CHAPTER-III
GATHER TOGETHER IN MY NAME

“. . . whatever the pain, I do not deny the past”

-- Maya Angelou, *The San Francisco Chronicle*
May 22, 1974

I have been given an adventurous spirit and the ability to forgive myself. The Biblical title of my second autobiographical volume symbolises my belief that many women and men, although they may never admit it, have had similar experiences. Until such time as they too have the need to tell the truth until it hurts, these men and women can gather together in my name and be heard.

-- Maya Angelou, *The Chicago Tribune*
May 30, 1974

In writing *Gather Together in My Name*, I had to scrape off all the awards and honours to deal with those experiences – to admit them all. It was more difficult to write about these experiences in 1973 than it would have been ten years earlier. Yet, if by my revelations I can encourage anybody first to avoid some of thing I experienced; and if they haven’t avoided them, if I can encourage them to forgive themselves, its all worth it.

-- Maya Angelou, *San Jose Mercury News*
June 2, 1974

The success of *Caged Bird* encouraged Angelou to continue her life story. Her second volume, *Gather Together in My Name* (1974), took three-and-a-half years to write. Continuing the saga of adventures in California, taking up from where *Caged Bird* ends. *Gather Together* is a travel story. An apt title for the book could be “Travel with Maya”. Her experiences carry her from San Francisco to Los Angeles to San Diego to Stamps back to San Francisco to Stockton and finally to Oakland, all in a brief time-span.

In these travels, Angelou once more exposes her audience to a varied cast, including a fair share of criminal types. The following questionable operators populate her book: L.D. Tolbrook, a pimp and con-man; Beatrice and Johnnie May, lesbians and prostitutes; Troubadour Martin, a dealer in stolen goods; Big Mary, who kidnaps
Angelou’s son; and a sundry sprinkling of junkies. Angelou skirts the edge of the underworld, but her innocence and openness bring out the good in unsavoury people, and they keep her from personal harm. Her life is actually enriched by her encounters with the fringes of society.

Gather Together in My Name begins in San Francisco shortly after the end of the Second World War. The illusion of racial equality in San Francisco during the war years begins to vanish. With white soldiers reclaiming their lives as civilians, black workers were expected to return to their farms and black military heroes to their ghettos. Angelou’s prefactory observations about race and the job market are intended to place the autobiographer within an historic framework, with her personal economic situation echoing the postwar decline of African American society.

At seventeen Maya, is looking for a job that will bring her recognition, money and independence, but she lacks the skills necessary to achieve these goals in a dominant white economy. Additionally, she believes, as do many young women, that to achieve her own goals she must leave her mother and stepfather, who have supported her, and define a new life for herself and for her two-month-old son. Leaving her family thus creates a double bind for the struggling single mother; she depends on them, but at the same time she wants to be independent.

Gather Together traces Maya’s emergence into the world of work, carefully recounting her pursuit of economic stability as she moves from job to job—from crude cook, to dancer, to prostitute, to fry cook. During the course of the autobiography she sometimes acts irresponsibly, when she endangers the safety of her son who is kidnapped
by a baby-sitter. She also exposes herself to a number of risky relationships with men; a dancer; married man who sells stolen clothes; a vein-scarred drug user.

At the end of *Gather Together*, she is finally saved when her most reliable friend, Troubadour Martin, demonstrates the dangers of drug addiction by walking her through a heroin den. Shocked and repentant, Angelou, in a promise to reclaim her innocence, abandons, her degenerate life and vows to return with her son to her mother’s protection.

Told with beauty and grace, *Gather Together in My Name* soars and sings. Written nearly three decades after the period it portrays the autobiography is a recollection of roughly three years in Angelou’s life. Not afraid to bare her soul and admit to bad judgement, followed by sometimes devastating consequences, Angelou gives readers glimpses into the challenges faced by a seventeen-year-old mother, herself still a child, trying to make her way in the world with her young son.

Written three years after *Caged Bird*, the book “depicts a single mother’s slide down the social ladder into poverty and crime” (1994: 120). As Angelou’s biographer, Mary Jane Lupton states, “she was able to survive through trial and error, while at the same time defining herself in terms of being a black woman” (1998: 6). Angelou states that she wrote the book, in spite of potentially harming the reputation she gained after writing *Caged Bird*, because she wanted to show how she was able to survive in a world where “every door is not only locked, but there are no doorknobs . . . The children need to know you can stumble and fumble and fall, see where you are and get up, forgive yourself, and go on about the business of living your life” (2005: 45). In spite of great difficulty Angelou, as the main character of the book experiences, she remains focused on the book’s themes of “survival with style, finding her true self, and admiration of
literacy” (1997: 86). The book’s title is taken from Matthew 18: 19-20: “Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (King James Version).

Reviewers found merit in the new volume. Phoebe Adams, for example, in The Atlantic, said Gather Together was “excellently written” (1974: 114). The Library Journal reviewer commented that it was “tremendously moving” (1974: 1494) and choice felt that Angelou was a “fine story teller” (1974: 920). A disquieting note, however, was expressed by Selwyn Cudjoe who thought that while Gather Together was well-written, better written than Caged Bird, it does not succeed because, unlike Caged Bird, it lacks “moral weight and an ethical centre,” thus denying it an organising principle and rigour capable of keeping the work together:

If I may be permitted, the incidents of the book appear merely gathered together in the name of Maya Angelou, they are not so organised that they may achieve a complex level of signification. In fact, it is the absence of these qualities which make the work conspicuously weak (1984: 20).

Cudjoe’s criticism seems forced and his opinions are couched in bloated language. “Complex level of signification.” In spite of Cudjoe’s captious comment, a moral centre is present in the novel. As noted, many incidents involve unsavoury characters and even criminal behaviour: lesbians, pimps, prostitution, drugs, love affairs, stolen goods, etc., but poetic justice is eventually rendered and virtue prevails. These people are not winners. However, there may be a moral weakness in that these lifestyles are not roundly condemned but matter-of-factly acknowledged. In this raffish milieu, Angelou serves what some critics have called a picaresque literary figure – a carefree, fun-loving individual – who moves through a disreputable world with good intentioned
determination and emerges stronger for the exposure. The existence of evil does not imply all things are evil nor that it must triumph. In fact, evil does not triumph in *Gather Together*. The innocent Angelou emerges triumphant.

The narrative organisation in *Gather together* follows the format found in *Caged Bird*. The book evolves as a series of interrelated episodes rather than as a single straight-line narrative. Once again, a series of incidents are chronologically tied together to describe Angelou’s quest for survival and identity.

In an interview published in *Black Women Writers at Work* Angelou noted that the title of *Gather Together* has a “biblical origin” (1989: 154). It is a “New Testament injunction for the travailing soul to pray and commune while waiting patiently for deliverance” (1984: 33). As for the motive for writing the unvarnished experiences in *Gather Together*, Angelou has said,

> ... comes from the fact that I saw so many adults lying to so many young people, lying in their teeth, saying ‘you know, when I was young, I never would have done ... why I couldn’t ... I shouldn’t ...’ lying. Young people know when you’re lying; so I thought for all those parents and non-parents alike who have lied about their past, I will tell it (1989: 154).

The underlying deep structure of this statement of motive carries four interesting implications: one is that people – young or old, white or black – are hypocritical. It is proverbial that what people say and what they do more often than not conflict. Kierkeguard, the philosopher and theologian, pointed out that hypocrisy is so deeply ingrained in man’s nature that a man could lose his hypocrisy about as easily as a fish could lose its scales. Angelou should be commended for facing and reporting repugnant situations truthfully. She chooses not to whitewash the real world she encountered. But
she conveys the positive message of hope by proving that an exposure to the dark side need not cause a loss of faith and goodness.

Angelou is also following an old religious custom, described by a theological term – exomologesis – in which a person expresses “complete openness about his life-past and present, followed by important personal changes, with the support and encouragement of other members of the congregations” (1971: 45). Writing *Gather together* when she is in her mid-forties, the Cellini approved age and perspective, and having been frank previously about her life experiences, in *Caged Bird*, Angelou is, nevertheless, worried about public reaction to an even more candid recounting of the adventures of a “reckless” and “foolish” young girl. A strong enough concern existed that Angelou admits to conferring with her son, her mother, and her brother to solicit their comments. She said, “This is what I want to do. I want to say to young people you may encounter many defeats, but you must not be defeated” (1974: 19). Then she read her family salient chapters, and they all expressed unconditional support. Her mother told her, “write it” (1974: 19). Her brother said, “please tell it” (1974: 19). Despite their approval and encouragement, this book was even more painful to write than *Caged Bird*, she says “because it deals with unsavory parts of my past” (1974: 19). But it makes more powerful her message of survival. These events happened when she was in control of her life and the choices were hers. However, providing sustenance for herself and her son led to some of the quick and easy choices.

A third implication is that Angelou wants to anticipate any criticism of her past life. By including unpleasant as well as pleasant incidents, she can head off negative comment from anyone who might be inclined to bring up something unfavourable or
scandalous. “Yah, I knew her when”, someone might say, and thus destroy her credibility. By taking the offensive with full, open disclosure, Angelou stares down her detractors. She gains an edge with her readers and they are more receptive to accepting her material as gospel.

There is finally, a fourth practical reason for her candour: sex sells, as romance novel publishers and tabloid journalists can attest. And there was a desire to meet the initial sales figures of *Caged Bird*. Since Angelou’s descriptions of her experiences as a sometime prostitute and as a short-term brothel operator, as related in this book, are virtually voyeuristic, she distances herself from blatant participation. She manages to maintain for her persona the traditional view that sex and love go together, whether it is in a brothel or in the privacy of one’s own bedroom. Angelou is removed from any stigma that might result from crass participation. She humanises her involvement and realises wrong doing, asking for forgiveness for youthful poor judgement.

*Gather Together*, a chronicle of another segment of the author’s daily travails, is a further journey seeking solutions. It concludes with the inevitable realisation by Angelou that the answers are within herself. As mentioned, *Gather Together* follows the same format as *Caged Bird*: a “Preface” presents the problem and sets the scene. The situation presented finds Maya Angelou, black, female, and an unmarried mother with a two-month old son to support. She is without any funds or job skills. She is 17 years old and has just graduated from high school. The place is San Francisco, and the time is the mid 1940s, just after the end of World War II. During the war years, the mood was upbeat. The law of supply and demand meant that good paying jobs existed for all people, anyone willing to try and learn. There was little talk of prejudice. Now with the end of World
War II, defense plants were shut down and soldiers who had been released from service hanged around “the ghetto corners like forgotten laundry left on a backyard fence” (1984: 3). There had been a lengthy feast but inexorably the famine followed. The job market tightened and easy money dried up. Making a living, honest or otherwise, became a fierce challenge.

Having a young child to care for means that further education may not be feasible for the single parent Angelou. Her mother and stepfather, Daddy Clidell, however, do offer to care for her son if she decides to continue her education in college. But Angelou is concerned and reluctant to relinquish her maternal role. She recalls her childhood and wonders if her mother would really accept responsibility for Clyde (Guy). She ends her prefatory section, as in *Caged Bird*, with reflection: “The mixture of arrogance and insecurity is as volatile as the much-touted alcohol and gasoline. The difference is that with the former there is a long internal burning usually terminating in self-destroying implosion” (5).*

In *Gather Together*, Angelou is still involved with her themes of protest and survival; of protest against prejudice, which shines more lightly upon the male and the white; of the need to survive and raise her son in a world dominated by the “loathsome white”, the mysterious ways of whites continue to disconcert her as they did in *Caged Bird*, reflecting her rural community perceptions. Her mother, grandmother, and her personal experiences all educate her about whites, but do nothing to lessen her aggravation or to develop within her an acceptance of feeling or acting inferior. During this period, she learns that it is white men who ask prostitutes to do “nasty things”.

*Maya Angelou. *Gather Together in My Name* (New York: Random, 1974). All subsequent references are to this edition.*
Furthermore, white folks are vulgar, and white men are sad as lovers” (141). Angelou writes that the examiner for a test she takes for a telephone job is “A silly white woman who probably counted on her toes” (6). Angelou’s own prejudices crop up frequently as conditional responses without consideration of their limitations. Her comments in Gather Together counter her junk yard lessons of Caged Bird. It has to be kept in mind that the books are reflective of a particular period in Angelou’s growth and development. Gather Together covers about four years of youthful maturation.

Angelou did absorb many of her mother’s warnings that enable her to function in the general white world. Angelou, her mother cautioned, should avoid “speaking to whites and especially whitemen” (50), an admonition that echoes what she had learned earlier in Stamps and had reported in Caged Bird: “the less you say to white-folks or even powhitetrash the better” (22). Her mother also warns her that “when a whiteman sees your teeth he thinks he sees your underclo thes” (51). Angelou does find some positive black and white interactive behaviour to report. This presages an eventual acceptance of individual actions. She even expresses tolerance of many things and certainly of all levels of language. One thing Angelou will not tolerate, however, is the use of the word “nigger” under any circumstances. The disparagement implied in the word is deeply ingrained, whether in a rural or urban setting. The prohibition is sometimes lifted in dialectic reporting of black-on-black conversation, but purely for purposes of realism.

A key incident in Gather Together occurs halfway through the book. It is another confrontation scene – a redux of the confrontation scene with Angelou and Mrs. Cullinan; and of Momma and the dentist in Caged Bird. This time, it is a confrontation with a clerk in a general merchandise store in Stamps when Angelou returns to visit Grandmother
Henderson. Southern blacks were still expected to defer to whites at that time and in that place. But when an adult Angelou is again misnamed – “This one’s Margaret or Marjorie or something like that” (76) - this sets Angelou off, and she responds impulsively, impudently and imprudently; “I slap you into the middle of next week if you even dare to open your mouths again” (77).

Angelou’s grandmother learns about the incident from a telephone call and confronts Angelou with an admonition in language characteristic of her background: “... you was downtown showing out” (78). It was a matter of principle, Angelou replies. Momma answers by swinging her hand hard against Angelou’s cheek, saying, “Here’s your principle,” (78), which demonstrates the firm discipline used to ensure the safety to an African-American offspring. But Angelou had wanted to show that her community also had a code of proper behaviour. Momma had lived a long time in a segregated community. She knows the local white thinking and warns Angelou, again in moving, informal, elliptical language that Angelou captures so accurately,

You think ‘cause you’ve been to California these crazy people won’t kill you? You think them lunatic cracker boys won’t try to catch you in the road and violate you? You think because of your all-fired principle some of the men won’t feel like putting their white sheets on and riding over here to stir up trouble? You do, you’re wrong. Ain’t nothing to protect you and us except the Good Lord and some miles (78-79).

In addition to her other qualities, Momma is a practical and prudent person. Angelou’s story shows how dangerous life could be for African Americans. One could get killed in Stamps, Arkansas, for simply “showing out,” just like Emmett Till did in Mississippi for his innocent remark to a sales girl.

The principle that Angelou felt was challenged was that her “personhood” was violated. As Hannah Nelson observes,
The most important thing about black people is that they don’t think they can control anything except their own persons. So everything black people think and do has to be understood as very personal. As a result, the inviolability of the Afro-American’s personhood is so closely guarded that any assault upon his/her person is frequently resisted (1984: 8).

African Americans are often accused of being “too touchy” or “too sensitive” when they react to situations as Angelou did, but the accusers are generally ignorant of the depth of the cultural issue involved. Generally bad treatment and the lack of conventional courtesy is rightly considered a personal affront by the targets but rarely by the perpetrators. This is magnified in interracial settings.

Momma then packs up Angelou’s belongings and Angelou returns to her mother and son in San Francisco. The door is closed in Stamps, Arkansas. Angelou belongs to a wider world and never again sees her grandmother Henderson, but will forever carry Momma’s marks.

As the principle of *Gather Together*, Angelou is still the youthful, high-spirited Marguerite,-- ‘Ritie’ – Johnson. Again writing from the advantage of maturity, Angelou recounts those confused adolescent years of 17 to 19, as she entered the real world, determined to make her own way. These are adolescent years, and Angelou describes some foolish mundane little things she did like wearing too much make up. And she sees herself as a product of “Hollywood upbringing and (her) own romanticism” (27). These are typical, trivial teenage concerns. They are normal considerations as contrasted to the abnormal underworld activities with which she finds herself involved. Her teenage heart and dreams must cope with adult arenas. The difficult task of sustaining independence means compromising her dreams.
Although Angelou briefly flirts with criminal deeds, she finds rationalisation in her need to make a living for her son and herself. She is always aware of being outside society’s norms and admits that during these times she did “drown into the slimy world of mortal sin” (140). She bounces from an “unpleasant pillar to an illegal post” (1974: 114), to use the words of Phoebe Adams in *The Atlantic*, but always as a temporary means to an acceptable end. Angelou does not lose her moral compass and maintains a firm distinction between right and wrong.

What emerges in *Gather Together* is an Angelou who is resourceful, capable and tough-minded. She realises that there is no free lunch and asks no quarter. She will take on any challenge to survive and feels that she can apply her intelligence to any reasonable task. She neither understands nor accepts failure. She will tackle whatever comes her way. A lack of experience in Creolc cooking does not stop her from taking such a job and doing it well. Dance routines she performs with R.L. Poole, although “largely unappreciated” (113) by audiences are nevertheless moderately successful and serve as preparation for future acceptance at the Purple Onion night club. Variety of employment is no barrier to Angelou. She sees opportunity where others might see oppression.

Angelou does not feel that her education ended with graduation from high school. Having been encouraged early in her life to appreciate literature, she continues to read, as she had done since childhood: “Until the gray light entered (her) room” (59). As a result, she becomes a wide reader with an inquisitive mind and a confidence in her own perceptions. Her reading was apparently eclectic and of college calibre: from the poetry of Countee Cullen to the lengthy prose of Russian authors. She refuses to be limited or “Caged”.
At the end of relating an anecdote, Angelou often generalises about her experience, a practice she started in *Caged Bird*. Such is her commentary of self-pity: “Self-Pity in its early stage is as snug as a feather mattress” (17). Her generalisations reflect her mature mind. Their reductionistic quality echoes the pithy maxims popularised by the French writer, La Rochefoucauld. They capture the attention of the reader by both content and form and are homey enough to make the reader comfortable. The familiarity of proverbs, a folklore constituent, allows the message to be old or new, but purely palatable.

In *Gather Together*, Angelou takes special pains to expand on the complex personality of her mother Vivian and how influential she was on the development of Angelou’s attitudes. This is a part of her metamorphosis from the child raised by Grandmother Henderson in narrow confines to the young woman capable of functioning in a larger world. Her mother is down-to-earth, practical and in keeping with tradition is verbally proficient. Inspirational, she advises Maya that “Anything worth doing is worth doing well” (81), and that Angelou should be the best at anything she can get into. Interestingly, she tells her, “Don’t be a funky chippy. Go with class” (84). Her mother cautions her to be on guard because “people will take advantage of you if you let them. Especially Negro women. Everybody, his brother and his dog, think he can walk a road in a coloured woman’s behind (108). Although her mother was kind, indulgent, and generous, she was not lenient nor was she permissive. “Her capacity to enjoy herself was vast and her rages were legendary” (105). Even though Vivian had made lots of money during World War II, she didn’t accrue it without effort. She never wasted her time and studied to obtain diplomas in several areas to suit available employment: “barbering,
cosmetology, ship-fitting, welding”, etc. (110). Her enthusiasm and energy are contagious. And Angelou is cast in the same spirit mould.

As for “Momma”, Angelou finds her still “right-thinking” and still “slow-speaking” (61) on her final visit to Stamps. To Momma, “Christ and the Church are the pillars of her life” (64). To Angelou, these teachings are forever a part of her being, but are not the entirety of her life.

There is no kind word in the book for her father, Bailey Johnson, Sr. She hates his “posturing and cr’ering” (144). But she does treat her brother Bailey. Jr. well. She admires his quick mind and his eloquent voice and dedicates Gather Together to him. He is a product of a common background, one in which their father played no part. Life went on inspite of Bailey, Sr.’s disinterest, and his offspring made of themselves what they could.

Gather Together, although recognised as better written, received less attention than the initial Angelou book, Caged Bird. Many of the incidents in it are rather bizarre. Whereas Caged Bird presents four anecdotes, the graduation ceremony, the boxing match, the breaking of Mrs. Gullian’s China, and the trickster story of Red Leg acknowledged as genuine folklore. Many of the Gather Together characters Angelou meets in her youthful travels inhabit the demimonde, a world not to be admired. Angelou rejects the alternatives explored in Gather Together as an exemplary literary effort, except for one very important thing: style.

Angelou’s knack for noting the similar in the dissimilar – for creating striking similes – is again evident in Gather Together: “looking like death eating a soda cracker” (23) and “crazy as a road lizard” (12). Angelou also weaves in many vivid invented
compounds in her narrative, as she did in *Caged Bird*: “never-could-have-happened land” (63) and “flesh-real and swollen-belly poor” (61). She continues to capture successfully the rhythm and flavour of colloquial language as exemplified by Momma: “You was downtown showing out”. These constructions never interfere with the reading of the book, but definitively delineate realistic characters. The creative metaphors of Angelou colour every page. The critical consensus holds that these “poetic” language devices contribute to a readable and engaging narrative. They stand as evidence of her finely-turned ear and her appreciation of the well-turned phrase.

Angelou uses comedy and humour even when she recounts the anguish of the confrontations she experienced as a child and adolescent. *Gather Together* as well as Angelou’s other narratives includes a share of scatological humour. This folksy form is easily understood by any audience. In *Gather Together*, profanity is fairly extensive, reflecting the tone of the times, post World War II, and the locus “You’re no shitty-ars baby” (89) and “like many weak people they wanted to milk the cow, at the same time denying the smell of bullshit” (48, 49) are but a couple of examples of this colourful language. Again Angelou prefers to be explicit rather than sanitising and thus rendering less realistic the language. She expects her readers to understand the appropriateness of such usage. The overall tone in *Gather Together* avoids truculence. There is still an anger often expressed about whites in commentary that is astringent. But it is not vicious. The spirit and pace of the narrative leaves no time to be vindictive. There are too many worlds to conquer. Angelou is always moving on and maintaining a positive outlook.
Gather Together closes the door on explorations of questionable activities and brings Angelou to the point of describing a respectable, normal home life for herself and her son. She reaches another maturity plateau. The advice of Vivian and Bailey, Jr., who ironically epitomise and embrace street smarts, turn Angelou’s intentions toward wholesome activities. They keep her focused on her themes of survival with style, finding her true self, and admiration of literacy. Gather Together explores the perimeter of the cage but finds its focus in a continuity of purpose.

The Maya of Caged Bird is easily recognisable as a child growing up in rural America whose experiences of abandonment and rape make her as memorable, in her way, as Mark Twain’s adventurous Huckleberry Finn is memorable in his way. The Maya of Gather Together is a different kind of woman, a Maya who has come of age, a survivor whose endurance is representative of a new class of black women. The point of view thus changes from that of an engaging girl to a sexy, willful mother who is the same person but dramatically different. Angelou’s unorthodox altering of the growing up pattern or Bildungsroman by way of a sequel surprised her critics, many of whom never guessed that the author would transform the girl from Stamps into the loose-living mother from California.

Angelou’s deviation from proper conduct was a violation of autobiographical tradition. A black woman who deals with lesbians, hookers and drug addicts, is bound to rock the standards used for centuries in evaluating American and European autobiography. Traditionally, the genre has been subdivided into professions occupied by men: statesmen, educators, soldiers, financiers, church fathers, and the like. Not until the Civil-rights and women’s movements of the 1960s and 1970s did a significant
number of writers challenge, this elitist notion of life telling. Like Ann Moody’s *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968) and Eldridge Cleaver’s *Foul on Ice* (1968), *Gather Together in My Name* is one of several contemporary black texts that reinvent the very notion of autobiographical decorum. They tell it like it is, without obeying the strictures of language and behaviour found in mainstream works.

When she first tries to tell her story, Angelou confessed to her difficulty with point of view. She felt that she was fragmented, that to convey her personality she would have to split herself into two women, one respectable and the other improper, one the autobiographer and the other her seamier self: “I wanted this fictional girl to do all the bad things and I was *Miss Goodie Two shoes*” (Icon 1997), she explained in an interview. She thought she needed to have “a fictional character go along side, I guess in the Margins.” She told her editor, Bob Loqmis about the plan and he said, “Try it” (Icon 1997). But it didn’t work. So her husband Paul encouraged her to reject this split point of view believing that the truth of her experience was real and whole: “Tell it. Because if it happened to black girls it happened to black boys, happened to white girls it happened to white boys. This is true” (“Icon” 1997).

Angelou told Dolly McPherson before *Gather Together* was published, she became increasingly worried about the adverse effect her autobiographical truth—saying might have on her family. Thus, she gathered them together: Bailey, Vivian Baxter, her husband Paul Du Feu and Guy, the name used throughout this companion for her son and read to them the sections on prostitution and drugs. And she said, “I want to read you this. If it hurts you, I won’t put it in”. Each accepted what she had written about her life – Vivian with a joke, Bailey with absolute trust. “My brother said, ‘I love you’. One
thing about you, you don’t lie. I love that”. “As for Guy”, Angelou continued, “He came between me and my husband and just took me and said, “‘You are the great one’” (“Icon” 1997). Her family’s encouragement made it possible for her to present a young black woman’s struggle, tell the truth, even when the truth could possibly cause harm to herself and others.

Like the literary titles of the other four autobiographies, the title *Gather Together in My Name* is elusive, perplexing. It seems to relate, as Sondra O’ Neale argues, to a New Testament passage that calls the “travailing soul to pray and commune” (1984: 33). Although Angelou does not discourage a religious reading, she offers a more specific interpretation, explaining that too many parents lie to their children about the past. She says: “Somebody needs to tell young people, listen, I did this and I did that. I thought, all those parents who lie, and fudge, and evade and avoid could gather together in my name and I would say it” (“Icon” 1997).

Angelou wanted the title, *Gather Together in My Name*, to convey the same point of view inherent in the autobiography – the narrator wanted her gathering of readers to know what had happened to her so that other young people in similar straits could avoid the same pitfalls. It seems, then, that the narrator of Angelou’s most controversial book is gathering a double audience – young people who need direction and older people who need to give it. In her name, the tarnished past will come forth. The truth will be told.

What the narrator achieves in the second volume is a remarkable sense of authenticity. As a straightforward recorder of life, she replaces the smooth chronology of *Caged Bird* for an episodic series of fragments that mirror the kind of discord found in actual life. *Gather Together* has an expanded consciousness that enables the reader to
identify with an African American woman experiencing life among a diverse class of people including prostitutes. Sondra O’Neale writes that Angelou “so painstakingly details the girl’s descent into the brothel that Black women, all women, have enough vicarious example to avoid the trap” (1984: 32).

At least one black woman experiences the kind of salvation that O’Neale is describing. A young woman came to a book signing in Cleveland, Ohio, shortly after *Gather Together* was published. It was a large crowd, and Angelou tried to speak to everyone in turn: “Suddenly there was this girl, black girl, with false nails, badly put on, and I looked up, and she had fake hair hanging down, false eyelashes, and it was 10:30, 11:00 in the morning. On a micro-miniskirt. I said, ‘Hello. And your name?’ She leaned over and she said, ‘I saw you on television. You even give me hope.’” Angelou paused. “if she’s the only person I wrote the book for, it’s all right, because I talked to her” (“Icon” 1997).

As it turns out, the girl in the miniskirt is not the only person Angelou wrote the book for. Despite some negative reviews, and despite some rather unflattering remarks from one television commentator, the Maya of *Gather together in My Name* is an inspiring woman primarily because of what she dares to reveal about herself. Her point of view in this volume can best be described as open or naked—a first person perspective so honest that autobiography becomes personal contact.

Dally A. McPherson argues that the fragmentation of character and plot in *Gather together in My Name* is a merit rather than a flaw, since it artistically reflects the “alienated fragmented nature of Angelou’s life” (1990: 63). The word “fragmentation” is used in this context to convey a sense of incompleteness or disconnection.
Maya’s fragmentation can be observed in any number of her relationships: with her mother, with the women she tries to control with her grandmother, with her lovers. Vivian Baxter, the absent mother of *Caged Bird*, is restored to importance in the second volume. *Gather Together* begins and ends with Maya’s mother. At the start, Maya and her child are living with Vivian and Daddy Clidell, Maya’s stepfather. As a matter of pride, Maya decides to leave and get a job, taking her son Guy with her when the book ends, Maya and Guy intend to return to the protection of Vivian Baxter, following Angelou’s glimpse at the horrors of heroin addiction. In its promised reunion of mother, child, and grandmother, the concluding paragraph directly parallels the ending of *Caged Bird*: Vivian turns out the lights of her house as Maya and her baby fall asleep.

Fragmentation is also a component of her relationships with other women. In *Caged Bird* Maya has one girlfriend, Louise Kendricks. A lonely girl, Louise has the kind of imagination that appealed to Maya. They hold hands, close their eyes, and pretend to be dropping from the sky. Together Maya and Louise “challenge the unknown” (119). The suggestive description of Louise, along with Maya’s concern about being a lesbian, takes a much sharper focus in *Gather Together*. Here there is no sweet Louise. Maya becomes a madam and the women who work for her, Beatrice and Johnnie Mae, are lesbians and prostitutes. The relationships between Maya and her whores are fragmented, built on distrust, controlled by Maya’s desire for money.

Maya is quite aggressive in securing the services of Beatrice and Johnnie Mae. She promotes herself as a madam and persuades the lesbian couple to work as prostitutes in their own small home. Maya does well enough to buy a car and some clothes, but the arrangement disintegrates when Maya arrives late one night and finds the girls working
after hours, in flagrant violation of Maya’s orders. Johnnie Mae threatens to turn Maya over to the police, where she will be jailed for owning an automobile purchased with money earned illegally.

Following the shakedown with Johnnie Mae and Beatrice, Maya gathers Guy and her suitcase, abandons her car at the train station, and goes by train to Stamps, in search of the “protective embrace” of Momma Henderson (61). For a while she works at Momma’s store, although customers are constantly wondering why any woman who left for San Francisco would come back to Stamps. She gets drunk at the Dew Drop Inn with her high school friends. Guy is happy to receive the attention of Momma and Uncle Willie.

During her stay, Maya goes into the white area of town to purchase a simplicity sewing Pattern at the Stamps general Merchandise store only to find that the pattern has to be specially ordered. The day she returns to pick it up is a hot, hot southern day, so hot that Maya’s “thighs scudded like wet rubber” (75). At the store she gets into trouble for talking brazenly to a saleswoman who has blocked her entry. Maya realises that she has become too racially liberated to accept the restrictions of the white community. In a parallel manner, Momma Henderson has remained fearful of white intolerance and continues to adhere to the unspoken rules concerning whites. In a memorable scene, Momma slaps her rebellious grandchild again and again, ordering her to leave Stamps for her own protection and the baby’s. It is the last moment of contact between them.

Although Maya’s outspoken attitudes lead to a termination of their relationship, her grandmother continues to be a reminder of morality and Christian values. In San Francisco, one evening, Maya now working as a prostitute, notices a cook on the
premises, a woman who so reminds her of Annie Henderson that she has to lower her gaze when the servant puts dinner on the table. The cook in the whorehouse represents Momma Henderson’s continuing spiritual influence and reminds the reader of how far Maya has strayed from the teachings of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church of Stamps, Arkansas.

Perhaps Maya’s major source of fragmentation comes from her relationships with men. Priscilla R. Ramsey concludes that Angelou often misinterprets the behaviour of men with whom she is infatuated. Because she becomes involved too quickly, she is “repeatedly hurt by men who are far more experienced than she, who are far more able to see her neediness and exploit it before she is able to see it in herself” (1984-85: 149).

Angelou’s male companions are rarely constructive. While the adult males in Caged Bird are crippled, absent, or abusive, the men in Gather Together are manipulative, unfaithful, or damaged. Early in the second autobiography Maya meets Curly, who gives her first “love party” (18). Overjoyed with the lovemaking, Maya senses maturity and pleasure for the first time. They take Guy to parks and playgrounds. Maya buys Curly an expensive ring on Daddy Clidell’s charge account. Then one night he tells her that his girlfriend has come back from San Diego where she had been working in a shipyard.

In her distress over losing Curly, Maya turns to her brother, who is again her defender, as she had been in Caged Bird. Bailey works for decent pay on an ammunition boat out of San Diego. Promising her two hundred dollars, he persuades her to leave San Francisco and make a new start in San Diego. Meanwhile, Bailey marries a high-school chum named Eunice who, much to his despair, contracts tuberculosis and dies.
Fragmented and incomplete after her death, Bailey has a breakdown, then turns to drugs to ease the emptiness.

Of the men who take advantages of Maya, L. D. Tolbrook is the worst. A married man, he lures Maya into becoming a prostitute for his sake. Professing that he owes money to some hardened criminals, Tolbrook convinces the “innocent” Maya to turn tricks. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the whorehouse scenes is the dialogue. Maya’s co-workers are intelligent women who know the trade. Clara, Maya’s boss, advises further and how to talk and act when she is with a man. Claro promises that if she is good, L. D. (Daddy) will get her a “little white girl,” meaning cocaine. Maya is beginning to suspect, from the way the whores talk, that Daddy is really a pimp, someone who is hiring her out for his own profit. When Maya tells Bailey how she is learning a living, he is furious. Once again Maya’s saviour, Bailey forces her to quit the whorehouse and orders her to warn Tolbrook that her brother Bailey is after him.

The climax of *Gather together in My Name* occurs when an unexpectedly compassionate boyfriend, Troubador Martin, takes Maya, now smoking a lot of marijuana, on an unnerving tour of the underworld of heroin addition. Troub makes her watch while he shoots up, makes her watch as the needle punctures a scab and “rich yellow pus” runs down his arm (180). Maya’s refusal, at Troub’s advice, to do hard drugs marks the end of her irresponsibility and the inauguration of new standards that help safeguard her and her son’s survival.

The end of *Gather Together* gives little indication that someday Maya will be a successful performer, wife, or mother. Deserted by her dancing partner, R. L. Poole, and betrayed by her pimp, L. D. Tolbrook, the best break she receives by the end of the
narrative is to have narrowly escaped heroin addiction. The book closes with an experienced Maya preparing to return to her mother’s protection: “I had no idea what I was going to make of my life, but I had given a promise and found my innocence. I swore I’d never lose it again” (181).

Although the reader may feel jolted by the suddenness of the ending, this sort of high-speed projection into the future is a common element in Angelou’s conclusions. Sondra O’ Neale comments on the “abrupt suspense” and drama with which the central character draws together her story: “in this way dramatic technique not only centralises each work, it also makes the series narrative a collective whole” (1984: 33).

The Maya of Gather together in My Name is a person of potential strength and moral integrity, perhaps even “innocence,” who is struggling against the temptations that the fast world of California is holding before her: sex, money, getting high. Through it all, the narrator is determined to present Maya as honestly as possible, in a way that readers will believe: “young people feel safe with me,” she claims, “because they know I’m not going to lie and I won’t fudge. I’m not going to tell them everything I know, but I will try to make sure that what I say is the truth” (“Icon” 1997).

Three major themes dominate Gather Together – motherhood, clothing and work. The theme of motherhood controls the plot of Gather Together. Maya makes decisions or forms relationships with the constant image of her son before her, as she tries to provide him with a stable environment or console herself when they are separated. Maya’s motherhood is what keeps her connected to the world of responsibility. However, she often falls short in her duties as mother, due to complications in her world
or the enticements of her male friends, who also want time with her. This situation highlights the duality Maya feels throughout the series between mothering and working.

If one were to recall the mother/mother/son still life – Vivian, Maya, and the baby in repose with which Angelou ended *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, this tranquil scene is disrupted in *Gather Together* as the young mother roams the streets of San Francisco looking for a way to survive. In the second volume she inverts the motherhood theme of *Caged Bird*: the little girl who longed for Vivian’s love is now a mother herself, a teenage girl responsible for the nurturing of her son. In so doing, Maya’s mother in *Gather Together* replaces Maya as daughter in *Caged Bird* and the theme of motherhood is at the centre of the rest of the autobiographies in the series.

With the theme of motherhood Angelou engages the reader in a mother/child configuration that is of vital concern for the remaining autobiographies. As Marianne Hirsch argues in another context, African American women writers during the last three decades are one of the few groups who tell the mother’s story and feature the mother in “complex and multiple ways” (1990: 414). In developing the theme of motherhood, Angelou applies the same quality of honesty to her role of mother as she does to her role of prostitute, in fact, the two tend to interconnect in their elements of pain, struggle, imperfection, and loss.

One of the problems any working mother faces is finding child care. Maya needs an adequate sitter to care for Guy while she is working, which means, at least in the case of being a prostitute, all –night–assistance. She finds an excellent sitter in Mother Cleo, a fat woman who likes babies and even takes in white infants, although she charges more for them. Another sitter, acquired after the interlude in Stamps, is Big Mary Dalton an
affectionate woman who lives in Stockton, where Maya takes a job first as a fry cook and then as a prostitute. Big Mary arranges for Guy to live in her house, with Maya taking her son on her day off. After she meets L.D. Tolbrook, though, Maya occasionally forfeits her day off with Guy to be with her boyfriend.

In a powerful treatment of child loss in *Gather Together in My Name*, Maya goes to Big Mary’s house and finds it deserted. A neighbour tells her that Big Mary moved away three days earlier and that she probably went to her brother’s in Bakers field. After a desperate search and a long bus ride, Maya locates Big Mary Dalton and her angry son, whose feelings of abandonment echo her own unhappiness during childhood.

Of the numerous references in *Gather Together* that address Maya’s feeling of inadequacy as a mother, the Big Mary episode is surely one. Guy cries, pulls his mother’s hair, and expresses his fury at being deserted for so long a time. Maya sheds bitter tears and acknowledges her “first guilt” (163). Earlier in the autobiography Maya admits to having ignored her son to such an extent that Big Mary Dalton asks: “Ain’t you got time for him?” (147). She also leaves him alone on the night that Troubadour Martin ushers her to the drug den near the San Francisco docks. These and other instances of maternal conflict or neglect give *Gather Together* a special tension. The tension does not vanish in the volume’s affirmation of “innocence” but continues with lesser or greater gravity throughout the series.

The second theme, clothing, is also of importance in the writings of African American women. Clothing is an indicator of class and character; black women writers often use clothing symbolically, as a kind of second skin or mask. In Paule Marshall’s *Praise song for the Widow* (1984), for example, the heroine is on a cruise ship. The six
suitcases filled with linen dresses and evening bourns become, on both literal and symbolic levels, the excess baggage that keeps her trapped in bourgeois values. Similarly, Jade, the light-skinned model in Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby* (1981), owns a sealskin coat, a rich, black fur that covers her sleek body.

Angelou introduces clothing as a theme on the first page of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Signs*. Her ugly purple frock made a noise “like crepe paper on the back of hearse.” A sign of her humiliation, the dress is also, as Liliane K. Arensberg (1976) observes, symbolic of the themes of death and rebirth that operate in the first autobiography. In *Gather Together in My Name*, however, the clothing theme is less austere. Here Angelou tends to use clothing as a form of deliberate costuming that either covers up or augments her character’s body, often conveying her bad taste and inexperience. Frequently, the way she dresses is determined by men she is involved with.

Similarly, the theme of clothing is also introduced on the first page of *Gather together*, in a description of San Francisco during the Second World War. Black women from the South, who knew only “maid’s uniforms and mammy-made dresses,” changed these garments for men’s work pants and took jobs in the Shipyards. Prostitutes were so busy they didn’t have time to take off their shoes, the narrator remarks in the prologue, foreshadowing Maya’s later work as a prostitute and madam.

Clothes become a tool of the trade when L. D. Tolbrook begs her to “dress her age” in short skirts, ankle socks, and hair ribbons. Teenage attire becomes her identifying feature as a prostitute and her clothing an ironic statement about the theme of innocence that helps structure the book. At the end of the autobiography, Maya regains her “innocence,” lost through her use of drugs, prostitution, and subservience to men and
their fantasies. Other references to clothes also point out the incongruity of her “innocence,” for instance when Troubador Martin stashes stolen clothing in her rooms until Maya’s closets are stuffed with sweaters and skirts; or her buying a too revealing dance costume for her first Poole and Rita performance.

Clothing takes on special significance when she returns to Stamps wearing her city clothing: White, off-the-shoulder peasant blouses and brightly coloured skirts with floral prints. Her high-school friend, L.C. Smith, tells Maya the truth. Everyone is laughing at her for wearing “the very clothes everyone here wants to get rid of” (69). Maya’s reason for going to the white section of Stamps is presumably to change her manner of dress, for she orders a simplicity sewing pattern for a design not available in Stamps. Reading the situation symbolically, simplicity can be associated with innocence. The specific pattern, too complicated for the Stamps General Merchandise store to stock, marks the end of Maya’s simplistic and innocent life in Stamps. Because of her arrogant outburst over a piece of clothing that doesn’t exist, Maya and Guy are finished in Stamps, ordered away for their own good by Annie Henderson.

A third theme, work, is also connected to related ideas in each of the volumes. Recall Maya’s delight in Caged Bird at being hired as the first black streetcar conductor in San Francisco. In Gather Together work is of supreme importance as the narrator persistently searches for a means of survival. Her greatest job disappointment occurs when, about to be inducted as an army recruit, Maya is suddenly rejected because the army learns that she attended the Mission Labour School for two years, a school on the list of the House Un-American Activities Committee. HUAC, a committee created by the authority of the United States Senate, was headed by Senator Joseph McCarthy
(1908-1957). Its business was to uncover Communists among Educators, Entertainers, governmental employees, the Army, the State Department, and anywhere else suspected of sheltering “Reds” or “commies.” The army says “No.” Even though they have no evidence that Maya was ever a Communist sympathiser.

She is more fortunate with other job applications in service or Entertainment businesses: cafeteria worker, cook, prostitute, dancer, and so forth. Food service – short-order cook, waitress, restaurant manager – offers work that Maya feels fairly comfortable with, perhaps because of Annie Henderson’s great success in selling lunches to mill workers in Arkansas during the Depression. Although Maya’s work in a San Francisco dinner is very depressing, she lifts her spirits by listening to jazz: “I let the music wash away the odors and moods of the restaurant” (80). Her restaurant jobs eventually become ways to meet male friends, who, like her jobs, tend to be short-term and unreliable.

Maya loses one decent job as the manager of a small restaurant in Oakland because of her own compassionate personality. Appalled to discover that her boss, Mr. Cain, promotes prize fighting, she becomes hysterical when she sees a small young boxer who looks like Bailey being “whooped” to death. When Maya starts screaming “stop them” and “freak,” she knows her job is over (173-74).

A second category of work in Gather Together, and one that has the greatest impact on her later years, involves the entertainment industry. As an individual or as part of a team, Maya shows promise as a dancer and cabaret singer. In a display of modesty, though, she refuses to dance nude for stage parties, telling R. L. Poole that she won’t have a “bunch of white men to gape at me” (113), Maya learns her routine quickly and incorporates the steps into the Poole and Rita reviews until Poole’s girl-friend returns to
replace Maya as his partner. By the time of the third volume, *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry like Christmas* (1976), Maya’s talent and diligence earns her a solid reputation as a performer, solid enough to be offered the opportunity to dance in George Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*.

A third kind of work in *Gather Together* involves illicit sex. One night in a bar where Maya works as a B-girl, pushing watered-down drinks at inflated prices, she meets two lesbians, Beatrice and Johnnie Mae. As usual, she is suspicious of gay women. Nevertheless, she accepts an invitation to visit them at their house, where she smokes Marijuana for the first time and where, may be because she is high, she concocts a plan to be their business manager or madam while Johnnie Mae and Beatrice turn tricks. In this capacity she makes enough money to buy a car.

While the idea of being a prostitute disgusts Maya at first, she later succumbs to the wishes of L. D. Tolbrook, who begs her to prostitute herself for her him so that he can pay off his debts. Maya is the least popular of the three whores at Clara’s. As Clara warns her, “men don’t want to get married, they just want to trick” (141). Maya dislikes the strong smell of disinfectant but enjoys the way the women talk to each other. The whorehouse scenes contain exactly the kind of material that Angelou was afraid to disclose to the public, fearing that her family would be offended if they knew she had been a prostitute. Nonetheless, the theme of sexuality in *Gather Together* reveals a great deal of honesty and daring on the part of the narrator.

The second volume of her autobiography ends just before she decides to settle down with a man she pictures as an “ideal husband,” who is in fact a heroin addict and gambler. Before it is too late, Angelou learns that she is on the verge of embracing
disaster and defeat. At the end, she regains her innocence through the lessons of a compassionate drug addict:

I had walked the precipice and seen it all; and the critical moment. One man’s generosity pushed me safely away from the edge . . . . I had given a promise and found my innocence. I swore I’d never lose it again (181).

With these words, ready to accept the challenge of life anew, Angelou brings the second volume of her life story to a close.

Throughout *Gather Together*, Angelou’s creation of imagined realities are central to the structural pattern and meaning of the work.

The most resonant incident in the autobiographer’s psychic journey occurs when Angelou undertakes a physical journey to Stamps, Arkansas, fleeing to the emotional security of her childhood home. The return to Stamps by train, setting memories in motion, balances the early desire of the autobiographer to move beyond her immediate home into the larger world. As Angelou moves past the sights, sounds, and smells of the town, memories come back:

In my memory, Stamps is a place of light, shadow, sounds and entrancing odors. The earth smell was pungent, spiced with the odor of cattle manure, the yellowish acid of the ponds and rivers, the deep pots of greens and beans cooking for hours with smoked or cured pork. Flowers added their heavy aroma. And above all, the atmosphere was pressed down with the smell of old fears, and hates, and guilt.

On this hot and moist landscape passions changed with the ferocity of armoured knights colliding . . . I took its being for granted and now, five years later, I was returning” (1990: 70).

For Angelou, then, there is a sense of timelessness in the “Cage” of her youth, not because she sees the place and its inhabitants as human archetypes, but because something of Stamps has remained a part of her. In Stamps, there are no great surprises for Angelou; the new sensations are the old ones, and the travels on the hot Southern road
is the voyager within. Returning and leaving form, therefore, a pattern in *Gather Together* – the pattern of a circuitous journey, a making of peace with the past so that, in retrospect, Stamps seems neither a sentimental haven or a cage.

Angelou’s stay in Stamps ends painfully when she is ordered out of town by her beloved Grandmother Henderson. Before Maya leaves, however, Grandmother Henderson administers a violent, protective reprimand to her grand daughter, whose behaviour has been sharpened by big-city ways, because she has endangered the safety of the family and community by responding to a white shop keeper’s abuse of her by engaging in some unacceptable abuse of her own. In this scene, the reader is reminded that the Black community of Angelou’s childhood and youth discouraged individuality out of self-defense. Since Grandmother Henderson had learned through harsh experience that the whole group could be punished for the actions of a single member, her violent reprimand was an efficient form of behaviour control and training, even for a young woman who was destined to return to San Francisco. Recalling that forced return to California, Angelou explains:

> Momma’s intent to protect me had caused her to hit me in the face, a thing she had never done, and to send me away to where she thought I’d be safe. So again, the South and I had parted and again. I was headed for the cool gray hills of San Francisco. I raged on the train that white stupidity could dictate my movements and I looked unsheathed daggers at every white face I saw (1990: 71).

After this brief and discomforting visit, Angelou returns to California to cook in a greasy, dingy, diner, knowing that the rancid cooking oil and the old men’s sadness had seeped into her pores. A few months of tap-dancing provide only a brief interlude in her life, for she reaches an all-time low and finds herself drawn towards heroin. Teetering on
the brink of destruction, Angelou is given a sudden glimpse into the hidden world of the wretched, a world into which she is poised to fall.

However, in a paradoxical way, her story of drifting disillusionment ends, somewhat abruptly, and becomes a celebration of life, when a drug addict (“slouched, nodding, his mouth open and . . . saliva sliding down his chin as slowly as the blood had flowed down his arm” (1990: 71) exposes himself to teach Maya a lesson. The end of Gather Together achieves the honed understatement of a deeply felt truth:

The life of the underworld was truly a rat race, and most of its inhabitants survived like rodents in the sewers and gutters of the world. I had walked the precipice and seen it all, and at the critical moment one man’s generosity pushed me away from the edge (1990: 72).

The generosity of Traubadour Martin, Mayo’s drug addict friend, gives Maya that rebirth into innocence. Thus, in this passage the older Angelou retrieves knowledge only dimly perceived by the nineteen year-old protagonist.

Roy Pascal argues that beyond factual truth, beyond the “likeness” (1990: 72), an autobiography has to give that unique truth of life as it is seen only from the inside. The autobiographer must, therefore, design a mode for structuring the narrative and for presenting truth. For example, the autobiographer may organise his or her life around a central symbol or image to suggest that all crucial experience are relevant to one central aspect of the writer’s being, as Maya Angelou does in Caged Bird or the autobiographer may employ various stances to define his or her character and to serve as the organising principle of the work. In Gather Together, Angelou employs such devices as humour and self-mockery, portraiture of the contradictory and imaginative selves, and fantasy. For the most part, Angelou is successful in her utilisation of these devices, but, at other times, she is less so. For example, humour and self-mockery become, at times, a substitute for a
deeper look, a closer examination of behaviour, motivation, attitude. However, because Angelou refuses to gloss over her stupidities and mistakes or to ignore her ridiculous posturing or feigned sophistication, humour and self-mockery become, in part, Angelou’s means of achieving distance in her work. To her credit, Angelou has the power of joking at herself, of recreating the past involved, and of capturing the pathetic and painful overtones of experiences through laughter in order not to be overwhelmed by them.

Note Angelou’s bittersweet memory of her train trip from San Francisco to Los Angeles to visit the Baxters:

Being from the City, I had dressed for the trip. A black crepe number which pulled and pleated, tucked and shirred, in a wrap all its own. It was expensive by my standards, and dressy enough for a wedding reception. My short white gloves had lost their early-morning crispness during the ten-hour coach trip, and Guy, whose immensity matched his energy, had mashed and creased and bungled the dress into a very new symmetry . . . . Inspite of the wrinkled dress and inspite of the Cosmetic case full of reeking with dirty diapers, I left the train with my son—a picture of controlled dignity. I had over two hundred dollars rolled in scratchy ten-dollar bills in my brassiere, another seventy in my puse, and two bags of seriously selected clothes. Los Angeles was going to know I was there (1990: 73).

Note also Angelou’s humorous yet bittersweet recollections of her dance audition in an Francisco for R.L. Poole, who later becomes her dance partner, and of her fateful excursion into downtown Stamps to purchase a dress pattern. An older Angelou humorously recaptures her dance audition:

As my leg slipped a part and down I lifted my arms in the graceful ballet position number one and watched the impresario’s face race from mild interest to incredulous. My hem caught mid-thigh and I felt my equilibrium teeter. With a quick slight of hand I jerked up my skid and continued my downward glide. I hummed a little snatch of song during the last part of the slither and kept my mind on Sonja Henie in her Cute little tutus. Unfortunately, I hadn’t practice the split in months, so my pelvic bones resisted with force. I was only two inches from the floor, and I gave a couple of little bounces. I accomplished more than I planned.
My skirt seams gave before my bones surrendered. Then my left foot caught between the legs of Mother’s heavy oak table, and the other foot jumped at the gas heater and captured the pipe that ran from the jets into the wall. Pinned down at my extremities with the tendons in my legs screaming for ease, I felt as if I were being crucified to the floor, but in true “show must go on” fashion I kept my back straight and my arms uplifted in a position that would have made Pavlova proud. Then I looked at R.L. to see what impression I was making pity at the predicament was drawing him from his chair.

My independence and privacy would not allow me to accept help. I lowered my arms and balanced my hands on the floor and jerked my right foot. It held on to the pipe, so I jerked again I must have been in excellent shape. The pipe came away from the stove, as gas hissed out steadily like ten fat men resting on a summer’s day . . . There was no doubt that R.L. Poole had just witnessed his strangest audition (1990: 74).

Of her three-mile walk into downtown Stamps she writes:

I dressed San Francisco style for the nearly three-mile walk and procedure through the black part of town, past the Christian Methodist Episcopal and African Methodist Episcopal churches and the proud little houses that sat above their rose bushes in grassless front yards, on toward the pond and the railroad tracks which separated white town from black town. My Postwar Vinylite high heels, which were see-through plastic, crunched two inches into the resisting gravel, and I tugged my gloves all the way up to my wrist. I had won over the near – tropical inertia, and the sprightly walk, made a bit jerky by the small grabbing stone, the neat attire and the high headed position, was bound to teach the black women watching behind lace curtains how they should approach a day’s downtown shopping. I would prove to the idle white women, once I reached their territory, that I knew how things should be done. And if I knew, well, didn’t that mean that there were legions of Black women in other parts of the world who knew also? Up went the Black status. When I glided and pulled into white town, there was a vacuum. The air had died and fallen down heavily. . . . Then I realised that the white women were missing my halting but definitely elegant advance on their own. I then admitted my weariness, but urged my head higher and my shoulders squarer than before (1990: 74).

Yet this refusal to let herself off easily and the self-mockery which is her means to honesty sometimes become a masking of a central truth. For example, the adult Angelou provides a similarly humorous recollection of her adolescent self when she describes, her
adoration of her one-time lover Curly, a description which provides humour rather than insight.

I was so happy that the next day I went to the jewellers and bought him an onyx ring with a diamond chip I charged it to my stepfather’s account (1990: 75).

Instead of reflecting on this act retrospectively and from the distance of adulthood, as she has viewed other experiences in *Gather Together*, the older Angelou simply ridicules herself, a response which is not a substitute for reflective commentary. Angelou’s is an ironic, mocking humour, and her jokes and humour are finely tuned. Yet nothing is merely humorous in *Gather Together*. And at no point does Angelou use humour merely to detract readers from her true feelings. Behind the laughter, behind the comic spirit is the adult’s vision of human frailty.

In *Gather Together*, Maya Angelou presents a moving portrait of the contradictory adolescent self, and, at times, the autobiography is a comedy of self-deception. However, the various acts and thoughts of the protagonist are never presented as odd twists and turns within a complex character. They are consistently the unresolved contradictions of an adolescent’s being. One senses this during Angelou’s moments of self-pity and guilt about her sons’ illegitimacy when the adolescent Maya is quite willing to play the role of the wronged young girl who has been left pregnant by “a low-down bastard” (1990: 75) and to conveniently obliterate from her mind the memory that she had initiated the sexual tryst with her son’s father. Further, when Curly leaves her, she pretends to be strong and independent but enjoys her role as the jilted heroine, “deserted yet carrying on” (1990: 76). At the height of her illicit prostitution business, she joins a Baptist church and stands in the chair singing the old songs with great feeling. And while
she enjoys the large bank account that she has accrued from her business, she wants “the money without name, the ease without strain” (1990: 76). During the two-and-a-half months when Angelou plays the role of Madam, she operates at the points of a stylistic triangle: in front of the lesbian prostitutes she is braggadocio; at the cocktail lounge where she has her legitimate job, she is the picture of modest servitude; and with Mother Cleo, the landlady/baby sitter who reminds her of Grandmother, Henderson, she is the innocent young mother. Maya’s power of contradiction is boundless. Even in Stamps, especially when Grand-mother Henderson is not around, she stands with hand on hip and head cocked to one side, speaking of the wonders of the West and the joy of being free, while conveniently forgetting that she has fled to Stamps for “protection”, that if life were so grand in San Francisco she would not have returned to the dusty mote of Arkansas. And although she wants to experiment with hard drugs, she does not wish to be exposed to the ugly realities of the drug world.

A revelation of youthful foolishness usually implies that something will take its place, that something within the character’s being will build slowly to edge it out. This is not always the case in *Gather Together*. Angelou’s innocence must re-established itself at the beginning of each episode in order for her behaviour to highlight the contradictory nature of her adolescent self. Nonetheless, one of the strengths of *Gather Together* is that at no point is the adolescent Maya wise before the event. She matures as she chronicles these years of her life and her gaining of wisdom is an often painful, tragi-comic experience.

In *Gather Together*, Angelou’s imagination interacts with and transforms her environment. In doing so, it often creates the reality that saves her. When for example,
she is hurt by the coolness of the Baxter’s reception in Los Angeles, she becomes the star of her own melodrama and fantasizes:

... one day I would be included in the family legend. Some day as they sat around in the close circle recounting the fights and feuds, the pride and prejudices of the Baxters, my name and would be among the most illustrious (1990: 77).

In Stamps, the confrontation with the store clerk stems from Maya’s insistence on playing a role. Up Pity Maya, sharpened by big-city ways, fantasizes that she is indeed an elegant, sophisticated San Francisco lady. Thus, for a few moments, the dusty General Merchandise Store is San Francisco’s Emporium, and Maya is an arrogant San Francisco matron reprimanding a silly, insensate clerk. As she begins to smoke marijuana more and more, she develops new postures and fantasizes about new dreams, many of which result from what she has seen in movies. She longs for a job as a companion/chauffeurette to a boss who is the image of Lionel Barry More. Somewhat later, even though the Poole-Rita dance partnership creates in her a longing for the stage and for the bravado of an audience, she dreams of finding a permanent love and marriage. Because of her strong desire for the June Allyson Screen-role life, she agrees to become the older L.D.’s. “Bobby Sock Baby” and a prostitute as well, in hopes of attaining a life of ease and romance. The foolish Maya even fantasizes about becoming the wife of her generous drug-addict friend Troubadour Martin and using heroin to prove her loyalty to him in order to gain a permanent relationship and security. The entire work emphasises the role of fantasy as a creative force in Angelou’s growth. Throughout the autobiography, the narrator’s imagination yearns for something beyond her reality. Thus, she uses the imagination not only to savour and stretch experience but also to make her reality bearable.
Throughout the narrative, Maya is brave, tenacious and hopeful in a way which transcends the unrealistic optimism of many contemporary autobiographies. It is primarily Angelou’s imagination that helps her to keep her identity intact while teaching her to act out roles of survival. Finally, what Angelou explores in *Gather Together* is the state of the relation between the romantic imagination—innocence—and the objective reality to which it ultimately must be reconciled.

In *Gather Together*, Angelou acknowledges defeat and vividly recreates the alienation and fragmentation that characterised her life. She does so not because she wishes to reinforce a sense of defeat or victimisation but to ensure that we all learn to recognise what constitutes vulnerability in order that we can avoid the consequences. This recognition forces one to acknowledge the sources of one’s pain and to reconcile oneself to bearing, in some degree, responsibility for that pain.

Entering squalid humiliation and returning from it whole and hopeful, *Gather Together in My Name* binds pain and humour together through its unique voice.

*Gather Together* introduces us to a world of prostitution and pimps, con men and street women, drug addiction and spiritual disintegration, Angelou manages to survive in that world but her life is without dignity and purpose and at the end of the work, she concedes that she had no idea of what she was going to make of her life, “but I had given a promise and found my innocence” (1970: 181). It is as though she had to go to the brink of destruction to realise herself – a striking demonstration of how capitalism always drives its victims to the end of endurance. One may either break down under the strains of society or work assiduously to salvage some dignity from the confusion of one’s life.
*Gather Together* reveals a much more particular and selective vision of Afro-American life in which Angelou’s encounters are limited to the declassed elements of the society. She is a short-order cook, a waitress at a night club, dancer, a prostitute, and the lover of a drug addict who steals dresses for a living. Her exploits as a madam and a prostitute take up approximately seventy-five of a one hundred eighty-page text, this emphasis differentiates this text from the others.

The violation that began in *Caged Bird* takes on a much sharper focus in *Gather Together*. To be sure, Angelou is still concerned with the questions of what it means to be black and female in America and exactly where she fits into the scheme of things. But her development is reflective of a particular type of black woman, located at a particular moment of history and subjected to certain social forces that assault the black woman with unusual ferocity. Thus, when Angelou arrives in Los Angeles she complains bitterly that her mother “hadn’t the slightest idea that not only was I not a woman, but what passed for my mind was animal instinct. Like a tree or a river, I merely responded to the winds and the tides” (23). In responding to her mother’s indifference to her immaturity, she complains that “they were not equipped to understand that an eighteen-year-old mother is an eighteen year old girl” (27). It is from this angle of vision, that of a “tree in the wind” possessing mostly “animal instincts” to an “unequipped eighteen year old young woman”, that we must respond to the story that she tells.

Neither politically nor linguistically innocent, *Gather Together* reflects the imposition of values of a later period on the author’s life. Undoubtedly, in organising, the selection of the text and having recourse to memorisation, the selection of incidents, the fictive principle, and so on come into full play. For example, it is difficult to believe
that Angelou set out to organise the prostitution of Jonnie Mae and Beatrice because she wanted to revenge those “inconsiderate, stupid bitches” (45). Nor can we accept the fact that she “turned tricks” for L. D. because she believes that “there was nothing wrong with sex. I had no need for shame. Society dictated that sex was only licensed by marriage documents. Well, I didn’t agree with that. Society is a conglomerate of human beings, and that’s just what I was. A human being” (142).

The importance of the text lies in its capacity to signify to and from a larger social context than that from which it originates. Inspite of the imperial tone she sometimes adopts, Angelou is an extremely lonely young woman drifting through this phase of her life. She is more isolated in the bustle of California than she was in the rural quietude of Stamps. The kidnapping of her child, her most significant achievement so far, and her escape from a life of drugs gave her a new understanding of life, rebirth into a higher level of dialectical understanding. Thus *Gather Together* presents itself as the necessary purgation through which the initiate must pass in order to (re)capture and to (re)define the social self to function in a relatively healthy manner in white America.

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