**Introduction**

The importance of Maya Angelou's autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* cannot be overestimated. Angelou's chronicle of an African American girl growing up in the rural South in the 1930s, written at the end of the turbulent decade of the 1960s, tapped into the conscience of a nation grappling with civil rights and women's liberation issues. In 1970 it was nominated for the National Book Award, and it soon became required reading at many high schools and colleges, a fact confirmed by the dubious distinction of its having been the frequent target of censorship. In 1995 the work topped the Office for Intellectual Freedom's "most challenged" list.

Following Angelou's appearance at President Bill Clinton's inauguration in 1993, where she read her poem "On the Pulse of Morning," interest in her work has intensified. In 1994, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* was named among the one hundred best books for young adults by the Young Adult Library Services Association. As of August 1997, it had been on the *New York Times* paperback nonfiction bestseller list for 153 weeks. Also indicative of the book's popularity is the impact it has had on popular culture. The June 1995 issue of the *Alternative Law Journal* reported that a character in the film Reality Bites declares that he "knows why the caged bird sings" and that this line is also used "in a song on Maxinquaye, the new album by Tricky." Angelou originally decided to write *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* because not enough had been written for young black girls in the United States. She wanted to remind her fellow African Americans that despite the obstacles and the pain they endured, there was much love and humor to be found in the African American community. Indeed, the book has a very definite appeal for young black girls. In a 1993 interview with Angelou, Oprah Winfrey described how important the work was to her because it was the first book she had read that reflected her own experience.

But despite her original intentions, Angelou found that when she began writing the book her ideas and audience changed: "I saw it was not just for black girls but for young Jewish boys and old Chinese women" ( Julianelli, 124). The book's popularity endures not only because it continues to be instructive on matters of race and gender, but also because it is a universal tale of survival.

This study of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* addresses both the specific and universal elements of Angelou's autobiography. It begins with a focus on the literary elements of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*: its genre, central themes, point of view, setting, and so on. This literary analysis traces Angelou's journey from an awkward, lonely, and insecure child to an adolescent who survives many heartbreaks and emerges as a self-reliant and mature young woman. Subsequent chapters examine specific issues raised by the autobiography and the particular historical moment it portrays. Chapter 2 explores race relations in the post-Reconstruction, precivil rights South (the milieu of Angelou's childhood). Chapters 3 through 5 focus on institutions that have shaped African American culture in general and Angelou's experience in particular: the African American school under segregation, the African American church in the rural South, and the family. Chapter 6 considers the problem of sexual abuse ( Angelou was raped at the age of seven), and Chapter 7 analyzes the issue of censorship. The bibliographic essay provides information on Angelou's activities, publications, and honors following the period portrayed in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

A study such as this assumes that a work like *I Know Why the Caged Birds Sings* is not an isolated story of a single individual. It is rather a multilayered chronicle that can offer insight about the history and culture of a people at a particular time and place and that raises issues of profound and universal significance. The analyses contained in this study help to illuminate the historical context of the work and help us to understand more fully the issues it raises.

Chapters 2 through 7 include carefully selected documents that offer insight on a number of topics. Introductory material explains the relevance of each document or group of documents to *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Many of the documents published during the first half of the twentieth century shed light on the period in history about which Angelou writes. The documents have been drawn from many sources, including magazine and newspaper articles, interviews and first-person narratives, government publications, scholarly books and articles, legal statutes, and publications of nonprofit organizations. They reflect a wide variety of disciplines, among them literature, history, sociology, law, and music. Study questions, topics for written or oral exploration, and suggestions for further reading are also included.

Many people have contributed to bringing this project to fruition. I would like to thank, first of all, my husband, Chip Wallace, and my children, Patrick and Kelsey, for their patience, love, and support. I would also like to express my gratitude to Claudia D. Johnson, editor of the Literature in Context Series, and my colleague at Bradford College, Deborah Mistron, for their valuable comments and suggestions. Thanks also to the many librarians who have helped me: the library staff at Bradford College, especially Pat Paquette for her expertise and commitment to obtaining sources for me through interlibrary loan; and Sharon Snow, Curator of Rare Books at Wake Forest University, and Ellen Bard at the Central Arkansas Library System for their research efforts on my behalf. Finally, I would like to thank the many people who were instrumental in obtaining the necessary permissions to reprint material contained in this volume.

**1**

**The Journey to Maturity and Self-Esteem: A Literary Analysis of Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings**

**THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL GENRE AND I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS**

In his analysis of Maya Angelou's autobiographical works, Selwyn R. Cudjoe asserts that African Americans have often chosen autobiography as their means of self-expression: "The Afro-American autobiographical statement is the most Afro-American of all AfroAmerican literary pursuits" (272). Cudjoe cites the autobiographies of Frederick Douglass, Linda Brent ( Harriet Jacobs), Booker T. Washington, Zora Neale Hurston, Malcolm X, and W.E.B. Du Bois as testimony to "the strength, consistency, and importance of this genre in Afro-American literature" (277).

Slave narratives constitute the first written African American autobiographies. Slaves wrote in order to expose the horrific conditions under which they lived and to provide proof of their humanity to further the abolitionist cause. In her work *Where I'm Bound*, Sidonie Smith discusses the structural and thematic motifs established in the slave narratives, which she argues are repeated in subsequent African American autobiographies, including Angelou's. Smith writes: "The ex-slave narrated the story of his successful break *into* a community that allowed authentic selfexpression and fulfillment in a social role. . . . He also narrated the story of his radical break *away from* an enslaving community that forbade him authentic selfhood" (ix).

In her anthology *Written by Herself*, Jill Ker Conway points to a dominant theme in black women's autobiography that is amply illustrated in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings:* "Because, from girlhood, these women faced the dual injustices of racial hostility and male exploitation, their life histories are told with no hint of romantic conventions. They describe, instead, a quest for physical and psychological survival" (3). Angelou's account of her childhood and adolescence chronicles her frequent encounters with racism, sexism, and classism at the same time that she describes the people, events, and personal qualities that helped her to survive the devastating effects of her environment. Despite the triple oppression she faced as a girl growing up poor in the racially segregated town of Stamps, Arkansas, Angelou stresses the role models and family members who sustained and nurtured her and the events that contributed to her development into a strong, independent young woman.

Angelou's rebellious spirit and zest for a challenge are revealed in an interview where she explained that she at first turned down the opportunity to write her autobiography, but was unable to resist when she was told that "to write an autobiography as literature is the most difficult thing anyone could do" ( Tate, 6). When asked in the same interview how she selected the events presented in her autobiography, Angelou declared: "Some events stood out in my mind more than others. Some, though, were never recorded because they either were so bad or so painful, that there was no way to write about them honestly and artistically without making them melodramatic. They would have taken the book off its course" ( Tate, 7).

Angelou's remarks suggest one of the complex issues involved in the analysis of autobiography. While autobiographers most likely intend to tell the truth about their own lives, they nevertheless make conscious decisions about what to include or exclude in order to write a coherent life. Conway notes, "Autobiographical narratives are fictions, in the same sense that the narrator imposes her or his order on the ebb and flow of experience and gives us a false sense of certainty and finality about causation in life." Despite this limitation, Conway goes on to assert the positive benefits of autobiographical narratives: "Yet they are not fictions but accounts of real lives, lived in a specific time and place, windows on the past, chances to enter and inhabit the real world of another person, chances to try on another identity and so broaden our own" (vii).

When asked whether she considers her autobiographical works to be novels or autobiographies, Angelou responds that they are autobiographies, suggesting that she has intended to write the truth about her life. But her response also alerts us to her intention to broaden her focus beyond her particular life to include a description of the historical moment she lived through: "When I wrote *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, I wasn't thinking so much about my own life or identity. I was thinking about a particular time in which I lived and the influences of that time on a number of people. . . . I used the central figure -- myself -- as a focus to show how one person can make it through those times" ( Tate, 6). Angelou's remarks are consistent with Cudjoe's analysis of the intentions of African American autobiography in general: "The autobiography . . . is meant to serve the group rather than glorify the individual's exploits. The concerns of the collective predominate and one's personal experiences are presumed to be the closest approximation of the group's experiences" (280).

For Angelou, the events she chooses to explore in her autobiography emphasize how she coped with her difficult life circumstances, and how others, too, can cope. She states: "All my work, my life, everything is about survival. All my work is meant to say, 'You may encounter many defeats, but you must not be defeated' " ( Tate, 7). Angelou, then, writes from the perspective of a mature adult and crafts her work to convey the process of her development, to demonstrate how she overcame her personal defeats and survived.

This chapter considers several aspects of the work: we will explore the significant structural elements, including the episodic nature of the work, the importance of the time period and setting, and Angelou's use of language and tone. The second part of the analysis considers the specific events and the particular people whose love helped Maya to endure a childhood haunted by alienation and loneliness.

**A STRUCTURAL AND DRAMATIC ANALYSIS OF I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS**

Angelou's approach to her life story is roughly chronological, beginning with her arrival in Stamps at the age of three with her brother Bailey and concluding in California at the age of sixteen just after the birth of her son. Her story unfolds in a series of selfcontained episodes that take place in various social settings. The opening scene is a carefully crafted description of an event that frames the entire work, defining the important thematic concerns that will be repeated throughout. The narrative opens with lines from a poem that attest to Maya's early sense of displacement: "What you looking at me for? I didn't come to stay . . ." (1). Her parents divorced when she was three years old, and their decision to send Maya and Bailey to live with their paternal grandmother contributes to Maya's low self-esteem and sense of not belonging. As many children do, Maya and Bailey feel that they are to blame for their parents' abandonment of them. Maya's sensitivity to the racism that permeates her environment further contributes to her sense of inferiority. Her sense of impotence and worthlessness is underscored in the opening pages when she dreams of waking up transformed into a beautiful white girl with blond hair and blue eyes. According to Smith, this "primal childhood scene brings into focus the nature of the imprisoning environment from which the self will seek escape. The black girl child is trapped within the cage of her own diminished self-image around which interlock the bars of natural and social forces" ( Song of a Caged Bird, 368).

This opening scene takes place in the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, one of the predominant settings for Angelou's work. Angelou's narrative highlights the importance of the church as a social institution in her life and in the lives of the African Americans in her community, an issue that will be taken up in detail in Chapter 4 of this study. Other social institutions provide the setting for important episodes in the autobiography. Angelou's eighth-grade graduation furnishes a glimpse into the educational practices and environment of the Lafayette County Training School (see Chapter 3). The many interactions with the members of her immediate family provide important insights into the African American family as an institution (see Chapter 5). Scenes in her family's general store are occasions to explore all manner of social and economic interactions. It is in the store that Maya learns sympathy for the morning hopes and evening disappointments of the unfortunate cottonpickers, where she witnesses her grandmother's painful encounter with the "powhitetrash" children, where she observes her grandmother's resourceful bartering during the Great Depression, and where she gathers with her community to listen to Joe Louis's fight with Primo Carnera, a white boxer.

The periods of her life spent in St. Louis and San Francisco offer Angelou perspective on urban life. St. Louis introduces her to relatives who are streetwise, to strange new foods like thin-sliced ham, and to the hustle and bustle of city life. Living in San Francisco adds to Angelou's knowledge of the ethics and behavior of the gamblers and con artists who frequent the black urban underworld.

The time period of the work is equally important. Angelou's description of race relations in Stamps during the 1930s provides a vivid portrait of the "Jim Crow" era with its laws legalizing segregation and its unwritten rules governing behavior between the races (see Chapter 2 of this study). Her time in San Francisco in the early years of World War II allows Angelou to observe the slow disappearance of the Japanese as they are sent to internment camps, and the gradual occupation of the Japanese districts by African Americans. The experience of the Japanese and the job discrimination she herself faces teach her that southern whites are not the only ones who practice racism.

Scenes in the work are often dramatic, sometimes comic, and always carefully wrought with a lyrical but honest quality. When an interviewer suggests that writing a novel would be easy for Angelou, Angelou's response confirms her preference for autobiography and again emphasizes her desire to tell the truth and her effort to convey a sense of collective experience: "I'm using the first-person singular, and trying to make that the first-person plural, so that anybody can read the work and say, 'Hmm, that's the truth, yes, *uh-huh*' and live in the work" ( Angelou, "The Art of Fiction CXIX", 156). Indeed, Angelou often generalizes her experience to provide insight into specific institutions, social settings, or characteristics and behaviors of a group or type. For example, at the conclusion of the opening scene, when she flees from church after her humiliating debacle in the Easter spectacle, Angelou writes: "If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat. It is an unnecessary insult" (3). Here she not only stresses her particular emotional devastation, but also extends her experience to relate it to the wider experience of the southern black girl.

But while Angelou's story embraces the larger issues, it is also the story of the kindness and love of particular people who had a positive effect on her life, and of the events that shaped and sometimes inspired her. In the second part of this analysis we will explore their impact.

**SIGNIFICANT OTHERS AND EVENTS**

From the age of three Maya is raised and nurtured by her strict and devoutly religious grandmother, whom she calls "Momma." Although Maya admits that she is often baffled by her grandmother's behavior, she clearly loves and respects her. This substitute mother-daughter relationship provides some security for the young Maya. Recent feminist studies emphasize the importance of the mother-daughter relationship for women's psychological development. Angelou gives prominence to the role of her grandmother (and later, her mother), and her narrative strategy bears witness to the impact these relationships had on her, and ultimately on her writing. For what is striking about her narrative choice is the importance she places on the role others have played in shaping her identity and destiny. Nancy Chodorow maintains that "because of their mothering by women, girls come to experience themselves as less separate than boys, as having more permeable ego boundaries. Girls come to define themselves more in relation to others" (93). In *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography*, Sidonie Smith reviews various theories of women's autobiography and cites among them "theories that distinguish women's autobiographies by the way in which women seem to unfold their story through their relationship to a significant 'other' " (18). [1](http://www.questia.com/read/27374794)

There are several "significant others" in Angelou's narrative. Maya's deep feelings for her brother Bailey are an important lifeline for her. She depends on him for love, laughter, and wise counsel. Bailey's support is crucial in one of Maya's early experiences of racism. At the age of ten, Maya goes to work as a maid for a white woman, Viola Cullinan, who decides that Maya's given name, Marguerite, is too long and arrogantly begins to call her Mary. Maya decides that she will not bear this indignity and that she must quit the job, but she knows that her grandmother will not allow her to quit without a good reason. Angelou credits Bailey with solving her dilemma. It is his idea that Maya break one of Mrs. Cullinan's favorite dishes in order to get herself fired. Bailey's idea works, and her success in carrying out this act, according to Sidonie Smith, "foreshadows Maya's eventual inability to sit quietly and is very much an expression of her growing acceptance of her own self-worth" ( *Where I'm Bound*, 131).

It is also at the age of ten that Maya begins to move outside the family circle and finds a best friend, Louise Kendricks. After a good giggle over an impromptu game of looking into the sky and trying to fall into it, they become friends. According to Angelou, their time is spent playing jacks and hopscotch, and telling each other their deepest, darkest secrets. This description of her friendship with Louise is consistent with the observations of Carol Gilligan in her work about the psychosocial development of girls, *In a Different Voice*. According to Gilligan and the study by Janet Lever she cites, "girls' play tends to occur in smaller, more intimate groups, often the best-friend dyad, and in private places. . . . [I]t points less . . . toward learning to take the role of 'the generalized other,' less toward the abstraction of human relationships. But it fosters the development of the empathy and sensitivity necessary for taking the role of 'the particular other' " (11).

We have seen how Angelou valorizes the "particular other" among her family and friends and the significant role they play in providing Maya with security and affection. The role of another is again underscored as Angelou describes the mentors she credits with her intellectual development. During a yearlong stay with her real mother in St. Louis, Angelou is the victim of sexual assault at the age of seven, and as a result of the trauma involved with this incident, she stops talking. Upon her return to Stamps, Arkansas, Maya is invited to the home of her grandmother's friend, Bertha Flowers, who gently leads her back to speaking. Mrs. Flowers inspires in Maya a love for books and the beauty of the spoken word, and, most important, shows Maya that she can be liked just because of who she is. According to Smith, "it is Mrs. Flowers who opens the door to the caged bird's silence with the key of loving acceptance" ( *Where I'm Bound*, 130). Repeatedly Angelou expresses gratitude for the presence of "particular others" in her life and credits them for the person she becomes. But despite her attachment and gratitude to others, she is still trapped by the forces of sexism and racism. Her move to San Francisco during World War II to live with her mother is the first in a series of incidents that signal profound changes in Maya's life. The unsettled atmosphere that prevails in San Francisco during the war ironically frees Angelou from the persistent feeling of being an outsider. Later, while visiting her father, Angelou's self-confidence increases when, never having driven a car, she successfully negotiates her way down a Mexican mountain with her drunk father unconscious in the back seat. Smith sees this as a watershed event for Angelou: "For the first time, Maya finds herself totally in control of her situation. Her new sense of power contrasts vividly with her former despair that as a Negro she has no control over her fate" ( *Where I'm Bound*, 132).

Another event during this visit with her father contributes to Maya's growing sense of well-being. After returning from the trip to Mexico, Angelou is stabbed by her father's jealous girlfriend, Dolores. Afraid to return home for fear of her mother's vengeful retribution upon Dolores, Angelou lives for a month in a junkyard with an assortment of other homeless children. This experience teaches Angelou respect for herself and others and furthers her sense of belonging.

It is during Maya's stay in San Francisco that her mother, Vivian Baxter, becomes a significant force in her life. Vivian's own determination and independence are qualities Maya emulates in her quest to be the first African American to be employed as a conductorette on the San Francisco cable cars. When Maya makes her decision to go to work, she reasons that her mother will support her because her mother believes in self-reliance and will appreciate her daughter's spunk. When Maya discovers that the cable car company will not hire African Americans, she stubbornly persists, haunting the streetcar office until she is hired. Sidonie Smith sees an important connection between the earlier episode with Mrs. Cullinan and Maya's rebellion against job discrimination: "Mrs. Cullinan's broken dish prefigures the job on the streetcar. . . . Maya assumes control over her own social destiny and engages in the struggle with life's forces. She has broken out of the rusted bars of her social cage" ( Song of a Caged Bird, 373). The final step in the young Maya's journey to maturity and selfconfidence occurs when she becomes pregnant. Suspicious that she may be a lesbian, Maya decides that she needs a boyfriend in order to assure herself about her sexual identity. To carry out her plan, Maya deliberately seduces a boy, and the result is an unplanned pregnancy. Her son is born when she is just sixteen years old, and for the first three weeks she is afraid to touch her child for fear that she may drop him or inflict some other injury on him. Finally, Maya's mother takes charge. Despite Maya's protests, Vivian insists that the baby sleep with Maya. Later in the night Vivian wakes her daughter up to show her that not only has she not crushed her son in her sleep, but she has intuitively protected her child while sleeping. Vivian's final lesson concludes *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*: "If you're for the right thing, then you do it without thinking" (246). This closing suggests that Maya's life has been a process of learning to value herself, of learning to trust her own strength, her intelligence, and her moral integrity. It is these qualities and the love and acceptance of her family, friends, and mentors that have enabled her to survive the personal defeats and the pain of oppression portrayed in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and that will sustain her through future trials described in subsequent volumes of her autobiography.

But it is well to remember at this point Angelou's statement that her autobiography is more than just an account of her personal failures and triumphs. In his analysis, Cudjoe maintains that Angelou succeeds in being broadly representative of the experience of African Americans in her autobiographical works:

As a statement, Angelou presents a powerful, authentic, and profound signification of Afro-American life and the changing concerns of the Afro-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 Afro-American and African peoples for their liberation and triumphs. It is a celebration of the struggle, survival, and existence of Afro-American people. (285)

Through her sensitive portrayal of the social environments and institutions that shaped her experience, Angelou achieves her objective of conveying the influence of the time period on her life and the lives of others. Angelou's autobiography succeeds, then, on two levels: first, as a personal memoir of a single individual who was able to survive; and second, as a representative narrative that exemplifies the struggle of many African American women against racial and sexual oppression.

**STUDY QUESTIONS**

|  |
| --- |
| 1. Why has autobiography been such an important genre in the African American literary tradition? |
| 2. What are some of the dominant themes in black women's autobiography? |
| 3. Why is the question of truth in an autobiography a complex issue? |
| 4. What are Angelou's stated intentions in writing her autobiography? Do you think she achieves her goals? |
| 5. Consider what impact Angelou's point of view as a mature adult has on how she chooses to tell her story. |
| 6. Consider the importance of the opening scene. What themes introduced in this scene are repeated throughout the autobiography? |
| 7. To what extent are the environment and time period in which her life story takes place important? |
| 8. How would you characterize Angelou's style -- her language, her tone, her choice of metaphors, and so on? |
| 9. Who are the people who contributed to Angelou's survival? How did they contribute? |
| 10. What events helped Angelou to feel that she had a place where she belonged and led her to feel increased tolerance for people different from herself? |
| 11. How does the conclusion of the autobiography contribute a sense of closure to the story? |

**TOPICS FOR WRITTEN OR ORAL EXPLORATION**

|  |
| --- |
| 1. Read Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem "Sympathy" and show how the themes of the poem relate to the themes of Angelou's autobiography and its title. |
| 2. Discuss the significance of the symbol of the cage in the autobiography. |
| 3. Compare and contrast Mrs. Flowers and Momma. |
| 4. Where do we see evidence of Angelou's strength and determination to resist oppression?  |
| 5. In your opinion, what does it mean to write "an autobiography as literature"? Does Angelou succeed in doing so? |
| 6. To what extent and in what specific instances in her autobiography are Angelou's experiences connected to the experiences of African Americans in general? |

**2**

**Violence and Intimidation as a Means of Social Control: A Historical Overview of Race Relations in the South**

Maya Angelou's portrayal of her childhood in Stamps, Arkansas, contains many episodes that provide important insights into race relations in the South in the 1930s. Segregation was a deeply ingrained part of southern culture and governed all aspects of social interaction. Many jobs were not open to African Americans, and they typically held only the lowest paid jobs. Blacks and whites lived in different parts of town, with African Americans relegated to the poorer areas. The two races went to different hospitals, were usually limited to treatment by doctors and dentists of their own race, attended separate schools and churches, used separate public restroom facilities and drinking fountains, swam at different beaches, ate in different restaurants, shopped at different establishments, and occupied different areas of movie theatres, with African Americans confined to the balconies only. Similarly, blacks and whites sat in different areas on buses, and African Americans were forced to sit in the back. If there was a shortage of seats, an African American was obliged to yield his or her seat to a white customer.

Laws sanctioning the legal separation of blacks and whites, the so-called Jim Crow laws, originated with legislation regulating train travel. The following excerpt is from an 1891 Arkansas law, "An Act to Promote the Comfort of Passengers on Railways and Other Purposes": Be it enacted by the General Assembly of the State of Arkansas: Section 1. That all railway companies carrying passengers in their coaches in this State shall provide equal but separate and sufficient accommodations for the white and African races, by providing two or more passenger coaches for each passenger train. *Provided,* That on all lines of railway less then [*sic*] twenty-five miles long, passenger coaches may be divided by a partition so as to secure separate accommodations, and they shall also provide separate waitingrooms of equal and sufficient accommodation for the two races at all their passenger depots in this State. ( Boyd, 9)

This type of legislation was common in southern states, and other Jim Crow laws quickly followed, regulating every conceivable type of social interaction. In *Jim Crow Guide to the U.S.A.,* Stetson Kennedy provides the following summary of some of the laws in Arkansas regarding sexual relations that reveals the extreme lengths to which lawmakers went in order to discourage or prohibit interracial marriage or cohabitation:

A person having any Negro blood may not engage in concubinage with a white, but may marry a white *provided* the Negro blood is not "visible and distinct."

"Concubinage between a person of the Caucasian or white race and between a person of the negro or black race is hereby made a felony."

*Penalty:* One month to one year "at hard labor" for each offence.

*Court rulings:* "Living together or cohabitation, whether open or secret," is contrary to law. However, "occasional intercourse" does not constitute concubinage or cohabitation. "No person shall be convicted of the crime of concubinage upon the testimony of the female, unless the same is corroborated by other evidence."

*Childbearing:* "Any woman who shall have been delivered of a mulatto child, the same shall be *Prima facie* evidence of guilt without further proof and shall justify a conviction of the woman." It is the duty of magistrates to issue warrants in such cases in the name of the state, and to prosecute. No *Negro* mother of a mulatto child has ever been prosecuted under this law. ( Kennedy, 64)

These and other Jim Crow laws were quite effective in ensuring the separation of blacks and whites. Angelou declares that in Stamps, segregation was so thorough that she was unsure whether whites were real; a trip to the white part of town felt like she was "walking without weapons into man-eating animals' territory" ( *Caged Bird*, 20). Segregation was enforced through the constant threat of physical violence and intimidation by whites against blacks. When Bailey comes home late one evening, past his curfew, Momma is not merely angry at a disobedient child; she fears that he has been the victim of a lynching. When Bailey stumbles on the corpse of a black man who has just been pulled from the pond, his genitals cut off, he witnesses the hatred of a white man who is delighted over the death of this black man, in fact, any black man.

The heartless refusal of a white dentist to treat Maya because of her race further contributes to her understanding of what can be expected from white folks. When her white employer, Mrs. Cullinan, shortens her name from Marguerite to Mary for the sake of her own convenience, Maya experiences firsthand the prevailing white attitude of superiority over blacks. Finally, the psychological impact of racism is represented in Maya's own internalized racism when she dreams of waking up, happily transformed into a beautiful white girl.

Maya's lessons on racial etiquette, the expectations governing social interactions between the two races, are learned from her grandmother. In a culture where violence was an acceptable means of keeping African Americans "in their place," where the justice system and law enforcement officials failed to protect them and might even condone or participate in violent attacks against them, safety was of paramount importance: "Momma intended to teach Bailey and me to use the paths of life that she and her generation and all the Negroes gone before had found, and found to be safe ones. She didn't cotton to the idea that white-folks could be talked to at all without risking one's life. And certainly they couldn't be spoken to insolently" (39).

The documents in this chapter provide a historical context for Angelou's presentation of her encounters with the physical and psychological violence of racism. They demonstrate the range of violent methods used to oppress African Americans, from the enforced servitude of slavery, to the threat and reality of lynchings and other forms of physical intimidation after Emancipation, to the economic and social inequality created by racism. Included are excerpts from a scholarly essay that gives a general historical overview of violence against African Americans during and since slavery; excerpts from a study on lynching published by the Commission on Interracial Cooperation; newspaper articles documenting two lynchings in Arkansas during the 1930s; and, finally, an interview that discusses the expectations and taboos of racial etiquette and the accommodation attitudes developed by African Americans in response to racism. **HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF RACE RELATIONS**

The following essay provides an analysis of the history of white violence against blacks, the methods employed to dominate African Americans during slavery, through Reconstruction and into the twentieth century, and the response of African Americans to these methods of social control. James Comer, an assistant professor of psychiatry at the Yale Child Study Center when he wrote this piece, was uniquely qualified to explore the psychological impact of violence against African Americans, for adults as well as children. Comer's insights into the socialization of children in a violent environment are particularly relevant for an understanding of Angelou's childhood and psychological development.

Comer deplores the harmful effects of physical and social violence for groups and individuals and poses the question at the heart of his analysis: Why have African Americans not resisted sooner and more forcefully the violence to which they have been subjected throughout U.S. history? He begins with a historical overview, detailing methods of violence during slavery and following Emancipation. He then explores the methods of socialization that assured that slaves remained powerless. These methods included legal, cultural, and psychological means. Although legally free after 1865, the legacy of slavery remained with blacks, most of whom were still economically, socially, and psychologically dependent on whites. Poor educational opportunities, severely limited employment options, and segregation, as well as white violence and intimidation, all worked to keep blacks in an inferior social position and to persuade many that they were indeed inferior.

It is this atmosphere of deprivation and violence that prevails in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Although Maya's grandmother owns her own store and some land, it is clear that Maya's family and the African Americans in her community struggle to survive economically. The threat of violence is ever present and keenly felt by the young Maya in her encounters with whites. Maya observes her fellow African Americans' response to the violence and intimidation -- their necessary accommodations to racism -- and her story is testimony to the sense of powerlessness and inferiority that may result and that must be vigorously opposed.

**LYNCHING AS A METHOD OF SOCIAL CONTROL**

Early in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou recounts an incident in which her family is warned that there may be an attempted lynching that night and that her Uncle Willie could be a target. She describes her fear when a former sheriff rides in and announces to her grandmother: "Annie, tell Willie he better lay low tonight. A crazy nigger messed with a white lady today. Some of the boys'll be coming over here later" (14).

Although estimates vary, statistics indicate that lynching was a widespread phenomenon after Reconstruction and during the first third of the twentieth century, particularly in the South, and that African Americans were by far the most frequent victims of lynching. In *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930*, Tolnay and Beck estimate that during the five decades between the end of Reconstruction and the beginning of the Great Depression "there were 2,018 separate incidents of lynching in which at least 2,462 African American men, women, and children met their deaths in the grasp of southern mobs, comprised mostly of whites" (17). *Lynchings and What They Mean* provides these statistics for specific states, including Arkansas: "Since 1889 Mississippi, Georgia, Texas, and Louisiana have had the largest numbers of lynchings, with 465, 464, 364, and 349 respectively. However, the lynching rate per ten thousand Negro population is considerably higher for Florida, Oklahoma, and Arkansas than for either of the four states mentioned. . . . Florida, with its phenomenal population growth in recent decades, shows a lynching rate of 4.5 per ten thousand Negro population during the 1900- 1930 period. . . . Other Southern States where the Negro's life has been least secure from the mob include Oklahoma, with a rate of 3.9; Arkansas, 2.9; and Texas, 2.5" (8-10, 13).

Tolnay and Beck theorize that lynchings as a method of social control became necessary only after Emancipation, as slavery had successfully controlled African Americans prior to the Civil War. But with freedom for African Americans came the threat of competition for political and economic power previously enjoyed lacks suddenly transformed from personal property to potential competitors" (57). These authors argue that whites believed it was necessary to neutralize the economic threat posed by African Americans and that the following methods were devised: "Jim Crow legislation, disenfranchisement, judicial discrimination, debt peonage, and violent intimidation were included in the repertory of social control techniques. It is within this context that mob violence can be viewed as an instrument of social control over a 'threatening' southern black population" (57).

The Commission on Interracial Cooperation expanded on these themes in *The Mob Still Rides*, tying lynching to racial exploitation. The document details the economic, political, and cultural manifestations of racial exploitation and articulates the view that lynching was only the most extreme method of keeping African Americans in their place. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* one sees the traumatic fear and humiliation the threat of lynching inspires, and one understands that to resist the racial status quo was to risk death. The document also provides a profile of the possible motivations for the perpetrators of lynchings, often poorer rural whites who needed to believe that another group of people was inferior to them to assure themselves of their own superiority.

*The Mob Still Rides* also addresses the role of law enforcement officers in lynchings, noting that "lynchers go unpunished because punishment of their crime depends upon the same peace officers and court officials whose impotence they demonstrated when they lynched; the officers of the law have already shown their unwillingness or inability to administer justice; and lynchers, in most cases, are responsible only to the local courts" (11). Furthermore, not a few officers cooperate in the lynchings, in some instances conniving, in others participating" (12).exclusively by whites. "Whites saw nearly four million southern lacks suddenly transformed from personal property to potential competitors" (57). These authors argue that whites believed it was necessary to neutralize the economic threat posed by African Americans and that the following methods were devised: "Jim Crow legislation, disenfranchisement, judicial discrimination, debt peonage, and violent intimidation were included in the repertory of social control techniques. It is within this context that mob violence can be viewed as an instrument of social control over a 'threatening' southern black population" (57).

The Commission on Interracial Cooperation expanded on these themes in *The Mob Still Rides*, tying lynching to racial exploitation. The document details the economic, political, and cultural manifestations of racial exploitation and articulates the view that lynching was only the most extreme method of keeping African Americans in their place. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* one sees the traumatic fear and humiliation the threat of lynching inspires, and one understands that to resist the racial status quo was to risk death. The document also provides a profile of the possible motivations for the perpetrators of lynchings, often poorer rural whites who needed to believe that another group of people was inferior to them to assure themselves of their own superiority.

*The Mob Still Rides* also addresses the role of law enforcement officers in lynchings, noting that "lynchers go unpunished because punishment of their crime depends upon the same peace officers and court officials whose impotence they demonstrated when they lynched; the officers of the law have already shown their unwillingness or inability to administer justice; and lynchers, in most cases, are responsible only to the local courts" (11). Furthermore, not a few officers cooperate in the lynchings, in some instances conniving, in others participating" (12).

**RACIAL ETIQUETTE AND ACCOMMODATION ATTITUDES**

In *The Negro Personality: A Rigorous Investigation of the Effects of Culture* Bertram P. Karon observes that the racial etiquette governing "all" contacts between Negroes and whites in the South is an elaborate ceremonious code which renders these interracial contacts as impersonal as possible" (18). David Goldfield provides the following examples of the racial etiquette in *Black, White, and Southern: Race Relations and Southern Culture, 1940 to the Present*: "For blacks encountering whites, the code demanded, among other things, 'sir' and 'ma'am,' averted eyes, preferably a smile, never imparting bad news, never discussing other whites, and always exhibiting a demeanor that would make a white comfortable in believing that this deferential mien was not only right but the way things ought to be" (2).

One of Maya's experiences with the racial etiquette is described when her grandmother's store is visited by a group of what she calls powhitetrash children. Angelou portrays her shame at her powerlessness to prevent the humiliations inflicted by the white children who presume to call her grandmother by her first name and who dare to mock her. And she is enraged that her grandmother addresses the offenders with the title "Miz."

Karon's analysis suggests that Maya's grandmother was responding to the social expectations demanded in black-white interactions:

Recognition of the inferiority of the Negro is embodied in the ritual of face-to-face discussions by the use of distinctions in the forms of address. The Negro is expected always to show his respect by using the title Mr., Mrs., or Miss when talking to a white person, while the white person addresses the Negro by the latter's first name, irrespective of how little acquaintance the two may have, or by the condescending epithet "boy" and its alternatives "uncle," "auntie," "elder," etc. These are used with no regard to the age of the Negro being addressed. . . . It is clear that this etiquette is designed to demonstrate that the Negro is inferior *and* that he recognizes it in the sense that he is willing to act out the ritual. (Of course, he has no real alternative.) (20-21) When Maya dares to believe she has an alternative to the racial status quo and challenges the racial etiquette upon her return to Stamps in the second volume of her autobiography, *Gather Together in My Name*, her grandmother promptly and forcefully impresses upon her the rashness of her actions. In this episode, Maya talks back to two clerks at the general store in the white part of town. Her grandmother receives a phone call and is waiting for Maya when she triumphantly returns. When Maya tries to explain, she is repeatedly slapped by her grandmother, who tells her: "You think 'cause you've been to California these crazy people won't kill you? You think them lunatic cracker boys won't try to catch you in the road and violate you? You think because of your all-fired principle some of the men won't feel like putting their white sheets on and riding over here to stir up trouble? You do, you're wrong. Ain't nothing to protect you and us except the good Lord and some miles" (93). With no further discussion, Maya is packed off to her mother in San Francisco.

Maya's grandmother's caution was typical of the attitude of many African Americans who had learned from firsthand experience and the experiences of others that conformity to expected behavior was a matter of life or death. As Goldfield notes:

Prudence born of fear usually inhibited retaliation or departure! from behavioral norms. Stories of white brutality against blacks, often for minor transgressions, circulated through black communities. As [Richard] Wright explained, "the things that influenced my conduct as a Negro did not have to happen to me directly. . . . Indeed the white brutality that I had not seen was a more effective control of my behavior than that which I knew." In 1955, Anne Moody, a black Mississippi teenager, heard news of a lynching near her Delta home. She recalled her immobilizing fear: "I didn't know what one had to do or not to do as a Negro not to be killed." So a constant tension gripped blacks in their relations with whites, an uneasiness that a wrong word or a gesture could have serious consequences (7).

The final document in this chapter is a 1939 interview with an African American that demonstrates the consequences of failing to observe the racial etiquette. Note that rather than attributing his child's death and his own thwarted ambitions to their real cause, white racism, Charlie Holcomb instead has come to believe that the place of African Americans has been decided by God and that his own race is inferior. His account and interpretation are an illustration of the accommodation attitude adopted by many African Americans, as described in *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*: "Accommodation attitudes are those which enable the Negro to adjust and survive in the caste situation as it is presented to him. . . . Accommodation involves the renunciation of protest or aggression against undesirable conditions of life and the organization of the character so that protest does not appear, but acceptance does. It may come to pass in the end that the unwelcome force is idealized, that one identifies with it and takes it into the personality" (250, 255).

**TOPICS FOR WRITTEN OR ORAL EXPLORATION**

|  |
| --- |
| 1. According to your reading of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, what was the racial environment in Stamps, Arkansas? Were the social control techniques discussed here effective in Stamps? Explain. |
| 2. Why did African Americans fail to achieve economic parity with whites after Emancipation? Use examples from "Tech 'Er Off, Charlie" and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* to illustrate your answer. |
| 3. Compare and contrast Momma's attitude toward whites with the views expressed by Charlie Holcomb in "Tech 'Er Off, Charlie". |
| 4. Maya believes her grandmother comes out the winner in her encounter with the powhitetrash children at the store. Why does she think so? Do you agree? Explain. |
| 5. What effect does the climate of racial prejudice have on Maya's psychological development? What is the significance for Maya of the episode with Mrs. Cullinan? |
| 6. Charlie Holcomb appears resigned to his place in southern society. What factors have contributed to his abandoning his ambitions? Does Maya share his resignation? Why or why not? |
| 7. Judging from the documents in this chapter and your reading of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, how did African American parents prepare their children to live in an environment of racial prejudice? What do you think of their methods? |

**The African American Church**

Many scholars who have studied the African American Church agree that it is the institution that has had the greatest impact on the African American community. Many slaves were first introduced to Christianity on the southern plantations. The church was a source of comfort and inspiration to them as they endured the horrifying conditions of slavery. The institution continues to provide solace to African Americans in the face of racism, violence, and poverty and has been a unifying force in the community.

The African American church has played a major role in rural communities. In 1933 Mays and Nicholson reported that "threequarters of all Negro churches are rural" (238). Certainly the church was a major force in Maya Angelou's life in the rural community of Stamps. It is no accident that the opening scene of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* takes place in church. Indeed, Maya and her family seem to have devoted a great deal of time to church and church-related activities. In *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas*, the third volume of her autobiography, Angelou writes:

I had grown up in a Christian Methodist Episcopal Church where my uncle was superintendent of Sunday School, and my grandmother was Mother of the Church. Until I was thirteen and left Arkansas for California, each Sunday I spent a minimum of six hours in church. Monday evenings Momma took me to Usher Board Meeting; Tuesdays the Mothers of the Church met; Wednesday was for prayer meeting; Thursday, the Deacons congregated; Fridays and Saturdays were spent in preparation for Sunday. (13)

Maya's grandmother is fiercely religious, and her religious convictions are a sustaining force in her life. As a Mother of the Church, "an honorific title usually reserved for the wife of the founder or for the oldest and most respected members" ( Lincoln and Mamiya, 275), Momma's religious authority is recognized. She begins each day on her knees in prayer and carefully instructs her grandchildren in the ways of the church, requiring strict observance of Biblical commandments. When Maya innocently begins a sentence with "by the way," she is punished for taking the Lord's name in vain, because Jesus is "the Way." The incident is illustrative of Momma's profound, even extreme, religious devotion and her determination to inculcate her religious ideals in her grandchildren.

**OTHERWORLDLINESS**

Like Karl Marx, some have argued that religion has served as the "opiate of the masses," that it has promised eternal reward for the oppressed in the afterlife, and thus has prevented or discouraged meaningful protest and collective resistance to oppression in this life. In the preceding document, Richardson acknowledges the validity of the charge that the African American church has not served as a leader in organizing protest of racial conditions in the South, but he defends the church for its lack of action. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* Angelou appears to be more critical of the church's failure to concern itself with the here and now. Her lengthy description of a revival meeting emphasizes the otherworldly orientation of the preacher, who takes as the text of his sermon "The least of these," and the contented reaction of the congregation, who believe that "all the Negroes had to do generally, and those at the revival especially, was bear up under this life of toil and cares, because a blessed home awaited them in the faroff bye and bye" (108-9).

Angelou's account suggests that she considers the preacher's message that African Americans should endure and resign themselves to their lot in life to be an inadequate response to their plight. Many scholars have agreed that the African American church has contributed to a lack of militancy among African Americans. E. Franklin Frazier notes in *The Negro Church in America* that "on the whole, the Negro's church was not a threat to white domination and aided the Negro to become accommodated to an inferior status. The religion of the Negro continued to be other-worldly in its outlook, dismissing the privations and sufferings and injustices of this world as temporary and transient" (51). Some scholars have argued that, like violence and segregation, the message of the church has been used to ensure white dominance over blacks. Gary Marx offers an important historical perspective in *Protest and Prejudice*: "Despite occasional controversy over religion's effect, most slave owners eventually came to view supervised religion as an effective means of social control" (95). Marx cites several other sources who make a similar argument for religion's role in maintaining the racial *status quo,* a situation many of these scholars argue continued well into the twentieth century (see Marx, 95, including footnotes). [1](http://www.questia.com/read/27374895) Thus, Angelou's expression of the otherworldly character of the church as recounted in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is consistent with the views of many who studied the church during the period preceding the civil rights movement. (See also John Dollard *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* and Benjamin Mays and J. W. Nicholson *The Negro's Church*.)

**EMOTIONALISM**

An example of emotionalism in the African American church can be seen in the groans, shouts, and shrieks of the congregation in the regular church service described in the preceding document. While Richardson, in *Dark Glory*, blames the lack of training for preachers and the historical origins of the church for this "surplus of emotion" (xiii), Angelou's amusing description of a service at her church suggests that individual members of the congregation can also be catalysts for extreme behavior. She describes Sister Monroe, who, on a particular Sunday, "gets the spirit" and pursues the minister up onto the altar, screaming and grabbing at his clothing (32). Other members of the congregation are similarly inspired, and the incident concludes with the minister, deacon, and chairman of the usher board on the floor following cries, punches, and other physical contact. This incident is a prelude to a second incident on a different Sunday when Sister Monroe assaults a visiting preacher, knocking out his false teeth.

Sister Monroe's emotionalism was not unusual in African American churches. Lincoln and Mamiya cite a visit by W.E.B. Du Bois to a black church, where he observed the intense enthusiasm and the open display of emotions and feelings exhibited by the worshipers. Some worshipers "got the Spirit" and were propelled into a paroxysm of shouting. While others "fell out" and rolled on the floor in a shaking, trance-like state, possessed by the Holy Ghost. Some people stood up in the pews and waved their hands over their heads, while others clapped their hands in time with the music. Even in the midst of preaching, the worshipers carried on a dialogue with the preacher by shouting approval and agreement with ejaculations like "Amen!" or "Preach it!" or "Tell it like it is!" At other times they encouraged the preacher to work harder to reach that precipitating point of cathartic climax by calling out, "Well? Well?" The highlight of the service was to worship and glorify God by achieving the experience of mass catharsis; a purifying explosion of emotions that eclipses the harshness of reality for a season and leaves both the preacher and the congregation drained in a moment of spiritual ecstasy. (5-6)

**MUSIC**

In Johnson's descriptions of the church services in *Growing Up in the Black Belt*, in the description of the West Tennessee revival in *These My Brethren*, and in the revival meeting described by Angelou in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, music plays a prominent role. In *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas*, Angelou relates: "When I was growing up in Stamps, Arkansas, Momma used to take me to some church service every day of the week. At each gathering we sang. . . . Our church was bare because the parishioners were poor and our only musical instruments were tambourines and our voices" (74). Religious music sustains Maya's family inside and outside the church. When Momma is taunted by the powhitetrash children (see Chapter 2), she quietly sings several hymns, drawing strength from the music in much the same way that slaves were comforted by spirituals.

Historically, music has been an important feature of the religious expression of African Americans. In their first preface to *The Books of American Negro Spirituals*, James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson explain that the spirituals originated with the slaves and that, like the sermons discussed earlier in this chapter, the focus was otherworldly:

Far from his native land and customs, despised by those among whom he lived, experiencing the pang of the separation of loved ones on the auction block, knowing the hard task master, feeling the lash, the Negro seized Christianity, the religion of compensations in the life to come for the ills suffered in the present existence, the religion which implied the hope that in the next world there would be a reversal of conditions, of rich man and poor man, of proud and meek, of master and slave. The result was a body of songs voicing all the cardinal virtues of Christianity -- patience -- forbearance -- love -- faith -- and hope -- through a necessarily modified form of African music. The Negro took complete refuge in Christianity, and the Spirituals were literally forged of sorrow in the heat of religious fervor. (20)

In his analysis of what he calls "the Sorrow Songs" of the slaves in *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois further elaborates the themes of the spirituals: through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope -- a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence. Sometimes it is faith in life, sometimes a faith in death, sometimes assurance of boundless justice in some fair world beyond. But whichever it is, the meaning is always clear: that sometime, somewhere, men will judge men by their souls and not by their skins. (189)

Angelou notes the common themes present in the songs sung at the revival and the blues heard on the way home: "A stranger to the music could not have made a distinction between the songs sung a few minutes before and those being danced to in the gay house by the railroad tracks. All asked the same questions. How long, oh God? How long?" (111).

**5**

**The African American Family and Other Role Models**

**THE GRANDMOTHER, MOTHER, AND MATRIARCHY**

The importance of family and of other influential people in Maya Angelou's journey toward self-acceptance and independence cannot be overstated. From her neighbor Mrs. Flowers's healing intervention after Maya is raped to her brother Bailey's unconditional love, Maya is fortunate to have the love and support of those around her. Angelou notes the significant role played by extended family and friends in her upbringing. Pointing out that she was raised by her grandmother and her Uncle Willie up to the age of thirteen, she adds: "But the people around us also helped raise us. They watched us when we were out of the house. They knew that Mamma was getting up in age and Uncle Willie could not get around easily, so they watched us and reported our actions to Mamma and Uncle Willie" (Angelou, Interview with RandallTsuruta, 4-5).

Perhaps no one had greater influence on Maya's early development than Momma, Angelou's grandmother, with whom Maya and Bailey were sent to live after their parents' divorce. Although Annie Henderson is not openly affectionate with her grandchildren, it is clear that Maya feels deeply loved by her grandmother.

The way Annie Henderson takes responsibility for her extended family is consistent with E. Franklin Frazier's analysis of the importance of grandmothers in the African American family. In a chapter entitled Granny: The Guardian of the Generations in *The Negro Family in the United States*, Frazier provides a historical perspective for this phenomenon:

During slavery the Negro grandmother occupied in many instances an important place in the plantation economy and was highly esteemed by both the slaves and the masters. . . . She was the repository of the accumulated lore and superstition of the slaves and was on hand at the birth of black children as well as white. She took under her care the orphaned and abandoned children. . . . When emancipation came, it was often the old grandmother who kept the generations together. (114-16)

Frazier cites a former slave who has assumed the care of her relatives: "Me being the oldest one and me being they mother's auntie and the oldest head, that's how I come by them" (117). Frazier explains: "This old woman expresses the characteristic attitude of the grandmother in her role as 'oldest head' in the family. Where the maternal family organization assumes such importance as among a large section of the Negro population, the oldest woman is regarded as the head of the family" (117).

While some analysts have viewed the importance of grandmothers and other extended family members as a sign of disorganization and pathology (the next document is a case in point), others have countered that the role of the extended family is a unique strength of the African American family. In their recent study of Holmes County, Mississippi entitled "The Black Extended Family: A Basic Rural Institution and a Mechanism of Urban Adaptation", Shimkin et al. write:

Both sexes feel an obligation to provide babies with physical affection, while contingent responsibility for the protection, care, instruction, and discipline of all children is diffused among related adults and, indeed, all adults. Whether the relationships are actually centered in the biological family depends upon circumstances and personalities. Children are readily transferred from the care of an unmarried mother or immature parents, say, to that of grandparents or an uncle and aunt. Less crowding in one household than in another, the availability of Head Start, or better schooling may motivate such adaptive shifts. These are designed for the children's welfare and may, in fact, be initiated by them. Often characterizing the behavior of strong and cohesive extended families, such fosterages are not abandonments of parental responsibility but rather sharings in the deep satisfaction felt by Holmes Countians in child rearing. (72)

In her much earlier 1939 study of the Deep South, Hortense Powdermaker also takes a positive view of what she calls the "elasticity" of African American families, which are more likely than white families to include members outside the nuclear family:

In most Negro households, grandparents, nieces, nephews, adopted children, and others who are not related even by adoption, commonly form part of the family group; and members of the real family are as commonly absent. . . . It is by now a well-established generalization that the typical Negro family throughout the South is matriarchal and elastic, in striking contrast to the more rigid and patriarchal family organization of occidental white culture. (143)

But despite the positive aspects of finding a home with extended family members, it should be noted that both Maya and Bailey suffer from their parents' absence. They blame themselves for their parents' divorce and separation from them. When they are reunited with their mother during a yearlong stay in St. Louis, Maya is ever-conscious of the fact that she cannot depend on her and fears that she could be sent back to Stamps at any time. In a 1983 interview, Angelou commented that Vivian Baxter "was a poor mother for a child" ( *Interview with Paterson*, 422). Nevertheless, in another interview, Angelou indicated that although she only lived with her mother intermittently and for short periods until she was thirteen, her mother has been a powerful role model for her: "I'm often asked how I got over that without holding a grudge. I see her as one of the greatest human beings I've ever met" ( *Interview with Oliver*, 114).

Vivian Baxter's influence is most clearly seen during the period Maya is living with her in California. When Maya decides to become the first black streetcar conductorette, her mother initially warns her that African Americans are not hired for this work. But once she sees Maya's determination to challenge this discriminatory situation, she gives her unflagging support. n *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* Angelou credits both her mother's and her grandmother's example for her refusal to go on welfare while struggling to raise her son Guy as a single mother:

My pride had been starched by a family who assumed unlimited authority in its own affairs. A grandmother, who raised me, my brother and her own two sons, owned a general merchandise store. She had begun her business in the early 1900's in Stamps, Arkansas, by selling meat pies to saw men in a lumber mill, then racing across town in time to feed workers in a cotton-gin mill four miles away. . . . My beautiful mother, who ran businesses and men with autocratic power, taught me to row my own boat, and paddle my own canoe, hoist my own sail. She warned, in fact, "If you want something done, do it yourself." (10-11)

There is no doubt that Vivian Baxter practices what she preaches. In California she initially provides the economic support for her children. When Maya and Bailey want to know what she does for a living, she describes her work in the saloons and gambling dens with characteristic honesty. Later, Vivian Baxter marries Daddy Clidell, and the family's financial situation is further secured by Clidell's real estate holdings and the series of roomers who share their fourteen-room house in San Francisco. (By the end of the second volume of Angelou's autobiography, Vivian and Daddy Clidell are divorced [ *Gather Together in My Name*, 170].)

Despite her occasional economic dependence on male lovers or husbands (in St. Louis her boyfriend, Mr. Freeman, provides the basic necessities), Vivian Baxter never appears to be controlled by the men in her life, nor will she allow her daughter to be. When she learns that Maya is pregnant, she asks if Maya loves the father and if he loves her. When the answer to both questions is no, she matter-of-factly accepts that her daughter will be an unwed mother. In the course of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya's mother, already divorced from Bailey Johnson, Sr., lives with Mr. Freeman (who is promptly arrested after raping Maya), and finally marries Daddy Clidell, whom Angelou suggests she was initially prepared to dismiss as just one more of her mother's lovers.

**ROLE MODELS**

Maya Angelou has cited numerous role models for her life and work, and for African Americans in general. In an interview with Claudia Tate, she asserted that whites and males are dominant in the world and that they must be countered with other role models, from family members to historical heroines:

We need to see our mothers, aunts, our sisters, and grandmothers. We need to see Frances Harper, Sojourner Truth, Fannie Lou Hammer, women of our heritage. We need to have these women preserved. We need them all: . . . Constance Motley, Etta Motten. . . . All of these women are important as role models. Depending on our profession, some may be even more important. Zora Neale Hurston means a great deal to me as a writer. (2)

When asked in the same interview about other writers who have influenced her work, Angelou mentioned several -- James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Rosa Guy, Ann Petry, Joan Didion -- but she acknowledged as particularly important "two men who probably formed my writing ambition more than any others. They were Paul La[u]rence Dunbar and William Shakespeare" (11).

In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* Angelou gives special recognition to the importance of black poets. After the disastrous speech by the white speaker at her graduation, Maya and her classmates are saved from self-hatred by the class valedictorian, who leads the audience in singing "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing" by James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson.

In another episode with striking similarities to the highs and lows of her eighth-grade graduation, Angelou remembers the significance of the boxer Joe Louis for African Americans. She describes the crowding of men, women, and children into her grandmother's general store to listen to a radio broadcast of Louis's fight with Primo Carnera. From Angelou's description it appears that the outcome of the fight has a direct correlation to her people's destiny and self-worth. When Louis is declared the winner, she exults: "Joe Louis had proved that we were the strongest people in the world" (115).

**MIGRATIONS**

As we have seen, the lives of Maya Angelou and her immediate family are characterized by a series of displacements. Born in St. Louis, Maya moves with her mother and father to California and is sent at the age of three from California to Arkansas to live with her grandmother. At the age of seven, Angelou is sent to live again with her mother, who has moved back to her hometown of St. Louis. Before moving in with their mother, Bailey and Maya live for half a year in St. Louis with their maternal grandparents. After she is raped, Maya and her brother are sent back to Arkansas. Later, when she is thirteen, Maya and Bailey travel with Momma to California. First they live with Momma in an apartment in Los Angeles for about six months. Then they move to Oakland, where their mother has an apartment. Finally they move to San Francisco when Vivian Baxter marries Daddy Clidell.

Although less is known about the movements of Maya's father, we know that he, too, leaves Arkansas, is in France during World War I, lives for a time with his wife and children in St. Louis, and eventually moves to California, where he works as a doorman at an expensive hotel and later in the kitchen of a naval hospital. Bailey Sr.'s movements are characteristic of the migration pattern of vast numbers of southern black men who moved from the rural South to urban areas north and west. In "The Present Status and Trends of the Negro Family," Charles S. Johnson notes the increasing urbanization of the black family:

As late as 1890 the Negro population was 80 per cent rural; by 1920 the percentage had dropped to 66.0, and by 1930 to 56.3. At the present rate of urbanization this population will be more urban than rural in 1940. . . . In all of the southern states there is evidence of the disintegration of these culturally stagnant black belt communities, a spreading of the Negro population into southern towns and cities and, by long migration, to northern industrial centers. (249)

A U.S. Department of Labor study, *Negro Migration in 1916-17*, cites the following causes for the migration of large numbers of African Americans from the South during this period: general dissatisfaction with conditions, ravages of boll weevil, floods, change of crop system, low wages, poor houses on plantations, poor school facilities, unsatisfactory crop settlements, rough treatment, cruelty of the law officers, unfairness in courts, lynching, desire for travel, labor agents, the Negro press, letters from friends in the North, and finally advice of white friends in the South where crops had failed. . . . However the influence came, and whatever concurrent causes may have operated, all will agree with Mr. Williams [a contributor to the report] when he says that "better wages offered by the North have been the immediate occasion for the exodus." (11-12)

**6**

**Child Sexual Abuse**

When asked whether any of her works have been misunderstood, Maya Angelou replied: "A number of people have asked me why I wrote about the rape in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. They wanted to know why I had to tell that rape happens in the black community" ( Tate, 11). Indeed, this incident, which occurs in St. Louis when Maya is seven years old, is one of the most horrifying events of Angelou's childhood. But despite those who would criticize Angelou for revealing that child sexual abuse occurs in the African American community, studies have shown that child sexual abuse "is not limited by racial, ethnic, or economic boundariessexual abuse of children exists in all strata of society" ( U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, i).

Angelou's account is a sensitive and brutally honest description of the abuse by her mother's boyfriend, Mr. Freeman, which in court against him. When asked whether Mr. Freeman had ever touched her before the rape, a guilt-ridden Maya lies and answers that he had not because she is afraid that she will be ostracized by her family if they find out that she had not disclosed his earlier fondling of her. Mr. Freeman is convicted and almost immediately found murdered. Maya, believing her lie makes her responsible for Mr. Freeman's death, decides that she must stop talking altogether so that others will not be harmed.

Angelou's account is consistent with many of the findings in current studies of child sexual abuse. Based on his survey of 796 college students, David Finkelhor reported that at least one of every five girls had had sexual experiences with substantially older partners and that "almost half [43%] of the girls' experiences were with family members" (57-58). Another 33% reported that the sexual experience occurred with an acquaintance. Angelou's experience is consistent with Finkelhor's contention that it is now a "well-established fact that sexual victimization occurs to a large extent within a child's intimate social network" (58). In regard to the age of the victim at the time of the sexual experience, Finkelhor notes: "It is assumed that a girl's vulnerability to sexual overtures increases as she acquires adult sexual characteristics. This assumption appears to be wrong, however. . . . Overall, experiences for both girls and boys cluster around the preadolescent period" (60). Finally, Finkelhor relates the victims' reactions to the sexual experience, the most common being fear or shock. However, a few (8 percent) actually remembered experiencing some pleasure as a result. . . . Contrary to the stereotype, most victims in our study readily acknowledged the positive as well as the negative elements of their experience. They talked about the times the physical sensations felt good, or they remembered how their sexual experience with an adult or family member satisfied a longing for affection and closeness that was rarely met at any other time.

These were not expressions of adult kinds of sexual passion and longings. On the whole, they were part of a confusing flood of feelings and sensations, usually dwarfed by an overwhelming sense of helplessness, guilt, anger, or fear. In fact, the pleasure often only intensified the guilt or the helplessness, since it added to the child's confusion and left the child feeling out of control of even his or her own emotions. (65-66) This progresses from fondling to forcible rape, and of her own confusion and pain as she tries to understand what is happening to her. The young Maya is frightened into submission by her abuser, as Mr. Freeman threatens to kill Bailey if Maya ever reveals the abuse. At the same time, however, Maya initially enjoys being held by Mr. Freeman. She writes, "From the way he was holding me I knew he'd never let me go or let anything bad ever happen to me" (61). After Mr. Freeman's crime is discovered, Maya is forced to testify

Angelou has stated that one of the challenges she faced in writing about the rape was to avoid portraying Mr. Freeman in a completely negative way. "I wanted people to see that the man was not totally an ogre" ( Tate, 11). In an interview in 1987, Angelou commented on how she has been able to forgive Mr. Freeman: "It had to do. . . with 'seeing the man. I don't mean physically seeing him. But trying to understand how really sick and alone that man was. I don't mean that I condone at all. But to try to understand is always healing' " ( Angelou, Interview with Crane, 175). Despite her ability to forgive, Angelou noted in this interview that she still bears the emotional scars of the abuse.

**Bibliographic Essay**

This essay considers some of the important events in Angelou's life beginning with the years following the birth of her son (the point where *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* concludes) and ending with her most recent activities and honors. Sources for these remarks include Angelou's own autobiographical accounts, a biography of Angelou, interviews, newspaper articles, an essay, timelines, publicity materials, and the Internet.

Angelou's second autobiography, *Gather Together in My Name*, was published in 1974. The book begins with a discussion of the hope African Americans had for better race relations at the end of World War II and the subsequent disappointment of those hopes. In *Order out of Chaos: The Autobiographical Works of Maya Angelou*, Dolly McPherson notes that the character of this political moment is consistent with Angelou's own story: "The fragmented texture of the larger American society at the end of World War II serves as an appropriate backdrop for the reader's introduction to the alienated and fragmented nature of Angelou's life" (622-63). Angelou details a series of odd jobs she takes to support herself and her infant son: restaurant jobs, including Creole cook, waitress, bus girl, fry cook, and manager; and even odder jobs, including madam, dancer, prostitute, and chauffeurette. During this period she returns to Stamps for a brief, ill-fated visit (her hasty departure is described in Chapter 2 of this study); she is turned down for the army on the grounds that she attended a school on the House Un-American Activities Committee ist; and she continues to study dance. When she considers trying hard drugs, a friend generously exposes Angelou to the horrors of drug addiction by bringing her to a hit joint for heroin addicts. His actions have the desired outcome, as Angelou ends the book with a fervent promise never again to lose her newfound innocence.

*Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* ( 1976), the next book in her five-volume autobiographical series, opens in 1949 with Maya landing a job as sales clerk in a record store. Here she meets Tosh Angelos, a white sailor, whom she marries "because he asked" (25). When her suffocating marriage ends after two years, she finds work, first as a dancer in a strip joint, and then in a cabaret singing calypso (it is in this job that her name is changed from Angelos to Angelou, "an exotic sounding corruption of her married name" [Shapiro, 89]). Her big break comes in 1954 when she is cast in the role of Ruby, a dancer-singer part in a touring company production of *Porgy and Bess*. The troupe's travels to eastern and western Europe and North Africa expose Angelou to a wide variety of languages and cultures. The title of the autobiography is suggestive of the camaraderie and rich social life she enjoys with the troupe's cast and many locals. According to McPherson, these experiences "expand and complicate [ Angelou's] understanding of the complexities of race relations" (85). After months on tour Angelou learns that her son is ill. She returns to San Francisco, guilt-ridden at having left Guy for so long. The volume closes in 1955 with mother and son together in Hawaii, where Angelou has again found work as an entertainer, and with Angelou's celebration of her "wonderful, dependently independent son" (242). McPherson writes: "While Singin'" and Swingin' is certainly a praisesong to *Porgy and Bess*, it is also a love song to Angelou's son, who grows up over the course of its pages" (89).

Angelou begins the fourth volume of her autobiography, *The Heart of a Woman*, published in 1981, with a discussion of the contradictions of black-white relations in 1957 and her brief membership in the "beatnik brigade" (3). She meets the legendary Billie Holiday. In 1959 she moves to New York to become part of the Harlem Writers Guild, where her early writing receives the valuable and sometimes harsh critiques of the other members of the guild. She appears at the famous Apollo Theatre, "long the most prestigious venue for black entertainers," according to Miles Shapiro (93). With Godfrey Cambridge, Angelou produces the "Cabaret for Freedom" in 1960 to benefit Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). She publishes her first short story in a Cuban publication. She becomes the Northern Coordinator for the SCLC and meets Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and South African freedom fighter Vusumzi (Vus) Make. Although they never formally wed, Angelou and Make soon consider themselves to be husband and wife. In 1960 she stars with James Earl Jones, Lou Gossett Jr., Cicely Tyson, and other important African American actors in Jean Genet The Blacks, with Angelou in the role of the White Queen. She composes some of the music for the play. During this period, Angelou is a founding member of The Cultural Association for Women of African Heritage, which organizes a protest at the United Nations on the occasion of the death of the president of the Congo, Patrice Lumumba. The *New York Times* front page description of the event includes the following headline: "Riot in Gallery Halts U.N. Debate: American Negroes Ejected after Invading Session" ( February 16, 1961). Angelou, Guy, and Vus move to Egypt after being evicted from their New York apartment when Vus fails to pay the rent. To prevent a second eviction in Cairo, Angelou finds a job as associate editor of a magazine, the Arab Observer, and later writes reviews for Radio Egypt. When her marriage ends due to Make's infidelity and his narrow views regarding the role of the wife of an African, Angelou moves to Ghana so that Guy can attend the University of Ghana. After Guy is seriously injured in an automobile accident, she finds employment at the university as an administrative assistant at the School of Music and Drama in order to be able to care for Guy during his convalescence. The book ends with her son once again establishing his independence as he moves into his new dormitory room, and with Angelou relishing the fact that she will now "be able to eat the whole breast of a roast chicken by [her]self" (272).

The most recent of Angelou's autobiographical works, *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* ( 1986), opens with a return to the painful, lonely days and weeks following Guy's accident. Although Angelou had intended to take a job in Liberia with the Department of Information, Guy's accident keeps her in Ghana. According to Dolly McPherson, Angelou has other reasons for staying in Ghana: "the need to leave Egypt, following her broken marriage to Vusumzi Make, and her decision to bring up her son in a country of Blacks governed by Blacks" (105). Angelou soon falls in love with Ghana and its people and develops a close relationship with other black Americans living there. During this period, Angelou grows disaffected with Martin Luther King's philosophy ("We were brave revolutionaries, not pussyfooting nonviolent cowards" [121]); nevertheless, in 1963 she and her radical friends march on the American Embassy in Ghana in sympathy with a march led by King on Washington, D.C. In Ghana, Angelou again meets Malcolm X after his 1964 trip to the Islamic holy city of Mecca. She is invited to Berlin and Venice to reprise her role in *The Blacks*. She returns to Egypt and is asked to sing for Liberia's president. When Malcolm X needs a coordinator for the Organization of Afro-American Unity and Guy declares that she has "finished mothering a child" (185), Angelou decides to return to the United States. At the airport in Accra she reflects that while she is leaving Africa, she is not sad, "for now I knew my people had never completely left Africa. . . . 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. I could nearly hear the old ones chuckling" (208).

Thus ends Angelou's own autobiographical accounts. In a 1987 interview Angelou declared that she plans to write one more volume, "bringing us up to the publication of 'Caged Bird' then go no further. 'After that it would just be writing about writing which is something I don't want to do' " (Webster). While we await the final volume of her autobiography, we are forced to turn to other sources for the events that follow Angelou's 1965 departure from Africa.

**Publication Information:** Book Title: Understanding I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents. Contributors: Joanne Megna-Wallace - author. Publisher: Greenwood Press. Place of Publication: Westport, CT. Publication Year: 1998.