CHAPTER-I
INTRODUCTION

Since 1945, autobiography is one of the richest, most revealing modes of black expression in present-day America. The date refers, of course, to the publication of Black Boy. Its distribution to over 325,000 members of the Book-of-the-Month Club and its enthusiastic critical reception were a landmark in literary history. Even more powerfully than with Native Son, Wright caught the consciousness of America at the war’s end, compelling it to experience through his memory and imagination the pain, deprivation, and triumph of will of his young Mississippi self. One of his severer critics, however, was W.E.B. Du Bois, whose very different notions of autobiography had been expressed five years earlier in Dusk of Dawn. Both books have revealing subtitles. An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept reflects Du Bois’ willing surrender of a purely personal chronicle, just as A Record of Childhood and Youth reminds Wrights readers that Black Boy is not, after all, a novel but a version of actual events. By example and precept, Du Bois and Wright have helped to define the nature of black autobiography which in the last forty-odd years has come to mirror, criticise, and create wider and wider areas of black life and culture. In the generations since these epochal works, nearly every segment of black life has found a voice through the art of personal history. Male and female, the young and the very old, educated and illiterate, revolutionary and conformist, novelist and singer, scholar and sharecropper, expatriate and ghetto-dweller, have sought, like Du Bois, to repossess their social and historical identities or, like Wright, to dramatise by fictional techniques the truth of their recreated lives. As both history and literature, autobiography has served the expressive aims of many diverse talents. The result is a cultural achievement vastly extending and enriching the tradition Du Bois and
Wright themselves inherited from Langston Hughes, Ida Wells Barnett, James Weldon Johnson, Booker T. Washington, and the nineteenth-century slave narrators. The sixties and seventies masterworks of this outpouring are well known, for they have found their way via paperback into the libraries and classrooms, the drugstores and supermarkets of the nation. The autobiographies of Claude Brown, James Baldwin, Malcolm X, W.E.B. Du Bois, Dick Gregory, Maya Angelou, Eldridge Cleaver, George Jackson, Angela Davis, Billie Holiday, and Nate Shaw (Ned Cobb often outsold the most popular white autobiographies at home and abroad. In the struggle for personal, political, and cultural independence, these and other autobiographies are playing a major role in the communications network linking the black writer to his other audiences. These narratives also articulate emerging forms of personal identity which pose important new issues for social scientists and philosophers of personality, race, and culture.

Because black autobiography is a powerful force in and a characteristic form of contemporary culture, it has attracted a growing number of critics and commentators. These come at the subject from several perspectives, historical and ideological, literary and philosophical, sociological and psychological. This diversity attests to the genre’s complexity, the difficulties in defining its varieties, and the mines of information and insight contained. Historians, black and white, have perhaps been slower than others to extend their investigations of contemporary black life through autobiography as C.H. Nichols and John Blassingame have done with slavery and slave narratives. The necessity of checking generalisations about black history against the recorded experiences of individual men and women should now be plain, given the controversial examples of Ulrich Phillips, Stanley Elkins, and Daniel Moyaniham. Yet even sensitive
scientists like E. Franklin Frazier, St. Clair Drake, and Lee Rainwater and historians like John Hope Franklin and Kenneth Stampp either shied away from autobiographies or treated them in terms of explicit content, without adequate consideration of language, style, or the psychological aspects of these intimate documents. All autobiography, in fact, communicates on several levels at once; it is simultaneously private history, artful story, and rich outpouring of psychic energies. Perhaps understandably, the literary approach to black lives has provided to date more perceptive readings, since close attention to style and language often alerts the literary critic to basic attributes the historian might miss. Confirmation of this may be found in two recent full-length studies by Sidonie Smith and Stephen Butterfield, both of which greatly extend and update Rebecca Chalmers Barton’s pioneer work. Shorter general essays by John Blassingame, Michael G. Cooke, and Roger Rosenblatt, as well as specific studies of authors and texts by Houston A. Baker, Warner Berthoff, George E. Kent, David Levin, and Carol Ohmann, among others, illuminate from various angles a burgeoning literature. The sons and daughters of Du Bois and Wright are beginning to receive the careful appreciation their works demand as deliberate creations.

By its protean nature autobiography escapes formal assumptions and prescriptions, for as James Olney has pointed out, each self and hence each life-history reflects “an unrepeated and unrepeatable being” (1972: 21).

Autobiography holds a position of priority, indeed many would say preeminence, among the narrative traditions of black America. African Americans had been dictating and writing first-person accounts of their lives for almost a century before the first black American novel appeared in 1853. It is significant that this novel, William Wells
Brown’s *Clotel*, was subtitled *A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States* and was authored by a man who had made his initial literary fame as a fugitive slave autobiographer. Ever since, the history of African American narrative has been informed by a call-and-response relationship between autobiography and its successor, the novel. Not until the modern era would the African American novel begin to match the rhetorical sophistication and social impact of autobiography. The number of important twentieth-century African American novels that read like or are presented as autobiographies confirms a recent black critic’s contention that “ours is an extraordinarily self-reflexive tradition” (1993: 1). The idea of the African American narrative tradition as patterned by a call-and-response formula is set forth in Robert B. Stepto, *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979). Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has emphasised the self-reflexivity of African American literature in both *Figures in Black: Words, Signs and the “Racial” Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), and *The Signifying Monkey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

It was the eighteenth-century slave narrator who first sang into print the “long black song” (Houston A. Baker, 1972) of black America’s quest for freedom. Since then African American autobiography has testified to the ceaseless commitment of people of colour to realise the promise of their American birthright and to articulate their achievements as individuals and as persons of African descent. Perhaps more than any other literary form in black American letters, autobiography has been recognised and celebrated since its inception as a powerful means of addressing and altering socio-political as well as cultural realities in the United States. Nineteenth-century abolitionists sponsored the publication of the narratives of escaped slaves out of a conviction that first-
person accounts of those victimised by and yet triumphant over slavery would mobilise white readers more profoundly than any other kind of antislavery discourse. A similar belief in modern black American autobiography’s potential to liberate white readers from racial prejudice, ignorance, and fear led Rebecca Chalmers Barton to publish *Witnesses for Freedom: Negro Americans in Autobiography* in 1948, the first book-length scholarly study of African American (or for that matter any form of American) autobiography. It was the narratives of self-styled black revolutionaries in the 1960s and early 1970s that compelled the American academy to reconsider widespread assumptions about literature’s transcendent relationship to social struggle. Since then, the fact that the antebellum slave narrative still receives more critical attention than any other subgenre of American autobiography points up the persistence of the conviction that black life-writing speaks powerfully to America’s need to confront its history if it is ever to change it.

Since Barton’s pioneering book, students and critics of African American autobiography have argued, with increasing emphasis and sophistication in the past twenty years, that this genre deserves to be regarded as a phenomenon of literary significance in its own right, in addition to its import as a social document. Described in terms of the three constituent elements of the word autobiography—*autos* (self), *bios* (life) and *graphe* (writing)—the recent history of readerly and scholarly interest in African American autobiography pivots on a shift from a traditional focus on the *bios* of the author, from whose example valuable insights about history and personal conduct might be gleaned, to investigations of the *autos* and *graphe* represented in and by the text. No doubt the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s and 1970s,
which posed profound questions about the kind of identity African Americans wished to create for themselves in the postcolonial era, spurred the concern with selfhood and modes of identification that reoriented so much African American autobiography criticism in the 1970s. The realisation that selfhood is itself constituted by language, along with a post-structuralist wariness of granting any text—especially autobiography—the authority of an unmediated representation of a life or a self, has contributed to the insistence in the 1980s and 1990s on an interrogation of the modes of writing adopted by black autobiographers. To comprehend the rhetorical choices and dilemmas that have faced black autobiographers, scholars and critics have recently begun the most extensive excavation of the history of the genre ever attempted. A notable result of this effort has been the creation of new editions of texts that had been long forgotten or facilely dismissed as inauthentic or subliterary. The recovery and republication of such texts as Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Zora Neale Hurston’s *Dust Tracks on a Road* enable readers to reexamine what black writers actually wrote in a context informed by the best biographical, historical and critical scholarship that has ever been brought to bear on African American autobiography. It may well be that criticism’s determination to reclaim the words of black autobiographers will lead in turn to enhanced study of their lives, their times, and their sense of themselves.

Along with this wide-ranging intellectual reconnaissance of their field, scholars and critics of African American autobiography have become increasingly engaged in rethinking the methods by which they do criticism. More than a little effort has gone into the task of demonstrating that autobiographies such as the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* are works deserving of a high rank
in the canon of American literature. But a countervailing trend in criticism has raised questions about the wisdom of evaluating black American autobiographies according to standard assumptions about how life, self, and writing interact in the tradition of Western autobiography. Much of the criticism of African American autobiography has thus been devoted to fashioning new, culturally specific ways of analysing and judging texts. As a consequence, this criticism has not only reconstructed the viability of the study of black American autobiography as a discipline in and of itself but also has played a leading role in the deconstruction of myths that assume a universal Western standard by which all autobiographies could be measured. The doors opened by scholars and critics of African American autobiography have seen the arrival of students of women’s Native American, Hispanic, and Third World life-writing, each with a significant contribution to the burgeoning field of autobiography studies. Given these developments in African American autobiography study, it seems useful to reflect on Black women’s contribution to the genre. As Joanne M. Broxton has rightly noted,

As black American women, we are born into a mystic sisterhood, and we live our lives within a magic circle, a realm of shared language, reference, and allusion within a veil of our blackness and our femaleness. We have been as invisible to the dominant culture as rain, we have been knowers, but we have not been known. This paradox is central to what I suggest we call the Afra-American experience (1989: 4).

The black woman’s participation in the American autobiographical genre begins with “Belinda, or the Cruelty of Men Whose Faces Were Like the Moon” (1787), a short narrative petitioning the New York legislature for reparations. This “as told to” account reflects an African woman’s shock at being taken while at prayer and sold into slavery: “Even when she, in a sacred grove, with each hand in that of a tender parent, was paying her devotion to the great Orisha who made all things, an armed band of white men,
driving many of her countrymen in chains, rushed into the hallowed shades!” (June 1787), “Belinda” records, therefore, not just the physical aspects of the capture in West Africa, and the dreaded “middle passage,” but the complete disruption of the narrator’s emotional and spiritual life and the corresponding loss of her sense of place, both physical and metaphysical. For the black woman in American autobiography, the literary act has been, more often than not, an attempt to regain that sense of place in the New World.

In America, the African woman met the problem of appropriating a new language as her own; she became an American. In the words of Belinda’s narrative, “She learned to catch the ideas, marked by sounds of language, only to know her doom was slavery, from which death alone was to emancipate her” (June 1787). “Belinda” reveals one black woman’s early attempts to own her words, her freedom, and most assuredly, her own image. In order to restore God’s power in her life after she was abducted to America, the African woman had to refashion the language she was forced to learn. In the movement from the spoken word to a written petition for reparations, “Belinda” crosses from the private sphere into a public arena to take a political position as spokesperson for millions of transported Africans.

Alice Walker raises a pertinent question. “What did it mean for a Black woman to be an artist in our grandmothers’ time? And in our great-grandmothers’ day? It is a question with an answer cruel enough to stop the blood” (1983: 234). Black women have been carriers of tradition, and values of care, concern, nurturance, protection, and, most important, the survival of the race. W.E.B. Du Bois spoke of the black man as a seventh son of a seventh son, gifted with a veil he could see out of but which others could not see.
into. For the black woman, there is a veil within a veil, a realm of shared knowledge communicated from generation to generation, both through literature and the oral tradition. Education in black womanhood begins in infancy with lullabies, nursery rhymes, and children’s games. This education intensifies during adolescence when older black women initiate younger ones in their secret recipes, sayings, and the ways and wisdom of holding a man (for example, “If you got a good man, hold on, and watch out for your friends, cause they’re the ones”). Motherhood can be a rite of passage, a vehicle for a new identity, as it was in 1861 for Harriet A. Jacobs in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, or in 1966 for Maya Angelou in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Others, like Zora Neale Hurston and Era Bell Thompson, suffered what the critic Margaret Homans has called “mantraphobia,” the fear of becoming what their mothers had been (1983: 3).

As Henry Louis Gates has observed, perhaps somewhat shortsightedly, “Literary works configure into a tradition not because of some mystical collective unconscious determined by the biology of race or gender, but because writers read other writers and ground their representations of experience in models of language provided largely by other writers to whom they feel akin [emphasis mine]. It is through this mode of literary revision, amply evident in the texts themselves—in formal echoes, recast metaphors, even in parody—that a ‘tradition’ emerges and identifies itself” (1988: xviii). Gates’s point about literary forms is well taken, but not all the texts in the literary tradition of black American women were written down. In the words of Temma Kaplan, “Often in the most oppressive situations, it is the memories of mothers handed down through the daughters that keeps a community together. The mother tongue is not just the words or
even the array of cultural symbols available to a people to resist its tormentors. The mother tongue is the oral tradition” (1988: 23). Indeed, this “unwritten literature” and the juxtaposition of literary and oral forms create a linguistic vitality that informs written literature on many levels. Black women autobiographers are grounded in a chosen kinship with their literary antecedents from blueswomen and evangelists to the works of the founding fathers, both black and white. Like the blues, most autobiographies by black Americans, male and female, tend to have a dominant internal strategy of action rather than contemplation. And, like the blues singer, the autobiographer incorporates communal values into the performance of the autobiographical act, sometimes rising to function as the “point of consciousness” of her people. Thus black women writers are joined together by forces both tangible and real, no more mystical than Du Bois’s veiled seventh son of the seventh son, and insist on their own terms. For while “mysticism” cannot define a tradition, there are unwritten texts and subtexts that black women bring to the reading or creation of written literature. This is not to assert that those born outside the “magic circle” of the black and female “world of love and ritual” are forever locked outside the text. For the text is accessible to whoever would first establish its proper cultural context, thus gaining access to a sphere of privileged (and valuable) knowledge—which was often what Toni Morrison has called “discredited knowledge” (1985: 342). The critic who is not a black woman must simply work harder to see the black woman at the centre of her own (written) experience. From this understanding, and a close reading of important literary antecedents, the tradition unfolds and defines itself.

Until very recently, women’s autobiography has not been treated with much sophisticated literary analysis. The pace of development of critical literature for
autobiography as a genre did not begin to quicken until the 1960s, and there was little adequate treatment of black literature as a tradition until the 1970s. Two books published in the 1970s helped define black autobiographical tradition and provide some notice of works by women. In 1974, Stephen Butterfield’s *Black Autobiography in America* demonstrated the parallel development of the slave narrative with colonial and early federal autobiographies, journals, and diaries, and noted the probable influence of the founding fathers on the slave narrators’ use of Christian rhetoric. Butterfield also mentioned black women’s autobiography as a “high course of literary interest different from one pursued by males,” but ultimately he failed to define the “high course of literary interest” in any way” (1974: 49). Also in 1974, Sidonie Smith’s *Where I’m Bound* traced the thematic and structural patterns established in slave narratives, which recur in subsequent autobiographies. Smith recognised the need for a volume of criticism on the autobiography of black women and treated Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* as an example of autobiography used as a vehicle for growth into “self-conscious black womanhood,” yet her focus is on the “black version” of Benjamin Franklin’s well-known formula, a formula that has appealed primarily to men” (1974: 121-125).

By the 1980s, the autobiography of black American women had begun to win the critical attention it merits. The critic James Olney saw this “sign of the critical/cultural times” as paradigmatic of increased interest in the genre as well as the “literary enfranchisement of the black woman.” Writing in 1980, Olney observed:

If black autobiography is a paradigm, the history of Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is a paradigm of a paradigm. Until fairly recently, black writing in general was barely mentioned as literature—if mentioned at all it was usually in some other context—and until very recently, autobiography received the same treatment. Moreover, women writers have not always been given due consideration as makers of
literature. But here we have an autobiography by a black woman, published in the last decade (1970), that already has its own critical literature. Is this to be attributed solely to the undoubted quality of Maya Angelou’s book? Surely not. And here is the most striking sign of the critical/cultural times: her autobiography was Maya Angelou’s first book. . . We can only conclude that something like full literary enfranchisement has been won by black writers, women writers, and autobiography itself (1980: 15-16).

This enfranchisement has been demonstrated by the literary flowering of black women writing autobiography, fiction, and poetry as well as literature and cultural history. Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Paula Giddings, Nikki Giovanni, and Angela Davis have become familiar to both white and black Americans. Therefore the black woman autobiographer (and in this case, the critic) arrives in not only a literary renaissance of the study of autobiography, but a renaissance of black women writing.

The 1988 Schomburg Library of Black Women Writers of the Nineteenth Century includes about twenty nineteenth-century narratives, along with informative introductions that supply both the critical and cultural contexts for the reading of these works within a larger tradition of black women writing. William Andrews’s gender-balanced writing on black American autobiography is among the most inclusive in its treatment of the works of women. This is especially true of To Tell a Free Story, easily the most comprehensive work on black American autobiography. The study of black women’s participation in the literary genre of autobiography reveals much about the ways in which the experience of racial and sexual difference influences the development of identity and the selection of language within a given narrative. Joanne M. Baxton’s Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within a Tradition views the autobiography of black American women as an attempt to define a life work retrospectively and as a form of symbolic memory that evokes the black woman’s deepest consciousness. Black women’s
autobiography is also an occasion for viewing the individual in relation to those others with whom she shares emotional, philosophical and spiritual affinities, as well as political realities. The present study acknowledges “the need to adjust critical focus from individual text to social context to appropriate conceptual framework—and back to the single text again” (1982: 24), as Albert E. Stone has rightly pointed. Additionally, the present study requires each individual text to be read in relation to others within the tradition of black women writing autobiography.

The participation of black American women in the written autobiographical genre includes different subgenres: slave narrative, travelogue, reminiscence, historical memoir, and modern autobiography. A redefinition of the genre of black American autobiography includes the images of women as well as their memoirs, reminiscences, diaries, and journals. This is a corrective to both black and feminist literary criticism that places the black woman at the centre of critical discourse and her own literary experience, instead of at the margins, where she has been too often found.

Black women created vital and sometimes hybrid forms, such as the spiritual autobiography/travelogue, travelogue/adventure story, and slave narrative/memoir, as they grappled with the challenges of freedom and the problem of attaining a public voice. These early works are represented by two examples of confessional spiritual autobiographies, *The Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee* (1849) and *Gifts of Power: The Journals of Rebecca Cox Jackson* (written between 1830 and 1864 and published in 1981); Elizabeth Keckley’s *Behind the Scenes: or thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House* (1868); and by Susie King Taylor’s *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp with the U.S. 33rd Colored Troops* (1902). Additionally, Harriet’s,
Moses of Her People (1869) and Narrative of Sojourner Truth (1878) were works of women William Andrews has called “inheritors of a black and female autobiographical tradition of activism founded on a commitment to religious faith, human rights and women’s struggles” (1989: 11).

The problems faced by a well-educated and extremely literate nineteenth-century black woman as she attempts to find a public voice were many. Charlotte Forton Grimke used a private autobiographical form, the diary, for recording the growth of her mind and as a tool for restoration and self-healing.

Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells, the posthumously published historical and personal memoir of a well-known journalist and anti-lynching activist does much to establish continuity in black female autobiographical tradition, for this autobiography has distinct characteristics that are common to both nineteenth-century narratives and modern autobiographies by black American women. Wells’s autobiographical consciousness moderates between the form of the confessional narrative and the historical memoir, permitting her to discuss not only her public but her private duty. Wells requires this dual form in order to demonstrate her development as a political activist and as an outraged mother.

Zora Neale Hurston and Era Bell Thompson represent the first generation of black and female autobiographers who did not continually come into contact with former slaves; their works turn away from the restrictions and limitations of the slave narrative and extend the quest for a dignified and self-defining identity to include a search for personal fulfillment. As formally literary enterprises Dust Tracks on a Road and American Daughter vary in coherence, wholeness, orderliness, and artistic achievement,
as individual works in any genre will do. But in the development of black women’s autobiography is their shared bonding and conformity to a “female” narrative mode—Era Bell Thompson’s narrative of isolation and transcendence and Zora Neale Hurston’s narrative of vision and power.

The archetypal patterns and narrative concerns established in early autobiographies renew themselves in contemporary works by black American women, Maya Angelou, being the most representative. Like Era Bell Thompson and Zora Neale Hurston, Angelou speaks with the triple consciousness of the *American Daughter*. She knows who she is, where she has come from, and what the source of her strength has been. She finds the place to recreate the self—the place Zora Neale Era Bell Hurston and Thompson and all those who had gone before had been searching for.

(i)

“All my work, my life, everything I do is about survival, not just bare, awful, plodding survival, but survival with grace and faith. While one may encounter many defeats, one must not be defeated”.

-- May Angelou (1990: 11)

Authoress, poet, playwright, editor, songwriter, singer, teacher, dancer, in the words of one critic, Maya Angelou has touched more bases in her career than her contemporaries. Yet, all these categories fail to reflect the scope of her life and the magnitude of her achievements. Self-described as “six foot, black and female” (1985: 9), her reach embraces both writing and performing arts. Angelou is, in sundry ways, larger than life. Blessed with a mellifluous southern accent, a voice caressingly seductive yet strong, this artful conversationalist has come a long way from Stamps, Arkansas, where she was raised by her grandmother, and from the years she spent in silence, between the

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ages of eight and thirteen, traumatised by the murder of the man who raped her. Of pain and disappointment, Maya Angelou has known more than most, but she remains a well-spring of strength and integrity. More than a mere survivor, she has defeated the demons of her past and her personal insecurities to produce a body of work that is both intensely personal and embarrassingly universal.

“You’re going to be famous”, Bellie Holiday told Maya Angelou in 1958, “but it won’t be for singing” (Black Women in America, Vol I. 1993). The first part of the prophecy, of course, was fulfilled. The second part, in the most superficial sense, was true as well. Angelou’s fame did not grow from the nightclub singing she was then doing to support herself and her son. Yet in another sense, Ballie Holiday was wrong. Since she first put pen to paper, ever since Maya Angelou has been singing.

She is a poet and author. She is a playwright. She is an actress, producer and director. She is a singer and a teacher and speaker. She is a civil right activist. She is a mother and grandmother. But most of all, she is survivor she has survived abuse and racism.

Growing up in a small town in Arkansas, Maya Angelou learned about poverty and racism at a very early age. People often thought less of her because of the colour of her skin. It took many more years before she had enough self-confidence to use her gifts.

Today, Maya Angelou is known and respected around the world. Her books and poems are read by millions. She has entertained children and has been celebrated by Presidents. Most of her work is about growing up as a African-American child in the United States and about how she feels about being an African American today.
Maya Angelou also writes and speaks about the challenges all people face, no matter what their backgrounds. In an interview printed in *Smithsonian Magazine* in April 2003, she said that no matter how bad things seem “somehow morning comes, and we get up and continue on” (2006: 7).

Maya Angelou was born Marguerite Ann Johnson on April 4, 1928, in St. Louis, Missouri. Her parents divorced when she was three years old, and Marguerite and her brother, Bailey, were sent to live with their grandmother. Their father placed the children on a train bound for Stamps, Arkansas. A tag attached to Marguerite’s wrist instructed that she and Bailey were to be delivered to their grandmother, Mrs. Annie Henderson.

Marguerite’s grandmother was strict but very caring. The children loved their grandmother, whom they called “Momma”, and felt welcome in her home from the start. Momma instructed the children to have good manners, to be respectful of adults, and to have faith in God. Their uncle Willie, who also lived with Momma, was another source of comfort. He believed strongly in education and always encouraged the children to learn.

Despite the warmth of her new home, Marguerite felt abandoned by the parents. It was a feeling that would haunt her throughout her childhood. Her brother, Bailey, was her best friend and the only person who could understand her feelings of rejection.

Marguerite also found acceptance and understanding in the pages of books. In her readings, the little girl discovered characters with whom she could identify and writers who seemed to be speaking just to her. She enjoyed the work of black writers such as Langston Hughes and Paul Laurence Dunbar. She also read Rudyard Kipling, and Charles Dickins, “They were my friends,” she said of these authors (Moore, Lucinda:75).
Marguerite’s childhood difficulties were tied not only to her family problems. She was also dealing with the same intense racial discrimination experienced by all black people in the South. At the time, Jim Crow Laws separated black and white people under a social and legal structure known as segregation. Black people were not treated equally or even fairly in much of the country. In the South, racism was particularly strong. This was the land where slavery had its roots and where lynchings were committed all too often.

In Stamps, there were two sides of the town – the black side and the white side. Black and white people went to different schools, different stores, they even walked along different roads. Momma ran the Wm. Johnson General Merchandise Store, the only general store in the black section of Stamps. This was the place where Marguerite lived and spent most of the time.

Stamps, Arkansas, was a difficult town for African-American people to live in. It was extremely segregated and black people lived in a part of town that was much poorer than the area where white people lived. Marguerite and Bailey sometimes had to travel into the white part of town to buy fresh meat to eat. This always filled Marguerite with fear. She had heard stories about the Ku Klux Klan, a group of white men who terrorised African Americans and sometimes killed them. In spite of this fear, Marguerite felt loved and protected by her grandmother while she lived in Stamps.

One afternoon, a former sheriff named Mr. Steward visited Momma’s store, he told the family that a black man had bothered a white woman. He warned them that Uncle Willie might receive a visit from members of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). Years later, Marguerite recalled the terror she felt. “Even after the slow drag of years, I
remember the sense of fear which filled my mouth with hot, dry air and made my body light,” she wrote (1970: 18). Uncle Willie hadn’t done anything wrong, but he was still in danger. If members of the KKK were looking to attack a black man, it wouldn’t matter which one they found. Anyone in the wrong place at the wrong time could be killed. Uncle Willie hid in a bin used to hold onions and potatoes. Throughout the long, agonising night, the family listened to Uncle Willie’s fearful moans from inside the bin. The KKK never came calling that night. Looking back, however, Marguerite still believes that if they had come to the store, “They would have surely found Uncle Willie and just as surely lynched him” (1970: 26).

Marguerite and her family had very few dealings with whites. Many years later, she recalled

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 dead 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 (1970: 26).

Although she rarely saw them, Marguerite knew certain things about white people. She knew that white children had a different, easier life – and that they lived by different rules.

Marguerite had her first real brush with discrimination at the movies. A white girl was selling tickets. When Marguerite gave the girl a dime for her ticket, the girl refused to touch the money. Instead, she used a card to push the dime into the change box. Then she refused to give Marguerite or Bailey a ticket. She wouldn’t even speak to them. She just flucked her hand in the direction of the theatre entrance. It was the first time, Marguerite realised she was being treated badly because of the colour of her skin. She
decided at that moment she would boycott the movies. This would be Marguerite’s first act as a Civil Right Activist. It would not be her last.

For the five years that Marguerite and Barley lived in Stamps, they did not hear anything from their parents except for getting Christmas gifts from them one year. Momma told them that their parents lived in “a heaven called California, where . . . they could have all the oranges they could eat. And the sun shone all the time” (1970: 52). Marguerite later wrote, “I was sure that wasn’t so. I couldn’t believe that our mother would laugh and eat oranges in the sunshine without her children” (1970: 23). In fact, Marguerite had convinced herself that her mother was dead: “I could cry anytime I wanted by picturing my mother lying in her coffin” (1970: 23) she recalled years later. The little girl was amazed - and hurt - to receive Christmas presents from her parents in 1934. It was proof that her parents were alive – and that they hadn’t bothered to contact her before.

No matter how bad she felt, there was one person whose love Marguerite never doubted. Her brother Bailey always protected her and made her feel wanted. Years later, she wrote about her feelings for Bailey:

Of all the needs (there are none imaginary) a lonely child has, the one that must be satisfied, if there is going to be hope and a hope of wholeness, is the unshaking need for an unshakable god. My pretty Black brother was my king clom come (1970: 23).

She also comforted herself by turning to books. Marguerite and Bailey attended the Lafayette County Training School where she studied hard. She especially enjoyed reading books by Edgar Allen Poe, William Shakespeare, and the African-American poet Langston Hughes. Once, when Marguerite and Bailey wanted to perform a piece of literature for Momma, they chose some lines for a play by Shakespeare. But they soon
changed their minds and memorised a poem by James Weldon Johnson, an African-American writer, instead. They were afraid Momma would disapprove of William Shakespeare because he was white.

When Marguerite was seven, her father showed up in Stamps and announced that he was taking Marguerite and Bailey back to St. Louis, Missouri, to see their mother. Marguerite did not want to go, but she had no choice. Shortly after they arrived in St. Louis, Marguerite’s father left her and Bailey with their mother and her boyfriend, Mr. Freeman. When Marguerite first saw her mother, she thought she’d discovered why she and Bailey had been sent away. “She was too beautiful to have children” (1970: 60), Marguerite remembered thinking. A few days later, their father left without explanation. Once again, Marguerite felt betrayed and abandoned.

For several months, Bailey and Marguerite stayed with their mother’s family, the Baxters. The family was a tough and rowdy bunch – the opposite of Momma and Uncle Willie. Grandmother Baxter was a pale-skinned woman who spoke with a German accent and commanded respect. The six Baxter children, including Marguerite’s mother Vivian, were known for being mean and quick-tempered.

Marguerite didn’t see her mother much. Sometimes the children met Vivian at a tavern, “While we sat on the stiff wooden booths, mother would dance alone in front of us to music from the [jukebox]”, Marguerite later wrote. “I loved her most at these times. She was like a pretty kite that floated just above my head” (1970: 65).

While her home life in St. Louis was unusual at best, Marguerite found some sense of balance in school. Uncle Willie and Momma’s strictness about studying had paid off. “We were moved up a grade because our teachers thought that we country
children would make our classmates feel inferior – and we did,” (1970: 63), Marguerite later explained.

At first, Mr. Freeman seemed harmless, but not long after Marguerite and Bailey moved in, he began to abuse Marguerite. One morning when no one was home, Mr. Freeman sexually abused Marguerite. Afterward, he threatened the little girl. He said that if she ever told anyone what happened, he would kill Bailey.

Marguerite was scared and confused. She didn’t say anything to her brother, and there was no one else to tell. Bailey had an active social life, but Marguerite hadn’t made any friends in St. Louis. The books she checked out from the library were Marguerite’s only company.

Freeman had moved out of the house, but Marguerite was still too scared to tell her mother what was wrong. Eventually the little girl shared her terrible secret with the brother. At Freeman’s trial, Marguerite had to tell her version of what Freeman had done to her. Freeman was found guilty and sentenced to a year in jail, but he was later released without serving his full time. A few days after the trial, his body was found in an alley. He had been kicked to death. The news hit Marguerite like a hurricane. She was horrified. She thought her testimony was the reason he had been killed. She blamed herself for Freeman’s death. She believed that her words in court had caused him to die: she began to worry that if she spoke again, someone else might die.

For about five years, Marguerite didn’t speak to anyone except Bailey. For a few weeks, the Baxter family overlooked Marguerite’s strange, self-induced condition. When the doctor said Marguerite had healed her physically, the family began to see her silence as a sign of disrespect. They punished the little girl and tried to get her to speak by
hitting her. Marguerite refused. Frustrated by her behaviour, Vivian sent Marguerite and Bailey back to Stamps. Marguerite was deeply wounded, but her loss would soon be repaid many times over. In silence, the voiceless girl would discover the power of words. She would also find a rare ability to understand the rhythm and meaning of life.

The quiet of Stamps was exactly what Marguerite needed. At home with Momma and Uncle Willie, she found some peace. Everyone in the community accepted her silence as a sign of her “tender-hearted” nature (1970: 92). No one pushed her to speak. Bailey was the only person Marguerite communicated with at all.

Ever since Marguerite stopped speaking, she had become more enchanted with language. She read as much as she could. She memorised her favourite poems. Like a photographer captures a scene, she took the words in and held them in her mind like a picture. While she walked alone through the dusty streets of Stamps or sat quietly and unnoticed in the shadow of the store, Marguerite would pull up the poems. She would play the words of Shakespeare, Dunbar and others, over and over to keep herself company.

Marguerite also started writing when she returned to Stamps. Every day the young girl filled a journal with essays and poetry. It was a safe place to express the things she wasn’t willing to say out loud. The hurt of abuse and abandonment wounded her, but writing gave Marguerite a way to begin to heal. She dreamed that one day her poems would be published and read aloud. For a black girl in the South, that dream had little chance of becoming a reality.

Marguerite remained alone in her silence until a woman in the community helped her find her voice again. Her name was Bertha Flowers. “She was one of the few
gentlewomen I have ever known,” Marguerite said later, “and has remained throughout my life the measure of what a human being can be” (1970: 93). She was the most sophisticated African-American woman Marguerite had ever met. Bertha encouraged Marguerite’s love of reading, but also taught her the importance of using her voice. She gave Marguerite books to read and pushed her to read them loud. In this way, Marguerite gained the confidence to speak.

Mrs. Flowers spoke to Marguerite about the power of the spoken word. She commended the young girl for reading, but added that reading alone wasn’t good enough. “Words means more than what is set down on paper,” she explained. “It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning” (1970: 98).

Mrs. Flowers read to Marguerite from *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens. Marguerite had read the story before. When she heard it read aloud, however, she wondered if the words could possibly be the same. When Mrs. Flowers finished, she asked Marguerite if she liked the story. The child broke her silence with a simple reply. “Yes ma’am,” she said. Years later, Marguerite reflected on her response. “It was the least I could do, but it was the most also” (1970:100).

At a time when Marguerite was regaining her voice and her confidence, several cruel racist incidents made it impossible for her and Boiley to remain in Stamps.

In 1940, when Marguerite was twelve years old, she was excited about her graduation from eighth grade. She was one of the best students in the class, and she felt the whole world was out there for her to learn about and explore. The days leading up to the ceremony at Lafayette Country Training School were filled with excitement and pride. As she sat in the audience on graduation day, however Marguerite’s happy feelings
were nearly shattered. Mr. Edward Donleavy, a white school official from Texakana, got up to speak. He told the audience all about how the white students at central school would be future, inventors, artists, and scientists. Then he went on to praise the athleticism of the boys at Marguerite’s school. These boys, Donleavy suggested, could try to be the next athletic heroes like boxer Joe Louis or Olympus gold medal winner Jesse Owens, Donleavy didn’t mention the Lafayette girls at all. “The man’s dead words fell like bricks around the auditorium and too many settled in my belly,” (1970: 179). Marguerite remembered. The words were like poison to the people in the audience. It was at this moment that Marguarite really began to understand what it meant to be African-American in the United States in the 1940s. No matter how smart she was or how hard she worked, it seemed no one believed that. African-American people could be successful and achieve great things.

The message behind Donleavy’s words was clear: Black people could never hope to be anything more than maids, farmers, or athletes. “It was brutal to be young and already trained to sit quietly and listen to charges brought against my colour with no chance of defence,” (1970: 180), Marguerite later recalled.

Later in the ceremony, Marguerite’s classmate Henry Reed delivered his valedictorian speech. Then he did something unexpected. He began to sing the poem “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” by James Weldon Johnson. It was a song Marguerite had sung many, many times, but this time, she really heard the words – and so did the others in the room: “The tears that slipped down many faces were not wiped away in shame,” Marguerite noticed. “We were on top again. As always, again. We survived,” (1970: 184), she thought with a sense of pride.

The words of Dickens and Dunbar helped Marguerite survive her childhood heartbreak and reclaim her voice. The words of James Weldon Johnson helped the black community survive the ignorance and harshness of a racist society. Nevertheless, an ugly pattern was becoming clear to the young girl. Time after time white people would knock black people down. Time after time, black people would pick themselves up. Then, one year after her graduation, Marguerite’s will to pick herself up again was sorely tested.

Because of the Jim Crow Laws, there were separate dentists for black and white people. The closest black dentist was twenty-five miles (40 kilometres) away, however, and thirteen-year-old Marguerite had a terrible toothache. Momma decided to take Marguerite to Dr. Lincoln; the white dentist owed her a favour. During the Great Depression ten years before, Momma had lent Dr. Lincoln money. She thought the dentist would return the act of kindness.

Momma was in for a rude awakening. Dr. Lincoln refused to treat Marguerite. “I’d rather stick my hand in a dog’s mouth,” (1970: 189) he said. Marguerite was hurt, and Momma was angry. There was nothing they could do, however, except take comfort from each other.

In the summer of 1941, 16 year-old Bailey came into his grandmother’s store looking shaken. He had just returned from an errand to the white part of town where he had witnessed a black man’s body being pulled out of the lake. Bailey suspected that members of the KKK had killed the man and dumped him in the water. That incident was the last straw. Momma feared for Bailey’s safety. Marguerite’s older brother had developed into a self-confident young man with a sharp tongue. In the South, a black man like Bailey was in danger of meeting the same fate as the man in the lake. Within a
few weeks, the children were headed to Los Angeles, California, where their mother now lived.

Marguerite was nervous about seeing her mother again. Vivian was nervous, too. These shared emotions helped mother and daughter connect and begin to form a loving relationship. Soon after Marguerite and Bailey arrived in California, their mother married Daddy Clidell. Clidell was a simple, good and honest man. He was the first father figure Marguerite ever knew. In early 1942, the family settled in San Francisco in a 14-room home that they shared with a series of boarders.

Marguerite enrolled herself at an all-girl’s high school near her home. Because of her good grades in Stamps, Marguerite was moved up a grade in school. She was not happy, though. The girls were together and more prejudiced than she was used to. Many of the black girls were like Marguerite and had just moved from the South. Unlike Marguerite, “They strutted with an aura of invincibility, and . . . they absolutely intimidated the white girls and those Black and Mexican students who had no shield of fearlessness” (1970: 243). Within a few weeks, Vivian transferred Marguerite to another school.

For the first semester, Marguerite was one of only three black students in the new school. For the first time in her life, she was not the brightest student. “The white students, she found, had better vocabularies and less fear in the classroom;” she later recalled, “even if they were wrong they were wrong aggressively, while I had to be certain about all my facts before I dared to call attention to myself” (1970: 243).

When she was 14, Marguerite received a scholarship to attend night classes at college. She enrolled in drama and dance classes, which would provide future career
opportunities. Her drama experience would also come into play when she found her ultimate calling as a writer. Marguerite’s drama training surely strengthened her ability to make language come alive.

In 1943, when she was 15, Marguerite’s father asked her to spend the summer in San Diego with him and his girlfriend, Dolores. A few weeks into the visit, Daddy Bailey planned a car trip to Mexico. He was crossing the border to buy groceries. When Daddy asked Marguerite to join him, she jumped at the chance.

Dolores was jealous that Bailey had taken Marguerite to Mexico instead of her. As soon as they returned, Dolores started a fight. “Bailey, you’ve let your children come between us,” she said (1970: 243). The two argued until Bailey finally stormed out.

One morning, Marguerite woke to find her car surrounded by a group of teenagers. They were watching her through the windows. The faces were a mix of white, black, and Mexican. Marguerite could see they were laughing and talking but she couldn’t hear their words. She prayed their laughter wasn’t directed at her. When Marguerite opened her door, any worries she had fell away. The group immediately accepted her. “After a month the thinking processes had so changed that I was hardly recognisable to myself,” she later recalled. “The unquestioning acceptance by my peers had dislodged the familiar insecurity” (1970: 254). Here at the junkyard, the colour of one’s skin meant nothing. For the first time, Marguerite experienced the feeling of being accepted as part of a community. Still, after four weeks, she was readily to go home to her mother. Vivian sent Marguerite a train ticket home without question.

Life at home was not as happy for Marguerite as it should have been. Bailey, at age sixteen, was not getting along with his mother and decided to leave home. He had no
idea where he was going, but he let Marguerite know that he could not stay. After Bailey left, Marguerite was so lonely that she felt she had to make a change. At age fifteen, Marguerite decided she wanted to be a conductor on a San Francisco streetcar. She liked the uniforms the female conductors got to wear. Marguerite went to the railway office and asked for a job application. In an interview, she remembered what happened next.

The secretaries in the office laughed at her and she went home in tears:

My mother asked me, ‘Why do you think they wouldn’t give you an application?’ I said, ‘Because I’m [black]’. She asked, ‘Do you want the job?’ I said, ‘yes’ she said, ‘Go get it! I will give you money. Every morning you get down there before the secretaries are there. Take yourself a good book. Now, when lunchtime comes, don’t leave until they leave. But when they leave, you go and give yourself on good lunch. But be back before the secretaries, if you really want that job” (2006: 23).

For three weeks Marguerite had to wait in the office for an application. The secretaries purposely bumped into her as they walked past and called her names, trying to make her go home. Finally, they gave her an application. She filled it out, and within a month she got the job. Marguerite became the first African American streetcar conductor in San Francisco. She spent six months ‘clanking up and down’ the city street.

After six months of work, she decided she was tired of her job. She chose to return to George Washington High School. When Marguerite graduated in August 1945, she was pregnant. She had been involved in a relationship with a boy from her neighbourhood. A few months later her son, Clyde Johnson, was born. Marguerite was only seventeen years old. Her mother and Daddy Clidell wanted to take care of Clyde so Marguerite could go to college, but Marguerite wanted to try to make it on her own.

Between 1945 and her fairly short marriage to Enistasious Angelos in 1982, Angelou struggled to maintain her independence and support her son. After renting a room and hiring a babysitter, Marguerite took just about any job she could find. She
worked as a cook at a restaurant, but soon realised that the life of a cook was not the life for her. Taking Clyde with her, she moved to San Diego and because a waitress in a nightclub, then a chauffer and salesperson. Her life was lonely and difficult, but she still had her books, and always found time for reading. She became interested in great Russian writers like Leo Tolstoy and the playwright Maxim Gorky. But nothing helped her loneliness, so she decided to go home. This time, “home’ meant Stamps, Arkanas, and Momma.

Unfortunately, Stamps was just as racist a town as Marguerite remembered, she could not stay for long in a town filled with so much prejudice. Her life seemed destined for failure as each job eventually failed or she fell in with unsavoury men and rescued herself by returning to her mother. Back in San Francisco and raising her three year old son, she took two part-time jobs.

What little free time she had she spent at a local record store, she listened to music. The store owner noticed how much she enjoyed music and offered her a job working in the store. It was here that she met Tosh Angelos, a Greek sailor (a white) who introduced her to jazz, an exciting style of music that is played by musicians by who often make up rhythms, melodies, and beats as they play. In her third autobiography, *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Getting’ Merry Like Christmas*, she describes her three-year marriage and subsequent separation. She needed to find a job; despite the fact that she had never performed before, except at her drama school, and had very little training, she got a job as a dancer at a nightclub. She did so well that she was hired at another nightclub in San Francisco called, The Purple Onion. The Purple Onion strongly suggested that she adopt a more theatrical name that captured the feel of her Calypso
dance performances. Up to that point she went by the name “Marguerite Johnson” or “Rita”, but changed her professional name to Maya Angelou (‘Maya’ – the name Bailey always called her, ‘Angelo’, which was Tosh’s last name). The club owners dropped the s, added a u, and pronounced it an-gel-oo. She was now Maya Angelou.

She soon became a part of a new world of African-American artists, dancers, singers, actors and performers. For the first time, her creative life and her working life overlapped. In 1952 she won a scholarship and training in African dance with dancer Pearl Primus of Trinidad. She took singing lessons, employed a drama coach and later studied modern dance with Martha Graham. The dance team “Al and Rita” she co-created with choreographer Alvin Ailey combined elements of modern dance, ballet, and West African dance. Then, in 1953, something even more thrilling happened. A popular Broadway show called New Faces of 1953 came to San Francisco and Maya was offered a part in the productions. Finally she secured a part in a travelling production of Du Bose Haywood’s folk drama Porgy and Bess. She travelled internationally with the troupe for a year, Porgy and Bess played to sold-out audiences in 22 nations of Europe and Africa. Everywhere Maya went, she took a grammar book with her. She learned the languages of different countries quickly, including French, Spanish, Italian and Arabic. She travelled internationally with the troop for a year until her son’s skin ailment required her return. Guilt about their separation made her vow that whenever she travelled again, so would he.

Maya kept her promise. For the next few years, mother and son lived in California, New York, Ohio, and Hawaii as Maya pursued singing jobs in various nightclubs. As Clyde regained his confidence in his relationship with his mother he
became more independent. He was just 10 years old when he announced that he was changing his name to Guy.

Maya and her son settled in Los Angeles in 1956. It was perfect timing. Maya had achieved great success as a singer and could have had a brilliant career. However, she knew that singing was not her true calling. Maya adored words and language. She had always kept a journal filled with her poems and songs. Until this point in her life, she had always thought of writing as just a hobby. It had never occurred to her that it could be her career.

Events in the 1960s began to shape Angelou’s career as a writer, social activist, and multi-talented woman. John Oliver Killens, a respected novelist in the 1960s, read some of Angelou’s work and deemed that she had talent but that is also needed work. He precipitated her move to Brooklyn, New York, for contact with the Harlem Writers Guild, a group that included African American novelists Paule Marshall and Rosa Guy. Angelou continued her singing for income as she endured the group’s sharp critiques about her play One Love, One Life. Angelou heard Dr. Martin Luther King speak in Harlem trying to raise money for the southern Christian Leadership Conference, the organisation he and others founded to coordinate their civil rights work. Inspired, Angelou developed a successful revue as a fund-raiser, which led to her appointment as the northern coordinator for the organisation. As she worked on the civil rights movement in America, Maya became increasingly concerned about the rights of people all over the world. The anti-apartheid freedom movement was just one of the other human rights causes Maya supported. In New York the same year, 1960, Angelou met and married the South African Freedom Fighter Vasumzi Make; performed in the French
playwright Jean Genet’s play *The Blacks*, and moved with her son and husband to Cairo, Egypt. There she took employment with an English newsweekly, although she was inexperienced and had to teach herself about journalism. After her son’s graduation from high school in Cairo, Angelou and Guy (who had renamed himself) left Egypt for Ghana, West Africa.

Although she was making a life for herself in Africa, including learning several of its languages and working as an assistant administrator at the University of Ghana, Angelou continued her activism. On the day of Dr. King’s march on Washington, she and other American blacks living in Ghana staged a supportive march to the American embassy. She also met Malcolm X in Ghana and returned to the United States in 1965 to work in his new organisation, but he was assassinated two days after her return. Back home, in characteristic fashion, Angelou embraced several artistic tasks that would eventually result in writing, becoming the focus of a multifaceted, energetic woman. In 1968, for example, she wrote *Black, Blues, Black*, ten one-hour programs for National Educational Television. Her friends, including the renowned novelist and essayist James Baldwin, encouraged her to write her life’s story. Beginning her writing career in the 1970s, Angelou joined a chorus of African American women – Toni Morrison and Toni Cade Bambara, among them – who were publishing their first works to reach a wide audience in that decade. Random house brought out *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, the first instalment in Angelou’s autobiographical series. Maya’s groundbreaking book exposed a way of life in the Deep South that most people did not know existed.

The decade of the 1970s was extraordinarily busy for Angelou with major writing projects and acting. Three volumes of autobiography, three books of poetry, and her
screenplay for *Georgia, Georgia* was published. Additionally, Angelou was nominated for a Tony Award for supporting actress in the play *Look Away* and nominated for an Emmy for her portrayal of Kunte Kinte’s grandmother in Alex Haley’s television mini series *Roots*.

In 1973, Angelou married Paul de Feu, a British–born carpenter and remodeler, and moved to Sonoma, California with him. They later separated and returned to the southern United States in 1981, where she accepted the first lifetime Reynolds Professorship of American Studies at Wake Forest University, in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

In 1993, she recited her poem on the *Pulse of Morning* at the inauguration of President Bill Clinton, becoming the first poet to make an inaugural recitation since Robert Frost at John F. Kennedy’s inauguration, in 1961. Since the 1990s, Angelou has actively participated in the lecture circuit.

Angelou campaigned for the Democratic party in 2008 Presidential primaries, giving her public support to Senator Hillary Clinton. In the run up to the January Democratic primary in South Carolina, the Clinton campaign ran ads featuring Angelou’s endorsement, attempting to rally support in the Black community; but Barack Obama won the South primary, finishing 29 points ahead of Clinton and taking 80% of the Black vote. When Clinton’s campaign ended, Angelou put her support behind Senator Barack Obama, who won the election and became the First African American President of the United States. She stated, “we are growing up beyond the idiocies of racism and sexism”. In 2009, Angelou campaigned for the same-sex marriage bill in New York State.
Angelou was the first African American women to direct a major motion picture, *Down in the Delta*, at the age of seventy.

Public recognition at the highest level began to pour in for Angelou’s inspirational work. President Gerald R. Ford appointed her to the American Revolution Bicentennial Council in 1975, and President Jimmy Carter named her to the National Commission in 1977. In 1976, a year after the appointment from President Ford, the Ladies Home Journal named Maya Angelou Woman of the Year in Communications. In 1992, in London, she received a special tribute by a children’s society that named their new facility for her, the Maya Angelou Child Protection Team and Family Centre. Perhaps the Capstone of recognition came in the form of Angelou being commissioned to compose and to read a poem for President William Clinton’s inauguration in 1993.

Among many other prestigious award, the Spingard Medal, the highest honour the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured people (NAACP) awards, was given to Angelou in 1994. In 1995, Angelou’s publishing company, Bantam Books, recognised her for having the longest-running record (two years) on The New York Times Paperback Non-fiction Bestseller List. In 1998, she was inducted into the National Women’s Hall of Fame. She has served on two Presidential committees, and was awarded the National Medal of Arts in 2000, the Lincoln Medal in 2008, and the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2011. Musician Ben Harper has honoured Angelou with his song “I’ll Rise”, which include words from her poem, “Still I Rise”. She has been awarded over thirty honorary degrees.

Angelou speaks six languages and has taught and lectured at several universities. She has taught at the University of Ghana, the University of California (Los Angeles) and
the University of Kansas (as writer-in-residence), and currently holds a lifetime chair as Z. Smith Reynolds Professor of American Studies at Wake Forest University.

A member of a number of prominent associations, such as the Directors Guild of America, she has also served on the advisory board of the Women’s Prison Association, and on the National Commission on the Observance of International Women’s Year and the American Revolution Bicentennial Council.

Angelou has also been honoured by foundations, receiving a Yale University Fellowship in 1970 and the enviable Rockefeller Foundation Scholarship in 1975. In 1982, at the age of fifty four, she was named Reynolds Professor of American Studies at Wake forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Two years later, the new governor, James B. Hunt, appointed her to the board of the North Carolina Arts Council.

Performance in the arts characterised Angelou’s activities before she came to national prominence through publishing her autobiographical series and poetry. Her talent for performance became an valuable adjunct in the creation of poetry, but even more in its performance. In addition to writing poems, Angelou has been a primary force in sustaining poetry as an oral art form. Drawing on her ability as an actress and the power for her deep, enthralling voice, she performs programs of poetry ranging from the nineteenth-century work of Paul Laurence Dunbar to contemporary poets. She is, like Sonia Sanchez and Nikki Giovanni, a performance artists, but unlike them, she offers programs of poetry that are not limited to her own work, along with the inspiration of her own experiences. She effectively commands the stage, employing all of her majestic height, and mesmerises audiences who fill auditoriums to capacity.
Like Langston Hughes’s work, Angelou’s poetry is mostly free of obscure symbols, and it appeals widely to a general audience. It is anchored by African American culture, particularly its music and history and its spirituals and linguistic expressiveness. Most of her poems are direct, the language is accessible, and brevity is a consistent quality. Many of her poems, like “Phenomenal Woman” and “Still I Rise”, seem written with oral performance in mind.

Angelou’s first published book of poetry, *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water ‘Fore I Diiie* (1971), anticipates the volumes that follow in its language, rhythmic rhyming, predominance of lyric forms, attention to black women, and emphasis on male and female relationships. The eighteen socially and politically concentrated poems in the second section of *Just Give Me a Cool Drink* are almost a rarity in Angelou’s later volumes. Their thematic distinctiveness is perhaps due to the timing of the civil rights era consonant with their composition and publication dates. *And Still I Rise* (1978), Angelou’s third volume of poetry, consists of thirty-two poems in three sections. The poem read for President Clinton’s inauguration, “On the Pulse of Morning”, relies on images of nature and human inclusiveness for its quiet power. In equating the rock, river, and tree with the longevity of earth, they become witnesses to lost worlds and a history of human degradation. Referencing the spiritual “Down by the River Side,” with its line “ain’t gon study war no more”, people are challenged to seek peace as in the old day when unity characterised existence. Inclusive in its roll call of nations, occupations, and the persecuted, the poem pleads to humankind to face history but to embrace a new destiny as if greeting a new day.
With the publications of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou was heralded as a new kind of memorist, one of the first African American women who was able to publicly discuss her personal life. She is highly respected as a spokesperson for Black people and women. Angelou’s work is characterised as autobiographical fiction. She has, however, made a deliberate attempt to challenge the common structure of the autobiography by critiquing, changing, and expanding the genre.

Spanning the first sixteen years of her life, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970), the first in the series, opens with Maya Angelou’s arrival, at the green age of three, in dusty Stamps, Arkansas. Her parents marriage dissolved, Maya and her older brother, Bailey, have been sent across country from their parents home in Long Beach, California, to Momma’s, their paternal grandmother in Stamps. After five years of chores, books, fantasies and escapades with Bailey, Maya rejoins her mother in teeming, gray St. Louis. There she is raped, at eight, by her mother’s lover, who in retaliation is murdered by her uncles. A guilt-ridden terrified and bewildered “woman”, Maya is again sent to Stamps. Upon her graduation from Lafayette Country Training School, at fourteen Maya rejoins her mother, now living in San Francisco. She spends part of one summer at a trailer camp in Southern California with her father and his lover Dolores. When returning with him from a jaunt into Mexico, Maya is stabbed in a quarrel with Dolores. Fearing another murderous reprisal, Maya is unwilling to return to any of her homes. Instead, she seeks refuge in a car junkyard. There “a collage of Negro, Mexican and white” youths initiate her into a redeeming vision of Universal brotherhood—one which Malcolm X could only discover thousands of miles from the United States in
Mecca. She returns to San Francisco, a sobered and self-possessed young woman, challenges the racial bar to be hired as the town’s first black female streetcar conductor. At the end of the book Maya becomes mother to an illegitimate son, the offspring of her “immaculate pregnancy”.

In addition to creating a trenchant account of a girl’s coming-of-age, Angelou’s autobiography also affords insights into the social and political tensions that pervaded much of America during the 1930s.

_I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings_ demonstrates many of the dominant conventions of the autobiography genre. The work has a chronological structure, utilises first person narration, and is focused on personal development and enrichment. However, the book also embraces characteristics from the fiction genre, including dialogue and vivid, sensory descriptions. Readers have also viewed _I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings_ as a _bildungsroman_, the story of a young girl’s growth and maturation. The book follows Angelou’s search for identity and her struggle with sexual abuse, racism and self-acceptance. The story is dominated by strong African-American women—Angelou’s enterprising and pious grandmother, “momma”; the cultured and proud Mrs. Flowers; and Angelou’s resourceful and vivacious mother. As Angelou is shuttled between homes, rootlessness and transformation emerge as dominant motifs in the narrative. Critics have often focused on the correlation between language, speech, and identity in _I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings_, evidenced by Angelou’s suppression and eventual recovery of her own voice. Angelou’s recovery from the trauma following her rape signalled her growing sense of self-acceptance and her discovery of her poetic voice.
Considered the strongest of Angelou’s autobiographical books, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* has garnered critical and commercial success, making Angelou a recognised name in contemporary American literature. Reviewers have praised Angelou’s dynamic prose style, poignant humour, and illumination of the African American consciousness through her portrayal of her own personal experiences. Yet a few educators have asserted that *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is inappropriate for children due to Angelou’s frank depiction of rape, racism, and teen pregnancy, causing the book to be banned in several school libraries. A number of commentators have placed *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* within the tradition of African-American autobiographies, including Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*, Nikki Giovanni’s *Gemini*, and Booker T. Washington’s *Up from Slavery*. Moreover, Angelou’s autobiographical work has been perceived as a logical progression from the work of prominent nineteenth-century African-American authors such as Frederick Douglass.

The second volume, *Gather Together in My Name* (1974), begins in the late 1940s; after the end of the second World War and its negative effects on black lives. It concludes several years later, after Angelou won her own personal war against drugs, prostitution and dependency. Angelou’s negative traits in this volume are intensified by a visit to Stamps, where she and Momma (Annie) Henderson confronted their differing attitudes towards race. These attitudes proved to be irreconcilable.

Much of *Gather Together* treats the issue of mothering. When Angelou became a mother she was still a child, understandably lacking in wisdom and sophistication, without job training or advanced schooling of any sort. Nevertheless, she was able to
survive through trial and error, while at the same time defining herself in terms of being a black woman.

Much of *Gather Together in My Name* charts her various work experiences as she moved from job to job, trying to provide for her son and survive in a hostile economic situation. She was a Creole cook, a dancer, a dishwasher, a barmaid. Frequently these jobs were entangled with her feelings for men who tried to take advantage of her naïveté.

Angelou’s confession that she had been a prostitute, that she had hidden stolen goods, and that she had almost lost her son was difficult to put into world. On the brighter side, however, in the confusion and turmoil that surrounded her, Maya had been learning how to perform professionally for live audiences. Her nightclub performances with R.L. Poole proved her to be a natural dancer; in 1952, at the age of twenty-four, she reportedly won a scholarship to study under Pearl Primus, the Trinidadian choreographer whose 1943 dance creation, “Strange Fruit”, was internationally acclaimed. In “Wouldn’t Take Nothing For My Journey Now” (1993), she tells about her dancing partnership with Aluin Ailey (1933-1989), the great African American performer and choreographer. Ailey brilliantly combined elements of modern dance, ballet, and West African tribal dancing. Angelou and Ailey would dress in skimpy homemade costumes and hire themselves out to the ELKS and the Masons as the team of Al and Rita (Wouldn’t Take Nothing For My Journey Now 95-98). She provides no time frame for their collaboration.

As Angelou became more in demand for her singing and dancing talents, she became more emotionally distraught in knowing that her career was in conflict with her
desire to be an excellent mother. This situation, very familiar to mothers with careers, becomes the major theme of her third volume.

Her next volume, Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas (1976) covers an unhappy stage in Maya’s development. Her dancing career improved, but with it came the anguish and isolation that resulted from being away from her son. She was also separated forever from Momma Henderson, whose death is movingly commemorated in Singin’ and Swingin’.

Maya, now Mrs. Tosh Angelos, was married and divorced in one short unhappy interval. Again on her own, she committed herself to the European and African tour of Porgy and Bess, which lasted almost two years, from 1954 to 1955. She was twenty-eight years old, with a young son whom she left with her mother, Vivian, repeating the history of her own early childhood, when she and Bailey were sent off to Momma Henderson.

Although sending one’s child to stay with his grandmother is not an uncommon solution for career women with children, the decision had unpleasant effects for Maya and Guy. According to Dolly A. McPherson, Angelou’s guilt and her intense love for Guy “over shadow her other experience” (89) in this troubling third volume. At the end, in an attempt to reconcile with her unhappy son, Angelou took him with her for an engagement in Hawaii, pledging to be with him in the future.

The Heart of a Woman (1981) is the volume that signals Angelou’s maturity. She became more certain in her mothering, now that Guy was an adolescent – although there was one near disaster with a street gang when she was performing in Chicago. Still, she
had promised herself to give up major tours and found fulfilment in her New York/Brooklyn environment – as an actress, a writer, and a political organiser.

The fifth volume, *All God’s Children Need Travelling Shoes* (1986), continues its coverage of Angelou’s African journey, from 1962 to 1965, although it was not published until 1986, two decades after she returned to the United States. After Guy’s car accident, stunned and despairing, Angelou settled in Accra, the capital of the West African nation of Ghana. When Guy miraculously recovered, he was able not only to attend classes at the University of Ghana, but also to move toward independence from his mother. Angelou spent the early 1960s in Accra, leaving only to join a theatrical group for a tour of two European cities, Berlin and Venice.

*A Song Flung Up to Heaven* (2002) is the sixth and final book in author Maya Angelou’s series of autobiographies. The 2002 spoken word album by the same name, based on the book, received a Grammy Award for Best Spoken Word Album in 2003. The book, set between 1965 and 1968, begins where Angelou's previous book *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* ends, with Angelou's trip from Accra, Ghana, where she had lived for the past four years, back to the United States. Two “calamitous events” (2002: 61) frame the beginning and end of the book—the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. Angelou describes how she dealt with these events and the sweeping changes in both the country and in her personal life, and how she coped with her return home. The book ends with Angelou at “the threshold of her literary career” (2005: 84) writing the opening lines to her first autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. 
As she had begun to do in *Caged Bird*, and continued throughout her series, Angelou upheld the long tradition of African-American autobiography. At the same time she made a deliberate attempt to challenge the usual structure of the autobiography by critiquing, changing, and expanding the genre. Most reviewers agreed that the book was made up of a series of vignettes. By the time, *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* was written in 2002, sixteen years after her previous autobiography, Angelou had experienced great fame and notoriety as an author and poet. She recited her poem *On the Pulse of Morning* at the inauguration of President Bill Clinton in 1993, becoming the first poet to make an inaugural recitation since Robert Frost at John F. Kennedy’s in 1961. She had become recognized and highly respected as a spokesperson for Blacks and women. She was, as scholar Joanne Braxton has stated, “without a doubt, . . . America’s most visible black woman autobiographer” (1994: 4). She had also become, as reviewer Richard Long stated, “a major autobiographical voice of the time” (2005: 84).

The title of *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* was based upon the same poem, by African American poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar, she based her first autobiography on. Like Angelou’s other autobiographies, the book was greeted with both praise and disappointment, although reviews were generally positive. Reviewers praised Angelou for “the culmination of a unique autobiographical achievement” (2002: 6-14), while others criticised her for coming across as “smug” (2002: 35).

In a 1986 essay, “My Grandson Home at Last,” published in the popular magazine, *Woman’s Day*, Angelou traced the effort to rescue Guy’s son Colin, who had been kidnapped by Guy’s estranged wife. The story, written from his grandmother’s perspective, describes Guy’s pain as a parent and reminds the reader of Maya’s own
anxiety as she tried to recover guy from his own kidnapping by Big Mary Dalton related in the powerful sequence of mother-loss in *Gather Together in My Name*.

The delicate personal essay in *Women’s Day* seems to be the antecedent of two books of prose reflections, what Angelou’s publisher labels on the dust jacket of *Even the Stars Look Lonesome* a “wise book”. *A Wise book*, a collection of informal essays, a series of musings, observations, meditations, or reflections, often interspersed with poetry—each term aptly describes the unconfined genre Angelou has selected for her post-autobiographical writings.

The first of the two, *Wouldn’t Take Nothing for My Journey Now* (1993), is dedicated to Oprah Winfrey. The title is from a Negro spiritual, part of which Angelou sang during the “Icon” interview. “It’s such a great song, you know. It’s a song from slavery. It’s got the most amazing king of spirit”. Then, without a pause, Angelou started to sing: “I’m on my journey now/Mt. Zion . . . And I wouldn’t take nothing. . . For my journey now” (1998: 19).

Although the title suggests that the book will develop the theme of the journey that dominates her autobiographies, the journeys that occur between its pages are more contemplative than narrative reminiscent of traditional Asian poetry or of the kind of short meditations dating back to the *Analects* of the Chinese Philosopher, Confucius (551-479 BC). Whereas the Confucian reflections were told by a male to males, Angelou alters the traditional gender expectations in both books of musings, rendering her advice from a woman’s perspective.

*Wouldn’t Take Nothing for My Journey Now* is a smaller book, consisting of a mere 139 pages. Nonetheless, Angelou manages to say a lot within the scope of the text,
on topics that range from instructions on how to be creative with fabrics to profound issues dealing with death, racism, Christianity, and West African religious beliefs. There are also solid representations of Angelou’s quoted sayings, including the well-known statement: “Human beings are more alike than unalike” (1998: 11).

The book is at its best when it is autobiographical – when its recounts episodes involving Maya’s brother or son or mother or grandmother, or when its presents a separate episode consistent with the Maya character of autobiographies. The section, “New Directions”, for instance, further relates the heroic story from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* about how Annie Henderson saved her family during the Great Depression by selling home-made meat pies to area factory workers. Other segments involving Annie Henderson include a fantasy in which Maya sees, her grandmother standing “thousands of feet up in the air on nothing visible” (74). This exaggerated description of Annie’s physical and spiritual power is reminiscent of similar scenes in *Caged Bird*, although the mystery of Annie’s faith seems less convincing here because it is treated briefly and outside the broader autobiographical framework. In a comparable sketch, Angelou creates an engaging portrait of her Aunt Tee from Los Angeles, an old woman who had spent almost sixty years working for white families and observing the sadness of their lives.

Of the various autobiographical moments in *Wouldn’t Take Nothing for My Journey Now*, the one that seems to sustain itself most effectively is “Extending the Boundaries”. The seven-page story is sufficiently developed to convey a narrative sense; it also gives us a Maya with three-dimensional sophistication of character that we find in *The Heart of a Woman* and *All God’s Children Need Travelling Shoes*. 
Even the Stars Look Lonesome was published in 1997, four years after Journey. It is similar in tone and layout, although the text is six pages longer. The book of reflections candidly discusses her mother Vivian Baxter, her husband Vusumsi Make, her son Guy, and other people prominent in the autobiographies. It also contains excellent discussions about African history, West African art, and aging.

Two of the most enjoyable essays were first, “Art for the Sake of the Soul”, which begins with Lucille Clifton’s “Miss Rosie” and recollects, among other things, an impromptu concert in Morocco that occurred during the original Porgy and Bess tour in the mid 1950s. A dancer and not a singer, Angelou was called on to perform. Unable to offer an operatic rendition, she sang Momma Henderson’s favourite spiritual, “I’m a poor pilgrim of Sorrow,” to the shouting and clapping of the almost five thousand people in the audience. The essay moves from her autobiographical experience to a statement on the universality of art, ending with a strong plea for governmental funding of projects in the arts and in the theatre, a position that Angelou has held for quite sometime.

In a provocative 1955 interview with Ken Kelley of Mother Jones Magazine, she spoke out against conservatives in the government who want to stop funding for the arts: “The conservative right has decided that artists are apart from the people. That’s ridiculous! I mean, at our best the writer, painter, architect, actor, dancer, folk-singer-we are the people”. She advises artists to sing, dance, and perform in public places so that the young do not have to surrender their dreams.

The other recollection in Stars that has tremendous vitality is “Rural Museums – Southern romance”. In Angelou’s view, the museum captured in its orderly presentations “the romance of slavery”, eliminating any real sense of the brutality, the beatings, the
cramped hovels, the exhaustion, the hunger. Missing from the reconstructed scene was “our historical truth” (94, 95), truth being just what a museum should uphold.

Although both these wise books make use of the travel motif, that theme is more central to Even the Stars Looks Lonesome than to its earlier journey titled “Companion Piece”. Angelou gives the reader some priceless glimpses of her self in each of the collections, although the frequent citations of poetry seem out of proportion if what the reader anticipates is an updated array of insights from the woman whose autobiographies have set the standard for length, breadth, and historical relevance.

Angelou’s children’s books belong outside this survey, with the exceptions of Life Doesn’t Frighten Me (1993), an illustrated version of a poem from her most popular volume, And Still I Rise (1978). Life Doesn’t Frighten Me was done in collaboration with artist Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960-1988). Its fear of the outside world is related thematically to Maya’s fear of crosses and white invaders, eloquently depicted in her autobiography, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings. The short text offers a series of negative images – barking dogs, ghosts, and so forth—all softened with the repeated line: “Life doesn’t frighten me at all” (1993: 89). Thus Angelou relegates fear to the dream world.

Her message is an effort to combat the dreadful reality she experienced as a black child in Alabama. It also speaks to the fears of many of today’s African American children; the AIDS threat; guns in the schools; gratuitous rape of the kind that Maya herself endured as a child.
As feminist scholar Maria Lauret has indicated, Angelou and other female writers in the late 1960s and early 1970s used the autobiography to reimagine ways of writing about women’s lives and identities in a male-dominated society. Lauret has made a connection between Angelou’s autobiographies, which Lauret called “fictions of subjectivity” and “feminist first-person narratives”, and fictional first-person narratives (such as *The Women’s Room* by Marilyn French and *The Golden Notebook* by Doris Lessing) written during the same period. Both genres employ the narrator as protagonist and “rely upon the illusion of presence in their mode of signification” (Lauret, 2008: 98). Lauret has also stated that “the formation of female cultural identity” (2008: 97) has been woven into Angelou’s narratives. Angelou has presented herself as a role model for African American women by reconstructing the Black Woman’s image throughout her autobiographies, and has used her many roles, incarnations, and identities to “signify multiple layers of oppression and personal history” (2008: 97). Lauret has viewed Angelou’s themes of the individual’s strength and ability to overcome throughout Angelou’s autobiographies as well (2008: 97).

Author Helton Els has insisted that while Angelou’s original goal was to “tell the truth about the lives of black women”, (John M Miller: 2010), her goal evolved in her later volumes to document the ups and downs of her own life. Els has stated that Angelou’s autobiographies have the same structure: they give a historical overview of the places she was living in at the time and how she coped within the context of a larger white society, as well as the ways that her story played out within that context. Critic Selwyn Cudjoe agreed with Els, and stated that Angelou, especially in her third
autobiography, *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas*, successfully demonstrated “the inviolability of the [African American] personhood” (1950: 8) as she expanded positive interactions with whites. In Angelou’s second volume, *Gather Together in My Name*, Angelou was concerned with what it meant to be a black female in the US, but she focused upon herself at a certain point in the history.

One of the most important themes in Angelou’s autobiographies are “kinship concerns” (1998: 11). African American scholar Dolly McPherson has insisted that Angelou’s concept of family throughout her books must be understood in the light of the way in which she and her older brother were displaced by their parents at the beginning of *Caged Bird* (1990: 14). Motherhood is a “prevailing theme” (1998: 11) in all of Angelou’s autobiographies, specifically her experiences as a single mother, a daughter, and a granddaughter. Lupton believes that Angelou’s plot construction and character development were influenced by this mother/child motif found in the work of Harlem Renaissance poet Jessie Fauset (1998: 11).

Scholar Mary Burgher has stated that black women’s autobiographers like Angelou’s have debunked the stereotypes of African American mothers, of being “breeder and matriarch” (1979: 115) and have presented them as having “a creative and personally fulfilling role” (1979: 15). Scholar Sondra O’Neale agrees, and insists that Angelou’s autobiographies present black women differently than literature had portrayed them up to that time. O’Neale goes on to state that “no Black Woman in the world of Angelou’s books are losers” (1998: 26) and that Angelou herself is the third generation of “brilliantly resourceful females” (1998: 26) who overcame the obstacles of racism and oppression.
Lupton has stated that the one unifying theme that connects all of Angelou’s autobiographies is what she has called “the mother-child pattern” (1999: 131). Angelou describes throughout her books her connection of mother and child—with herself and her son Guy, with herself and her own mother, and with herself and her grandmother. Although Angelou’s grandmother dies early in the series, in *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas*, her third autobiography, Momma is quoted throughout the entire series. Other themes include the absent and/or substitute father, the use of food as a psychosexual symbol, and the use of staring or gazing for dramatic and symbolic effect. They are also related through literary elements such as the ambivalent autobiographical voice, the flexibility of structure to illustrate the disjointedness of life, and Angelou’s commentary on character and theme.

Beginning with *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* Angelou uses the metaphor of a bird struggling to escape its cage described in the Paul Laurence Dunbar poem, “Sympathy”, as a central image throughout all of her autobiographies. Like elements within a prison narrative, the caged bird represents Angelou’s confinement resulting from racism and oppression. This metaphor also invokes the “supposed contradiction of the bird singing in the midst of its struggle” (Richard Long 2005: 35). At least one reviewer criticised Angelou for harbouring “a fanatic hostility expressed toward all white people” (1997: 3). Writer Lyman B. Hagen disagrees, starting that like Angelou’s friend and mentor Longston Hughes, Angelou “explains and illuminates” (1997: 4) the condition of African American in the US, but without alienating her readers. For example, Angelou promotes the importance of hard work; a common theme in slave narratives, throughout all her autobiographies, in order to break the African American stereotype of laziness.
Critic Pierre A. Walker has placed Angelou’s autobiographies in the African American literature tradition of political protest written in the years following the American Civil Rights movement. Walker has emphasised that the unity of Angelou’s autobiographies serves to underscore one of Angelou’s central themes: the injustice of racism and how to fight it. Walker also has stated that Angelou’s biographies, beginning with *Caged Bird* consist of “a sequence of lessons about resisting racist oppression” (1995: 8). This sequence leads Angelou, as the protagonist, from “helpless rage and indignation to forms of subtle resistance, and finally to outright and active protest” (1995: 8) throughout all six of her autobiographies. Hagen states that Angelou changes, in the course of her autobiographies, her views about Black-White relationships and learns to accept different points of views. It is Angelou’s “mental adjustments” (1997: 7) regarding race, and specifically, about white people, that provides Angelou with freedom. He adds that one of Angelou’s “universal themes” (1997: 7) is that humans are more alike than different.

Maya Angelou’s understanding of the human experience and her ability to translate the fears, joys and hopes of people of all creeds has made her the voice that people choose to represent them again and again. Fittingly, Maya was asked to write and read a poem for the 50th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations on June 26, 1995.

The last stanzas of the poem, “A Brave and Startling Truth” (1995), convey the lifetime of wisdom of this great American voice. In Maya’s words, we see the courage and compassion that have been gained through decades of love, loss, tragedy and triumph:
When we come to it
We, this people, on this wayward, floating body
Created on this earth, of this earth
Have the power to fashion for this earth
A climate where every man and every woman
Can live freely without sanctimonious piety
Without crippling fear
When we come to it
We must confess that we are the possible
We are the miraculous, the true wonder of this world
That is when, and only when
We come to it.

William G. Jones, a retired auto worker says:

I saw Maya a few months ago in Minneapolis. She is amazing and I don’t say that lightly. The hall was packed, but she connected with everybody. She made us all smile – it felt like she was talking just to us, one at a time. And when she does that little dance step up there – it’s like she’s twenty instead of eighty. She’s got a gift, a rare gift. People won’t see the likes of her again, not for a long, long time (William G. Jones, “Personal Interview”, April 3, 2008).