CHAPTER-VIII
CONCLUSION

Man knows himself only insofar as he knows the world, and becomes aware of the world only in himself, and of himself only in it. Every new object, well observed, opens a new organ in ourselves.

Goethe, Maximen and Reflexionen, VI

The French word genre means a classification of literary works according to type—lyric, narrative, dramatic – which are further divided into novel, short story, epic poem, tragedy, and so forth. According to Meyer H. Abrams, genre is of use to the reader because it “creates a set of expectations which . . . enable the reader to make the work intelligible” (1993: 77). In other words, if the reader knows for a fact that Angelou’s I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is an autobiography, then the reader also expects the sequel, Gather Together in My Name, to have understandable characteristics of the genre, such as first-person narration, a chronological order, and an emphasis on the self.

Autobiography is a major literary genre, the form that Maya Angelou has used in her long prose works. Broken down, the word auto/bio/graphy means self/life/story, the narrative of the events in a person’s life. It is also known as life writing or the literature of self-revelation. According to Alfred Kazin, autobiography “uses fact as a strategy [It is a] history of a self, [and exhibits a] concern for the self as a character” (1964: 213).

The Afro-American autobiographical statement is the most Afro-American of all Afro-American literary pursuits. During the eighteenth century, thousands of narratives (the forerunners of the autobiography) were written by Afro-Americans to express their opposition to the evils of slavery and to effect their liberation. The autobiographical
statement, up until the contemporary era, remains the quintessential literary genre for capturing the deep cadences of the Afro-American being, in which the deepest aspirations are revealed and evolution and development under the impact of slavery and modern-day United States capitalism traced.

In examining the social and political context out of which the Afro-American self evolved, it is important to note that in its most essential aspect, slavery did not offer very much the “formal freedoms” that were granted to black people in the United States and that slavery and its aftermath represented a system of organised and sustained violence, psychic and otherwise, against a subject people. While slavery enslaved the whole person, imperialism, under the illusion of granting full freedom to the individual, stole the labour of Afro-Americans just as savagely and limited their participation in the social and political affairs of the country to a minimal and peripheral degree. As a result, the entire social development of Afro-Americans has been conditioned by their struggle to liberate themselves from the crippling social and psychological effects of the dominant ideology and culture. To a large degree, this struggle manifested itself in the literature of Afro-American peoples, particularly in the autobiography. Since literature examines the manner in which ideology (ideas, values and feelings) function within the social totality, it is in these autobiographical statements that we begin to understand the manner in which the Afro-American person (self) evolved. The violation and degradation of the Afro-American woman remained largely ignored and seldom discussed publicly. Her condition remained a closely guarded secret and few of the thousands of autobiographies that were published in the early years were concerned with her condition. This absence continued well into the contemporary era, leading to a situation in which one could speak
about the autobiographical statement in the Afro-American literature without really having to confront the Afro-American woman as black and as female; as a person and as a presence; as autonomous and as responsible. In the Afro-American autobiographical statement, the Afro-American woman remained an all-pervading absence until she was rescued by the literary activities of her black sisters in the later part of the twentieth century.

On her comprehensive work on Angelou’s autobiographical oeuvre, *Order Out of Chaos*, Dolly McPherson begins her examination of the first volume by elaborating a theory of autobiography as genre.

The subject of autobiographical writing is the self becoming conscious of itself in history. Hence, the main tasks of autobiography are to depict the individual in the circumstance of one’s time, and to show to what extent the society stood in one’s way and how the individual overcame it (McPherson, 2).

Having established a theoretical frame, one that situates the individual – an already formed and integrated, albeit preconscious self – at centre McPherson proceeds to read the opening lines as a encapsulation of the “pattern of mobility that characterised [Angelou’s] formative years” (1990: 18). Furthermore McPherson locates the child’s speech as the expression of a developing consciousness. The development of individual consciousness toward selfhood serves as McPherson’s critical touchstone. According to McPherson’s genre theory, the autobiographer’s primary task is the definition and redefinition of self, and she takes as her critical project the exploration of the particular kind of self or subject that emerges in Angelou’s autobiographies. Despite this seeming focus on the process of self-definition however, McPherson has a particular kind of self in mind, however, the quintessential American individual.
McPherson stresses at the outset of her study that Angelou writes an American autobiography. She identifies three of the themes in the work – community, family, and the individual – as distinctly American. McPherson, no doubt, intends this inclusion of Angelou in the American autobiographical canon to serve as a validation of the writer and her work. Ironically, the inclusion serves to validate the very hegemonic discourses that have historically excluded Angelou, inscribing her into limiting narratives of race, class and gender, effectively crafting her displacement as a “Southern Black Girl” (2005: 362). These discourses, turning upon ideologies of difference consign Angelou to a space on the margins of, if not outside of, the social order. As that social order constructs and perpetuates narratives of community, family and the individual, Angelou would likewise be excluded from those narrative spaces. Angelou’s experiences of community, family and individuality, then, are shaped by her experience of difference, so they cannot simply be designated “American” or written into or contained by the American autobiographical form, forged as they are in response to and outside of the narratives that characterise that genre. Instead, Angelou appropriates and adapts the autobiography to articulate a specific subjectivity. One that, despite exclusion, interpellation and displacement, asserts itself within experiential and narrative spaces of its own crafting.

McPherson’s project of summarily considering Angelou’s work as part of an American autobiographical discourse is especially curious when considered in light of her own assessment of the writer’s work as “recreat(ing) (. . .) the dynamics of many young Black girl’s disillusionments and imprisonment in American society” (McPherson25). Other scholars have also fallen into the paradox of studying Angelou as a distinctly African-American woman autobiographer, then simultaneously emphasising
and dismissing those particular social and political forces, specifically the interpellations based on race and gender, that shape Angelou’s life and narrative. Francoise Lionnet effects an investigation into the “double voiced” (2005: 362) nature of Angelou’s text, her artful manipulation of language to tell a seemingly simple story to a white audience and simultaneously, to signify something else to the black audience. Within her discussion, Lionnet focuses on the author’s creation of herself as a literary picaresque heroine. Like McPherson’s reading of Angelou’s work as distinctly American, Lionnet uses the picaresque as paradigm, imposing a particularly European tradition, imbued with the ideological reification of the individual and his/her personal journey, upon Angelou’s work.

Ostensibly interested in Angelou as a black autobiographer who practices in the “long tradition among oppressed peoples of understanding duplicitous uses of language for survival,” Lionnet, for the most part, neglects the implications of the intersections of race and gender in the work. In the very act of exploring them – “Angelou’s own narrative is a tragi-comic tale of growing up Black and female in America” – she seems intent upon nullifying the specificity of the cultural forces that shape Black female subjectivity – “she creates an allegory of the feminine condition which cuts across historical, social and racial lines” (Lionnet, 150).

Such an assertion should be read in the light of what might be posited as Angelou’s own statement of thematic concern in the opening pages of Caged Bird: “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” (2005: 363). Certainly with this passage,
Angelou points to a project wherein she is specifically engaged in elaborating the formation of a particular subjectivity—one that is Southern, Black and female.

McPherson’s reference to the autobiographical self becoming aware of itself in history is apt here. Angelou writes her life story with an acute awareness of her own historical situatedness in the cultural imagination as a person who is both Black and female. This Black woman, positioned at the interstices of race and gender, being non-white and non-male, becomes for the purposes of the hegemonic order, the other of the other. This positionality, along with the socio-economic conditions that are its material manifestations serves as the source of Angelou’s displacement. It is this position out of which she seeks to write herself by disrupting the social and political to privilege the communal and relational in the formation of black female subjectivity.

Angelou’s struggle toward a self-authored subjectivity takes place in the South of the 1930s and 1940s, but the Black woman’s battle with objectification and otherness is as old as her presence in the United States. Paula Giddings explores the dialectic established during slavery, which defined black women:

The Victorian “extended” family put the “moral categories of women into sharp relief. The white wife was hoisted on a pedestal so high that she was beyond the sensual reach of her own husband. Black women were consigned to the other end of the scale, as mistresses, whores, or breeders. Thus in the nineteenth century, Black women’s resistance to slavery took on an added dimension [. . .] The focus of the struggle was no longer against the notion that they were less than human [. . .] but that they were different kinds of humans (1985: 43).

During this period, Black women were consigned to a particular place in the social order, not only constructed in opposition to white women, but assigned roles that served to fix this binary. Once abolition “freed” them from the roles of “mistresses, whores and breeders” (2005: 364), the still dominant patriarchal order developed other means of
keeping the white woman/black woman dichotomy in place, inscribing Black women into equally denigrating and fragmenting narratives and stereotypes that turned upon their race and gender.

As Black women have endured these historical realities and negotiated the narratives that have been socially and culturally imposed upon them, their relationships with each other, as mothers and daughters, as sisters, as friends, have often served as a source of strength and a space of resistance. In Lionnet’s study, however, she curiously asserts that Angelou, unlike Zora Neale Hurston, is not strongly connected to other women in a “network of friendly relationships” (2005: 365), reading her instead as an individualistic heroine. Emerging naturally out of analyses that Americanize and allegorize Angelou’s story, such an assertion overlooks the critical and culturally specific communal ethos that makes Angelou’s a distinctly African-American autobiography and the relational dynamics that draw her unmistakably into the company of Hurston and other African-American women writers who locate their relationships with other women as the spaces in which they are nurtured and allowed to grow. Angelou as the autobiographical subject does indeed come to a point of individuality, emerging only through a process of subject formation that is bound up in her connection with other women. Angelou’s autobiography’s communal and relation emphasis, along with the specificity of the subjectivity she centres decentres the genre’s individualistic and allegorical imperatives.

In “Reconstruction of the Composite Self; New Image of Black Women in Maya Angelou’s Continuing Autobiography,” Sondra O’Neale examines the presence and significance of images of black women that take shape in Angelou’s work, she credits
Angelou with “remold[ing] perception” (1984; 26) of black women, combating negative stereotypes that prevail in the cultural imagination.

No Black women in the world of Angelou’s books are losers. She is the third generation of brilliantly resourceful females, who conquered oppression’s stereotypical maladies without conforming to its expectations of behaviour (O’Neale 26).

O’Neale’s discussion of Angelou’s depiction of Black women in her life emphasises the strength of those images, leading the critic to conclude that Angelou “effectively banishes several stereotypical myths about Black women” creating in the place of the dominant culture’s myths “a new totality of archetypal black women: a composite self” (1984: 35).

While O’Neale’s assertion that Angelou dismantles negative stereotypes is certainly upheld by the author’s careful revelation of Black women who give the lie to those images, the scholar’s further point that Angelou creates a “new totality” (2005: 366), an alternative “composite self” (2005: 366), does not seem in keeping with the author’s project of creating an expansive experiential and discursive space for Black female subjectivity. Indeed, O’Neale’s argument implies the exchange of a socially imposed stasis for another of one’s own making. Just as social stereotypes objectify the Black female subject, this new archetypal, composite self would impose a different manner of limitation on the Black woman’s becoming, establishing a fixed notion of what a Black woman’s becoming, establishing a fixed notion of what a Black woman is and can become. Rather than a complacent composite, the Black female subjectivity that Angelou forwards turns upon the potential for a resistant hybridity within black female subjectivity.
Angelou executes this project by establishing a complex tension between representation and disruption in her text. Her project moves beyond Lionnet’s notion of “double voice” to evoke Mae Henderson’s critical concept of internal heterogeneity.

What is at once characteristic and suggestive about black women’s writing is its interlocutory or dialogic, character, reflecting not only a relationship with the “other(s)”, but an internal dialogue with the plural aspects of self that constitute the matrix of black female subjectivity (Henderson, 118).

Just as Henderson locates the black female writer’s “relationship with the other(s)” (2005: 366) as integral to the plurality of black female subjectivity, the dialogic nature of the black female subjectivity that emerges, for example, in *Caged Bird* begins with young Maya’s relationship with the adult women in her life.

O’Neale offers an interestingly paradoxical text on the influence of these relationships on the child, diminishing the impact of the adult women in her life – “aside from will and determination (Angelou) could not extract dependable techniques from their experiences” (31) – yet asserting that Angelou’s ultimate achievement is her development of a particular hybridized subjectivity through her emergence as a “Baxter-Henderson woman”. Lionnet, on the other hand, holds firm to her positing of Angelou’s mother, Vivian Baxter, as the critical figure in young Maya’s development: “It is against [Vivian’s] maternal persona and role model that Maya the narrator keeps measuring her accomplishments” (Lionnet, 132).

Vivian Baxter certainly plays a crucial role in Maya’s process of subject formation, but she is by no means the only black female figure that impacts the girl’s development. Two other important female presences collaborate with Vivian to influence young Maya’s becoming, Grandmother Annie Henderson and Mrs. Bertha Flowers.
Together, these three women form a triad which serves as the critical matrix in which the child is nurtured and sustained during her journey through Southern Black girlhood.

During the historical moment in which Maya grew up, these women also seem to represent three images of black female own subject formation. Angelou, the adult autobiographer, reveals these images and the identities they describe as constructs however, disrupting them to collapse the dualistic portrayals of Black women as embodied in the age-old images of the Matriarch and the Jezebel and the oppositional construction of black female identity and white female identity as embodied by the image of the Lady. Out of the rubble of dismantled images and identities, binaries and oppositional constructions, Angelou’s autobiography opens up a discursive space of political resistance and personal potential arising from an organic, ever emerging, hybridised black female subjectivity.

As *Caged Bird* opens, Maya and her older brother Bailey, Jr. have been sent by train across country from California to Stamps, Arkansas, to live with their paternal grandmother, Annie Henderson. Grandmother Henderson, or Momma, as the children call her, seems to typify a certain image of the Black woman that, though superficially benign, has been wielded as a weapon against her by the dominant culture, the Matriarch. Angelou’s depiction of Momma is suggestive of the Black Matriarch, the strong, independent woman who, out of necessity born of circumstance, serves as the head and the heart of her family. Indeed, Annie Henderson is an older southern Black woman, a pillar of her church and of her community, in which she runs the general store. Grounded in and strengthened by the religious tradition of the Black Church, she runs the store and
her family with an iron-clad resolve and authority. Angelou describes Momma in almost larger-than-life terms.

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 (1970: 38).

Despite its seemingly sympathetic, perhaps even validating tone, the image of the matriarch has been used by the dominant culture, through the auspices or under the guise of sociology to suggest the presence of a cultural pathology, an assault by Black women upon Black men and their manhood. This view would have it that Black women’s independence, regardless of socio-economic necessities, deprives Black men of their rightful places as breadwinners and heads of family, thus stripping them of their masculinity. Moreover, according to this analysis, by assuming these supposedly masculine roles, Black women relinquish their feminine identities and become lesser women. Rendered somehow androgynous and certainly asexual, the Black Matriarch becomes the embodiment of spiritual will, consigned to one-dimensional, thus limiting, narrative, communal and experiential spaces.

In opposition to the asexual construction of black female identity represented by the Matriarch, the dominant culture, more specifically the white patriarchy, created the image of the wanton Black Jezebel. This hyper sexualised myth of black womanhood grew out of slavery as an explanation and rationale for slave-holders sexual impositions upon and rape of enslaved black women. The abolition of slavery did not abolish this image from the national imaginary, however, as the dominant culture perpetuated a nation that without the moral authority imposed by that culture, black women’s libidinous
drives might well explode to the detriment of society. So for black women, the erotic, both the sensual and the sexual, must either be disowned, becoming a foreclosed aspect of their subjectivity, or owned and used against them, becoming a part of the unique confluence of race and gender oppression that marks their history.

In *Caged Bird*, Vivian Baxter, Maya’s mother, may be read in the context of this aspect of the black female erotic. Upon encountering her mother for the first time after a long separation, Maya is “assailed” by Vivian’s beauty and knows immediately that she had sent Bailey, Jr. and herself away because “she was too beautiful to have children”. Angelou paints Vivian in evocative, sexual terms in the novel – “to describe my mother would be to write about a hurricane in its perfect power. Or the climbing, falling colours of a rainbow,” – and, in the process, places her in opposition to Momma – “her red lips (Momma said it was a sin to wear lipstick) spilt to colour looked see – through clean” (49).

Vivian embodies sensuality not only through her physical beauty, however, but also through her lack of a certain quality of self-consciousness. Angelou best reveals this quality in a few lines describing the children’s meetings with their mother in a St. Louis tavern:

> At Louie’s (…) while we sat on the stiff wooden booths, Mother would dance alone in front of us to music from the Seeburg. I loved her most at those times. She was life a pretty kite that floated just above my head (54).

Vivian’s life is one marked by a very different manner of independence from Momma’s. She lives according to her own rules, redefining traditional views of maternity, eschewing conventionality, and, according to the times, violating accepted morality. She makes her living as a gameswoman in joints, working into the early hours of the morning and
beyond, and lives with men to whom she is not married. The image of the Jezebel that Vivian’s character suggests is explicitly negative (as opposed to the subtle denigration of the Matriarch), denying the Black woman inscribed in it any subjectivity beyond her sexuality.

As the dominant culture consigns Black women to the hypo feminine and hypersexualised images of the Matriarch and the Jezebel, respectively, it excludes them from other realms of female subjectivity most notably those characterised by the “higher” virtues. Instead, they are constructed in opposition to this other image of womanhood and, in the process, in opposition to white women for whom this image, the idealised image of the Lady, is constructed and reserved. Giddings and other scholars have posited the black woman/white woman binary as a historically situated creation of the patriarchy through which women of African descent and women of European origin were cast into diametrically opposed spaces in the cultural (read: Patriarchal) imagination, elaborating a continuum of womanhood, more specifically female sexuality, with the Black Matriarch on the far right, the Black Jezebel on the far left, and the Lady at centre, a decidedly white centre.

Into this reserved space, Angelou writes Mrs. Bertha Flowers, “the lady who threw [her her] first life line” (77). After a trauma that leaves the young Maya psychically scarred and voluntarily mute, Mrs. Flowers is the one who begins to draw her out of her self-imposed silence. For the young girl, Mrs. Flowers provides them and for the rest of her life “the measure of what a human being can be” and makes her “proud to be a Negro, just by being herself” (79). But Mrs. Flowers does not seem to embody
“Negro-ness” as the dominant culture would define it. Indeed, Angelou says of her that “she was our side’s answer to the richest white woman in town” and that “she acted just as refined as white folks in the movies and books” (78, 79).

Like Vivian, Mrs. Flowers, although more familiar, is not quite real to Maya: she reminds the child more of the women in the English novels she reads than of anybody in her material world, most notably her mother and grandmother. In contrast to the volatile and vivid Vivian, Mrs. Flowers transcends the sexual, having “the grace of control to appear warm in the coldest weather”. More significantly, she is depicted as somehow removed from the rest of the black community: she does not belong to their church and she is not, in the young Maya’s approximation of things, “familiar with” anyone, as “no one would have thought of getting close enough to Mrs. Flowers to ruffle her dress . . . she didn’t encourage familiarity” (78). The Lady, then, while valorised by the black community, is too aligned with whiteness to be a part of that community.

While Maya the child positions Mrs. Flowers outside of and somehow above the black community and draws Momma and Vivian as diametrically opposed figures, Angelou the autobiographer forwards an altogether different project. She takes quite a risk by portraying these three women in a manner that alludes to these culturally constructed images or interpellations; her project might be mistaken for an attempt merely to humanise these images, to somehow reappropriate and empower them. Such a gesture, however, would ultimately have only reiterated these interpellations and empowered the social and political forces that collude to create them, making Angelou complicit in Black women’s disempowerment and displacement. Instead of an ultimately negating attempt to redeem these images of black women, Angelou moves toward a
critical transformation of black female subjectivity, disrupting the boundaries and collapsing the binaries that limit it to reveal a discursive hybridity within the text that, in turn, creates the promise and potential for a personal plurality in her life and the lives of other Black women.

Angelou begins this project by (re)presenting the fragmented black female subject, dispossessed of her strength, sensuality, and intelligence through her cultural displacement into negative, stereotypic/mythic images. Rather than simply empowering these women, and consequently, the images in which they are inscribed to offer a new composite, as Sondra O’Neale posits, Angelou frees the women from the images by collapsing the oppositional constructions and moving the disparate visions of womanhood toward convergence. This convergence is represented into two emblematic moments in the text.

My picture of Mother and Momma embracing on the train platform has been darkly retained [. . .]. The sounds they make had a rich harmony. Momma’s deep slow voice lay under my mother’s rapid peeps and chirps like stones under rushing ware (171).

The talked and from the side of the building [. . .] I heard the soft-voiced Mrs. Flowers and the textured voice of my grandmother merging and melting (79).

Angelou uses images of fluidity, of “rushing water” and “merging and melting” to suggest the way these women, so seemingly different, flow into each other. She elaborates this critical confluence beyond the symbolic, however. Within the text, there are other narrative moments when this convergence occurs. One such moment in relation to Mrs. Flowers and Momma occurs when the child, Maya, experiences a passionate hatred of Momma for “showing her ignorance” by addressing Mrs. Flowers as “Sister Flowers” and doing so in non-standard English. The child Maya experiences only their
difference, and it is only after many years, writes Angelou the autobiographer, that she realised that “they were as alike as sisters, separated only by formal education” (78). The blurring of black female images continues as Maya recognises the beauty of each of these three women. Whereas her mother’s beauty “assails” her immediately, and she appreciates Mrs. Flowers beautiful warm colour and graceful deportment, Maya only recognises Momma’s beauty in the aftermath of the traumatic, but pivotal incident when three white girls, in a deliberate show of racial privilege, arguably a part of their own inauguration in Southern, white society expose their base rear ends in the yard of Momma’s store, already aware that they are impervious to any chastisement or reprimand by the older black women because of the colour of their skin. After the girls tire of their antics and attempted display of power, Maya’s grandmother comes in and looks down on her, crying in her frustration and rage over the perceived humiliation of the girls’ disrespectful behaviour: “She looked until I looked up. Her face was a brown moon that shone on me. She was beautiful” (26). At that moment, Momma joins Vivian and Mrs. Flowers, becoming beautiful in Maya’s eyes.

Perhaps the most effective area of convergence is the participation of all three women in mothering. The text contains a provocative sign for this multiplicity of mothers in Maya’s imagination:

I could cry anytime I wanted by picturing my mother (I didn’t quite know what she looked like) lying in her coffin [. . . ] The face was brown, like a big O, and since I couldn’t fill in the features I printed MOTHER across the O (43).

Although Maya only has one mother, “MOTHER” serves as a shifting signifier in the text, signifying all three of the adult women in Maya’s life. This is not to say that Angelou’s project is to establish or validate an image of the black woman as Mother;
again, that would be just another socially sanctioned and refined interpellation. Rather, to destabilise the oppositional constructions, Angelou shows these disparate black women, Momma, Vivian, and Mrs. Flowers, all engaged in this critical relational dynamic. She is nurtured by all three woman and each greatly influenced her emerging subjectivity. Each bequeaths to her a particular legacy that helps the child make her way in the world and helps determine who she will be in the world. As the black slate of the “O” is filled in by one, then another woman, Angelou establishes mothering as a collaborative creative process; each woman engages the role of “MOTHER” in her own way, bringing her own inimitable colours and contours to the space, revealing mothering both as a potential form of resistance and a manner of artistry with the child Maya serving as the ultimate canvas. *Caged Bird* ends as Maya becomes a mother and an artist in her own right, learning from her mother, expressly Vivian, but really the hybridised mother of Momma, Vivian, and Mrs. Flowers, how to mother her own child.

It is most significant that the emblematic scenes of convergence reveal the voices of the woman dissolving into one another. It is this coalescence that gives Maya her voice. Momma, Vivian, and Mrs. Flowers flow into each other and, in turn, into Maya. As Angelou, the autobiographer, frees the women in her text from the stasis of their assigned images, she writes her way out of her own displacement and into a new narrative of Black female subjectivity.

Fluidity is finally the dominant image in Angelou’s life and autobiography. The young Maya’s physical mobility, her movement from California to Stamps to St. Louis to Stamps and finally, back to California serves as a central metaphor for a psychic mobility. Ultimately, Maya must find her way out of the psychological and spiritual
immobility of her displacement and find the means to awaken herself out of an “ugly black dream” (2005: 373).

The girl-child, Maya must ultimately discover that this dream is not her own; the dominant patriarchal culture dreams, in Ntozake Shange’s words, “a thing callt a coloured girl” (2005: 373) and inscribes her there, seeking to deny her the right to dream her own self. But Angelou writes her way out of their dream by developing in her life and text a space that defies definition. She opens up a narrative space that, in the end, allows her to not only escape her displacement but also to transcend the social interpellations used to displace her.

Critics like Dolly McPherson and Francoise Lionnet, have often read Angelou’s autobiography as the quintessential American story of the quest for self, celebrating Angelou’s ability to “find her/self” despite the social forces that would limit her. Such readings are based on the unexamined and so precarious percept that the person’s emergence as an individual is positive, liberating. Angelou’s autobiography suggests that this mythic attainment is not so simple. As she negotiates the spaces to which she is consigned because she is Southern, black, and female, Angelou reveals the manner in which the black female subject, a distinctly communal and relational subject, is engaged in an ongoing series of negotiations with the social, cultural, and political interpellations of itself.

While motherhood is a theme that binds the volumes of Angelou’s autobiography, her fundamental awareness as a woman is highlighted as the third of four crises Angelou faces in the structuring of her self-identity. This challenge is most specifically highlighted in her fourth autobiographical volume, *The Heart of a Woman.*
Noting that, in her initial explanation of the “tripartite crossfire” she has faced, she speaks from the stance of a black woman, one finds that the adult narrator Angelou has successfully integrated her womanhood as a positive aspect of self. However, sexuality is a source of concern for the character Maya, beginning at a young age, and the common concern about appearance is not missed in her narration. Lacking a small frame or fine features, Maya is not considered pretty as a young girl. Rather, her brother Bailey is blessed with traditionally feminine characteristics—grace, flowing curls—while Maya is simply a “too big Negro girl” (Caged Bird, 4), passed off jokingly by her family as the daughter of a Chinese man. This reversal is undoubtedly a source of confusion for the child, and her appearance is yet another source of displacement for Angelou.

While her opposition to womanhood is never as outright or aggressive as her confrontation of black identity and white society, she does not begin to explore, or embrace her sexuality and the strength derived from being female until after the birth of her son, Guy.

Angelou’s insecurity over her appearance is compounded at the age of eight by the rape she endures by her mother’s lover. The tremendous guilt she feels, coupled with the much-too-early awakening to her sexuality, further displaces Angelou from comfort as a woman by separating her associations of sex and love entirely. Exemplifying this fact, her next sexual encounter takes place after a mere introduction to the idea of lesbianism sufficiently convinces the wholly insecure Angelou that, because of her having been moved by the vision of a friend's bare chest, she too must be a “woman lover” (Caged Bird, 266). She again understands her sexuality as wrong when judging by her surroundings, just as she decided her appearance to be wrong following the receipt of
a white doll. As with this blonde and blue-eyed example from her childhood, Angelou finds less than sufficient reassurance or acceptance from her mother to squelch her insecurity.

The experience of Guy’s birth, however, forcibly opens a door to stability that had not previously existed in Angelou’s life. While Angelou does not deny her inability to fully comprehend her role as mother at the time—“just as gratefulness was confused in my mind with love, so possession became mixed up with motherhood” (Caged Bird, 280)—she does allude to her experiencing, for the first time, the fact that her sexuality and femaleness are innate in her identity. One particular incident relates Angelou’s first encounter with her motherly instincts. Frightened that her newborn would be crushed sleeping in bed with her, Angelou begs her mother not to leave the young Guy in her bed once she falls asleep. When the practical Vivian Baxter refuses, Angelou vows to stay awake the entire night to avoid smothering the baby inadvertently. However, she awakes to the voice of her mother, and looks to find the baby sleeping safely in the crook of her arm. Instinctively, she has created a tent with her arm in which the baby sleeps:

Mother whispered, “See, you don’t have to think about doing the right thing. If you’re for the right thing, then you do it without thinking” (Caged Bird, 281).

Vivian’s assurance plants the first seed of womanly confidence in Angelou. She recognises that, despite appearance, awkwardness, or insecurity, she is a woman without trying. The assertion by her mother that she is “for the right thing” begins to reverse the tide of self-loathing stemming from her abandonment by the same woman years earlier. If the mother who abandoned her as wrong could see her as being fundamentally right, Angelou might also understand her sexuality as fitting well.
Though she does not realise it until it is threatened, Angelou’s womanhood and motherhood prove the most consistent source of inner stability throughout the external trials of her life’s journey. Her need for adaptation in order to provide for her child, and the innate ability to do so which comes with being female, give her the strength of character to confront the hardship she meets. This fluidity of character helps her to survive, and the certainty of womanhood is the compass she follows in life.

If the birth of Guy is the start of Angelou’s exploration into the heart of her womanhood, her acceptance of Female as a fundamental part of her identity comes with her divorce from Vusumzi Make, her second husband. In rejecting his paternalistic attitude, she again fights the battle of absorption versus identity, choosing to assert her strength as a woman rather than to have her own identity absorbed into that of her husband.

Her gradual realisation of the importance that her female independence holds is characterised in the following passage from *The Heart of a Woman*:

> My position had always been that no one was responsible for my life except me. . . Of course, no man had ever tried to persuade me differently by offering the security of his protection. . . I wanted to be a wife and to create a beautiful home to make my man happy, but there was more to life than being a diligent maid and a permanent pussy (*Heart*, 167-168).

Never having had her independence challenged in adulthood, and having always been the sole protector of herself and her son, Angelou begins to note the centrality of her womanhood only when it is threatened by the complete dependence which her marriage to Make demands. Though motherhood has been one of the few constants throughout her life, she has not necessarily had the opportunity to recognise the equal significance of her identity as a strong woman and the fact that her ability to mother stems from that
womanly strength. In the face of Make’s attempts to control her, she discovers the third level of identity that she must secure: Maya the woman.

The experience of motherhood is that source of internal constancy which Angelou looks to for support and purpose while floundering between her various modes of identity. The constancy of her motherhood and the continual companionship of her son give Angelou not only a sense of permanency as she dismantles and restructures herself, but also a sense of purpose when her mind otherwise seeks only to flee its surroundings. It is simultaneously a steadying element, allowing her to disregard external stabilisers in her search for identity, and also one that causes her to continually seek complete stability in the future, for the sake of her son.

She gives birth to her only child at the same period in life when she begins to actively seek identification. Symbolically, she gives birth to her changeling self at the time of Guy’s birth. Thus, as Guy grows through his mother’s volumes, Angelou also matures, increasing her self-awareness in a manner not dissimilar from that of her young son. The period of self-discovery chronicled in Angelou’s autobiography begins, in earnest, when she is 17 years of age and ends with the independence of her newly matured son when he reaches the age of 17. The parallel between mother and child provides a sense of continuity across the pages, but also gives Angelou an opportunity to view herself in the kind of remote sense that she uses to examine her surroundings. The example and experience of her son are the ultimate window to self-comprehension available to Angelou, and it is therefore highly significant that the two egos remain intertwined throughout her phases of self-acceptance.

As with any individual whose childhood lacked the security of parental
involvement, Angelou finds parenthood difficult at times, and often sees her own insecurity in her son. She attempts to be all things to Guy—mother, father, sister, brother—in order to allay the possibility of his feeling alone as she did. At the same time, reconciliation with the mother who abandoned her is made possible because she comes to understand Vivian’s past actions when she finds herself in similar circumstances. When, in *Gather Together in My Name*, her son is abducted by a babysitter, Angelou unwittingly faces a situation in which Guy understands himself as having been abandoned, not unlike her own abandonment at the age of three:

> I stood holding him while he raged at being abandoned . . . Separate from my own boundaries, I had not known before that he had and would have a life beyond being my son, my pretty baby, my cute doll, my charge . . . I began to understand that uniqueness of the person. He was three and I was nineteen, and never again would I think of him as a beautiful appendage of myself (*Gather*, 192).

Guy reacts to abandonment in a way in which Angelou was never allowed to do—with forceful emotion. This and several other incidents in Guy’s life allow Angelou to experience again the emotions of her childhood, examining them from a more mature stance and subsequently coming to terms with them. The realisation of her own motherly misunderstanding leads Angelou to recognise how her own mother could have misunderstood the responsibility of motherhood when abandoning her two children.

While motherhood is a continuous thread in Angelou’s autobiography, the embodiment of the theme varies. The closeness of Angelou’s relationship with Guy lessens as they each mature. Her need to associate with her child is reduced as she comes to terms with the issues of insecurity she has held onto from her own childhood, and the immediate association with his experiences decreases as she finds and accepts her own identity. Further, the strength of her relationship with Vivian increases with Angelou’s
own comprehension of her role as mother.

The final split in identity between mother and son comes once Guy has left Angelou’s home in Ghana and moved on to the University. In a decisive scene—one of the few repeated in two volumes—Guy declares his love for his mother, but also his independence (Travelling Shoes, 185). As he departs, Guy comments to Angelou, “May be now you’ll have a chance to grow up” (Heart, 324). His insight is significant, alluding to the nearly formed identity his mother has cultivated in his presence but not yet tested on her own. Angelou’s response, though reflecting her immediate surprise and confusion, also clarifies the separation: “How can he love me? He doesn’t know me, and I sure as hell don’t know him” (Travelling Shoes, 186). Though she has known and understood her life through his to this point, Angelou has now constructed a separate and intact identity, and thus no longer needs to, or can know her son’s identity, in the same way that one can never know another’s experience fully. While her role as mother does not end per se, its importance as a source of stability is gone, and Maya Angelou steps forth as an individual.

Three familiar themes of African-American autobiography and folklore frequent both the prose and poetry of Angelou: repeated triumphs over obstacles, including numerous betrayals; the search for identity, culminating in self-reliance; and the promotion of literacy and learning. Moreover, as James Oleny reports, “There is the pattern of bondage, flight and freedom . . . found in virtually all black autobiography” (1990: 77) and which is an integral part of Angelou’s work. She adds a universal theme addressing all humans as being more alike than unlike, refusing the hardening of the human spirit.
Angelou writes not just of what has happened to her but its effect upon her. Her books unfold what she has learned, how she has grown, and how she moved along the trail of self-discovery. She lets her stories tell themselves and from these stories emerge the expositions of a theme. Angelou’s dedication to growth and self-evaluation comes up repeatedly; how she modifies, for example, her ideas about black-white relationships. Despite early environmental conditioning, she eventually realises, as did her friend Malcolm X, that not all whites are devils, thus negating a major obstacle to a free and open life. In other words, her acceptance of disparate points of view marked her growth from an either-or thinker where things are always black or white, to looking at events in a grey light. This freedom of thought allowed a break of limiting bondage and the need to seek new arenas depicted in each volume of Angelou’s autobiographies. Freedom is found through mental adjustments rather than physical displacements.

The theme of personal identification described in *All God’s Children Need Travelling Shoes* reminds Angelou that you can’t really leave home. African by definition but American by birth, both influence her being. When Angelou once called herself a “Stampsonian,” she admitted a recognition of being firmly planted in traditional Southern culture, and she can’t slough off that influence. Her bondage and flight cannot be denied. She accepts that a person is marked by genetic make-up and environmental background, but individual freedom is found internally. She indicated in at least one interview that one’s background is ingrained beneath fingernails and hair twists and the song of speech. But this is all part of survival, the acceptance of the individual and self and the realisation of the worthiness of all.

An important corollary to freedom and survival is protest, which, Angelou says,
“is an inherent part of ‘her’ work.” But she warns that protest should be tempered: serious consideration of protest is required to avoid dangers of interpretation. Angelou avoids using polemics, or lecturing or deliberately structuring her anecdotes to be obvious platforms for advancing social or political ideas, but she lets her stories carry the message. She avoids what Robert Penn Warren in 1958 objected to about the practices of some published writers:

Protest *qua* protest denies the textures of life. The problem is to permit the fullest range of life into racial awareness. I don’t mean to imply that there’s nothing to protest about, but aside from the appropriate political, sociological, and journalistic concerns, the problem is to see the protest in its relation to other things. Race isn’t an isolated thing—I mean as it exists in the U.S. -- it becomes a total symbolism for every kind of issue.

Further maintaining the tradition of what has been labelled black autobiography, Angelou incorporates principles from slave narratives such as recognition of the work-ethic. As Stephen Butterfield observes, “Most of (slave) narratives embrace the work-ethic . . . despite the fact that slaves were stereotyped by whites as lazy and had no reason, given the conditions, to work for their masters any more than was necessary to avoid punishment.” Angelou promotes the value of work throughout her autobiographies and as central to some of her poetry. Her basic initial themes of overcoming difficulties and finding self-worth are repeatedly advanced by Angelou as part of a strong work-ethic in her world. Everyone Angelou knew in her community worked hard: her family at the store; the men folk in the fields and mills; and the women in the homes of the whites. In short, “the moral assumptions of the slave narrative,” according to Butterfield, “include not only temperance, honesty, worship of God and Christ but also ‘respect for hard work.’” Many native folktales incorporate these virtues. These tales counter the stereotypes promoted by racists and are utilised by many African-American writers.
including Angelou. She dispels negative images whenever possible.

The second of Bloom’s autobiographical canons embraced by Angelou is that defined as “feminist.” This is seen as a gender based perception of events, the male versus the female outlook. The inclusion of Angelou in Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s Reading Black, Reading Feminist validates her adherence to Bloom’s canon. Gates determines that current black women writers found their voices around 1970 and are linked to a 19th century tradition and mind-set. Women’s many roles motivate and fill their writing. Keneth Kinnamon suggests that “…more than male writers, women are concerned with such themes as community, sexism (especially sexual exploitation), and relations with family and friends.” Joanne Braxton agrees and finds such themes to be “traditional in autobiography by black American women. These include the importance of the family and the nurturing and rearing of one’s children as well as the quest for self-sufficiency, self-reliance, personal dignity, and self-definition” (1989: 184). These abstracts can be found throughout women’s literature. While it is true that women “seem correspondingly less interested in individual rebellion, alienation, and success against the odds, as Richard Wright's work seems to suggest” (1986: 133). Angelou’s writings do relate one confrontation after another: between a black and a white; between Angelou and a white housewife; between Angelou and a white salesgirl; between a white boxer and a black one; even between Angelou and her white husband. These confrontations however, are not presented as feminist issues, but rather as racial situations. They do not impact upon a gender interpretation. Their inclusion is to demonstrate everyday race conflict. It has been noted that all black autobiography will include a confrontation scene. Elizabeth Janeway notes in her essay on women’s literature, “That to be distinct from men’s
literature women’s literature must constitute ‘an equally significant report from another, equally significant, area of existence’” (1987: 872). Hence, some of the major themes of women’s literature are “madness, powerlessness, betrayal, and victimisation” (1987: 872). These themes can be found frequently in the works of Angelou. They will be identified as individual writings are discussed.

Angelou’s autobiographies are representative of books written by African-American women published in the late sixties and thereafter in which “the writers were more outspoken about pride in their race than in themselves as women” (1980: 149), although the authors as women remain the focus. Several critics writing specifically about Angelou have found common ground. Selwyn Cudjoe in his study, “Maya Angelou and the Autobiographical Statement” finds: “the Afro-American autobiographical statement emerges as a public rather than a private gesture, me-ism gives way to our-ism and superficial concerns about an individual subject usually give way to the collective subjection of the group.” He adds, “It is never meant to glorify the exploits of the individual and the concerns of the collective predominate” (1984: 10). In a similar vein, Joanne Braxton observes that “unlike the solitary but representative male hero ‘who belts with his fists and his feet,’ the black woman autobiographer uses languages, invective, impertinence, and ritual invocation--to defend herself physically and psychologically. As often as not, she celebrates a collective rather than an individual achievement” (1991: 205-206). G. Thomas Courser proposes that Angelou’s autobiographies are “prophetic autobiography, a genre characterised by the conflation of the personal and communal history” (1981: 591). In short, female writers tend to include the universal when writing about the particular. Angelou’s body of particulars utilises all of the above women and
ethnic universal characteristics as detailed by the mentioned commentators.

In all autobiographies, the writer has the power of selecting the material, and therefore the product is subject to self-service or bias. The writer can exercise influence and personal opinion by careful choice of the remembered events presented. Angelou attempts to balance the remembered events between the pleasant memories such as her relationship with the erudite Mrs. Flowers of Stamps, and the unpleasant ones, the mocking of “momma” by powhitetrash teenagers. She thus enhances the reality and verity of her recollections. This balance of personal material allows her to validly insert folkloric communal anecdotes.

Childhood is Blooms’s third canon of autobiography embraced by Angelou. According to Richard M. Coe in his, When the Grass Was Taller, which focused exclusively on an examination of autobiographies of childhood, these autobiographies are authored mainly by established writers. Angelou, having acquired credentials as a professional, qualifies to present her autobiography of childhood, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, under Coe’s precept.

One can often look back with fondness or sorrow on childhood, but these times are not usually considered fascinating or worthy of being chronicled. Coe claims “triviality is the very essence of childhood experience” (1984: xii). And William Kinsella said that in his childhood “nothing interesting ever happened to (him)” (1990: 2). William Kennedy quotes Faulkner who said “the problems of children are not worth writing about” (1989: 55-56). These counter comments do not negate the importance of the influences of these years and events in shaping a person nor do they refute that some childhood experiences deserve recall. The systematic segregation and racism that
Angelou endured and observed as a child, and the traumatic rape that she suffered cannot be dismissed lightly or considered inconsequential in her development. Her judgement of future events is unavoidably coloured by the lessons learned and experienced in her tightly-knit segregated society. Her personal guilt regarding swift street justice following her rape weighs heavily upon her young life. To a child, a simple cause and effect results from being “good” or “bad” and is consistent with Lawrence Kohlberg’s first stage of moral development.

Coe’s study defines this genre, which he calls “the Childhood,” as an autobiographical work "whose structure reflects step by step the development of the writer's self" (1984: 9). Coe’s analysis “applies particularly to sensitive, introspective, often iconoclastic or idealistic writers critical of the segment of society they encounter as children and adolescents.” This statement may be appropriate to Angelou. In his chapter, “Portrait of the Artist Surrounded by Family and Friends,” Coe identifies some of the common characteristics of childhood:

In the life of every child there are encountered certain irreducible facts. There is the fact . . . the guilt, indeed the sin--of having been born. And of having . . . a mother. Perhaps, and putatively, a father. Of being dependent, ineffective, and small. There is the fact of having to rely, complacently or disgustedly, upon the ministrations of others, unchosen and uninvited . . . . Of growing up. Of willy-nilly being educated. Of being Awful. Of discovering the world and one’s own body; its prowess, its demands and its fiascoes. Of falling in love or soaring in lust (1984: 139).

In his study of 600 childhood autobiographies, Coe could have easily included *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* because it contains most of his general elements. Angelou is “Awful” because she is a “too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair, broad feet and a space between her teeth that would hold a number-two pencil. . . .” (1970: 2)
and wears hand-me-down clothes. She had a mother and a father, but the father was never affectionate. She was dependent, ineffective, and small (young). She had to rely on the ministrations of others—her grandmother and family. She discovered the world and her own body alone as an adolescent. At that time, she didn't fall in love or soar in lust, but she did question her sexual identity and sought determination from a deliberate liaison. She became pregnant from that first encounter and thus was forced to move beyond childhood and its attendant guilts.

Another characteristic of written childhood references, according to Coe, is that “poverty is the significant element in the genre almost from earliest times” (1984: 206). Angelou’s hometown of Stamps in the 1930s suffered along with the rest of America the severe economic depression. Poverty was everywhere. Although Angelou’s grandmother owned a general merchandise store, her household suffered only a degree less than other families. In spite of the difficult conditions, Angelou makes a special point to note that her family did not have to go on relief. This serves to disabuse the reader of the notion that all African Americans existed on federal subsistence. Nonetheless, in I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings there is found the “rough correlation between poverty that accompanies so many of our childhoods and the intensity of minute and detailed observation in the refashioning of that childhood experienced by the adult poet” (1984: 206). A further observation of Coe’s is that autobiographies of childhood usually come from families “with a strong element of emotional imbalance” (1984: 140). The rape of the child Angelou introduces a period of great emotional strain. Her imbalance, however, was countered by the strength of her grandmother Henderson who gave to Angelou tough love and a stability. Without formal psychological counseling,
Momma found someone to break through the self-imposed silence resulting from the child’s response to the rape event.

According to William Kennedy, “It’s not that children in trouble are not great subjects, but what you need is a world and a way of approaching the world. . . . It’s the sense of response, as opposed to problem” (1989: 55-56). Angelou responds to the problems of childhood by creating a persona. Encouraged by her literary friends, James Baldwin, John O. Killens, and others to be “bodacious enough to invent her own life daily,” she created a fictionalised person who is carried and defined by various narratives. She invented herself because she was tired of society inventing her, of distorting her personality, of turning the stereotype into reality, of carrying a label bestowed on her by outsiders. She found the freedom to express her own feelings and opinions unburdened by the interpretations of others. Stephen Butterfield claims “that the main burden of the black writer . . . has been to repair the damage inflicted on him by white racism, rend the veil of white definitions that misrepresent him to himself and the world, (and) create a new identity” (1974: 6). Thus Angelou continues the mission of African-American writers through her structured recollections and reinforces the worth of people by her recorded accomplishments, both real and invented.

While Angelou is an autobiographer and not a “fiction” writer, she purposefully populates her narratives with characters who belie that stereotyped, two-dimensional picture of African Americans: Momma; brother Bailey; Vivian Baxter; Daddy Clidell; the two Flowers, Bertha and Martha; Angelou’s son; Mr. Elders; Martin Luther King; Malcolm X; Julian Mayfield; all are strong figures. And the persona Angelou created for herself is very close to the real life Angelou: both are articulate, imaginative, witty,
strong, independent individuals. She is an intelligent personality rather than the vapid, cheerful know-nothing of a novelist's creation. She deliberately rejects common caricatures.

Angelou concedes having difficulty writing autobiography as literature. She explains that a distance must be established so that the writer is addressing the proper time-frame. When she wrote the teleplay *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* she “would refer to the ‘Maya’ character so as not to mean me (herself). It’s damned difficult (for) (me) to preserve this distancing. But it’s very necessary” (1989: 148). In other words, when Angelou writes about the feelings of a twelve year old, it must reflect the feelings of that age, not the feelings in retrospect. She isolates herself to reach back, free of current influences.

For her actual writing, Angelou reports the first thing she does is to find the rhythm in a subject, the “natural rhythm” of a piece. This rhythm dictates her flow and style within the structure she has chosen. The rhythm Angelou refers to has been recognised as derivative of the native religious and jazz rhythms previously noted. There emerges a comfortable swing of highs, lows, and bridges that envelopes the reader.

Because autobiography is individual revelation, it is falsely assumed that these revelations will be the unvarnished truth. Elizabeth Bruss defines autobiography as “a purportedly true work in which the autobiographer is the source of the subject matter” (Dec. 1990). Richard Coe observes that in autobiography the “border-line between fact and poetry is impossible to determine” (1984: xii). It is not surprising to discover that wide-spread distrust exists about absolute truth in autobiography. William Maxwell says, “In talking about the past we lie with every breath we draw” (1990: 345). Mark Twain
and Woody Allen offer similar realistic comments.

Sheldon Kipp rather harshly concludes, “reminiscence is an art that intermingles fact with fiction and unconsciously edits each retelling of our tales. Any personal vignette told exactly the same way more than twice is likely to be a deliberate lie” (1987: viii). The use of fiction by Angelou has been already established. A gentler interpretation of Kipp’s holds that any story told more than twice qualifies as folklore. Houston A. Baker, Jr. says that folklore is the very basis of black literature. He also points out that written black folklore has a recent history, having been in development only about three hundred years. It therefore contains far more contemporary material than the lore of other groups.

Angelou’s first autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, includes a heavy concentration of amusing and entertaining folk tales and language, much of which is of current derivation. This reflects the material of childhood conditioning. Folklore, however, becomes less obvious in Angelou’s succeeding autobiographies as she experiences personal growth. The early influence of folklore has a natural impact upon a child and its strength is no doubt directly related to the isolation and internalisation of a particular community.

While folklore permits certain distortions of fact, especially in autobiographical works, writers of pure fiction can be expected to be extremely expedient with the truth. Their comments range from John Cheever’s statement, “I have been a story teller since the beginning of my life, rearranging facts in order to make them more interesting and sometimes more significant” (1991: 36) reasoning “that it is not the facts that we can put our fingers on which concern us but the sum of these facts; it is not the data we want but
the essence of the data” (1991: 40), to William Kinsella frankly admitting that “Ninety percent of what I write is just imagination. Imagination is so much more interesting than real life. My life is dull. If I wrote autobiographical stories I wouldn’t be making a living as a writer” (Simonsen 2). What these writers strive for is not the pure unvarnished encyclopaedic truth but plausibility. A.B. Guthrie tells us, “plausibility is the morality of fiction” (1991: A2).

Thus if Angelou needs any justification for varying facts or stretching details, it is easily found. She has license to fictionalise, to enhance interest. Although she admitted creating a persona, she has never admitted to re-defining the facts in her stories. However, she admits that, “there’s a world of difference between truth and facts and that facts can obscure the truth”. Angelou is attuned to reaching her audience. Her editor once said that she could rewrite a book by completely turning it around and letting the original ending serve as a beginning, using the same facts in a different order for a different impact. In an interview, the real Uncle Willie admitted that “some part of the book (I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings) could have been fictional. I wouldn't say it is all true,” he said, “I suppose all books have some fiction in them” (1970: B2). One can assume that “the essence of the data” is present in Angelou’s work. Angelou parallels Kinsella who said, “I found a good voice to tell the stories and I think I understand the way any oppressed group survives is by making fun of the people who oppress them” (Simonsen 2). It follows that many of the anecdotes Angelou tells have been told before and usually at the expense of the oppressors: whites. These stories have been handed to Angelou via her traditional folklore. Her personal embellishments obscure their roots to the casual reader, thus they appear to be occurrences unique to her and fitted to her
literary framework.

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Angelou’s potential as a writer could be discerned when she was still a child in Stamps. At the age of nine, she wrote a descriptive passage about Arkansas quoted by Dr. Dolly McPherson in her dissertation on Angelou and by Esther Hill in an article which showed Angelou’s promising facility with words: “Such jolting, rumbling, squeaking and creaking! Such ringing of cowbells as the cattle plodded along!” (1989: 111). This is the same age at which Angelou admits to discovering a love for Shakespeare and learning much from his work. She credits her reading and memorising a considerable amount of poetry such as all 1800 lines of Shakespeare’s “The Rape of Lucrece” with shaping her writing. She also had read the Bible twice at an early age, according to her close friend and colleague, Dr. Dolly McPherson, and memorised many passages, Angelou recalls writing songs when she was fifteen and attempting poetry which was admittedly “bad,” but her style has been characterised as poetic and biblical so her early literary encounters were not without obvious influence.

Angelou fits the description of a natural story-teller as outlined by Russell Miller: “. . . able to set the scene quickly and evocatively, describe the action in rich detail, recount credible dialogue and interject humour with an acute sense of timing” (1987: 67). These traits reflect a good listener with a rich oral heritage, and Angelou is certainly that. She recounts hours spent as a child who is seen but not heard.

Angelou has an ear for dialogue no doubt acquired from those listening hours, and does not falsify her characters with inappropriate language. She does not sanitise the language or culture of a character in order to make him or her more presentable. She
strives for credibility. Her grandmother slips into “Black English” on occasion and drops “s’s” and omits verbs in some sentences, as appropriate to her vernacular. Angelou’s uneducated folk speak with the grammar and the vocabulary of their background; and the informed and knowledgeable, like Mrs. Flowers speak in an appropriate general level. The dialogue comfortably fits the characters. It neither demeans nor inflates and sets the scenes accurately for readers. These scenes provide the canvas upon which Angelou paints her word pictures.

Angelou’s descriptive style has been called sensuous. This perhaps reflects her show business experience as a performer. She is keenly aware of emotional impact and demonstrates a tremendous bonding with her readers and listeners. Her style carries great emotional appeal. Angelou’s public appearances captivated her audience with words and their delivery, and her writing follows this pattern of word-awareness and tonal inflection. As noted before, there is a musical tilt to her sentences.

Angelou’s style reflects the inflections and rhythms and natural metaphors of the blues which creates a sense of community with her readers, but she also incorporates prose identifiable with African-American sermonising. This, too, signifies to her particular audience. An essential blues characteristic of ironic understatement serves as vehicle for enduring the contradictions of life. Yet, conscious overstatement of episodic details allows a focus upon the extreme emotional responses. Angelou permits herself flights of fantasy and exaggeration to express an intensity of feeling. This is particularly pertinent to Caged Bird when a major goal is self-determination.

Angelou’s treatment of love must be examined in any analysis of her work. There needs to be consideration given to the undercurrent of four kinds of love woven
throughout her narratives and her poetry. These perspectives are integral to her content.

Many of Angelou’s messages arise from spiritual love. In her twenties, Angelou examined Christian Science and inquired about Judaism, but the pull of the charismatic Christian teaching of her early years was always strong. She never rejected Christianity nor formally severed ties with the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. This was her early anchor, and it was here that her Bible-quoting “Momma” Henderson held a prominent place. Angelou accepted the existence of a higher being and rejected her first husband’s atheistic stance. Angelou was adamant about not wanting her son growing up in a “godless” family. She writes how church attendance made her feel cleansed and whole. The existence of God was a given, as was her love of His world. “Love”, she recognises has no barriers. It jumps hurdles, leaps fences, penetrates walls to arrive at its destination full of hope”. She later found a similar spiritual love amongst her African brothers and sisters. To this day, Angelou is actively and unabashedly involved in her religion as she acknowledges publicly. She credits it as being a great source of strength and a linchpin of her philosophy of life.

Angelou also candidly discusses conjugal love. She is proud that she respected and honoured the vows of marriage and did not pursue married men. In her marriage to Tosh Angelos, she speaks of physical passion and the general loving relationship they had until they separated. She describes a number of other loving monogamous relationships—emotional and physical—that she had over the years. In one of her poems, she reflects poetically her admiration of a husband. Her poetry includes a number of frank “love poems.” She frequently mentions tender responses between couples she knows. She does not confuse love with sex and praises sincere relationships.
Genuine brotherly or familial love, a third type, exemplifies Angelou’s love for her brother, Bailey; and for her mother, grandmother, and Uncle Willie, and their love of her. Her grandmother’s and mother’s love were unconditional, the kind of love she admired in her poem, “The Mothering Blackness.” The total, fierce, unquestioning love of Angelou for her son is her ultimate expression of this love. Her love for the writer activist Julian Mayfield was deep and strong, and in no way erotic. Angelou said that a black woman, because of economic and other pressures, needs a brother to tell her when she strays from the accepted norm, and Mayfield fulfilled this need. Her poems about freedom fighters are additional expressions of love and admiration. Her books are filled with characters who exhibit unselfish consideration and love of her and each other.

Finally, there is sexual love, love without emotional content. Sexual love can exist in marriage as well as can conjugal love, but is generally taken to be outside the marital state. Throughout her books she sprinkles references to purely physical encounters, her own and others. She offers no judgement of these relationships. They are accepted as natural occurrences and are not subject to moralistic preaching. The satisfaction of a human need to feel loved, even briefly, is regarded as very basic to mankind.

It is significant that Angelou’s rejection of Make comes only after their arrival and settling in Africa. This Continent of black skin provides an environment free from white pressure in which Angelou can explore her femaleness and eventually her American status (Hagen, 107). Ekaterini Georgoudaki explains this significance by stressing Angelou’s understanding of Africa as female rather than as a place (19). She emphasises Angelou’s view of Africa as a woman showing “strength under stress” and
“perseverance in a hostile world” (25). It is, therefore, likely that the acceptance begun with her real mother should be completed with Mother Africa. Angelou draws the strength to assert her independence from the earth of a strong woman beneath her feet. As she has rightly put it “for Africa to me . . . is more than a glamorous fact. It is a historical truth. No man can know where he is going unless he knows exactly where he has been and exactly how he arrived at his present place” (2002: 58).

She makes note, in The Heart of a Woman, of the generally male-dominant society still present on the continent of Africa. She comments on her first meeting with the wives of other African leaders, saying that she “didn’t know then that all wives of freedom fighters lived their lives on the edge of screaming desperation” (Heart, 158). While one might construe this statement as a comment on the constant worry of these wives over the safety of their husbands, in Angelou’s case it is more appropriate to interpret it as revealing her frustration at not being included in the freedom fight herself.

Even while preparing to assert her womanly independence, Angelou does not allow herself to fully identify with the singular label of “woman” just yet. Instead she states that

Some black women agreed that black man had rapacious appetites, and allowed their husbands and lovers the freedom of the fields. Some other women, with knives and guns, boiling water, poison and the divorce courts proved that they did not agree with the common attitude (Heart, 295).

She clearly does not include herself in the “common attitude,” and thus effectively presents herself as in opposition to a yet another majority. Always quick to assert the fact that she does not associate herself with the feminist movement of white American women (Gilbert, 89), Angelou then, by default, positions herself against black men alone rather
than the male sex in its entirety. In her fear of absorption, she reminds the reader of her individuality as a black woman, and further as a woman with a distinct personality, by outlining these several modes of difference in her situation from that of the majority.

During the demanded divorce court of acquaintances in which Angelou and Make find themselves, she purposely uses profanity and “revel[s] in the rustle of discomfort” (Heart, 300), pushing her opposition to its fullest point. Expecting rejection, she is surprised when the court sides with her; the correctness of her strength and power as a woman is thus reinforced even in the most paternalistic of environments. The completion of her divorce marks the ultimate confirmation of her female identity.

As with her transition from the Black Stamps community to the larger white-dominated community of San Francisco, Angelou’s move from America to Africa gives her a new scene for confrontation, and thus provides an impetus for the quickened acceptance of one element of her identity in order to begin the battle for another. Angelou is able to accept female nature as a central part of her identity more easily because she is simultaneously faced with the question of her identity as an African versus American.

In the final volume of her autobiography, All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes, Angelou settles in Ghana, with the hope of ending her lifelong displacement and being accepted at last into her “home.” The theme of return to Africa is a common one in African-American literature, particularly in autobiography. In Angelou’s works, this idea is present nearly from the point at which she first understands slavery as having been an institution. However, her journey to Egypt, with the cast of Porgy and Bess is the first instance in which Angelou recognises her American status as a distinct identifier in her life, and one with which she must later grapple. From this point, she idealises Africa in
her mind as the geographic place where she will find herself whole again.

Africa comes to represent “home” on a number of levels for Angelou—literally, as the native land of her ancestors; symbolically, as the mother who abandoned her long ago; but also hopefully, as embodying the distant possibility for complete acceptance which she strives for continually. Maya Angelou “adopt[s] Africa as a place of peace, freedom, security, and happiness,” states Ekaterini Georgoudaki (1991: 19).

Though the African backdrop gives Angelou an opportunity to explore her understanding of what it is to be African American without racial distraction, she at first positions herself mentally in opposition to the Africans amongst whom she finds herself, as she has done when faced with any new cultural situation. This mental opposition again allows her to examine the culture laid out before her—and the options for identification that exist—but also puts her in a position of antagonism to the one place that has occupied her mind as an ending point for her journey of displacement. In *The Heart of a Woman*, Angelou describes herself in relation to the story of Brer Rabbit, a long-enduring symbol of African-American survival. When her coworkers at a Cairo newspaper suggest she move her desk to an empty library supposedly for the sake of learning Arabic, Angelou relates the story of Brer Rabbit and the Briar Patch, identifying herself as Brer Rabbit and characterising the Egyptians as the man who threatens Brer Rabbit with the “worst thing” (*Heart*, 277). In this case, it is the library’s volumes of English text—a familiar sight from her American upbringing—that represent the niche (the “worst thing”) in which Angelou is most comfortable. As her world of books sheltered Angelou from white racism and oppression as a child in Stamps and a young adult in San Francisco, it also buffers her from prejudicial treatment of another sort in
Africa. This African versus American usage of the tale is ironic, given that the man opposing Brer Rabbit generally represents the white oppression of African Americans. Here, Angelou pinpoints the Africans of her promised land as nearly synonymous with the oppression she knew in America, though for different reasons. She recognises that the geographic place she had dreamed of is not without imperfections as a possible home.

Despite these instances of conflict in Egypt, Angelou reverses her lifelong pattern of wary examination upon reaching Ghana. For the first time, she throws herself into the society and culture of Africa—trying, it would seem, to make Africa embrace her. The Ghanian society, however, reacts to her with the same indifference of the Stamps community years earlier: “It closed in around us, as a real mother embraces a stranger’s child. Warmly, but not too familiarly” (*Caged Bird*, 7). She is embraced by a slew of colourful characters, but always as a visiting American of individual interest, and never as an African. As Harold Bloom has rightly noted, “Angelou and her fellow expatriates actively reject their American identities by moving to Africa and embracing Ghana’s leader as their own, but find that they are unable to completely dislodge their association. Eventually—and ironically—each finds the greatest solace in the company of fellow Americans” (2002: 61). Again, Angelou accepts her American identity where she finds it a rarity, just as she had done as a black girl in white San Francisco.

Just as she moved toward accepting her black identity in childhood by finding individual black examples of the independence she so desired, Angelou likewise is eased in the acceptance of her American identity by the African-American examples she encounters and examines in Africa. In this case, however, it is the reminders of an abandoned Black America that tug at her heartstrings and lead her to recognise the
importance of the “American” in her label as an African American. David DuBois, her companion in Egypt, and Julian Mayfield, fellow expatriate in Ghana, offer support to Angelou in the face of mounting difficulty in foreign surroundings. The aid from and reminiscence evoked by these Americans—even as African Americans—helps her realise that abandoning America for Africa does not accomplish her goal of self-knowledge. Rather, she must reconcile the two identifiers within her makeup, as they are perhaps those that most define her place within the society of men.

Angelou’s divorce from Make in some way foreshadows her experience in Ghana while searching for an elusive home. Upon her accepting his offer of marriage, Make declared, “This is the joining of Africa and Africa-America!” (Heart, 141). She marries without any personal knowledge of the African man, accepting the idea of a life with him—“a life beckoning adventure and Africa” (Heart, 140). The eventual failure of this bond suggests the inability for an African America, separated so long ago, to ever fully reunite with the homeland of Africa. Angelou, as a character within her life, fails to recognise this significance at the time, but as author, she prepares her reader for the disappointment she expresses later.

Her final realisation that Africa will not provide a serum for her lifelong restlessness comes at an unexpected point, after she has met with the extended family of her servant boy, Kojo:

I drank and admitted to a boundless envy of those who remained on the continent, out of fortune or perfidy. Their countries had been exploited and their cultures had been discredited by colonialism. Nonetheless, they could reflect through their priests and chiefs on centuries of continuity. . . .I doubted if I, or any Black from the diaspora, could really return to Africa (Travelling Shoes, 76).

Perhaps it is her sheer confusion over the encounter that makes her recognise her inability
to truly flesh with the African culture around her. More likely though, it is the display of familial and cultural continuity that seems so foreign to her patterns of self-inflicted and culturally imposed displacement.

Selwyn Cudjoe suggests that Angelou does, in fact, leave Ghana more African than when she had arrived; saying that her “identification is complete and the link is made” (Lindberg-Seyersted, 76). While her admission of failure in trying to find a perfect Africa might appear to imply her complete failure at assimilation, one must not overlook the fact that African identification is indeed still a significant part of Angelou’s heritage. Her experience in the small village of Keta offers validation of her African identity in some sense. Angelou is recognised as a descendant of Africa and relation of the tribal women, but also lamented as one irrevocably lost from their society. The incident clarifies the boundaries of Angelou’s African and American identities, and leads her to accept both as the final pieces of self in need of adherence. Reflecting on this experience while preparing to return into America, Angelou remarks:

Many years earlier I, or rather someone very like me and certainly related to me, had been taken from Africa by force. This second leave-taking would not be so onerous, for now I knew my people had never completely left Africa. We had sung it in our blues, shouted it in our gospel, and danced the continent in our breakdowns (Travelling Shoes, 208).

She ends her search for personal identity with the knowledge that the nature of her parts makes a single geographic home impossible—her Black skin keeps her from full comfort in a white-controlled America; her femaleness makes her unsuited for a male-dominated Africa; and her American character makes her unable to completely assimilate in Africa despite the attempt. However, though the sum of her parts makes such a physical place of belonging impossible, they also render one unimportant. The bonds of
identification, which hold her being intact, also tie her tightly to the whole of humanity. Thus, Angelou can return to America, and eventually to the South, without feeling the oppression of displacement that plagued her youth. The peace she finds in self-knowledge leads her to identify as a human being above all other things. As Daniel Challenger has rightly put it, “to read Angelou is to hear and see and smell and state and feel a world” (1997: 45).

The language with which Maya Angelou spins her web of prose and poetry affords a palette of immense colour and sensation to shade the images of her experience. Her talent with metaphor and simile leads the reader to find the most satisfying insights into her life in the most abstract of descriptions.

She faithfully includes the sensation of her life rather than simply spelling out her emotional state at any one moment, and one appreciates her detail all the more for the private thoughts stealthily imparted. In *Travelling Shoes*, she illustrates her infatuation with the Ghanaian people—indeed, her anticipation of having come home—by explaining her abstract impression of them:

I was captured by the Ghanaian people. Their skins were the colours of my childhood cravings: peanut butter, licorice, chocolate and caramel (20).

Here, she does not express her belief in Africa as home in an outright manner, yet the mention of her childhood “cravings” is understood as implying not only young Marguerite's sweet tooth, but also adult Maya’s tender cravings for belonging.

One cannot help but note her linguistic style when reading Angelou’s collective works. The choice of words is clearly one of great import for the author, not only for the sake of conveying the correct impression, but also because of her fundamental belief in
the importance of language. At a young age, an inherent love of books and the influence of Bertha Flowers brought her to the understanding that “language is a man’s way of communicating with his fellow man and it is language alone which separates him from the lower animals” (Caged Bird, 95). The importance she places on the power of accurate expression motivates Angelou’s careful word choice and shapes her unique and beautiful style.

The importance of language not only is the force behind Angelou’s works, it is also a fundamental message within them. As that which allows one to communicate with others, language is a defining element of the individual. In relating her journey toward self-identity, Maya Angelou expresses the importance of words in identifying oneself. Particularly in the attention to naming found in her autobiographies, one recognises her message that language is a mode of self-definition.

Across the six volumes of her life, her name changes numerous times. She begins with the given name of Marguerite Johnson, and as her personality and company change, she moves through the monikers My, Maya, Rita, Ritie, and Maya Angelos, eventually settling on Maya Angelou. The singular importance of her name becomes clear in Caged Bird, when she resorts to violence after being misnamed by an employer, Mrs. Cullinan. Dolly Aimee McPherson clarifies the importance of the name to Angelou as a “symbol of her tentative uniqueness; where Maya is wholly unsure of her identity, the very wording of her name sometimes stands as the only certainty she has regarding herself” (1989: 30). Being misnamed by another implies that she is not understood or recognised as an individual, and Angelou does not stand for being renamed without her permission. Thus, she alone controls her developing individualism. She gives this same respect and
freedom to her son in allowing him to choose his own name. Though she gives him the name Clyde as an infant, he prefers Guy, and Angelou respects this preference religiously. For Angelou, her name is—even in its changing form—a defining element of which she is sure, and a base upon which she might build her personal identity.

Angelou is also careful to respect the linguistic diversity of the characters in her autobiography, giving credence to the idea that she sees language as defining individuals. She painstakingly preserves her mother’s jive talk and the scatology of her “erring” father. Her attention to spoken conversation also reflects the insight that written language is not enough to express oneself fully. “For Angelou,” says McPherson, “the mission of autobiography is bound up with the magic of the spoken word and the oral tradition” (1989: 156). Again, the early lessons of Bertha Flowers ring out through Angelou’s works: “Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning” (Caged Bird, 95). The combination of written line and spoken word reaches the pinnacle of individual expression to which Angelou aspires in her daily life.

For Angelou, the significance of language is not only as self-defining, but also the external conveyance of that self-definition. It is not enough to name oneself and one’s personality; one must also impart that self-image correctly to the outside world in order for it to be recognised and accepted as real. Angelou’s interest in dictionaries displays her great preoccupation with being correctly understood. During the international journeys of Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas, she obtains a dictionary at every stop, learning enough of the local language to express herself as needed. She sees language as the link between humans, and wants always to link herself
to those around her. Her early love of Shakespeare, who was scandalous in his crossing of colour lines, reflects Angelou’s belief in the power of words to transcend human differences. In her childish manner, she forgives herself the love of a white man by concluding, “After all, he had been dead so long it couldn't matter to anyone any more” what race he had been” (Caged Bird, 14). Translated through the eyes of the adult Angelou, the sentiment implies a hope, a belief that her messages of individual importance and self-acceptance will be carried colour-blind through the language of her autobiography.

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