

SUNY College Cortland

Digital Commons @ Cortland

Master's Theses

5-2014

Gender and self-representation in Maya Angelou's autobiography I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

Jay-Nel Steitz

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.cortland.edu/theses>



Part of the African American Studies Commons, American Literature Commons, Family, Life Course, and Society Commons, Fiction Commons, Gender and Sexuality Commons, Inequality and Stratification Commons, Literature in English, North America Commons, Race and Ethnicity Commons, and the Women's Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

Steitz, Jay-Nel, "Gender and self-representation in Maya Angelou's autobiography I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" (2014). *Master's Theses*. 34.

<https://digitalcommons.cortland.edu/theses/34>

This Open Access Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Cortland. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Cortland. For more information, please contact DigitalCommonsSubmissions@cortland.edu.

**Gender and Self-Representation in Maya Angelou's Autobiography *I Know Why the Caged
Bird Sings***

by

Jay-Nel Steitz

**A thesis submitted in
partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of**

**Master of Arts
in English**

at the

State University of New York at Cortland

May 2014

Gender and Self-Representation in Maya Angelou's Autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

A voice that has been silenced for so long has much to say. Whether still confined or set free, the statement applies equally to both. The silenced voice wants not only to tell his or her story, but to share the life experiences which in turn reveal the identities of these individuals. These silenced voices then are not those of the oppressors, but the oppressed; and when an oppressor wants to share his or her story, the oppressed wants to tell their side of it as well. How can those labeled the marginalized outcasts of society express their feelings and share their perspectives if they are forced into silence? How would they ever be able to break this silence?

Nevertheless, for so long the dominant race—those of European ancestry—has pervaded in North America since the colonization of the land during the late 15th and early 16th centuries. But even before they arrived, the European man long before dominated in the Western world. It was the white man who was adventurous and therefore it was he who would have stories to tell; it was he who has accomplished many “feats” and in turn who knows himself and his rightful place in society. It would be these “courageous” men of pale skin, fair eyes, and light-colored hair who would be allowed to not only share their stories but capture it permanently on paper. These stories chronologically told and written on paper by the scribe himself which consisted of his life and life experiences formed a genre of writing—the autobiography.

But before getting into what constitutes as a prototypical autobiographical work according to the dominant scholars of autobiography, those labeled the marginalized must be discussed as they are the ones whose writings have taken the structure and content of a “normal”

autobiography and reformed and reshaped it to fit their stories. This becomes the first hurdle that critics of the typical autobiography face—, who are those, allowed to write autobiographies and rightfully call them so? Secondly, not only is there the ostracized groups in society based on race and physical characteristics, but women also face many prejudices—even in the marginalized group—due to their gender. Women have added their voices to the playing field of the autobiographical world by completely reforming the typical structure and content, by illustrating that their self-representation expressed through their narratives had been formed not in isolation to others or society, but infused with others as it reveals they all exist because of one another. Their lives have all been entwined; therefore, one woman’s life is never isolated but as Estelle Jelinek (1980) points out in “Women’s Autobiography and the Male Tradition,” that a woman’s autobiography—a woman of color—“tend[s] to consist of fragmented, disjunctive units.” So then is there a true and virtuous autobiographical format along with appropriate scribes?

Well-known autobiographical critics such as Georges Gusdorf and James Olney claim that indeed, there is a dominant structure and specific content that make up a true autobiography. And nowhere within their claim do the marginalized have any place. In James Olney’s essay, “Autobiography and the Cultural Moment: A Thematic, Historical, and Bibliographical Introduction,” he cites examples of what has long since been constituted as prototypical autobiographical works:

The first autobiography was written by a gentleman named W. P. Scargill; it was published in 1834 and was called *The Autobiography of a Dissenting Minister*. Or perhaps the first autobiography was written by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the 1760s (but he called it his *Confessions*); or by Michel de Montaigne in the latter half of the sixteenth century (but he called it *Essays*); or by St. Augustine at the

turn of the fourth-fifth century A.D. (but he called it his *Confessions*); or by Plato in the fourth century B.C. (but he wrote it as a letter, which we know as the seventh epistle); or...and so on (6).

Whether written structurally in the form of a letter or an essay, or whether the subject—as in Augustine’s *Confessions*—is rendered around the self as a sinner who seeks redemption with his God to—by the end of the narrative—makes a rediscovery of himself, these examples Olney lists “[are] evident in the fact that every one of the writers mentioned (as well as others) has had his champion(s) as the first—or at least the first *true*—autobiographer” (7). For instance, the conversion narrative *Confessions* written by St. Augustine has been considered to be one of the prototypical models of an exemplar autobiographical work. Another example is Rousseau’s *Confessions* at an attempt to make sense of one’s self. First and foremost, both Augustine and Rousseau display characteristics that, according to traditional critics such as Gusdorf and Olney, an autobiographer must possess for the written work to be considered a valid autobiography: white, heterosexual, and a man of privileged status. According to his essay “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography,” Georges Gusdorf asserts that ‘privileged status’ is not only used as a reference to those who held elite positions in society, but it specifically refers to a certain culture—“Western culture.” “It would seem that autobiography is not be found outside of our cultural area; one would say that it expresses a concern peculiar to Western man, a concern that has been of good use in his systematic conquest of the universe and that he has communicated to men of other cultures; but those men will thereby have been annexed by a sort of intellectual colonizing to a mentality that was not their own,” Gusdorf purports (29). With Gusdorf’s assertion in mind, autobiography is then limited to the white man who has the power to roam new land and conquest territories, in order to share what he deems are his worthy life

experiences while “colonizing” and “civilizing” other cultures. Secondly, the autobiographer must also, Gusdorf contends, possess a “conscious awareness of the singularity of each individual life” (29) for the work to be considered an autobiography. In other words, as the narrator sits down to engage in his life writing, the essential essence of his script must be centered on the idea of individualism. Therefore, both *Confessions*, as Gusdorf claims sets the beginning marker for an autobiography, displaying coherent and unitary patterns throughout the narrative geared toward empowering the self which are dominant ideologies acquired by any prototypical autobiography.

However, autobiographies like Augustine’s, as feminist critic Leigh Gilmore in her book *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women’s Self-Representation* claims, “traditional criticism of autobiography has construed a genre that authorizes some ‘identities’ and not others and links ‘autobiography’ to the post-Enlightenment politics of individualism or the post-Romantic aesthetics of self-expression or both” (xiii). As a result, the notion of the self dates back to the age of the European Renaissance when the creation of the arts and the concept of selfhood truly developed. For this reason, Augustine and others who have been considered to have written “true” autobiographies have been the base model for traditional critics to neatly fit these life-stories into a literary genre based upon the notion that the autobiographer must be a Western, white man whose life-writing is centered around his autonomous and individualistic selfhood.

Although Gusdorf and other traditional critics embrace this concept of individuality in order for an autobiography to succeed, this individualistic notion of the self throughout the narrative presents theoretical problems for the critics analyzing works composed by those, as Susan Stanford Friedman states in her essay “Women’s Autobiographical Selves: Theory and

Practice,” “who recognize that the self, self-creation, and self-consciousness are profoundly different for women, minorities, and many non-Western peoples” (35). Leigh Gilmore concurs with this premise put forth by Friedman in view of the fact that she points out further on in her essay that a redefining of autobiographical theory is critical, if those “identities” that traditional criticism of autobiography have dismissed or marginalized as their work cannot be neatly analyzed through the lens of an autobiographical theory based solely on what Gusdorf considers a Western concept of individualistic selfhood.

As a result, when analyzing an autobiographical work using the theoretical model based on the concept of individuality may lead to problems when reading and interpreting an autobiographical work written by “women, minorities, and many non-Western peoples” who Betty Bergland claims is an “Other,” in her article “Postmodernism and the Autobiographical Subject: Reconstructing the ‘Other,’” and “by cultural Other, we generally consider those persons negatively constructed in the dominant symbolic order: not-male, not-white, not-American, etc.” (131). These “cultural Others” did not have the same life experiences and advantages that Caucasian, heterosexual, and elite men were once allowed to engage in. The reason is men of a Caucasian descent have been the ones who have had the benefit of a privileged status in the sense that the rules that govern a society have been written and enforced by them. They, with each cultural and societal decrees, then have decided the place of all “others” that surround them. They have become the symbol of forced silence. These “others” then become anyone who is of a different race and ethnicity than those of Western Europe. Race, consequently, then became one of the deciding factors for Caucasian men from the old, Western world to culturally deem someone as an “other.” American history is a testament to anyone who is classified as an “other” not having the advantages allotted to those white men of privileged

status. Often times, these “other” men would be equated to animals justifying the white man to utilize humans as slave labor.

A prominent example of how Western white men used race and slave labor to their advantage has roots here in America—or what is also considered to be the New World. Founded upon slave labor, the New World had been taken over by men from Europe. These conquistadors, Christopher Columbus, Hernan Cortes, and Francisco Pizarro—to name just a few of the notorious—conquered territories already inhabited by people viewed as “others” by the white man because of their cultural differences. The natives, savages in the eyes of the Western world, were either obliterated from their land or forced to work as slaves while missionaries were sent over from the old world to help “civilize” a so-called uncivilized society. However, not only were natives of the Americas forced into slave labor. Africans were also conquered on their own land in Africa by the invasion of the white man, and then forced onto slave ships sailing toward the Americas. As the populations of the Native Americans started to decline due to war, disease and the many who revolted against the atrocious governing by these conquerors, Africans—descendants also deemed savage-like due to their skin color and cultural customs—became the popular replacement of the slave labor in the Americas. As the settling and colonizing of North America had been underway by the Europeans, their motivation to make a profit and enhance the economy led their immoral actions to become justified by prejudice against physical characteristics unlike any of those they possessed. These men, these “others” then would not, according to critic Gusdorf and other traditional scholars, deem fit to be an author of an autobiographical work, let alone value the narrative as laudable.

At one point or another in history, African-Americans—along with other marginalized groups— were stripped of their basic human rights. Therefore, they were not allowed nor

considered to be individuals. And according to critic Gusdorf, an iconic Western man, in order to script an autobiography, he would have to have had the self at the center of the text. However, those who were marginalized did not have that privilege awarded to them as they were the ones whose life as the conquered and civilized were centered around the experiences of the conqueror. With that being said, if no African or African-American could possibly have had the same life-experiences as of those from a Western civilization, how were they able to express themselves if they did not fit the traditional role of what Gusdorf deems to be acceptable? One example of this dehumanizing differences experienced by slaves in the United States and according to the laws at the time, no person of African descent was permitted to read or write—a law formed out of fear from the slave masters that an educated slave would lead to an uprising. In his introduction to *Bearing Witness: Selections from African-American Autobiography in the Twentieth Century*, Henry Louis Gates states:

Deprived of access to literacy, the tools of citizenship, denied the rights of selfhood by law, philosophy, and pseudo-science, and denied as well the possibility, even, of possessing a collective history as a people, black Americans—commencing with the slave narratives in 1760—published their *individual* histories in astonishing numbers, in a larger attempt to narrate the collective history of “the race. If the individual black self could not exist before the law, it could, and would, be forged in language, as a testimony at once to the supposed integrity of the black self and against the social and political evils that delimited individual and group equality for all African-Americans. The will to power for black Americans was the will to write; and the predominant mode that this writing would assume was the shaping of a black self in words. . . [Therefore]

constructed upon an ironic foundation of autobiographical narratives written by ex-slaves, the African-American tradition, more clearly and directly than most, traces its lineage—in the act of declaring the existence of a surviving, enduring ethnic self—to this impulse of autobiography (4).

Then, according to Gates, the slave narrative warrants a mention as it also paved the way to the literary genre of autobiography for African-Americans. The slave narrative has its roots embedded within African-American autobiography; therefore, autobiography essentially is formed out of the slave narrative. However, Annette Niemtow raised a good question in her essay “The Problematic of Self in Autobiography: The Example of the Slave Narrative” when she asked about the motives behind the self-writings scribed on paper. For many former slaves, who could read and write, they wrote because they had an agenda. Niemtow’s claims, “Ostensibly, the primary motivation was to woo white readers to hatred of slavery and to love of abolition; many narratives were written at the urging of white sympathizers” (97). Most wrote, using their life experiences, as a way to gain political achievement amongst Northern abolitionists who wanted these horrific stories to shock and awe the country to illustrate how slaves were being mistreated in a nation that had not only a century ago fought for its freedom from Britain. The slave narrative, generated out of angst for a political reform in America, paved the way for a critical review of a nation founded upon the premise that “all men are created equal.”

But Niemtow goes on further to explain that “There were other motivations too, motivations the slave writer shares with all other autobiographers, who attempt to describe a self—no matter how painful to acknowledge—before it disappears, to describe a self which, no matter how despicable, is so fragile that unless it exists on paper, it will hardly exist at all” (96).

Then, according to Niemowtz, both men and women, despite their gender difference, have experiences to share collectively as well as individually as an oppressed group. The autobiography became a way to humanize oneself, to cope with the degradation of slavery or with the scars it left on the generations thereafter, and to eventually triumph collectively as an oppressed race. But there would not be an authentic autobiography if, at first, the slave narrative had not been created to share the individual and collective experiences of a race degraded to intolerable cruelty.

The slave narratives were not all about the injustices, but about how the injustices they were forced to endure ended up shaping each individual slave's life. These individuals wanted their voices to be heard not to talk about the harsh labor and punishments they underwent, but to illustrate how these heinous, inhumane acts shaped their individuality. Niemtow declares, "There are at least three conditions needed for all autobiography, including slave narratives: the history of an individual; an interest in content as well as the form of that person's life; and an implicit identity between the writer and the protagonist" (97). Both Gates and Niemtow argue that an autobiography must encompass the individual therefore agreeing with traditional critics that the individual must be present along with his or her personal experiences within an autobiography in order for it to be considered authentic. On the other hand, they include the oppressed and conquered as reliable authors of autobiographies as well. The definition mentioned in the introduction to this essay regards any man who desires to permanently record and share his experiences here on earth. Despite the efforts by those to dehumanize "others," they were and are human beings. Some of these "others" even risked their lives to stand up and fight for their basic rights as humans.

A prime example of one of these men reckoned a slave was Frederick Douglass who shared his experiences of his life as a slave in the first of his works, *The Life of Frederick Douglass: A Slave Narrative*. Within Douglass' *Narrative*, he attests to this notion of the white man keeping the colored man uneducated and "in his place." Douglass, defying this oppressive law in effect, risked his own life to teach himself how to become literate as he knew that that would be the beginning to his freedom. Douglass' perseverance to learn how to read and write fueled the abolitionist movement with his *Narrative* illustrating an inequitable life of misery and humiliation of himself and his people. Douglass' narratives along with others paved the way for others to eventually voice their experiences of their individual lives as well as their society as a whole through autobiographical works.

Take note of the "true" autobiographers Olney cited in the introduction of this essay—they were all males. Men, of a non-Western, non-white heritage, however, were not the only ones whom were reckoned to be unfit as authors of autobiographies. To distinctively further separate *Homo sapiens*, women were grouped into their own category—a marginalized category further defined by gender. Throughout history, societies have always distinguished between the male and female species as well as the roles each of these genders held within their communities. Women, black or white, have been given the role of the nurturer; her duties, first and foremost, are at the forefront of the homestead. Psychoanalytic feminist Janice Haaken declares, in her book *Pillar of Salt: Gender, Memory, And the Perils of Looking Back*, "Women are more engaged than men in caregiving responsibilities, and more attenuated, nuanced responses to social cues may be acquired in the course of engaging in this form of work" (101). Hence, women are to provide a hospitable home which includes the preparation of the meals, the chores and cleanliness of the household, the upbringing of the children, and the up-keeping of a pleasant

outward appearance—to simplify her obligations. Women, then, were confined to their homes whereas men were able to roam about in the public and freely travel wherever they desired. For this reason, many more women than men grew up illiterate as it was regarded unnecessary to educate them since their place of business did not exist outside the realm of their home. Even so, does this mean that not a single woman ever broke this nonsensical concept and learned to read and write? If one were to agree with critics such as Gusdorf and his individualistic, Western-culture based theory, one could argue that even though there may be written works produced by women, thereby verifying a small population of literate women, women would not have been considered to have produced autobiographical works as they do not possess the essential characteristics—they are not male, they do not conquer, and their selfhood is not isolate but entangled with others who surround them.

One scholar who does not comply with the theory traditionalists use to analyze autobiography is critic Mary G. Mason. Mason, first, ascertains throughout her essay “The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers” that autobiographies have been written by women. Margery Kempe’s *The Book of Margery Kempe* is the first autobiography produced by a person of any gender in English, although Mason states it is not “generally recognized” (209) as so. Along with Kempe, Mason forms her essay around three other women authors: Margaret Cavendish, Julian of Norwich, and Anne Bradstreet. She argues that due to the role society has placed upon women as nurturer and caretaker of the private sphere-of- life as well as the decrees forced upon them lead them to experience life differently than their male counterparts. This in turn causes women to encompass the lives of others surrounding them, especially when logging down their experiences. Kempe’s *Book* parallels Augustine’s *Confessions* not only structurally—coherent, chronologically, and because her work is seen as a conversion narrative due to what

Mason calls Kempe's story a "personal conversion" (220). The reader's main focus, then, throughout the narrative would be on the author's self and reformation of this self as the narrative is outlined with individualistic paradigms. Moreover, what makes Kempe's life-story unique among other women during her time is that she set forth on multiple pilgrimages, resulting in experiences only typical of men. Men were the ones who were allowed to be mobile. Nonetheless, even with these traditional autobiographical attributes present within Kempe's *Book*, Mason continues on to point out in her essay that when read from a feminist perspective, one will also find the life-stories of other people Kempe encountered. Mason lists the characters one would encounter throughout *The Book*:

...we as readers are introduced to townspeople, pilgrims, foreigners, Englishmen abroad, clerics both hostile and friendly, magistrates, nobility, the poor and sick whom Kempe served. And in closer focus her *Book* brings to life a whole array of individual characters: the divine figures of God, Christ, Mary, and a host of saints; Margery Kempe's family, husband, son, and daughter-in-law; a number of spiritual confessors, among them master Allan, who was responsible for encouraging her religious enthusiasm; figures of historical or social prominence such as Philip Repington, Bishop of Lincoln, Thomas Arundel, Archbishop of Canterbury, the Duke of Bedford, the Mayor of Leicester; and finally a number of individualized commoners such as the lascivious steward who tried to rape Kempe at Leicester and the protecting jailer who saved her, or the broken-backed Richard who loaned her money in Rome (219-220).

These individuals have a place within Kempe's autobiography, and women's autobiography in general, as these individuals make up the life experiences of the author.

Equally, when analyzing women's autobiography like that of Margery Kempe's through a feminist or psychoanalytic perspective, it can be compared to one that is written by any woman regardless of color or race. The comparison found within both being compared will yield similar results within the narrative revealing not only the self's individuality, but those that helped shape and create the self. So even though the four women Mason provides are examples of women *autobiographers*, dating back to c.1432 (Margery Kempe), with physical characteristics proving they are from a Western, Caucasian lineage—which Gusdorf would deem appropriate for one of his male subjects, as autobiographer to be—the women of color and their stories have been forgotten. Needless to say then what of those women of a different race? Were culturally “others” considered to have the same life experiences because they were categorized as “others”? Were women collectively considered to have the same life experiences because they were further categorized by gender and even further classified by their race? But as Friedman claims in her essay, the concept of individualism that pervades the traditional autobiography theory provides room for speculation when analyzing the autobiographies written by those who have been marginalized—especially autobiographical works constructed by women. Friedman continues on to explain the reason: “the fundamental inapplicability of individualistic models of the self to women and minorities is twofold. First, the emphasis on individualism does not take into account the importance of a culturally imposed group identity for women and minorities. Second, the emphasis on separateness ignores the differences in socialization in the construction of male and female gender identity” (35). Women and minorities, therefore, are not being truly represented. This individualistic concept, which every critic of autobiographical works concurs is an essential element of an autobiography, is not the only and most important element that makes up an autobiography. Although the individual's identity will be revealed throughout the

narrative, a women writer tends to involve the stories of all those who are a part of her life. This is especially true in autobiographies written by women of color. Lourde Torres states in her article that women autobiographies not only contain different content but the structure is also set up differently. Men's narratives are not only based on the prototypical concept of the self, but are also chronologically structured. Women of color write in more of a fragmented structure as to share the life experiences of those who have shaped hers (277)¹. The self-representation of these women writers, therefore, can only be understood when the stories of those who aided in the shaping of their lives have been understood as well. And to understand the lives of any of these women, they would need to rise to the occasion and take the challenge to un-silence their voices and share their experiences.

It was this challenge that was sought and taken by African American women who decided to write down their lives because silence was no longer an option. Their pens became their tape recorders, their papers became their voices. They had voices just as their male counterparts did, and if writing would be the beginning of their freedom, to share their experiences of what it was like to be a woman in a dominant patriarchal society surviving off the strength of those surrounding her, then some did indeed accept the challenge.

Women of color felt the silencing of their voices even more so than Caucasian women as they were the ones who served white women; they were often hired as help or maids around the home. One particular group that dominated the population of the housemaid-work force was those of African descent. African American women were forced into becoming housemaids since slavery in the United States had begun. Furthermore, even with the end of slavery, these

¹ See Lourde Torres article "The Construction of the Self in U.S. Latina Autobiographies" as a reference.

uneducated, poor, black women had no choice but to continue to endure a life of a housemaid as that was the better of the two jobs—house servant or field picker. The challenges these women faced from psychological and physical degradations led them to not only want to voice their experiences to shed the oppressive silence forced upon them, but to reveal how they found themselves through the shared strength and experiences of those around them—particularly other women whom they bonded with. These women relied on each other to just make it through the day. Therefore when one woman tells her story, she is not only revealing her identity but the identities of those around her as well.

This identity formation of women of color has been a subject under much study. Just as Mason proposes a more cognitive based theory to explain the role of the “others” and the self-representation forged by the lives of those around them to construct their autobiography, Nancy Chodorow also forms her study of autobiographical works created by the “other” based on a cognitive theory. Her studies focus on the object-relations theory based on a psychoanalytic approach that Sigmund Freud used to examine the relationship between a son and his parents. According to Freud during the Oedipal stage, a boy rejects his mother and attaches to his father therefore separating and isolating himself from his mother. Conversely, Chodorow would argue that when girls are in the Oedipal stage, they never reject or repress any of their emotional feelings for their mothers therefore staying attached to them even as they pass through the Oedipal phase. Friedman states, “Using and revising psychoanalytical objects-relations theory from a feminist perspective, she [Chodorow] argues that ‘growing girls come to define themselves as continuous with others; their experience of self contains more flexible or permeable ego boundaries’” (41). This concept of being “continuous with others” allows girls/women to help each other out by relying upon each other for support. The “flexible or

permeable ego boundaries” females cross found within narratives truly reveals the oppression women have been subjected to over time.

According to Lourde Torres’ article, “The Construciton of the Self in U.S. Latina Autobiographies,” Torres shares the same views about self-representation forming around the lives of others with critics such as Mason, Jelinek and Chodorow. Lourde’s depiction of this is elucidated through the use of written collections of Latina women to reveal “the main thematic concern of the texts, as in all autobiographies, is the self, but in these texts is complicated by the problematic of the fragmented, multiple identity” (277). The “multiple identity” of a person that Lourde’s speaks of symbolizes the effect that others can have in the shaping of a woman. A woman may have “multiple identities” because she comes into contact with “multiple identities.” Therefore, this “multiple identity” that Lourdes speaks of represents all those who encompass the autobiographer’s world. Thus in order for those to understand an autobiographical work written by a marginalized woman, one must recognize that the work will break the traditional structure and content of one written by a male counterpart.

A women’s autobiography may not adhere to the traditional structures of autobiography, but nonetheless the narrative makes up in what the male autobiography lacks—that is, an enriching story of triumph and defeat given the hardships in comparison to the loneliness one feels from beginning to end. A representation of the best evidence provided is warranted by comparing two autobiographical works—both written by African Americans and each autobiography a representation of the male and female gender who wrote them. I will compare Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* with Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. By comparing these two narratives, one will be able to see that both of these works are

autobiographical in that they represent the self. However, with further analysis, Angelou's work will reveal the lives of others while Wright's predominantly focuses on him.

The tone of *Black Boy* was that of an ominous odor, that of a bitter taste left on your palate. Although no justification is needed as to why Wright chose to portray every aspect of his life from a negative perspective given the time period, he chose to do so by portraying everyone in his life, and those he would come into contact with, in a negative way as well. The first person he begins with is his father: "He was the lawgiver in our family and I never laughed in his presence. . . He was always a stranger to me, always somehow alien and remote" (10). So whether or not Wright wanted to be alone in the world as illustrated through his narrative, it may have partly been due to the fact that he felt alone, abandoned by his father since his childhood. But his father was not the only person painted as a dislikable person found in Wright's life. He portrays his mother with negative scrutiny; the only difference is that he blames his mother for the way he turned out as a man:

My mother's suffering grew into a symbol in my mind, gathering to itself all the poverty, the ignorance, the helplessness; the painful, baffling hunger-ridden days and hours; the restless moving, the futile seeking, the uncertainty, the fear, the dread; the meaningless pain and the endless suffering. Her life set the emotional tone of my life, colored the men and women I was to meet in the future, conditioned my relations to events that had not yet happened, determined my attitude to situations and circumstances I had yet to face (100).

Defeated not by the actions of a mother—his mother, but by his insecurities he chose to focus on throughout his life. Even though he says those insecurities were due to his mother's inability as a competent woman, he chose to let those hardships overtake his optimistic side. In fact, this negative veil Wright chose to see through, lent an off-putting perspective toward African-American women perceiving them as weak, unstable, ignorant beings. As Wright seems to find no comfort from those whose role was to nurture and comfort him, he ends up on his journey—to rid himself of the Jim Crow South—alone.

Angelou's autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* on the other hand, shares in similar experiences of those of her black counterpart Wright but when sharing her story, she does so in a way that does not convey her everyday experiences leaving a solemn mood with the reader. In no way does Angelou lie or soften the outcomes of her experiences, as she too faced segregation in the Deep South like Wright, but instead she does two things: she counters her negative occurrences with the triumphs she does experience, along with the support and love of those around her. Angelou, unlike Wright, does not portray every person in her life as the enemy. She also does not live her life in complete isolation from those around her. In fact, she needs the help of those around her as their advice and own experiences help to guide Angelou into making her own decisions. These decisions, ultimately made by Angelou but made based on others, indirectly, are examples of the crossing of boundaries Chodorow points out in her revised object-relational theory.

The crossing of boundaries Chodorow speaks off is how Angelou structures her autobiography. Unlike Wright who tells his story as a linear composition, Angelou's is the prime example of how a woman of color can tell her story—in fragments using the narratives of those around her to fill the space around hers. The fragments that are found within Angelou's narrative

represent each one of the woman who helped forge Angelou's identity. The three women who help form Angelou's life are her grandmother whom Angelou calls Momma; her biological mother, Vivian; and Mrs. Flowers, the town librarian. These women are viewed as role models who aided in shaping Angelou's identity as well as playing an integral part in providing comfort and relief in an era where the rest of society excluded them because the pigmentation of their skin was the "wrong color."

Angelou's telling of her childhood experiences as an African-American girl growing up in the segregated South not only details her youthful experiences but the lives of those who make up her community as well. Those involved in Angelou's life help form the decisions about her life and the life of her son she would eventually come to make. With Chodorow's gender-relational approach, and the women who were responsible for aiding Angelou through her childhood and young-adult years, I will argue that Africa-American women's autobiography will never just tell a story about themselves as they are never separate or isolate beings from their community. Not only does Angelou's experiences growing up as an African-American during the Jim Crow South warrant the necessity for the women around her to be looked upon for support, but Angelou does so by using a common motif—a woman's body—throughout her narrative to further warrant the support needed from the others.

The body is an integral symbol throughout Angelou's autobiography as it represents the journey Angelou and other women—not even just those within Angelou's narrative but all marginalized women—take as their path is a continuous boundary that encircles all of them. Angelou uses her body to illustrate how women continuously are there for each other. Given the roles of caretaker and caregiver, then others must be involved. And in order for the reader to truly understand Angelou's life, the reader must not only connect emotionally with Angelou, but

also with those that helped shaped Angelou's life; Angelou does this through the opening of her book. She hooks her African-American reader in, especially the women, as the experience she describes has been a testament to the life experiences of every other African-American. Black women can relate to Angelou's experiences as they have shared in these experiences having similar if not the exact same incidents. Angelou's "selective experiences" as Lecater Bland, Jr calls them in his book , *Voices of the Fugitives: Runaway Slave Stories and Their Fictions of Self-Creation* were obviously significant enough that she chose to open her autobiography with them. Everything from the Church as the setting, to the description of those inside, to Angelou's dissatisfaction for her body will resonate with her African-American audience as they would have had similar experiences.

As Angelou continues further on, she keeps her reader's attention by sharing her disgust with her own body. At such a young age, this not only signaled the effects of slavery which still polluted the way of the South, but it revealed how children at a young age were made to feel ashamed to be black:

Wouldn't they be surprised when one day I woke out my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn't let me straighten? My light-blue eyes were going to hypnotize them. . .Because I was white and because a cruel fairy stepmother, who was understandably jealous of my beauty, had turned me into a too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair, broad feet and a space between her teeth that would hold a number-two pencil. (Angelou 3)

One could argue that all children at one point in their youth struggle with the appearance of their physical characteristics and what is considered normal and what is not but for African-Americans, the struggle was enormously worse. The societal norms in place had made African-Americans feel embarrassed and ashamed of who they were. For that reason, Angelou at first does not identify with the women who make up her community. They were not, what society considered normal, and therefore Angelou did not want to identify with them, but instead she would rather try and identify herself—or at least her external characteristics with that of white girls. And as Angelou's mind is occupied with a child-like fantasy caused by being ashamed due to her society, she immediately dismisses the hard work her grandmother put forth in an effort to sew her dress as she remarks how, “. . . Easter's early morning sun had shown the dress to be a plain ugly cut-down from a white woman's once-was-purple throwaway” (2). Even at a young age, Angelou knows that in American society African-Americans compared to whites are seen as a homely race as she mentions in disgust how her dress was made from a white woman's dress that had been discarded: “I was going to look like one of the sweet little white girls who were everybody's dream of what was right with the world” (2). Angelou knew then that equality among the whites and blacks would not be a recognizable achievement for her during her childhood. For African-Americans, the epitome of “what was right with the world” was impossible for them to achieve as they could not genetically alter their skin color or physical characteristics. This further proves that even African-American children were not sheltered from the oppressive distinctiveness used to separate them from their counterparts whom Angelou tries to identify herself with at the start of the narrative. Bland states:

. . . Autobiography refers to a style of writing in which the writer, from a particular place in life, looks back over a lifetime of experience and writes about

it in hopes of finding in that experience some sense of coherence and meaning. . .

All autobiographers are selective in the experiences they recollect and in their selection of experiences from those recollections (32-33).

This may not be so much of an attack against her Momma as it is an attack against the white population and how African Americans were thus treated. In turn, Angelou reveals the lack of appreciation from a child's point of view trying to find herself and understand the issues that continue to plague society in comparison to what her prior generations have had to face and overcome by making-do with what was allotted to them.

Therefore, *Caged Bird* is just as much a narrative depicting Angelou's life as it is about grandmother Henderson's life. The bond and closeness these two shared is made evident through the name she calls her grandmother by—Momma. This woman, who raised Angelou, is nothing like any of the women. Wright portrays in his narrative. Despite Angelou's childish perspective and harsh portrayals of her grandmother as someone described as being strict, she does highlight her grandmother's good attributes as well. Her grandmother indeed should receive recognition as her accomplishments were very unlikely for African Americans—especially women. Angelou recalls a Stamp legend in *Caged Bird* as to how her grandmother became the first and only Negro woman to be referred to as Mrs. She does so by owning her own store which allows her to provide favors and loans to others, and she does so willingly if they need the help. Although there are incidents that Angelou describes through her life-story that involves her Momma as a strict character, Angelou relies heavily upon her grandmother and her status not only in the community of Stamps, but on the other side of the tracks—the “white” town.

It is the experiences that Momma encounters in her life that help her guide and raise her own granddaughter through life and also shapes Angelou's decisions. Momma was one of the women who help Angelou to embrace her body. By the fifth chapter of her narrative Angelou shares with her audience the degradation she witnesses her grandmother encounter when the "powhitetrash children" (28) of Stamps intrude upon Momma's land. The girls use their body and racial decrees to taunt Momma:

. . . But the big girl turned her back, bent down and put her hands flat on the ground. . . She simply shifted her weight and did a hand stand. Her dirty bare feet and long legs went straight for the sky. Her dress fell down around her shoulders, and she had on no drawers. The slick pubic hair made a brown triangle where her legs came together. . . The other girls clapped her on the back and slapped their hands. (32)

This encounter Angelou is a witness to helps her when she was a teenager trying to obtain a job for the trolley transportation in California. Angelou sees how her grandmother stands up to the children; although Momma ignores them and does not engage, Angelou knows this took a lot of courage to be the bigger person. Momma teaches Angelou to be proud of her body by not letting the white children mentally take a toll on her. Momma, although classified racially as a black person, was a better person than those children for her upstanding morals and ethics. Angelou then internalizes what she has learned from her grandmother and begins to not only accept her race, but becomes proud of being an African-American. She internalizes the racial conflict and overcomes her dilemma. She eventually becomes the first African-American woman as a conductor for the trolley transportation system.

When Angelou witnesses her grandmother's encounter, it is another triumphant, albeit degrading, experience and this leaves Angelou with heroic tales about her grandmother's actions. The reason for their trip is never accomplished as the white dentist refused to treat Angelou. However, grandmother Henderson was not going to let this unkind act impede on her right to take a stand. Grandma Henderson's altercation with the only dentist within walking distance of the town, and a white male nonetheless, leaves an everlasting impression of what a strong individual can accomplish despite their gender or race. Mamma in turn, is not only Angelou's caregiver, but also their lives would intertwine and influence each other for the rest of their existence. The intersecting and crossing of these women's lives—or as Chodorow would say, “boundaries”—are what keeps the relational ties among them; not only between Angelou and Mamma, but between all women who interact with each other. As Friedman states, “Chodorow's approach also suggests that the concept of isolated selfhood is inapplicable to women” (Friedman 41). It is inapplicable because women typically do not cut themselves off from others or society. They rely on each other as a source of comfort and companionship.

As one progresses through Angelou's narrative, the motif of the African-American woman's body continues to emerge. A woman's body has often been the subject of much violence in a patriarchal society. A woman's autobiography is a way to shed light on the violations women have had to endure for centuries in a patriarchal, dominated society. The traumatic experience Angelou has with the violation of her body by her mother's boyfriend—an adult Angelou had trusted because her mother had trusted him—has a lasting impression on her as it dominates her life for five years: “The act of rape on an eight-year-old body is a matter of the needle giving because the camel can't. The child gives, because the body can, and the mind of the violator cannot” (Angelou 78). Freeman is murdered, and Angelou thinks it is because she

spoke up and told of the incident so she chooses silence to try and redeem the act. However, her silence represents that of her ancestors where they were silenced and still continue to be.

Angelou does not know whom she can trust so she resorts back to her inner self. She punishes herself because she does not truly understand that silencing herself has always been the forced-upon-way of her people. Mama intervenes and asks that Mrs. Flowers meets and speaks with her silenced granddaughter. In turn, Mrs. Bertha Flowers ends up helping Angelou to overcome her self-inflicted silence.

According to Angelou, Mrs. Bertha Flowers was not like the other women who resided in Stamps. Angelou begins with the elegant description of her body: “Her skin was a rich black that would have peeled like a plum if snagged, but then no one would have thought of getting close enough to Mrs. Flowers to ruffle her dress, let alone snag her skin...She wore gloves too” (93). Angelou progresses from the beginning of her novel when she envied the physical characteristics of white girls, when she fantasized about having physical attributes of a white girl. She now appreciates the “blackness” of Mrs. Flower’s skin, the skin of an African American, the color of her skin. And although Angelou equates her to a white woman by saying, “She was our side’s answer to the richest white woman in town” (93), it is because she now has pride for being an African American.

Mrs. Flowers is well-educated for her time and presents herself in a confident manner. She did so in a way that was unusual especially for a Southern black woman during the time of Jim Crow. Yet Mrs. Flowers does not let the segregated South stop her from living her life. This is why Angelou says, “She was one of the few gentlewomen I have ever known, and has remained throughout my life the measure of what a human being can be” (94). Angelou looks up to Mrs. Flowers, and it was Mrs. Flowers who un-silences Angelou’s childhood voice after the

incident. Mrs. Flower's helps Angelou break through her inner silence or as Angelou puts it, "...the lady who threw me my first life line" (93). Mrs. Flowers helps Angelou to realize the importance of sharing one's thoughts through her words of wisdom:

Now no one is going to make you talk—possibly no one can. But bear in mind, language is man's way of communicating with his fellow man and it is language alone which separates him from the lower animals. . .

Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning. (98)

Angelou eventually breaks through her silence. Angelou believes, with the help of Mrs. Flowers that their race was not animal; they each had a voice just like the white man. They would have to use their voices to make their words and their thoughts heard. She helps Angelou in a different way than that of Mamma and Vivian—she gives Angelou her voice back.

Another individual who plays a significant role in shaping Angelou's identity is her mother, Vivian Baxter. Despite the initial abandonment of Angelou's biological parents in the opening of her work, Angelou's need for approval from her parents is an integral part of who Angelou would become as a person. Angelou's bond with her mother is what kept her mother in her life. From the moment Vivian is introduced in Angelou's work, it is clear she is different than the other women who make up Angelou's life in Stamps. Angelou quotes, "Mother's beauty made her powerful and her power made her unflinchingly honest" (206). Vivian used her beauty as an opportunity to participate in a society that had for so long been denied to African Americans. Even though the opportunities that prevailed for African Americans were such that not even a member of the low white class would want to partake in, it was still a sign of

freedom—a sign that they were their own person. And Vivian, when explaining to her children what she does for a living in a city that allows blacks to run their own lives, does not sugarcoat it:

. . . she walked us to Oakland’s Seventh Street, where dusty bars and smoky shops sat in the laps of storefront churches. She pointed out Raincoat’s Pinochle Parlor and Slim Jenkins’ pretentious saloon. Some nights she played pinochle for money or ran a poker game at Mother Smith’s or stopped at Slim’s for a few drinks.

(206)

These were the menial jobs that African Americans were subjected to undertake. However, these jobs also allowed them to finally have a voice—to be a part of society. And not only could they do so collectively based on their race, but it allowed them to individually matter in society.

Since her mother is afforded the opportunity to individually shine, Angelou was able to witness her mother partaking in this opportunity. She is able to see yet another example of how a strong African American woman in her life succeeds given her surroundings. Vivian shows her daughter how it was possible to break away from the past, from segregation, from Stamps, and everything it stood for. These experiences with her mother later shape Angelou’s views and actions as she tries to obtain a job as the first African American woman trolley conductor.

Autobiographies by black women, therefore, seem to exhibit signs not of static boundaries but those of fluid ones. Likewise, it is at the end of *Caged Bird* where Angelou closes with a rite of passage of motherhood, a vehicle for a new identity” (Braxton 3). This new identity means embarking on a new passage for Angelou—she now becomes the ultimate caregiver, her newborn son’s mother. Angelou now has taken on the responsibility to provide the basic

necessities of life to someone other than herself. This becomes her chance to continue the voice of her mother and her mother's mother—an ending that is also simultaneously a beginning and continuation.

It is evident that Angelou struggles with this new concept of beginning to become a mother. After she finally tells her mother she states, “. . . I had carried a baby, eight months and one week, without their being any the wiser” (287). Angelou's constant struggle throughout her pregnancy is that she feels she cannot tell her mother. At 15 years old, she feels this would disappoint her mother. Except, it was unsurprisingly Angelou's mother who ended up helping her through the end of her pregnancy, and also after her son was born. The reason for the mother-daughter bond that Angelou and Vivian share is, as Chodorow suggests “. . .the importance of mother-child relationships” (Friedman 41). She has the same special attachment to her mother that she will soon have with her newborn son. Chodorow goes on to claim:

Mothers tend to experience their daughters as more like, and continuous with themselves. Correspondingly, girls tend to remain part of the dyadic primary mother-child relationship itself. This means that a girl continues to experience herself as involved in issues of merging and separation, and in an attachment characterized by primary identification and the fusion of identification and object choice. (Friedman 42)

And even though Angelou has a son, and not a daughter, she is still a woman and will exhibit this “mother-child” relationship with her son.

Angelou's and her mother's paths always cross; their experiences intertwine leaving them with shared and similar experiences. Angelou uses her mother's life and heeds her advice to then

impart this knowledge into being a good mother in raising her son. Even Angelou's mother believes in Angelou's capability to be a good mother as she tells Angelou, "See, you don't have to think about doing the right thing. If you're for the right thing, then you do it without thinking" (289). Angelou was protecting her newborn baby unconsciously; she did "the right thing" because of who she is as a person. Not to mention Mamma, Mrs. Flowers and Vivian who all were the women role models in Angelou's life. The experiences involving those women and Angelou, that Angelou was a witness to, imparted wisdom upon Angelou and shaped Angelou's character. They have instilled in her the positive self-esteem to be strong, independent, and honest no matter her race or gender or physical attributes. Moreover as long as these women's paths cross, they will always have shared experiences. Angelou's experience of "patting [her] son's body" (289) was a sign of protection and maturity. Angelou has now also become a protector of her voice as she went from disliking her black body, to having her black body violated, and finally full-circle to having a baby whose body now needed her protection so that it could continue the legacy. Angelou overcame these struggles that she had with her body through the help of all the women in her life that shared the experiences and enabled her to do the same.

It would seem then that "Chodorow's theory of differential gender identity highlights the unconscious equation of masculine selfhood with human selfhood in the concept of isolated identity proposed by writers like Gusdorf and Olney" (Friedman 41). Unlike those of black male autobiographers like Wright, black female autobiographies are never about the isolated self. In fact, many women writers' autobiographies, like Maya Angelou's, would not fill many pages if it were not for incorporating and intertwining the many fragments of experiences with those surrounding them in their works. The crossings of the female boundaries are what have allowed women to progress as a gender and individually in today's society. If it were not for women

writers sharing each other's stories, the world, and especially other women, would not only miss out on their side of the story, but the world would not be able to truly understand their experiences. By being able to share their voices and how those experiences have molded them into the women they eventually become, they unlock the ability to pass this knowledge onward. As Angelou states in the later part of *Caged Bird*, "The Black female is assaulted in her tender years by all those common forces of nature at the same time that she is caught in the tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and Black lack of power" (272). Therefore, black women due to their marginalized gender and race have experiences different than women that come from other racial backgrounds. Angelou, her contemporaries, and all those before and after her have not only publicized their lives to take a stand, but they have done so to show the world who they are. They no longer will tolerate the silence that had been opposed upon them as a gender, as black women during a racially divided time in our country. It is through their words, their speeches, and their writings that have shed light and left their audience with a better comprehension of what these women had to endure and overcome in a society that thrives on a concept of selfhood. Gusdorf states, "Man must be an island unto himself. Then, and only then, is autobiography possible" (36). In contrast, it would seem almost complementary that in order for autobiography to be possible for a woman they must be the sea around the island. Angelou's autobiography and those alike, have then broken the traditional claims of what constitutes as a "true" autobiography as the static boundaries have been permeated. The requirement of a woman's autobiography then might be for the woman to be the intertwined, complex and fluid ocean around the island Gusdorf metaphorically speaks of.

Works Cited

- Angelou, Maya. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1969. Print.
- Bergland, Betty. "Postmodernism and the Autobiographical Subject: Reconstructing the 'Other.'" In *Autobiography and Postmodernism*. Ed. Kathleen Ashley, Leigh Gilmore & Gerald Peters. Boston, Boston University Press, 1994: 130-166. Print.
- Bland, Sterling Lectar Jr. *Voices of the Fugitives: Runaway Slave Stories and Their Fictions of Self-Creation*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2000. Print.
- Braxton, Joanne, M. *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within a Tradition*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989. Print.
- Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Boston: Dover Publications, 1995. Print.
- Friedman-Stanford, Susan. "Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice." In *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings*. Ed. Shari Benstock. North Carolina Press, 1988: 35-62. Print.
- Gates, Henry Louis. *Bearing Witness: Selections from African-American Autobiography in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Pantheon Books, c1991. Print.
- Gilmore, Leigh. *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994. Print.
- Gusdorf, Georges. "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography." In *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*. Ed. James Olney. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980: 28-48. Print.
- Haaken, Janice. *Pillar of Salt: Gender, Memory, And the Perils of Looking Back*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1998. Print.

- Jelinek, Estelle C. "Women's Autobiography and the Male Tradition." In *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*. Ed. Estelle C. Jelinek. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980: xii-274. Print.
- Mason, Mary G. "The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers." In *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*. Ed. James Olney. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980: 207-34. Print.
- Niemtzow, Annette. "The Problematic of Self in Autobiography: The Example of the Slave Narrative." In *The Art of Slave Narrative: Original Essays in Criticism and Theory*. Ed. John Sekora & Darwin T. Turner. Western Illinois University, 1988: 96-107. Print.
- Olney, James. "Autobiography and the Cultural Moment: A Thematic, Historical, and Bibliographical Introduction." In *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*. Ed. James Olney. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980: 3-27. Print.
- Torres, Lourdes. "The Construction of the Self in U.S. Latina Autobiographies." In *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Sidonie Smith & Julia Watson. Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1998: 276-287. Web. 10. Feb. 2014.
- Wright, Richard. *Black Boy*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1945. Print.

Jay-Nel Steitz

C00384239

Gender and Self-Representation in Maya Angelou's Autobiography *I Know Why the
Caged Bird Sings*

Dr. Emmanuel Nelson

May 2nd, 2014