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Maya Angelou

From 'Caged Bird' to 'All God's Children'

By Eugenia Collier

In her literary contributions, Maya Angelou speaks for us all. Her latest autobiography — or rather the fifth segment of her ongoing autobiography — is the culmination to which the other four have pointed. *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* tells of Angelou's three years in Ghana, along with a little band of American Blacks whom she called the Revolutionist Returnees. The book is not only good reading, but also an important statement which touches a nerve in the Black American psyche. On some level of our being, we all want to go "home" again. Maya Angelou actually did it.

Of all genres, autobiography is particularly suited to the experience of Blacks in the diaspora. Beginning with the slave narratives, Black folk have given eyewitness testimony to human history's most tragic chapter.

Critic Selwyn Cudjoe, in an article on Angelou's autobiographies, states, "The practice of the autobiographical statement, up until the contemporary era, remains the quintessential literary genre for capturing the cadences of the Afro-American being, revealing its deepest aspirations and tracing the evolution of the Afro-American psyche under the impact of slavery and modern U.S. imperialism."¹

Black autobiography, as Cudjoe points



out, is intensely personal. Yet it is a collective experience, an ongoing collective history which has molded us and which provides the context in which the personal is couched. Therefore, Cudjoe concludes, the Black autobiographer emerges not as an egotistical, unique individual but rather as a member of a group, speaking of and for the group.

As we all have observed, literature has dealt harshly with the Black woman. Seldom shown as more than a sex object or a mother-type, she has received superficial and sometimes distorted treatment, even in the canon of Black American literature. In the 1970s, women themselves took the reins in creating more rounded, more realistic portrayals of women in their complexity.

Cudjoe reiterates that Angelou's autobiography, in response to inadequate, surface treatment of Black women in literature, presents "a powerful, authentic and profound signification of the condition of Afro-American womanhood in her quest for understanding and love rather than from bitterness and despair. Her work is a triumph in the articulation of truth in simple, forthright terms."

(Evans, P. 11).

The sweep of Angelou's work includes not only womanhood but, indeed, what it means to be a Black person — ultimately, a Black person on a pinnacle of history.

The series of autobiographies begins in chaos. After a tempestuous marriage, her parents separate. Maya's early memory is of her three-year-old self and her brother Bailey, only a year older, alone on an interminable train ride to begin life anew at the home of their paternal grandmother in Stamps, Arkansas. That fearful journey characterizes much of Maya's early life. Adrift in a chaotic world, the two babies have little other than their own inborn courage and their survival instinct to see them to safe haven — this time with Momma Henderson — only to venture forth again on a different journey to another haven which also dissolves. There are many journeys in the series of autobiographies. On one level, most are escapes from some situation which has become unbearable. On another level, each is a further step in Maya's journey toward awareness.

The introduction to *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*² pinpoints a moment of anguish. Tiny Marguerite (Maya's birth name) forgets her lines in an Easter program. In her nervousness and embarrassment, she tries desperately and unsuccessfully to get to the bathroom in time, and there is yet another reason to be spanked by her grandmother and ridiculed by her peers. Disillusion and despair, self-doubt, aloneness in trouble, and a sense of being somehow out of tune with everybody else — these were the colors of Marguerite's world. Yet the incident marks the dawn of awareness. The development of this awareness flows through all the subsequent autobiographies. Growth is not easy; often it is agonizing. "If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl," Angelou writes, "being aware of her displacement is the

rust on the razor that threatens her throat." (*Caged Bird*, 3).

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is itself a remarkable statement of what it is like to be a Black girl-child in a hate-ridden land, which, as Cudjoe says, is characterized by "the violation of the Afro-American because he is too helpless to defend himself consistently, and the further degradation of his social being as the nature of the system worked toward his further diminishment." (Evans, 8).

We are witnesses to the impact of racism, superimposed on the stresses normally characteristic of growth as Marguerite-now-Maya, grown, reveals the incidents which are, ultimately, cornerstones of *becoming*. Her selfhood is assailed from within and without. The too-frequent uprooting and shunting back and forth between grandmother and mother, the traumatic encounters with both the white world and the Black, and the ultimate outrage — rape at age eight by a trusted adult — each occurrence is a wound. Yet in the tradition of the survivors, Marguerite develops the inner strength apparently inherited by her foremothers, and each wound becomes a source of strength and self-knowledge.

Each subsequent autobiography continues the theme of developing awareness. In *Gather Together in My Name*,³ Maya leaves her mother's house, along with her young son, determined to prove her worth. With her way of handling life with courage and even daring, Maya becomes a cook, a madame, a dancer, and a prostitute (to help a perfidious man whom she loves). She has two serious, unhappy love affairs, for which she sheds lonely tears. Her beloved brother Bailey marries, but his wife dies, and he begins his road downward, a road which eventually leads to prison.

There are many journeys. The final one is a journey back to her mother's place. "I

Maya has traveled far, not only in physical distance but also in the spirit.

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." (*Gather*, 181).

In *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas*,⁴ Maya has a brief marriage with a man of Greek extraction. She is immersed in the American myth of a woman's goal — a nice man to take care of her. Her lessons are painfully learned. Then she embarks on a fantastic journey — she joins the cast of *Porgy and Bess* and tours Europe. She emerges with a deeper self-knowledge, a wider vision of the world, and a start toward becoming a successful artist.

*The Heart of a Woman*⁵ begins in 1957, in the days of the Civil Rights movement. Maya sees herself and Black America in the context of America. She believes in integration: She and twelve-year-old Guy live for awhile in a commune with white people. When she comes out of the commune, she rents a house in a white neighborhood; for awhile she lives remote from Blacks.

Later, she moves to New York, where she meets John O. Killens and joins the Harlem Writers Guild. She becomes the Northern Coordinator for the Southern

Christian Leadership Conference. Eventually she meets and marries Vus Make, an African freedom-fighter, and moves with him to Cairo. The marriage fails; she is unable to be the submissive wife of his expectations. She and Guy move to Ghana.

Maya has traveled far, not only in physical distance but also in the spirit: from a white commune to Cairo, to Ghana — to independence, to commitment, to the search for understanding.

The autobiographies are exciting in a number of areas. They are, first of all, a systematic unfolding of the life of one of the most talented people of our times. Moreover, they give us glimpses of other personalities — artists, writers, entertainers — whose public image we know: Julian Mayfield, John O. Killens, John Henrik Clarke, Paule Marshall, Rosa Guy — too many to name here. There is a particularly moving vignette of the doomed Billie Holiday. There are telling portraits of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. Maya moves from the awful days of rabid racism through the terrible/wonderful civil rights movement, and she takes us with her. In this journey through time she is both unique individual and voice of the collective Us.

Although these autobiographies have the sound of casual storytelling, actually they are carefully crafted. Maya Angelou uses the techniques of fiction. Her characters are vivid. Her relationships with her family are as ambivalent and complex as such relationships always are. Her mother Vivian Baxter, her grandmothers, her beloved and troubled brother Bailey, her son Guy, and the various characters whom she meets along the way are real because she makes them so and because they resemble people we have known all our lives. Plot, theme, setting — aspects of fiction which are often part of fictive analysis — are

24 developed to various degrees in the autobiographies.

Throughout, Angelou is beautifully proficient in her exploitation of the imaginative use of language with which Black people are peculiarly blessed. "I write for the Black voice and any ear which can hear it," she says. "I write because I am a Black woman listening intently to her talking people." [Evans, 3, 4]

Nommo — the Word — is of profound, even mystic importance to those who emanate from Africa. The Word is magic, performs miracles. Read Hughes' *Simple sketches* or Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and you will hear the Word. Read/listen to the poets and story-tellers (Sonya Sanchez says, "We be word sorcerers"). Ride the bus up Seventh Street in Washington, D.C. and listen to the talkers, you will hear the Word. Stroll through the Punch-Out cafeteria at Howard University's Blackburn Center and eavesdrop on the students who just flunked your freshman English course, and you will hear the most imaginative, complex, metaphorical language this side of the *Harbrace Handbook*.

Hannah Nelson⁶ knew the value of the spoken word. "In speaking of great matters," she said, "Your personal experience is considered evidence. With us, distant statistics are certainly not as important as the actual speech of a sober person."⁷

Angelou partakes of the same magic word-making. Throughout the autobiographies there sounds the voice of the Black folk, dealing with the is-ness of life. The picture is not always pretty, because life is not always pretty. But the truth is told succinctly and vibrantly. Take, for example, Vivian Baxter's description of what happened when her boy friend Good-Doing found her eating fried chicken with a male friend:

"Baby, I swear to you, I don't know what

sent him off, but before I could say anything, he reached in his pocket and pulled out a knife. You know he's got something wrong with the fingers on his left hand, so he bent his head over and was trying to open the knife with his teeth. Now, you can see by that, that he's a fool. Instead of moving away from him I just stepped over to the mantel. I put Bladie Mae in my pocket before I went up to the room. When he came up with his knife half open, I slapped him cross the face with old Bladie.

"He jumped faster than the blood. Screamed, 'God-dammit, Bibbie, you cut me!"

"I said, 'You goddam right, and you lucky I don't shoot you on top of it.' [Gather, p. 107]

A pervasive theme, naturally developed in all the autobiographies, is the strength of the Black woman, her ability to prevail despite the awful hurting put upon her by the world, even by her own Black man, who all too often assuages his own hurt by further oppressing her. Yet there is no blatant preaching, no anti-male rhetoric. There are too many men for whom she has profound love — her brother Bailey, for example, and her son Guy. Many of the "brothers" appear in the dedications to the works. In any case, the story is told with humor and compassion. And if you are a Black woman, you see yourself coming and going. And you are proud.

All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes is the apex toward which the other autobiographies have pointed. Those three years in Ghana provided the liberating experience which set the direction of her subsequent life, freed her to do the kind of soul-searching necessary for autobiographers, let flow the poetry.

There is in each of us a longing for completion, an instinctual movement to-

ward filling in the empty spaces. For us who were robbed of our past, there is a great void in the racial psyche, a groping for unknown, unremembered things. Maya's pilgrimage to the ancestral land, painful and joyful and perplexing as it was, filled that void for her. And because she speaks from a collective as well as a personal experience, we, reading her book, are also rendered whole.

Her entry into Ghana is a baptism of pain. Two years in Cairo trying vainly to live up to her husband's expectation of an African wife resulted in a ruined marriage, separation, divorce. But those were years of preparation, a seasoning time for the Ghana experience. Maya intends to settle her son Guy in the University of Ghana and then travel alone to Liberia to work. But on the third day in Ghana, Guy is seriously injured in an automobile accident, and Maya stays in Ghana to be near him.

Many things happened to Maya in Ghana, but the book is not a mere narration of events. The telling is a coalescence of the present and the distant past, of Africa and the diaspora, of the personal and the collective, the physical and the psychic. Questions are answered and other questions raised.

These were the exciting years of the mid-sixties — years of heroes and of heroism. The world became smaller as Black people increasingly looked to Africa for identity and sought to reestablish bonds broken generations past. The sage W. E. B. Du Bois, ninety-five and dying, had led the way by leaving the United States entirely and becoming a citizen of Ghana. Julian Mayfield, a Black American writer, actor, and rebel, and his wife Ana Livia were the center of a group of American Blacks who had moved to Ghana in an effort to find their roots. They were writers, artists, teachers, plumbers, whatever. They were strang-

ers in a strange land. They had left home to find home. The concept of "home" to them had taken on new and multi-leveled definitions.

Angelou pinpoints the dilemma of the diasporan Black in the ambivalence of these expatriates and in her own ambivalence. The apex of this duality is seen in their response to the March on Washington in August of 1963. The American Blacks, together with a crowd of Ghanaians, support the D.C. march with a demonstration at the American Embassy in Accra. News of Dr. Du Bois' death gives to the event a poignancy and an aura of renewed commitment. Having begun their march at midnight (to coincide with the seven a.m. start in Washington), the demonstrators jeer when the two American soldiers — one Black — raise the flag at dawn. But they are torn within themselves. Maya remembers this moment in a moving passage:

" . . . Many of us had only begun to realize in Africa that the Stars and Stripes was our flag and our only flag, and that knowledge was almost too painful to bear. We could physically return to Africa, find jobs, learn languages, even marry and remain on African soil all our lives, but we were born in the United States and it was the United States which had rejected, enslaved, exploited, then denied us. It was the United States which held the graves of our grandmothers and grandfathers. . . "[127]

Increasingly Maya is drawn into Africa, to an extent impossible for her during the Cairo years of trying to be a submissive wife. Wearing African attire and speaking in Ghanaian ethnic languages, she is often mistaken for a native-born African. Constantly she observes links between African and Afro-American cultures as the wisdom of her mother and grandmother bubbles up from the past, or as a young

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boy seems the alter ego of her brother Bailey, or as some African ritual evokes memories of home.

Yet as an American Black she retains a sense of unease. The years of slavery and oppression have given the Americans a different orientation in vital ways. A steward in the faculty lounge, for example, reacts differently from Maya when, upon overhearing a conversation among arrogant, racist Europeans, she becomes enraged, tells them off, threatens to slap the water out of them all, and retreats. The steward follows her and offers wisdom.

"This is not their place. In time they will pass. Ghana was here when they came. When they go. Ghana will be here. They are like mice on an elephant's back. They will pass." [52]

Maya responds:

"In that second I was wounded. My mind struck a truth as an elbow can strike a table edge. A poor, uneducated servant in Africa was so secure he could ignore established white rudeness. No Black American I had ever known knew that security. Our tenure in the United States, though long and very hard-earned, was always so shaky, we had developed patience as a defense, but never as aggression." [52]

Often Maya is discomfited by the thought that Africans participated in the enslavement of their brothers. The ancestral past and the present moment have a curious way of blending, and she finds within her a kernel of resentment toward those who stayed, wondering whether this one's or that one's ancestors had sold hers into slavery. Part of that resentment is envy. After witnessing a beautiful example of African family solidarity, she ponders:

"I . . . admitted to a boundless envy of those who remained on the continent, out of fortune or perfidy. Their countries had been exploited and their cultures had been discredited by colonialism. Nonetheless, they could reflect through their priests and chiefs on centuries of continuity. The lowliest could call the name of ancestors who lived centuries earlier. The land upon which they lived had been in their people's possession beyond remembered time. Despite political bondage and economic exploitation, they had retained an ineradicable innocence.

"I doubted if I, or any Black from the diaspora, could really return to Africa. We wore skeletons of old despair like necklaces, heralding our arrival, and we were branded with cynicism. In America we danced, laughed, procreated; we became lawyers, judges, legislators, teachers, doctors, and preachers, but as always, under our glorious costumes we carried the badge of a barbarous history sewn to our dark skins." [76]

It is this tension between African-ness and American-ness which informs the book, and this tension, I believe, is the basis of our confusion over who we are.

As Maya wrestles with her complex feelings about Africa, other things are happening to her. Malcolm X visits Accra and deepens her insights into the Black situation. She has a romance with a dashing Muslim. She travels to Germany

26 to appear in Genet's *The Blacks*. She sings for a President. She meets many people and partakes of many events. Always the Revolutionist Returnees are her family.

One of the most moving themes in the book is her relationship with her son Guy. The mother-son bond is perhaps the most painful of all human relationships. It is seldom explored. Especially, it seems to me, is there agony in the separation process when the mother has reared her son alone. Single Black mothers in particular go through hell because they have endured so much and become, by necessity, so strong that their sons attain manhood not by destroying the father, who is already gone, but by destroying the mother. In any case, sons struggling to be men do not know how much they hurt the one left behind.

We watch with empathy the crucial process of separation of Maya and Guy. In the other autobiographies we have watched his growth, his centrality to her life from the time when sixteen-year-old Marguerite becomes pregnant. We have watched the joy and travail of his rearing; we have noted that in all her journeys, he is her stability. We see the necessity of separation. And we hear her anguished cry:

"He's gone. My lovely little boy is gone and will never return. That big confident strange man has done away with my little boy, and he has the gall to say he loves me. How can he love me? He doesn't know me, and I sure as hell don't know him." [186]

Throughout the book, the fictive techniques which we observed in the earlier autobiographies render the work effective. Angelou introduces us to a bevy of characters who assume varying degrees of roundness. Particularly vibrant are Kojo, the "small boy" of the household, and her laughing hairdresser Comfort,

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whose pathetic death is so engrained in traditional African beliefs. The informal portrait of Malcolm X is an important segment.

Among the people whom Angelou describes is Julian Mayfield, who left the United States to escape government harassment and around whom the Revolutionist Returnees gather. More than a decade later, Mayfield became writer-in-residence at Howard University, where he was my colleague and treasured friend. Because of those years in Ghana, Mayfield was able to bring to students a special insight, a special sense of Blackself which is, unfortunately, rare and not always appropriately valued. Julian Mayfield died in the fall of 1984. It is good to read of him, to see him alive again at a high point of his life in Angelou's account.

In this latest autobiography, Angelou continues the tradition of *Nommo* — the Word — as in the previous narratives. The language is spare, rhythmic, authentic in sound.

"As a composer writes for musical instruments and a choreographer creates for the body, I search for sound, tempos, and rhythms to ride through the vocal cord over the tongue and out of the lips of

Black people. I love the shades and slashes of light. Its rumblings and passages of magical lyricism. I accept the glory of stridencies and purrings, trumpetings and sombre sonorities." [Evans, 3-4]

It is clear that Angelou is reaching for this use of language. Sometimes she achieves it in an obvious fashion, as when, in an argument with Julian Mayfield, she demands angrily, "How do you know my business so well? Was that my daddy visiting your mother all those times he left our home?" (11). At other times her conscious search for clarity and beauty in language appears in quick little figures of speech: "I made bitterness into a wad and swallowed it . . ." (7) or "From the airplane window sunlight on the Sahara made the sandscape look like a lumpy butterscotch ocean." [176]

Eventually Maya decides to leave Africa. She needs to leave Guy to continue his entry into manhood. Besides, she has gotten from Africa all that she can, and has given all that she has. It is time to go home. "If the heart of Africa still remained elusive, my search for it had brought me closer to understanding myself and other human beings. The ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned." [196]

But she has one more river to cross. She still has not made her peace with Africa.

If this book were a novel, I would find the last occurrence unbelievable and contrived. But autobiography is, presumably, truth; and I have seen enough of miracles to know that they really do happen.

On her last days in Ghana, Maya has a mystic experience which yields a profound psychic acceptance of the Africa in her and the Self in Africa. It is this experience which restores her, which sets her free.

A few days before her departure, riding

with friends to eastern Ghana, Maya has a feeling of inexplicable terror when their car approaches a bridge. She insists upon walking across. She learns later that generations ago the bridges in that site were so poorly constructed that they would crumble under the weight of vehicles, and only those on foot were likely to cross safely.

Still shaken, she enters a marketplace in the little town. She is startled and then gratified to find that she bears a strong physical resemblance to the people there. And they refuse to believe that she is an American; they insist that she is one of them. Her friend tells her the village's history, how years ago only the children escaped being killed or taken into slavery. The descendants of those children know their terrible history and still mourn. The people weep and offer her gifts. And for Maya the empty space in her selfhood is filled.

"The women wept and I wept. I too cried for the lost people, their ancestors and mine. But I was also weeping with a curious joy. Despite the murders, rapes and suicides, we had survived. The middle passage and the auction block had not erased us. Not humiliations nor lynchings, individual cruelties nor collective oppression had been able to eradicate us from the earth. We had come through despite our own ignorance and gullibility, and the ignorance and rapacious greed of our assailants.

"There was much to cry for, much to mourn, but in my heart I felt exalted knowing there was much to celebrate. Although separated from our languages, our families and customs, we had dared to continue to live. We had crossed the unknowable oceans in chains and had written its mystery in "Deep River, my home is over Jordan." Through the centuries of despair and dislocation, we had been cre-

Angelou introduces us to the bevy of characters who assume varying degrees of roundness.

ative, because we faced down death by daring to hope." [207]

The empty space is filled for Maya and for me, the American Black reader. Because somewhere in Africa there is a village where someone of mine was taken. What I could not do, Maya Angelou did for me, and I, too, feel fulfilled. Again the Black autobiographer speaks for her people, and we are all affected.

Maya leaves Africa knowing who she is and who we are.

"Many years earlier I, or rather someone very like me and certainly related to me, had been taken from Africa by force. This second leave-taking would not be so onerous, for now I knew my people had never completely left Africa. We had sung it in our blues, shouted it in our gospel and danced the continent in our breakdowns. As we carried it to Philadelphia, Boston, and Birmingham we had changed its color, modified its rhythms, yet it was Africa which rode in the bulges of our high calves, shook in our protruding behinds and crackled in our wide open laughter." [208]

The awareness which was, in her Arkansas girlhood, the rust on the razor at

her throat, is now the instrument of her wholeness.

Maya Angelou knows — and tells us in a series of brilliant autobiographies — why the caged bird sings. □

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Notes

1. "Maya Angelou and the Autobiographical Statement," in *Black Women Writers: A Critical Evaluation*, edited by Mari Evans (New York: Doubleday, 1984), pp. 6-24. This quote is on p. 6.
2. New York: Random House, 1970.
3. New York: Random House, 1974.
4. New York: Random House, 1976.
5. New York: Random House, 1981.
6. One of the informants in John Langston Gwaltney's *Drylongso: A Self-Portrait of Black America* (New York: Random House, 1980), p. 6.
7. Quoted in Cudjoe's article, Evans, p. 9.