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## **Symbolic Geography and Psychic Landscapes: A Conversation with Maya Angelou**

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MAYA ANGELOU'S  
*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*



A CASEBOOK

Edited by  
Joanne M. Braxton

New York    Oxford

Oxford University Press

1999

# Symbolic Geography and Psychic Landscapes

## *A Conversation with Maya Angelou*

JOANNE M. BRAXTON



The ax forgets.  
The tree remembers.

—Maya Angelou,  
quoting an African proverb  
in *Even the Stars Look Lonesome*, 1997

MAYA ANGELOU, Z. Smith Reynolds Professor of American Studies at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, is the author of five autobiographies, of which *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970) is the first and best known.<sup>1</sup> Even before accepting the lifetime appointment at Wake Forest, Angelou's teaching and experience spanned not only the United States and Europe but also Africa and the Middle East.

A celebrated poet, teacher, and lecturer who has taught at the University of California, the University of Kansas, and the University of Ghana, among other places, Angelou has been honored for her academic and humanistic contributions as a Rockefeller Foundation Scholar and a Yale University Fellow. While in Ghana, she worked for the *African Review* as feature editor. Previously, while residing in Cairo, Egypt, Angelou (who speaks French, Spanish, and Fanti) edited the *Arab Observer*.

In the 1960s Angelou served as northern coordinator of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference at the invitation of Dr. Martin Luther King. She has received presidential appointments from President Gerald Ford, who asked her to serve on the U.S. Bicentennial Commission, and President Jimmy Carter, who appointed her to the National Commission

on the Observance of International Women's Year. A member of the original cast of Jean Genet's *Les Blancs*, as well as the European touring company of *Porgy and Bess*, Angelou's acting credits include an Emmy Award-nominated performance as Kunte Kinte's grandmother in the televised film version of Alex Haley's *Roots*.

Without a doubt, Maya Angelou is America's most visible black woman autobiographer. While black women writers might share traditional motivations for writing autobiography, other motives derive from their unique experiences. In the eyes of the predominantly white and male culture, women, and particularly black women, speak as "others," which is to say that, at least as far as the awareness of the dominant group is concerned, the black woman speaks from a position of marginality. And yet, against all odds, she comes to self-awareness and finds herself at the center of her own experience. Veiled though she might be (even twice veiled, thrice if she should be a member of a sexual minority), the black woman autobiographer possesses her own self-conscious vision of herself and her community.<sup>2</sup> She sees herself and her community in relation to those who have described her as "other," and the very awareness of her enforced marginality becomes an additional catalyst for life writing, for testifying, for "telling it like it is."

Often masked, the anger of the black woman autobiographer is a deep and abiding one, as must inevitably be the case when an "othered" writer develops enough awareness of self and self-esteem to believe that her life is worth writing about. "When I pick up the pen to write," Angelou told Bill Moyers in a PBS interview, "I have to scrape it across those scars to sharpen the point."<sup>3</sup>

Maya Angelou has tempered her own anger and put it to a constructive purpose; her work speaks to the necessity of reflecting, remembering, opening, cleansing, healing, and, at times, issuing a warning. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, she focuses almost entirely on the inner spaces of her emotional and personal life, crafting a "literary" autobiography that becomes not merely a personal record but also a stage on which the sins of the past can be recalled and rituals of healing and reconciliation enacted.

As I have suggested elsewhere, *Caged Bird* "is perhaps the most aesthetically satisfying autobiography written by a black woman in the years immediately following the Civil Rights era."<sup>4</sup> Since its initial publication almost thirty years ago, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* has continually ranked on the *New York Times*' Best Seller List. *Caged Bird* has been studied by many critics; it still resonates, even with readers generations beyond its original audience. And Angelou's audience has increased along with her public

stature. The *New York Times* reported that "the week after Angelou's recitation of 'On the Pulse of the Morning' at the 1993 inauguration of President William Jefferson Clinton, *Caged Bird's* sales increased by nearly 500 percent, forcing Bantam to reprint approximately 400,000 copies of the autobiography and Angelou's other works."<sup>5</sup>

Although *Caged Bird* has generated a substantial body of criticism and found a solid place in the humanities curriculum, it is not a book that has been received without controversy. According to Lyman B. Hagan, "*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, lauded by many as a literary classic which should be read and taught to all African American young people, is one of the ten books most frequently targeted for exclusion from high school and junior high school libraries and classrooms."<sup>6</sup> Why? Poet and critic Opal Moore puts it this way: "*Caged Bird* elicits criticism for its honest depiction of rape, its exploration of the ugly spectre of racism in America, its recounting of the circumstances of Angelou's own out-of-wedlock teen pregnancy, and its humorous poking at the foibles of the institutional church."<sup>7</sup> Angelou inscribes her resistance to racism, sexism, and poverty within the language, the imagery, the very meaning of her text; her truth-telling vision confronts stereotypes old and new, revising perspective and discomforting the reader seeking safety in the conventional platitudes of the status quo. Simultaneously, *Caged Bird's* profoundly moral stance challenges its audience to confront the contradictions of life and to create positive change, beginning with one's self and then one's community. As such, the task that Angelou set out for herself as a writer must be acknowledged as one of exceeding complexity; she seeks to inspire and to direct.

Angelou employs two distinct voices in *Caged Bird*, that of the mature narrator and that of the girlchild whom Angelou calls "the Maya character" (and whom I call Marguerite). Speaking of this dichotomy, Angelou told Claudia Tate, "I have to be so internal, and yet while writing, I have to be apart from the story so that I don't fall into indulgence. Whenever I speak about the books, I always think in terms of the Maya character. . . . so as not to mean me. It's damned difficult for me to preserve this distancing. But it's very necessary."<sup>8</sup>

Taken together, the two voices might be seen as representing the interplay of history and memory. To borrow from the blues idiom of Ralph Ellison, the mature autobiographer consciously fingers the jagged edges of her remembered experience, squeezing out a tough lyric of black and blue triumph. Maya Angelou, née Marguerite Johnson, emerges miraculously through a baptismal cataract of violence, abuse, and neglect. Evoking transcendent awareness through the agency of memory, the *symbolic* Maya

Angelou rises to become a "point of consciousness" for her readers.<sup>9</sup> In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, the reader might hear echoes of Gorky or Dostoyevsky, Zora Neale Hurston or Richard Wright, yet Angelou signifies on these inherited models to "sing" her sassy song of the self.

Among the many possible approaches to the writing of an introduction to this collection of essays on *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, I opt for an exploration of the ways in which Maya Angelou's autobiographical voice embodies memory. Critics of fiction and nonfiction alike agree that memory is a "plastic" medium through which the past can be seen and reconstructed. "[M]emory is almost sacred," wrote French historian Pierre Nora.<sup>10</sup> And Melvin Dixon saw memory as a tool that could be used both to dismantle and reclaim. In his words, "Memory becomes a tool to regain and reconstruct not just the past but history itself."<sup>11</sup> Putting it another way, critic and writer Karen Fields wrote, "[M]emory collaborates with forces separate from actual past events, such as an individual's wishes, a moment's connotations, an environment's clues, an emotion's demands, a self's evolution, a mind's manufacture of order, and yes, even a researcher's demands."<sup>12</sup> Toi Derricotte expressed it simply and more elegantly, perhaps, when she wrote, "Memory is in the service of the greatest psychic need."<sup>13</sup>

The collection is framed by two interviews and begins here in the introduction (as it ends in Claudia Tate's well-known piece from *Black Women Writers at Work*) with Angelou's own words. In the fall of 1996, I visited Angelou at her home in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, having obtained permission to interview her for this book. That interview is embodied within the text of this introduction. Fascinated by the theoretical interplay between history and memory (and what Melvin Dixon called "strategies of recollection"), I asked Angelou about her writing technique and, specifically, how she uses memory to "reenter" historical time.

JOANNE BRAXTON: If you think now about the actual historical moment and what was going on in your mind when you were a child and then when you think of what memory has done to that moment, does the memory seem very different?

MAYA ANGELOU: What I remember I remember completely. Whole scenes play themselves against roads and farmland. I can remember the aroma in the air, the background sounds. . . . On the other hand, if I don't try to remember it, then whole things are lost completely. It has been that way with me all of my life.

So what happens when I write autobiographies is that I try to suspend myself from the present. I get myself into a time, into a particular day and I'm there. Each time that I do that, I am also aware that I might not come out, that I might be trapped in that time—it's frightening.

I keep a hotel room and I go to it about five thirty in the morning and pull off my coat. I have a yellow pad and the Bible. I get on the bed and try to find that entry. It is so scary. It is so physical that by twelve o'clock I'm just wet. Soaked. Then I get up and take a shower at the hotel and go home. Sometimes I will cook, make a pot of soup, say, and then go back to the hotel again and write.

BRAXTON: How does it feel to sit there holding that tattered old paperback copy of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* with this nearly thirty-years-younger Maya Angelou on the cover?

ANGELOU: It's like seeing a movie, one that's known, maybe one that's written. It's not painless to remember.

BRAXTON: The life is not painless . . . the remembered life? Or the writing?

ANGELOU: All of them! I just turned to (putting down the book) something I haven't thought about in a long time. When my father . . . see, so many things come to mind. . . . I mean, I was very kind in this remembrance. . . . When I left my father's house, or the house that he took me to . . . he came back to give me a dollar and a half.

I grew up that day terribly.

If Angelou here admits employing a self-censoring "strategy of recollection," this selective remembering might be an example of what Karen Fields calls the "'wedding list' or 'church program' sort of memory." Often this sort of memory, with its emphasis on "the utter necessity of getting it right," as Fields points out, does not like to be questioned or verified.<sup>14</sup>

During our conversation, Angelou spoke at length about shattering experiences of racism, sexism, and poverty represented in *Caged Bird*—experiences viewed through the lens of memory. To aid in exploring the relationships among history, memory, and writerly craft in *Caged Bird*, I asked Angelou to diagram the yard, the house, and the immediate environs of the Wm. Johnson General Merchandise Store in Stamps, Arkansas (generally known as Sister Henderson's Store).

Within this cleanly swept yard, ten-year-old Marguerite experiences what she describes in *Caged Bird* as the "most painful experience that I ever



had with my grandmother." In this confrontation, Mrs. Annie Henderson, Marguerite's grandmother and her absolute protector, positions herself as a literal barrier between her family and a "dangerous" white world, even though she must subject herself to racial insult to do so. Even when verbally assaulted by the adolescent girls, Momma Henderson remains outwardly "cool," giving no visible sign of her inner turmoil. During our interview, Angelou explores perspectives she withheld when writing this critical scene in *Caged Bird*.

BRAXTON: Let's talk about the geography, the physical geography of your grandmother's yard. Please draw or diagram things in your grandmother's yard? Could you situate the store . . . would you mind?

ANGELOU: O.K. There is the store. Out the back door . . . that's the back door . . . out the back door as you come out and to the left there is a garden—this is the garden—and behind the garden there is a chicken coop right there. And over on the right as you came out of the back door, there were two ways out of the back of the house . . . this was the bedroom. . . .

Over here was the pigs' sty as you turn right. This is the kitchen, which was about here; out that door were steps, and this was my uncle's bedroom with Bailey, and my grandmother's bedroom with me was here. And here was the kitchen; all the rest of this was store. There was a window here, near my grandmother's bedroom, and then a window here, and there was a big door to the store; this was the front door.

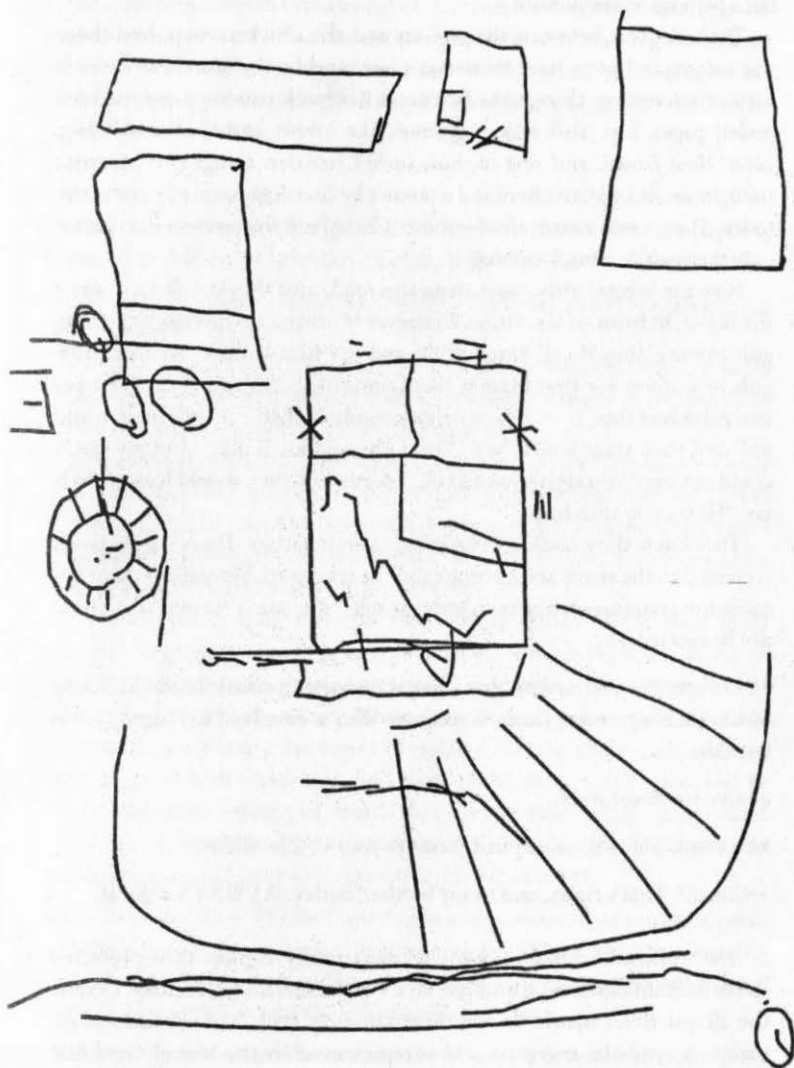
Here, outside, was the real living area. This was a chinaberry tree. My grandmother had a table built around the chinaberry tree so people could sit there under it. On Saturdays, women would come there and get their hair done and ladies would come, hairdressers. Men would barber around this chinaberry tree. At one point, we had lawn here, where we could play croquet, in the back, because in front of the house was dirt. I raked the dirt . . . here from the front porch back to the chinaberry. There were wash pots, right here, huge wash pots, and over there was a well where we drew water.

BRAXTON: Pots for washing clothing?

ANGELOU: Um hum, big iron pots. We boiled clothes in one and one was for rinsing, and there was a clothesline from that tree [to] another tree. The road came right across here and so there was a drive, I mean, for people who had cars or wagons.

Along here, this was the way to town, and this was the way to Mrs.





Drawing of Maya Angelou's backyard.

Flowers' house. The school was still up here, up the hill. So, you could see from the porch—well, you could just see the path, there wasn't a road, but a path up to the school.

The toilet was between the pigs' sty and the chicken coop. And there was a door, and over here there was a box, and in the box there were all sorts of interesting things like Sears and Roebuck catalog pages used for [toilet] paper, but also nice magazines like *Liberty* and *Good Housekeeping*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, and one of those little Christian things that Momma thought should go out there and wouldn't be sacrilegious to put out in the toilet. They were never used—these [Christian] magazines—for paper, only the Sears Roebuck catalog.

Now the [white] girls came along this road, and they'd walk in front of the house, in front of the store. Whenever Momma or anybody saw white girls coming, they'd call Uncle Willie and tell him to hide. Because these girls, or women, for that matter, could come in the store and say, "I'll have two pounds of this . . . I'll have ten pounds of this . . . I'll have so and so." And then they would say, "Put it on my bill, Willie." And my uncle could not say, "You don't have a bill," because all they would have to do is say, "He tried to touch me."

They knew they couldn't blackmail Grandmother. There was no point coming into the store and getting candy or trying to. They showed out because my grandmother was so impregnable. She was a fortress that could not be entered into.

BRAXTON: Are you saying that there is a sexual dynamic in the backdrop of this exchange even though everyone who is involved in chapter five is female?

ANGELOU: Absolutely.

BRAXTON: There is an implied threat to your Uncle Willie?

ANGELOU: That's right, and to my brother, Bailey. ALWAYS a threat.

The white and female "children" deliberately exploit their protected status to intimidate and humiliate Mrs. Henderson and her family. Despite the almost ritual insult by the three taunting girls, Mrs. Henderson remains, in symbolic memory and as represented in the text of *Caged Bird*, nearly impassive. Only her apron strings flutter as the girls flaunt their imagined racial superiority.

What is the source of the narrator's selective remembering here? Is the version represented by the narrator in *Caged Bird* a sanitized example of

"wedding list" or "church program" memory? Is the mature autobiographer's decision based on aesthetics? Or was Angelou, when writing, aware that a radically different treatment of this scene of confrontation, one that took into account all of its racial and sexual implications, might cause her book to be viewed as "just another protest work," possibly limiting her audience? If so, did her strategy of recollection collaborate with that awareness? I probed further.

BRAXTON: During the exchange in the yard, the "Maya character" reflected that there was a shotgun loaded and tucked away. Did she have any awareness of what it would have meant to use that gun?

ANGELOU: The four hundred and ten. My Uncle Willie always called it the four hundred and ten. . . .

I knew that killing was a sin. I knew that you weren't supposed to do anything to whites, not speak to them or even look them in the eye. I also knew that whites could and did do anything to us.

At my grandmother's quilting bee, five or six of her lady friends would quilt, and they had a big rack and they'd put it in her bedroom, which was really part living room too. They rolled out the quilt, and the ladies would do that fine stitching. And they would talk, and if I could keep really quiet just outside the door I could overhear them.

The women would tell the most stories about black men being lynched, black men running away, white men they worked for trying to get to them, and white women pretending they didn't see it, didn't see the husband try to feel them up. White women being angry with the black woman for even being an object of sexual desire to their husbands, not ever angry with the husband. So I heard all of that, and I knew, had to know, have some inkling of, lots of things. Of course, I didn't understand all of the implications, but you couldn't be black in the South past five years of age and not know the threats implied and overt.

BRAXTON: In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, you write about many terrible experiences. How did you emerge from the chrysalis of Maya's vulnerability? What enabled you to heal yourself where another person might have been destroyed? What was the difference?

ANGELOU: I can't remember a time when I wasn't loved by somebody. So even in the bad, really bad times, in Saint Louis, my brother, Bailey, helped. When I couldn't really trust my mother or her mother, or my uncles . . . they amused me, of course . . . they were funny . . . but to trust them????

My grandmother loved me and Uncle Willie loved me UNCONDITIONALLY . . . even when I became so weird that they couldn't understand me—they loved me. They loved me even then. . . .

And my grandmother to my knowledge never once kissed me, but she'd stroke my hair and pat me and say, "Poor girl." That was the equivalent to sitting in her lap, you know. Momma would look at my hair and say—and I would sit on the floor—and she would say, "Momma will plait your hair."

She'd cook for me. Whatever she cooked was everybody's dinner, but she would say, "Marguerite, you've got bumps on your face and I'm gonna make you some greens." Now that was everybody else's dinner too, but I knew it was for me and whatever bumps I had had to leave, and they would. That knowledge in itself is a healing lard, an ointment, a lotion. It is true therapy, true. And sometimes, I mean in the crisis, in the maelstrom, one may not think about the fact that one is loved. But you come out of that maelstrom, you come through the storm because of it. You see?

That's what I mean by love. I don't mean indulgence. The larger society could say anything it wanted, anything about me, but my grandmother said I was somebody.

BRAXTON: I'm sure that you knew that you would be criticized for writing about the rape. Why did you do it?

ANGELOU: Writing is very hard for me. Writing well, that is, telling the truth, is almost impossible. Anything I write, I write because I have to write. And I have to tell the truth about it, not just facts about it. If I could get away with it, inside myself, I would write the facts. But if I start to write, I have to write the truth.

The rape of a child is the cruelest action because it has so many implications. The child is, herself, himself, the potential rapist. Many people who have been raped quite often go to violate everything: themselves first, and then their families, their lovers, then the community and the society. It is so awful. I can say, honestly, that I don't believe a day has passed that I haven't thought about it, in something I do, in my own sexuality, in my own practices. So I thought to myself, "You write so that perhaps people who hadn't raped anybody yet might be discouraged, people who had might be informed, people who have not been raped might understand something, and people who have been raped might forgive themselves."

That's why I wrote about the rape.

Everything costs, Joanne Braxton, everything costs, everything, all the

time. I am always amazed to see photographs of myself. I always look like I'm about to cry, and I have reason for it.

The essays that follow, all previously published, provide a range of perspectives on *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and offer appropriate contextualization and a variety of critical approaches that support sound readings of the text not only by scholars of autobiography and black and women's studies but also by a more general audience reading Angelou's work for pleasure. Dolly McPherson's "Initiation and Self-Discovery" is placed first because it establishes a literary and cultural context, examining the ways in which *Caged Bird* forever reconfigured African-American autobiographical expression and paved the way for future generations of black women writers. McPherson theorizes about the autobiographer's use of memory to recreate herself in the light of her own method and the ways in which the amazing popularity of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* over a period of thirty years parallels Angelou's emergence as a public figure. In McPherson's words, "[C]ritics had no reason to think that a first book by an entertainment personality would be of particular importance. . . . For Angelou, however, the autobiographical mode was to become the means to an enduring public career."<sup>15</sup> This is a worthwhile observation, for even in the United States, a country that has emerged or "grown up" with the autobiographical genre, the writing of literary autobiography has rarely been a route to such popular acclaim.

Opal Moore's "Learning to Live: When the Bird Breaks from the Cage" originally appeared in a volume on censorship. With First Amendment rights under fire from religious conservatives, and *Caged Bird* one of the most frequently banned books in American schools, no discussion of this book can be complete without a consideration of the problem of censorship. Moore asks the critical question, "Will children be harmed by the truth?" She argues that *Caged Bird*, at once so race- and gender-specific and at the same time universal, "transcends its author." *Caged Bird* must not be banned, Moore says: "[A] younger audience . . . needs to know that their lives are not inherited or predestined, [and] that they can be participants in an exuberant struggle to subjugate traditions of ignorance and fear." Indeed, Moore lauds *Caged Bird* as "a book that has the potential to liberate the reader into life," a viewpoint shared by many parents, teachers, and critics.<sup>16</sup>

Mary Vermillion writes about somatophobia, or fear of the body, specifically fear of the black female body in this case, in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Vermillion's essay "Reembodying the Self: Representations of Rape

in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*” examines issues of rape, voice, and literary empowerment. According to Vermillion, “The woman who records her own rape must—if she does not wish to do with her pen what Lucrece does with her sword—close the distance between her body and whatever her society posits as a woman’s integral self (i.e., sexual reputation, mind, soul, desire, or will).”<sup>17</sup>

Vermillion explores a fear and disdain for the body that decidedly fosters the oppression of black women in somatophobic societies. The prevalence of somatophobia complicates wildly the task of the African-American woman who would remember publicly her own rape. Vermillion asserts that the black woman writer “must recover and celebrate her body without reinforcing racist perceptions of her as mere body.”<sup>18</sup> Moreover, she argues that *Caged Bird* continues in the tradition of Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by challenging and subverting the somatophobia inherent in patriarchal societies that posit blacks and women as being more bodylike, more sensual.

Pierre A. Walker writes about *Caged Bird* as “literary autobiography,” focusing on form. In his “Racial Protest, Identity, Words, and Form,” Walker proposes the “difficulty of writing autobiography ‘as literature.’” Analyzing Angelou’s seamless narrative and “the formal ways *Caged Bird* expresses its points about identity, words, and race,” Walker comments on the “internal organization of chapters” and their thematic juxtaposition. Walker demonstrates that in *Caged Bird*, “the political and the formal [are] . . . inextricably related” both to each other and to the development of Angelou’s aesthetics.<sup>19</sup>

In “Paths to Escape,” Susan Gilbert examines the two voices of *Caged Bird*, “the child, growing to consciousness of herself and the limits of her world, and the author, experienced, confident, and didactic.”<sup>20</sup> Unlike the hero of the *bildungsroman*, Marguerite, the lonely and isolated heroine of *Caged Bird*, like many others in the black female autobiographical tradition, narrates a collective story wherein she transcends loneliness and pain and ultimately finds her way to survival, fulfillment, and the realization of a self-defining identity.

Liliane K. Arensberg’s “Death as Metaphor of Self” traces Angelou’s “protean and existential” movement, and her continual “reorientation and assimilation” as defining themes of her identity. Arensberg also examines Angelou’s ambivalent feelings about her mother, including fear, love, desire, and rage. Facing the very real threat of violence from potential white lynchers, Marguerite Johnson balances her fear with a “revenge fantasy” in which “Gabriel Prosser and Nat Turner had killed all whitefolks in their

beds and . . . Abraham Lincoln had been assassinated before the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, . . . Harriet Tubman had been killed by that blow on her head and Christopher Columbus had drowned in the *Santa Maria*" (*Caged Bird*, 152–53).<sup>21</sup> This fantasy reshapes history through public remembering in service of a deep need to overcome the weight of the past, a past in which black folks and Indians, viewed in a more conventional historical light, always lose out.

In "Singing the Black Mother: Maya Angelou and Autobiographical Continuity," Mary Jane Lupton argues that Maya Angelou's autobiographical series is, "like an unfinished painting," an "ongoing creation, in a form that rejects the finality of a restricting frame." "What distinguishes . . . Angelou's autobiographical method," Lupton argues, "is her very denial of closure. . . . Angelou, by continuing her narrative, denies the form and its history, creating from each ending a new beginning, relocating the center to some luminous place in a volume yet to be."<sup>22</sup> Lupton argues that, at this point, there can be no closure to Angelou's continuing narrative. A careful look at the body of Angelou's oeuvre confirms Lupton's argument. The volumes of Angelou's autobiographical writing that follow, *Gather Together in My Name* (1974), *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* (1976), *The Heart of a Woman* (1981), *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986), and her essays and poetry, many of which have autobiographical content, suggest a fluidity of form and a layered or accretive approach to self-representation that transcends any narrow definition of genre.<sup>23</sup>

In closing, Claudia Tate's classic interview from *Black Women Writers at Work* discusses, among other things, Angelou's philosophy on the importance of image making, especially for black women writers. Angelou speaks very consciously about her role as an image maker, especially as young black postmodernists seek responsible mentors after whom they may model useful and responsible lives. And the casebook ends, as it began, with Angelou's own words.

Thirty years ago Maya Angelou was a virtually unknown black entertainment figure and a survivor of poverty, abandonment, child abuse, and unwed motherhood. Autobiography, beginning with the publication of *Caged Bird* in 1970, is at least partially the answer to the phenomenon of Angelou's unprecedented ascent to the podium where she would read "On the Pulse of the Morning" to celebrate the inauguration of an American president, the first black and the first woman ever honored to be commissioned to write a public poem for such an occasion.

Who is the "phenomenal woman" known as Maya Angelou (née Marguerite Johnson)? "Dr. Angelou" to her students and colleagues at Wake



Forest University, "Dr. A." to her staff, "Sister" to her colleague and friend Professor Dolly McPherson, "Aunty" to her niece Rosa Johnson, and "Grandmother" to her beloved grandson Colin Ashanti Murphy Johnson. Like the little girl Marguerite whom she has somehow kept alive within her memory and her spirit all of these years, Angelou has continued to grow, returning continually to the black experience for models and inspiration.

While Angelou has overcome much through personal courage, humor and romance, love and laughter have played important roles in her continuing quest for growth and renewal. As I was about to conclude our interview in Winston-Salem, I asked an open question, which, characteristically, she used to teach me about the importance of something I had overlooked—in this case, romance.

BRAXTON: Is there anything that I didn't ask you that I should have asked you?

ANGELOU: Yes, you should have asked me about romance!

BRAXTON: What about romance?

ANGELOU: That's a good question! [Laughter] I think it is very important in everybody's life. Without romance we risk being brutish and bland. Without romance we might have our sexual needs satisfied, but just that . . . just that. I think that black women tend to be romantic much longer than white women, so that in my late sixties I find myself as sexually excited as I was in my late forties, for that matter, and excitable.

I have to tell you a story about my mom. My mom was married to Poppa and Poppa was my stepfather, but he had never had any children. So, I was his first child as far as he was concerned, his first daughter. He probably had been about sixty-nine. He and my mother married when my mother was sixty-nine. They have been together for a few years, but they married on her sixty-ninth birthday. So, when she was about seventy-four, she called me from Scotland, California, where she lives and she said, "Baby, I'm through with your daddy. I'm through with him, I mean it—you better talk to him."

So I said, "What is it Mom?"

"Well you see, he thinks just because he had a stroke, that sex is dangerous for his heart," she said. "I told him, what better way to die?" She said, "and he thinks I can be satisfied with just having sex once a month . . . I'll put his butt out on the street, you better talk to him."

I said, "Mom, I don't know how . . ."

She said, "You're the only one who can."

I said, "O.K., you leave the house at 5:30. You go somewhere at 5:30 this afternoon." I thought all day, I prayed, and finally I called him, six o'clock, their time. I said, "Hey, Pop."

And he said, "Baby, how you doing down there in North Carolina."

I said, "Pretty good, Poppa. Let me speak to Mother."

He said, "She's out. She went over to your cousin Katie's."

I said, "Oh, she's not feeling very well is she?"

He said, "Yeah, she's feeling really good . . ."

I said, "Poppa, she is not eating."

And he said, "Yes she is."

I said, "You mean she's got an appetite?"

He said, "Sure, your momma's got an appetite."

I said, "She's not cooking."

He said, "Yes she is, she made that wonderful lunch for me today and we had it together . . . she's got a good appetite."

I said, "But she's not drinking."

He said, "Yes she is, she had . . ."

"Yeah, but Poppa I'm trying to get a picture of her, cause I see her as losing her appetite."

He said, "No, no she's got a good appetite."

I said, "Listening to music?"

He said, "Listening to Take Six this morning. We put it on that sound system you gave her."

I said, "But she's not playing those cards . . ."

He said, "She is over at your cousin Katie's right now; you know they playing those bones."

"So what you are saying, Poppa, is that all of her appetites are good?"

He said, "Yes ma'am, I can tell you that."

I said, "Poppa listen, please excuse me, but all of her appetites are good, but you see that means that she has got only one appetite that you can satisfy and . . ." I said, "Poppa please . . . Poppa, I have to tell you that she has gone needing in some area that only you can . . . Poppa please excuse me, the fact is she's desperate Poppa . . ."

He said, "Goodbye."

I hung up the phone.

The NEXT morning, my mother calls: "Hello, Mother's Little Diamond!"

Full of the joys and sorrows of the real world in all of their complexity, Maya Angelou offers her readers the possibility that they might experience the fullness of their own lives and be baptized into an awareness of the mystery and wonder of what it means to live and breathe and love and walk this earth of terrible and terrifying beauty. Hers is a road map that cries out for each reader to reinvent herself—in short, to become her own mother.

#### Notes

1. Angelou's other four autobiographies are *Gather Together in My Name* (1974), *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* (1976), *The Heart of a Woman* (1981), *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986).

2. In the introduction to *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within a Tradition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), I revise DuBois's definition to argue that there are gender-specific veils of perception, language, reference, and allusion within the veil of blackness. See pages 1–8.

3. Maya Angelou, speaking to Bill Moyers, "Creativity with Bill Moyers," PBS Video, CEL Communications, Inc., 1981.

4. Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography*, 13, 181–82.

5. Nadine Brozan, "Chronicle," *New York Times* (late/final edition), January 30, 1993.

6. Lyman B. Hagan, *Heart of a Woman, Mind of a Writer, and Soul of a Poet* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1997), 148–49.

7. Opal Moore, "Learning to Live: When the Bird Breaks from the Cage" in *Censored Books: Critical Viewpoints*, ed. Nicholas J. Karolides, Lee Burrell, and John M. Kean (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1993), 306–07.

8. Claudia Tate, "Maya Angelou," in *Black Women Writers at Work* (New York: Continuum, 1983), 3.

9. In "Richard Wright's Blues," from *Shadow and Act* (1953, 1964), Ralph Ellison wrote, "The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism." (See Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* [New York: Harper and Row, 1953, 1964], 78.)

James H. Cone calls the blues "secular spirituals," because while they "confine their attention solely to the immediate and affirm the bodily expression of the black soul . . ." they have theological significance in the sense that they are "impelled by the same search for the truth of the black experience" as the spiritual. (See James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis

Books, 1997], 100.) Like the preacher or the blues singer, Angelou assumes a representative and symbolic role, speaking for others who might remain largely voiceless while investing certain authority in the annointed representative.

10. Pierre Nora, as quoted by Melvin Dixon, "The Black Writer's Use of Memory" in *History and Memory in African American Culture*, ed. Genevieve Fabre and Robert O'Meally (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 18.

11. Melvin Dixon, in *History and Memory*, 18-19.

12. Karen Fields, "What One Cannot Remember Mistakenly," in *History and Memory*, 150.

13. Toi Derricotte, *The Black Notebooks* (New York: Norton, 1997), author's preface.

14. Fields, 152.

15. Dolly McPherson, *Order Out of Chaos: The Autobiographical Works of Maya Angelou* (London: Virago Press, 1991), 23 and 22.

16. Moore, 306, 308, and 314.

17. Mary Vermillion, "Reembodying the Self: Representations of Rape in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*," *Biography: An International Quarterly* 15, no. 3 (Summer 1992): 244.

18. *Ibid.*, 245.

19. Pierre A. Walker, "Racial Protest, Identity, Words, and Form in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*," *College Literature* 22, no. 3 (Oct. 1995): 91, 105, 99, and 94.

20. Susan Gilbert, "Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*: Paths to Escape," *Mount Olive Review* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 39.

21. Liliane K. Arensberg, "Death as a Metaphor of Self in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*," *College Language Association Journal* 20, no. 2 (Dec. 1976): 277 and 283.

22. Mary Jane Lupton, "Singing the Black Mother: Maya Angelou and Autobiographical Continuity," *Black American Literature Forum* 24, no. 2 (Summer 1990): 257 and 258.

23. In a brief introduction to the reprint of Nellie Arnold Plummer's *Out of the Depths: Or the Triumph of the Cross*, I discuss the discontinuous narrative form employed by some African-American autobiographers and compare it to the construction of the memory jar, a monument honoring a deceased loved one. The memory jar has some of the qualities of a quilt or "comforter" made from familiar material and scraps of worn-out clothing. It too "comforts," but the quilt is pieced together, while the memory jar is layered, with objects embedded in the plaster surface sometimes overlapping. (See Braxton, introduction, *Out of the Depths: Or the Triumph of the Cross* [New York: G. K. Hall, 1997].)

Like the multiple surfaces overlaying the brown glass of the memory jar, Angelou's five narratives build one upon the other, occasionally overlapping the po-

etry and autobiographical essays. For the writer, one of the unique advantages of the "layered" form of the accretive narrative is that it allows many voices to speak and more than one story to be told. Accretive forms occur naturally in the folk discourse of oral cultures; if one speaker lays down the thread of a well-known narrative, another might pick it up. In Angelou's larger narrative, the emerging Mayas carry the story, engaging in a call and response both with the imagined reader and earlier selves, sometimes within the same text. Through this process, the Maya-myth emerges.