"Life is pure adventure, and the sooner we realize that, the quicker we will be able to treat life as art," writes Maya Angelou.\(^1\)

Ralph Ellison, speaking of his own early discovery of the role of art, he calls it "a mode of humanizing reality and of evoking a feeling of being at home in the world. It is something which the artist shares with the group."\(^2\) Such an affirmation of life, a humanizing of reality, is Zora Neale Hurston's and Maya Angelou's answer to the question of how a black girl grows up in a repressive system without being maimed by it, in their works discussed in the previous chapters. Art protects the human values of compassion, love, innocence, and makes the freedom of the self-realization necessary for real survival. Ultimately, as artists, their concern is with the humanity which must survive, and even assimilate into its own creative potential, such restrictions as these writers have encountered. For, if this humanity cannot survive restriction, then it will itself become assimilated to the roles imposed upon it.
While writing one's autobiography, one's primary concern is the illumination of personal and historical identity while giving shape and meaning to the experiences out of which that identity has developed. Through the abyss of social and emotional death, Zora Neale Hurston and Maya Angelou emerge as tenacious and vital individuals. Indeed, in keeping with their death and rebirth fantasy, Zora Neale Hurston and Maya Angelou are reborn; once into a life-affirming identity recorded within the pages of their narrative, and again, when they recreate that life as authors of their autobiographies. If one must enter a dark night of the soul in order to emerge radiant then Hurston's and Angelou's "terrible beauty" shines clear in the sky.

Maya Angelou is still exploring her own desire to create meaningful art, what she calls "art for the sake of the soul." "I've known Maya more than thirty years", says poet, scholar and essayist Eugene Redmond. "What may appear to be a meteoric rise has actually been a measured and powerful one. What hasn't changed is that Maya is always growing. She is constantly studying and she plays games [.]. She's seventy two and she's smokin'."4

Of all the writers of the period, Zora Neale Hurston had, perhaps, the closest view of the migration and its religious pulses. The Great Migration of over one million blacks from South to the
urban North during the period 1917-30 had enormous social and political consequences. This movement northward fundamentally restructured the forms and meanings of African American identity and its cultural expressions. Nowhere was this upheaval felt more acutely—as both an opportunity and a cause for anxiety—than among African Americans. The glowing prospect of better paying work in the industrial North, as well as the chance to escape the most egregious racism of Jim Crow South, lured hundreds of thousands of African Americans northward, a great tumultuous river flowing toward what seemed to be freedom.

In many respects, Zora Neale Hurston embodies the history of the migration and values of the New Negro, scrambling her way by imagination, main strength, and force of will from a modest Florida home to a graduate degree in anthropology and eventual recognition as a major American writer. It was a period, when, in Du Bois' words, African American men felt their best chance to attain "self-conscious manhood." As, Alain Locke succinctly puts it in the introduction to his classic contribution to the Renaissance, *The New Negro*, "In the very process of being transplanted, the Negro is becoming transformed." For Locke, the New Negro becomes a kind of superman, "shifting from countryside to city", able to "hurdle several generations of experiences at a leap" (*Locke The New Negro*)
The opposition of a newly industrialized and rationalized urbanity with the vital, organic community of traditional, rural life was literally mapped out on the black body. The old Negro increasingly became associated with the rural South and the New Negro was depicted as the emblem of the urban, industrial North. "With each successive wave of it, the movement of the Negro becomes more and more a mass movement toward the large and the more democratic chance - in the Negro's case a deliberate flight not only from countryside to city but from medieval America to modern" (Locke *The New Negro* 6).

Zora Neale Hurston was, in fact, the only major writer of the Renaissance to be raised in the rural landscape of the deep South, unless one counts Richard Wright's late participation in the Renaissance. Moreover, she grew up in the home of a Southern preacher, witnessing the power and possibilities of such a life in the home territory. As Robert Bone has noted, Zora Neale Hurston's impulse toward wandering and seeking new experiences place her works in the picaresque tradition. She, like many of the characters she would later create, was an adventurer seeking to break "with the fixity of things." As Bone also notes, Zora's impulse toward "far horizon which informed her movements throughout her life, [...] the quest for new and better and more exciting experiences, in short, the
search for the Promised Land-in which preceded the Harlem Renaissance." 

It was the songs, tales, language and creativity of the folk that gave black existence its distinctiveness. Zora Neale Hurston writes in the typescript of "Folklore", in Florida Federal Writers' Project, ca. 1938:

Folklore, is the art people create before they find out there is such a thing as art; it comes from a folk's 'first wondering contact with natural law' - that is, laws of human nature as well as laws of natural process, the truths of a group's experience as well as the principles of physics. (qtd. in Hemenway: 159) 

In her reclamation and celebration of African American folklore, Zora Neale Hurston often expressed her ideas in sermonic form and through the voice of the folk preacher, the very embodiment of African American oral tradition. Hurston appropriated the folk preacher's voice as a vehicle to inspire spiritual rebirth as well as to incite resistance to European cultural hegemony. Like the spirituals, sermons were mediums of psychic and spiritual regeneration, transforming silenced object into speaking subjects. Through the visionary words of the folk preacher and the response of the congregation, African Americans created a world wherein
they were at the center, where they found comfort and consolation. With the word, they armored themselves to cope with and survive daily indignities, to continue their struggle for emancipation, and to resist systematic exploitation. The folk preacher and the folk sermon are prime examples of black folks' efforts to establish a libratory voice, to cast themselves as speaking subjects and to resist oppression.

Zora Neale Hurston appropriated this traditional evangelical style as she evoked the voice of the folk preacher and the rhythm and rhetoric of the folk sermon form to articulate her own struggles and individual standpoints. No matter how much she rubbed her head against college walls or how cosmopolitan her perceptions became, Hurston remained a part of the religious folk tradition into which she was born. Through her father, a traveling Baptist minister, her mother, the superintendent of the Sunday school and her community, Hurston was indelibly impressed with the beliefs and practices of the Black Southern Baptist religious tradition. She was captivated by the poetic, vivid, dramatic language of the church as it was preached and performed. She was no less awed by the entrancing and uplifting power of the preacher who could make congregations respond with a ready acceptance of all that was said. Her belief in the primacy of power of the spoken word and her
intimate knowledge and understanding of the sermonic tradition and her fascination with the preacher and the sermon is most apparent in *Jonah's Gourd Vine, Moses, Man of the Mountain*, “Book of Harlem”, “The Pet Negro System”, “The Sanctified Church”, and *Dust Tracks on a Road*. It is also apparent, though less conspicuously so, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God, Seraph on the Suwanee*, and *Mules and Men*.

Hurston was born in a world that denied her the untrampled blossoming of her own existence. In this concern Maya Angelou says to Devinia Sookia (1987):

> Phyllis Wheatley wrote 217 years ago and when she was a slave. Zora and Nella Larsen wrote long ago. To be a woman writer and be accepted forty years ago was not possible because of the social restrictions on black women, where as it was not very difficult for black women writers in my time to be accepted.

(qtd. in Elliot: 191)

Hurston's historical, embodied self, subject to the determinants of time and place--an African American woman confronting racism and a world war--represents the site of a privileged resistance to those webs of belief which might encourage resentment and fixation on an unjust and painful past. She grew up
in an unreconstructed South, in a separate and unequal society in which Jim Crow was the unabashed order of the day. Nor quite a second-class citizen of gender and ethnicity, neither respected for her genius nor wealthy despite her success, nor a paragon of anybody’s standard of beauty, she was placed, decidedly, on the margins, in a position of relative powerlessness vis-à-vis white, patriarchal America. These marginalizing factors and the author’s resolve to resist and overcome them determined the “daimon” of the unitary self or persona in Zora Neale Hurston’s narrative. The daimon, that is, the driving motivation, is the empowerment of the self. The author, therefore, constructs a mytho-narrative wherein the persona created transcends the oppressive conditions of society and holds power over self and world.

Zora Neale Hurston was persistent in her desires and defiant in the face of those who would deprive her of or prevent her from attaining them. She makes a significant distinction, in her autobiography, between the outward show of things and the inward reality. Inside she sucked sorrow, and inside is where she journeys to realize her desires and where the external world is powerless to control her. When the saddle horse is vehemently denied to her, the narrator creates her own: “Since Papa would not buy me a saddle horse, I made me one up. No one around me knew how often I rode
my prancing horse, nor the things I saw in far places."¹⁰ No one knew, so no one had the power to deny her. No one had the power to control her. Retreating within the private psychic space, she is beyond external censor and control. By emphasizing her courage and tenacity, the narrator tends to mitigate the impact of oppressive forces in the lives of African Americans in general and her own life in particular. She exhibits in her autobiography, as that, whatever direction she takes, she is compelled by an "inner urge" that is not responsive to external reality. The psychological strategies can be seen that characterize Hurston's struggle in the face of a culture of domination.

Hurston is a progenitor of the new African American female self. Hurston wrote against the stereotypes of the day and gave us, particularly those of us who list her among the critical foremothers, new categories of perception (women's images) and new ways to consider the stuff of the lives (folkways as the basis of "art"). She was also in continual battle against stereotype perceptions of herself as countrified fool, bodacious, hussy, etc. And one has to continually resist the various interpretations handed down in the past decades--Zora as victim, as ritual doll, as hustler, etc., if one is to get to the glory of the work itself. Hurston's art has proved to be
compelling for writers such as Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. Molly Hite is of the viewpoint:

By treating the marginal as central and thereby unsettling the hierarchical relations that structure mainstream genres. Alice Walker and Hurston manage to handle very well the conventions that threaten to enslave them in a system of representation not of their own making. (qtd. in Gates, Jr.:16) 11

Hurston epitomized the intellectual who represented "the people" through a reconstruction of "the folk", avoiding the class confrontation of the Northern cities. She praised her people and it is now befitting to let the folk praise her.

*Dust Tracks on a Road* does not take much imagination to glimpse the traces of the South in Zora Neale Hurston's title. Roads on which, feet leave dust tracks are dusty roads--hot, sun-baked, dirt roads that comb the Southern heart-land from South Carolina to Texas. Dusty roads link Eatonville, Florida, to Stamps, Arkansas. These are the roads that bare-footed black Southern women have traveled since slavery days. These are the roads that cheaply shod black Southern women still travel on foot, or on dilapidated buses. Trains now link these Southern towns, if not to each other, to the rest of the country. But, the roads remain, like a faded tracing on
the face of the South. The roads of black folks delineate the
topography of those centuries of oppression which emancipation
could not eradicate. The roads of black folks, like a grid of veins
and arteries, join disparate communities and scattered women in the
throbbing center of a common past.

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* shows blacks as a caged
people. Unbreakable bars closed black communities in upon
themselves, denying both the communities and the individuals who
composed them access to the surrounding white world. Within
those cages black communities developed their own vibrant life,
black women raised up black girls in the way that they should go
singing in the face of danger, singing to thwart the stings of
insolence, singing to celebrate their Lord, singing to testify to a
better future, singing with the life blood of their people, black
women defied their imprisonment. The cages constrained, but did
not stifle them. The songs of confinement grounded the vitality of
their tradition, launched the occasional fledgling to freedom.

The collective identity of African American women sinks its
roots in the roads and fields, the towns and villages of the South. In
the pages of white Southern women, the South frequently figures as
a natural wonder. For them, towering oaks, dusky cypresses,
resplendent magnolias embody the splendor of their region--its
distinct physical presence. For black women that landscape nears a
more ominous face, for its splendors belong to the whites. For
black women, the South wears a human face, with the face of danger
always shadowing the face of love. Above all the South remains
home—the wellspring of self.

In the roads and cages of the South, during slavery times as
thereafter, lay the history—the pre-history—of each and every black
self. These roads and cages embodied the specific history that made
the black self a singular self, rather than an accidental exemplary of
some archetypical self. Only through recuperation of that history
could African American men and women represent their discrete
selves as whole and free. The challenge of representing a
metaphysically free yet historically specific self, proved daunting
although never insurmountable. Writing in the late 1960s, Maya
Angelou noted in the first volume of her autobiography that, “If
you ask a Negro where he’s going”. She was met with silence.

Both Zora Neale Hurston and Maya Angelou are oppressed by
whites. But, part of them is always untouched by the oppression,
observing and commenting on it from a distance. What makes the
difference may be a closer integration with their background they never had to defend themselves from the assaults of the whites. They do not submit tamely to the oppression. They are repeatedly thrust into situations where they must act on their own initiative to save themselves and thereby learn the strength of self-confidence conveying that the man has to sweep the veil aside himself and search for his own connections. Like the mule, the mulatto -- it was believed of a black to be "a degenerate, unnatural offspring, doomed by nature to work out its own destruction." \(^{13}\)

Hurston implicitly told whites that contrary to their arrogant assumptions, they had not really affected blacks that much. Blacks continue to practice their own culture which as a matter of fact is more alive, more aesthetically pleasing than that of the whites. She felt that black culture manifested an independent aesthetic system that could be discussed without constant reference to white oppression. This approach of Hurston was oblique and open to misrepresentation. She chose to write of the positive aspects of black experience because she did not believe that white injustice had created a pathology in black behavior. This position is brought into sharp focus in the criticism of her career by a white radical, Harold Preece.
Like Hurston, who creates a sense of the shared life she knew in Eatonville, Florida, as a black child, Maya Angelou recaptures the sense of life she came to know as a child in Stamps, Arkansas. While Hurston's technique for expressing this shared life is to speak in the village voice, Maya Angelou's technique for expressing this shared life centers around the reconstruction of her childhood environment and the recapturing of her response to the environment. In her earliest work, Maya Angelou achieves this, in part, by remembering her past: the cotton pickers who came into her grandmother's store in the morning hours before work to buy sardines and cheese, the men and women who helped Momma to prepare the pork for sausage and who entered into the spirit of the revival and Sunday church services with joyful thanks and praise. Grandmother Henderson, Uncle Willie, Bailey, and the community at large are the center of Maya Angelou's childhood, and the shared life of that community is an important part of that childhood memory. As is obvious in her autobiographies, Maya Angelou, like Hurston, is concerned with black life as it is informed and affected by the traditions and patterns of the past. And, in common with the life of Zora Neale Hurston, the events in the autobiographies are shaped by Maya Angelou's command of the language, a level of articulation which employs both the linguistic rituals of the
dominant culture and those of the black vernacular tradition. The mission of autobiography is bound up with the spoken word and the oral tradition for Zora Neale Hurston and Maya Angelou. Like Zora Neale Hurston in Florida, Maya Angelou in Arkansas flavors her autobiographies with the language of black folk culture. As, Maya Angelou writes autobiographical texts that include the Bambara people of Africa, Hurston has written books like *Tell My Horse* (1938), which describe her experiences with voodoo ritual in Haiti.

Zora Neale Hurston and Maya Angelou created verbal art that is thoroughly visual in technique. There is more of the possibility of intertextuality between Zora Neale Hurston and Maya Angelou. Maya Angelou herself, in an interview with Claudia Tate, acknowledged the influence that Zora Neale Hurston had had upon her.

The same interconnectedness may be achieved via the visual aspects of language and, one would argue, would be possible despite the fact that Hurston died before Maya started writing; the experience which underlay their writing was the same.

At the beginning of the twentieth century American culture knew no black discourse of Southern roads and cages. The discourses existed, but did not figure prominently, and certainly not independently, in the dominant discourses of the country. Zora
Neale Hurston and Maya Angelou being extraordinarily witty women, acquired an instant reputation for high spirits and witty dialogues and side-splitting tales. The legacy inherited from their mothers made them special children and had a tremendous influence on their lives. Zora Neale Hurston's mother, Lucy Ann Pots, did not want to "squinch" her spirit and turn her child into a "mealy mouthed rag doll" (Dust Tracks 21). Maya Angelou's mother, Vivian Baxter, left an impact on adult Maya, whilst, Hurston's mother left an indelible mark on her daughter in the moments of innocence, up to the age of nine. Having an impact at the different periods of life, no matter, mothers stood with an iron-will to be the guiding star of their children, throughout their lives. Maya Angelou's mother showed Maya the way at each step of life and made it feasible for her to stand out in the crowd. She herself was one among the hundreds and never took respite from life. Try and try again was the basic formulae of her life. And, that's what she blended into the blood of her daughter.

In different ways, Zora Neale Hurston and Maya Angelou broke grounds for new representation of the African American female self. Dust Tracks published in 1942 and Caged Bird, published in 1969, explicitly reclaim the Southern past as the grounding of their author's identities. Both explicitly reject white
norms of womanhood as models. In Hurston's pages, the Southern past reemerges as a mythic past suitable for the unique self; in Angelou's pages, it acquires a historical and sociological specificity that helps to account for the modern strength of the female self as survivor. Maya Angelou like Zora Neale Hurston, a generation later, links her own resolve to the grit and courage of Southern black women.

Each of the above mentioned autobiographies lay emphasis upon the development of a very essential "I", an "I" that grows more egoistic as it progresses through a traditional quest pattern, wherein the child separates from the family and goes in search of the experiences that allow her to become a person whose life merits publication. For these women, this outward journey into unfamiliar places is an actual one. They run, they wander, they follow paths similar to those of their brothers and sisters who wrote their personal accounts of becoming, paths that were essentially those of the slave narratives. Southern roads and cages: Zora Neale Hurston and Maya Angelou knew them well.

Less afraid than Hurston of the burden of her people's history, Maya Angelou anchors herself in that history. Less apprehensive than Hurston of her own anger at racism and oppression, she insists upon their persistence. Openly proclaiming the "lifelong paranoia"
that Stamps forced upon her, she can also claim her kinship with generations of black female survivors. No less a denizen of the Republic of Letters than Zora Neale Hurston, Maya Angelou claims her rightful place as a woman—a black woman. For Zora Neale Hurston’s myth, she substitutes history and thereby claims her specific identity.

Unlike Zora Neale Hurston, who was strongly connected to other women in a network of friendly relationships, as well as to rich and solid folk traditions she helps to reclaim—that of “conjure women” for example, Maya Angelou’s narrator is a much more picaresque heroine, a modern day Moll Flanders, who learns to survive by her wits. In that respect, she too is related to a black folk tradition, but it is perhaps more “male”: the shiftless trickster or con man, who relies on his ability to tell a good story to get out of sticky situations (Brer Rabbit, for instance). The narrator’s mother also fits into this tradition. She is a consummate business woman, runs her rooming house with a fist of steel, has a roster of conquests that testify to her independent nature. She is a Jill-of-all-trades, who, by the fourth volume of the narrative, is said to have been “a surgical nurse, a realtor, had a barber’s license and owned a hotel.” Maya Angelou’s style parodies that of such fictional autobiographies as Daniel Defoe’s Moll Flanders (1722).
There is no indication that Zora Neale Hurston was ever well known—as a writer or as a person—among the masses during her lifetime. With an impressive group of people—the elitists—on the other hand, she enjoyed brief periods of notoriety. Maya Angelou has attained name and fame in her lifetime, whereas this was a far-fetched ideal for Zora Neale Hurston. Alex Haley says about Maya Angelou, “She has become, now a legend. When I’m traveling and giving talks I continually meet people who want to know about her, who say they just want to touch her or be with her” (qtd. in Elliot: 208). This may also be true as, she is living and still creating more space in more hearts. Maya Angelou has a presence that commands attention. Alex Haley calls it “Hollywood energy” (qtd. in Elliot: 209). Thomas Mullen agrees when Alex Haley said, “when she walks into the room, you know she’s there, it’s a palpable thing” (qtd. in Elliot: 209). Thomas Mullen saw Maya Angelou take a campus audience hostage when she first spoke at Wake Forest University in 1971. “She had the audience so caught up that by the end of the evening they were standing up and firing questions at her right and left”, said Mullen, the dean of the college at Wake Forest. “Usually you have to pry questions out of kids. She opened up. She made them feel something” (qtd. in Elliot: 209).
By the late 1960s, African American women writers had begun the task of reclamation, the renaming and reclaiming of black women's history and selfhood. Two authors chose to do this by reassessing the lives of black women in the South. Often misrepresented in literature, and silenced in life, the landscape of their lives for the most part remained uncharted. Hurston and Angelou, both raised in the South, gave voice to the black women. Black progress has been attained in America not only because of the leadership of black men but also because of the unsung spirit of noncompliant black women.

Zora Neale Hurston and Maya Angelou, bear similarities, yet, their identity never mingled with the other, and holds the two upright conspicuously. These autobiographers do add their testimonies, they do voice a collective song. But, what is sometimes not recognized sufficiently is that they are also singing solos, and it is the melody, not the refrain, that distinguishes their songs. What, Alice Walker writes in *The Nature of This Flower Is to Bloom*, gives the apt description of the two autobiographers:

Rebellious, Living.

Against the Elemental Crush.

A Song of Color

Blooming

For Deserving Eyes
No one could wish for a more advantageous heritage than that bequeathed to the black writer in the South: a compassion for the earth, a trust in humanity beyond our knowledge of evil, and an abiding love of justice. Black women inherit a great responsibility as well, for they must give voice to centuries not only of silent bitterness and hate but also of neighborly kindness and sustaining love. They care because they know this: the life they save is their own.
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