INTRODUCTION

A child is born. With the first breath, the child commences a life-line, a graph, an appearance (an entrance) and gets a name. Naming not due to the fear of being lost, but because identification in this world stands next in row with hunger and protection. And, as the child grows, develops and formulates things in the mind—the very first disturbing thought is, who am I, where I've come from and where I'm heading towards? These conscious and unconscious voices keep on nagging until it reaches to a certain level of inhaling and grasping the unheard answers. Ralph Ellison notes, “When I discover who I am, I'll be free” (qtd. in Smith:137). May be, certain answers lie beyond the tangible reach but there is a meaning to it which unfolds in the self. Yes, living identity-less is a penance. But, working in the process of realizing one's own stillness, hearing the unconscious mind, merging into the sixth sense is the ultimate realization of eternity and the self. This realization may come either in a single moment or in a flash, or in hours, through the timeless journey inward. And, in this stillness lies the expression of the sublime experience and vision which, when put in words finds form in autobiography. In a fractured universe, an evolving process provokes fantasies of the real. This
The evolving process is a mirror carried along a high road. At one moment, it reflects vision—the azure skies, at another the mire of the puddles at the feet. No more elegant tool exists to describe the human condition than the autobiography.

Autobiography is the workshop of the self. Turning life into words, it is the journey from inside to the outside, a critical exploration of the selfhood. And, in the process of this journey, a re-birth, a re-making of the soul occurs. And, this journey inward, for an aesthetic that bespeaks the soul, does not halt at a given point. Listening within the self becomes the most active and demanding process of life. And, while producing it's own being—a part of itself—it is nonetheless equivalent to the labor pains of a woman agonizing and craving for re-production. Life, whether originating in the universe or in the womb, is "composed of the hot. And what is recreated is — the miracle of his/her own life." Jo Spence discovers that the subject is always in the process, that "there is no peeling away of layers to reveal a real self, just a constant reworking process." And, in the process, the autobiographer becomes selective, moves consciously and in drawing the image and patterns of a human life, the marriage of opposites is celebrated. And, this celebration gives birth to autobiography.
In this world of struggle, contradictions, chaos, confusion and dilemma, a free conceptual construction is the only way man has of making the universe stop pounding and washing away at his little light of consciousness. One learns to manipulate the chaos—not to control it—to ensure the individual and collective survival. And, this impulse is the roof and earth, the nook and corner, the fact and fantasy of the creation of an autobiography. The inner will and outer circumstances, together, make the autobiographers find that self which they must be and choose to be. A curtain raiser of self lays bare the multiple voices buried deep into the conscience. We have no more knowledge at the end than at the beginning, but we see things differently and we relate things in different ways not because they have at all changed, but because we have, and because there exists now a new metaphor of our self.

Autobiography is more closer to the self than any other genre (testimonials, diaries, biographies, memoirs). Despite the fact that autobiography is so difficult to write, it holds a high place today. As, it has an ability to reflect and give focus to some consistent need and sense of possibility in the community it serves. The autobiographer serves not only the self but also the community by shifting from subjective to objective. Besides, the autobiographer (with her/his fragmented self) is also the reflection and
amalgamation of the past and the present. It is a symbol of the image of the present life, a moment of intimacy placed on the crossroads of past and future. All the three tenses of life webbed together in a single genre by a single creator.

Several reasons are portrayed as to why an autobiography is written. To ease loneliness and anxiety; a bridge for life transitions or as a way of doing reality checks; and that it is a form of therapy, self-healing, and emotional release; a source of pleasure, creativity and self-affirmation; an act of remembering, self-defense, or survival. Artists approach their work in so many different ways. Some are first driven by the idea of fame, thoughts of money, and greatness. With others the process of creating art is a spiritual undertaking, not fully chosen by them, but like a cross taken up, because a higher power called them to art as a vocation. Shamara Shante Riley writes in “A Sistah Outsider”:

Writing gives me some sort of voice to articulate my thoughts about my identity in a world where people constantly try to deny me the right to have my own identity. Writing in my journal is also cathartic because it enables me to survive, to heal many of the wounds that have existed in my life.³
When a person sits down and writes about what happened in her or his life, an autobiography results. It is as simple as that. Or is it? Unfortunately for those who love simplicity, but fortunately, for those who delight in complexity, uncertainty, and ambiguity; autobiographies are far from being transparent, lucid and accurate stories of life. Each autobiography is unique, as the story of a unique individual. However, because that individual—the ultimate insider—is describing her or his own life, does not mean that important parts of the story are necessarily as accurate, complete, and full of insight as a version of it by an outsider. The quest, the search is ceaseless and it knows no edge line—horizon of life.

Autobiography provides a new lens through which critics reconsider not only black women’s autobiography but texts by an African American, whose autobiography aims at elucidating selfhood through an articulation of ethnic ties and cultural roots. This has been actively achieved by Zora Neale Hurston, who published an autobiography in 1942 (*Dust Tracks on a Road*). She was not the first African American woman to publish an autobiography, but she was the first to create a language and imagery that reflected the reality of black women’s lives. Ignoring the stereotypes, social and literary, that her predecessors spent their energies rejecting, Zora Neale Hurston rooted her art in the cultural
traditions of the black rural South. As a daughter of the region, she claimed these traditions by birthright. As an anthropologist, she reclaimed them through years of intense, often perilous, research. As a novelist, she summoned this legacy in her choice of setting, her delineation of character, and most devotedly in her distillation of language.

Hers became, arguably, the first authentic black female voice in American literature. She had been the most important collector of African American folklore in the country. She had been the first scholar ever to research hoodoo in America and had studied the most systematic religion in Vodun in Haiti. She had published more books than any other black American woman of her time. The study of Zora Neale Hurston and her works afford an insight into the creative process involved in composition, the constraints imposed by audience and publishers, the courage and tenacity needed to succeed, as well as evidence of white racism in two entirely different multiracial societies. Above all, from her work, one learns something about self-definition. Zora Neale Hurston began the process by rejecting labels that had been attached to black women by others and replacing them with some she chose for herself. Initial labeling was a product of culture, race, class and gender, and
autobiography was her attempt to redefine herself in defiance of these shaping forces that govern all our lives.

Zora Neale Hurston makes explicit two contradictory and submerged elements of the tradition: First, and most visibly, she restores funkiness and folk roots to black women’s discourse; second, she dares to articulate black women’s craving for independent recognition in the republic of letters. She is one of the most prolific black woman writers in America, an intellectual and spiritual foremother of a generation of black women writers. She believed in the beauty of black expressions and traditions and in the psychological wholeness of black life. And, of all the people in the world, she chose to be more and more herself. She not only celebrated the distinctiveness of black culture, but saw those traditional black folkways as marked improvements over the “imaginative wasteland of white society.”

In the twenties and forties, there were tremendous pressures on black writers. Militant organizations, like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), expected them to be race people, defending black people, protesting against racism, and oppression. Whereas the advocates of the genteel school of literature wanted black writers to create respectable characters that would be a credit to the race. Many
black writers chafed under these restrictions, including Zora Neale Hurston, who chose to write about the positive side of the black experience and ignored the brutal side. She saw black lives as psychologically integral—not mutilated half-lives, stunted by the effects of racism and poverty. She gives up militancy and denies any racial conflict within herself. And, because she is an autobiographer who is willing to allow the folklore of her race to influence her work, it has a broader sense of cultural vision, language, and idiom than the works of her mostly male contemporaries. Hurston reinforces the sense of her personal uniqueness not only through action and narration, but also through prose style.

The thrust of black feminist writing on Zora Neale Hurston implicitly proposes her life and work as a role model for contemporary black female scholarship, black women of the twentieth century, intellectual curiosity, and literary production. Indeed, her work foreshadowed the issues of black women which came to prominence in the early seventies, specially the plight of black women as a subject matter in and of itself deserving literary and scholarly attention. Hurston is an initiatory figure, who has had the power to take certain initiatives in life and career that may have
seemed improbable for a black woman of the times. Today, the scholars attempt to voice the voicelessness of Zora Neale Hurston.

Autobiography aims to celebrate and sing the self. We know of no other autobiographer in American letters who celebrates and sings her life with as much verve and display of vulnerability as Maya Angelou. She has shown (in the six volumes of autobiographies) how the often self-serving autobiographical form can be transformed into a strong evocation of the human spirit. Maya Angelou is not the only black autobiographer who has focused on childhood years in the deep South, and the painful memoirs of those years. Richard Wright’s life, as recaptured in *Black Boy* (1942), was an unbelievable round of hunger, poverty, brutality and mistreatment. In the recollection of his childhood, he emphasized his most painful remembered experiences. Approximately a quarter of a century later, Anne Moody in *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968), followed a similar trend when she brought to life, in graphic and moving language, the sights, smells and sufferings of rural poverty, and her own simultaneous discovery of sexual power and social powerlessness. On the other hand, Mary Mebane’s *Mary* (1981) is an evidence of the paucity of celebration and transcendence. Even though frustration and tragedy tough their lives, these autobiographers retain a measure of spiritual integrity.
In sharp contrast, however, Maya Angelou is less concerned with recapturing the external conditions of her environment. As an autobiographer, she is concerned with recapturing her growing awareness of her environment, her response to that environment and to the people who made up that environment; their manners, talk, gestures of bravado, their thoughts and dreams. Unlike the personal narratives of Richard Wright, Anne Moody, and Mary Mebane, Maya Angelou's autobiographies affirm life itself, despite its difficulties, and celebrate the power of the individual to meet the challenges.

Maya Angelou's six volumes of autobiographies (1969-2002) offer insight into personal and group experience in America, and create a unique place within black autobiographical tradition. It is not because her work is better than its formidable autobiographical predecessors, but throughout her autobiographical writings she adopts a special stance in relation to the self, the community and the world. Maya Angelou's concerns with family and community, as well as with work and her conceptions of herself as a human being are echoed throughout her autobiographies. Central to this configuration is the discovery that the individual self is really a series of selves evolving around a core of values, opportunities, and experiences. The journey or quest is for self-knowledge, and
especially, for resurrection—the triumph of life over death. And, the unfolding of her own integrity of mind and the identity she creates for herself in order to survive and grow in a world that is structured to suppress her development. The ways in which she faces these concerns offer instruction into the range of survival strategies available to women in America and revel, as well, important insights into black traditions and culture. Events are not only significant in themselves, but they also mark points of transcendence.

Maya Angelou, in the series of autobiographies examines the manner in which the events of the thirties to nineties make an impact upon her life. The political currents of the time are more prominent in the last three volumes of her autobiographies. Throughout the six volumes she presents a powerful, authentic, and profound signification of African American life and the changing concerns of African American woman in her quest for personal autonomy, understanding, and love. Such a statement, because of the simple, forthright, and honest manner in which it is presented, is depicted against the larger struggle of African American and African people for their liberation and triumphs. It is a celebration of the struggle, survival, and existence of the African American people.
It is indisputable that Maya Angelou's contribution to autobiographical form in America remains unsurpassed. Maya Angelou's unique probing of the interior self, her distinctive use of humor and self-mockery, her linguistic sensibility, as well as her ability to balance the quest for human individuality with the general condition of black Americans distinguish her as a master of the genre. She breaks new ground by exposing issues such as rape and incest within the black community. She also uses her maturing understanding of family and community to project an individual attempt to forge and maintain a healthy sense of self within a group that is undergoing a cultural transition. She demonstrates how she has always striven towards a self-empowering identity, which can be seen as an inspiration for women (black or white) who confront the heart of the matter. She is the third generation of brilliantly resourceful females, who conquered oppression's stereotypical maladies without confirming to its expectations of behavior.

An important literary artist is one who possesses significant ideas and feelings and who commands, as well, the technical ability to present those ideas and feelings effectively. Such an artist is Maya Angelou. Her artistry is demonstrated by her skillful techniques for presenting innocence, fledgling maturity, the contradictory selves of adolescence, and the centered focus of the
adult woman. Her works display striking and empathetic portraits of people and powerful recreation of both strengths and weaknesses in black folk and cultural traditions. Besides, her gifted prose, the constant sense of color and warmth throughout the autobiographies reflect her understanding of people to an amazing durability. One of the most memorable and unique characteristics of the autobiographies is that they reveal a consistency in Maya Angelou's vision of the human condition, particularly in the autobiographer's preoccupation with the effect of the community on the individual's achievement and retention of an integrated, acceptable self. Her movement toward the interior self is constant throughout the six volumes of autobiographies, a movement that emphasizes its prominence as the core of Maya Angelou's values.

Maya Angelou demonstrates an exceptional ability to narrate the life story as a human being and as a black American woman in the twentieth century. In doing so, as one critic has observed, Maya Angelou is performing for contemporary black and white Americans, many of the same functions that an escaped slave like Frederick Douglass performed for nineteenth century audience through his autobiographical writings and lectures. This is to say, that, both Frederick Douglass and Maya Angelou function as articulators of the nature and validity of the collective heritage, as
they interpret the particulars of a culture for a wide audience of both black and white Americans. Moreover, Maya Angelou illuminates the black experience in an American context and in meaningful relation to the parallel and converging experiences of white Americans. In doing so, she provides her audience with a fuller realization of the black American consciousness within the larger context and demonstrates that, as people who have lived varied and vigorous lives, black Americans embody the quintessential experiences of their race and culture.

Maya Angelou is a significant living voice, a wind-up figure, who is constantly on work over the current situation of blacks in America. A conscious figure winding up the aroma of blacks for a period of three decades, imbibing in herself and her autobiographies, the age of thirties as deftly as that of the twentieth century.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


