 (office)
850-561-2290 (fax)
yvonne.mcintosh@famu.edu

YAKINI B. KEMP, *Treasurer*

Florida A & M University
P. O. Box 38515
Tallahassee, FL 32315
850-599-3737/ 561-2608 (office)
850-561-2976 (fax)
yakini.kemp@famu.edu

ELIZABETH J. WEST, *Assistant Treasurer*

Georgia State University
Department of English
University Plaza
Atlanta, GA 30303
404-413-5866 (office)
404-413-5830 (fax)
ewest@gsu.edu

SANDRA G. SHANNON, *Editor*

College Language Association Journal
Howard University
Department of English
2441 6th Street, N.W.
230 Locke Hall
Washington, DC 20059
202-806-5443 (office)
202-806-6708 (fax)
editor@clascholars.org
sshannon@howard.edu

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

2014-2016

*The Executive Committee consists of the officers of
The College Language Association and the following Members-at-Large*

MARIO A. CHANDLER, *Immediate Past President*

Oglethorpe University
4484 Peachtree Rd., N.E.
Atlanta, Georgia 30319
404-364-8382 (office)
678-698-4312 (cell)
404-228-2562 (fax)
mchandler@oglethorpe.edu
mariochand@gmail.com

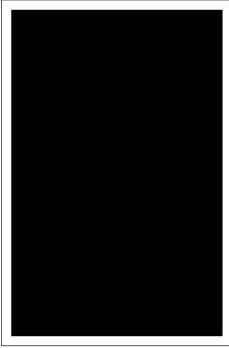
DONNA A. HARPER, *English Area Representative*

Spelman College
Department of English
350 Spelman Lane
P.O. Box 745
Atlanta, GA 30314
404-270-5588
dharper@spelman.edu

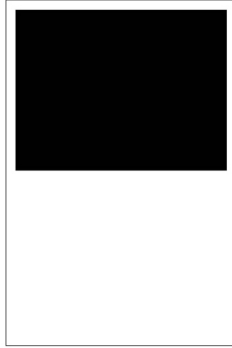
MARGARET MORRIS, *Foreign Language Area Representative*

South Carolina State University
Department of English and Modern Languages
Room 357 Turner Hall, D Wing
Orangeburg, SC 29115
803-536-8847
mmorris1@scsu.edu

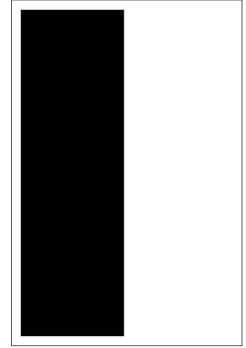
CLAJ Advertising Specifications



full page
5.5 X 8.5



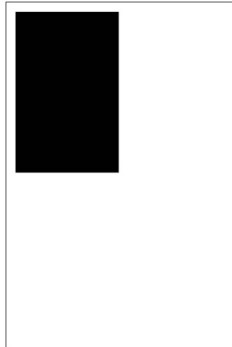
half page horizontal
5.5 X 4.1875



half page vertical
2.6875 X 8.5



quarter page horizontal
5.5 X 2.19



quarter page vertical
2.6875 X 4.1875

All press-ready ads should be submitted as pdf, tif, jpeg, or eps files.

Please submit exact size for ads, based the above specifications.

All fonts must be embedded. For fonts that are not embedded, we reserve the right to replace those fonts.

Grayscale halftone images: 300 dpi

Line art (such as type): 600 dpi

Low resolution Images taken from Web sites: may be rejected.

CLAJ reserves the right to approve all copy.

Full Page: \$85 for CLA members/ \$150 for nonmembers

Half Page: \$50 for CLA members/ \$75 for nonmembers

Quarter Page: \$35 for CLA members/ \$50 for nonmembers

Submit ads electronically as an email attachment to editor@clascholars.org