

IABAA 2017 – Lives Outside the Lines: A Symposium in Honour of Marlene Kadar

Panel 17: Autobiography and the Black Female Body Politic: Illness, Singing, and Black Diasporic Subjectivity

Moderator and Respondent: Mildred Mickle

Mildred Mickle is the Associate Professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania, McKeesport. There she serves as the Co-Head of Letters, Arts, and Sciences; the Head of African, and African American Studies; and the Coordinator of Theatre, the Creative Writing Certificate, and the Africana Certificate Programs. Dr. Mickle received her Ph.D. in English from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Kimberly Burnett

Disruption: Maya Angelou and the Singing Body

This presentation will provide a brief overview of the singing body in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), *Singin' and Swingin'* and *Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* (1976), and *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986). I examine how Angelou's focus on the singing body allows a critical re-imagining of black female embodiment in which the body and the mind are interconnected. I contend that the singing body is itself, as Spillers suggests, a form of writing— a “hieroglyphic” that speaks as much to the experience of black female being as the literary text. In this presentation, I will share selected recordings of Maya Angelou's own singing to consider questions such as: What does it mean to consider music as an archive in Angelou's work?

Specifically, what does the singing body mean for a construction of black female identity or black feminist identity? In addition to exploring challenges of the process itself and what they reveal about our values and assumptions as scholars, I will examine the significance of re- thinking the boundary lines of the body (lived experience) and voice (the expression of the mind) and what lies at the intersection. In particular, I am interested in questioning what remains troubling about the mind/soul or body/spirit connection in the re-telling of one's life and what it proffers to discussions about gender. I argue that the singing body in Angelou's writing disrupts normalized narratives of black female subjectivity and internalizes a discussion of boundary and dislocation within the black female body.

Kimberly Burnett is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her research focuses on gospel music in African American literature of the twentieth century, specifically examining the role of gospel music in constructions of black womanhood.