Maya Angelou: Metamorphosis: A Personal Journey in Identity Politics

By

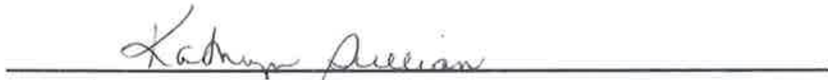
Christine Chambers-Merriman

Approved:

Robert Reising, Ed.D.
Thesis Committee Chairman

Shelby Stephenson, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Clarence Toomer, Ed.D.
Committee Member

Approved: 

Kathryn Sullivan, Ph.D.
Director of Graduate Studies

May 7, 1994
Date

00252702

Cage
AS
36
.N6
P4555
1994
no. 2

Table of Contents

Abstract..page 1

Introduction....................................page 3

Phase One: Dichotomy............................page 5

Phase Two: Anger, Audacity, Action..............page 19

Phase Three: Chrysalis..........................page 33

Phase Four: Creativity: Finding the Balance......page 48

Conclusion......................................page 51

Appendix: Selected Poems........................page 53

Notes...page 70

Works Cited.....................................page 74

Works Consulted.................................page 76

Abstract

Maya Angelou displays in her works of autobiography and poetry a tension between her perceptions of self, and her need to reconcile those perceptions with an evolving vision of universal culture. A study of her attitudes towards race, gender, and class reveals a metamorphosis in identity politics, a transformation that moves from a small, isolated, and often angry world-view to a position of racial pride, powerful gender identity, and world citizenship. The operative themes of race, gender, and class will be examined in four aspects, corresponding to the stages of her growth: perception of dichotomy in her life; anger, audacity, and action as response; a transitional chrysalis period; and emerging creativity , marked by the tension of balance and counterbalance, (self vs. universal image) as she continues to explore the question of her identity in the world.

Peter Erickson, in Rewriting Shakespeare, Rewriting Ourselves, provides a working definition of "identity politics":

> The deep heart's core of literary experience involves the engagement with one's cultural specificity, including its political ramifications. While the notion of universality sidesteps the task of acknowledging and assessing cultural difference, identity politics enables us to begin this task.

He further elucidates:

> Identity politics refers to categories of race, gender, and class by which we name difference. Thus, when the ideal of common culture is counterbalanced by giving equal weight to the principle of identity politics, the term *counterbalanced* means that the two terms are not so much reconciled as held in productive tension (172).

Acknowledgment and assessment of cultural difference was a primary task of Maya Angelou's young womanhood; celebration of both differences and common humanity the theme of her later works. The tensions created by this counterbalance have been catalysts for a metamorphosis in her own "deep heart's core", a change that continues to inform her development as author and human being.

Introduction

Maya Angelou began her life with notable inauspiciousness, a child who saw herself as "an old biscuit, dirty and inedible"(CB.90). Her early years were shaped by her experience of race, gender, and class; yet later, in discussing her life, she was able to agree with Shakespeare that "Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them" (Twelfth Night, Act II, Sc.5, line 159), adding, in an interview with Bill Moyers, that she felt herself to be "the recipient of all three conditions". Only a great coming-to-terms with her sense of self in the world could allow such an assessment. The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between Maya Angelou's early experiences and influences and her subsequent growth in terms of identity politics, and to examine how this change constitutes a metamorphosis in four stages: a perception of the dichotomies in her life; a period of anger, audacity, and action; a chrysalis period; and a time of creativity.

The child Maya, referred to by Angelou herself in the second person when her positions are distinct from those of the adult author, was often consumed by feelings of alienation, worthlessness, and rage as she perceived the discrepancies in her world between white and black, rich and poor, male and female. From 1931, when she arrived in Stamps, Arkansas, tagged with her identity pinned to her

dress, until her emergent womanhood that began roughly with her grammar school graduation in 1940, and her move to California within the year, she was essentially enraged and displaced. In California, she entered a world where she began to feel at home and began a period of identity assertion that sought to belie earlier feelings of worthlessness with action. That her actions were often rooted in anger, and even more often tinged with a note of audacity became for Angelou a means of survival, a means of reconciling the realities of her life with what ought to be. The third stage of her metamorphosis began in the late 1950's, as she began to channel her perceptions into writing, calling on the earlier creative efforts of dancing, singing, and performing to translate onto paper her need for self-expression. In her present writings, the fourth stage, Angelou continues to refine her continuing perception of herself as a Black female, and continues to balance that view with her interpretations of a universal culture of which she is both a vital constituent and a creation herself apart and distinct.

Phase One:Dichotomy

Maya Angelou often begins her talks by singing a few bars from an old spiritual: "Look Where We've All Come From". That is fitting, in much the way that it is expected that older Southerners of any race still ask, soon after meeting, "And who were your grandparents?"

Maya Angelou comes from many places that to her childish perceptions were filled with dichotomy: a sense that what was true in her life was not true for all; that what was true in her life ought not to be true in any life. She was a poor, Black girl-child in the Depression South when that was about as low on the social scale as one could be. She was traded from parents to an elderly grandmother and back again several times yet found measures of strength with each and learned lessons in each place that carried her through life. She was an early and voracious reader: though they did without much in her family, she and her brother were never without books. She was violated as a child, and she violated herself by refusing to speak. She became, as she put it, "an ear" (Moyers), and in that self-denial she fed the roots of her later poetry. She grew up in the church, which, for her as a child, was the scene of much misbehavior and the source of many songs of strength. "I was terribly hurt in this town" she told Bill Moyers, "and vastly loved." Contradiction and tension were a way of life.

A dichotomy in identification was evident early for Maya Angelou. Claudia Tate, in a 1983 interview, asked her what writers influenced her work. The answer was immediate: "Paul Laurence Dunbar and William Shakespeare. I love them" (11). In an interview with Bill Moyers, however, she was more blunt.

> Moyers: Shakespeare was your first white love?
> Angelou: That's true...I couldn't believe it, that a white man could write so musically...'When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes'...(Sonnet 29). I wept. I thought myself certainly in disgrace with fortune, being black and poor and female in the South. And I was also out of grace with men's eyes because I wasn't pretty.

Despair over race, and class, and gender was already in tension with its expression in Maya's life. Years later, responding to a 1985 speech in which Maya Angelou said of Shakespeare, after reading the "29 Sonnet", that he was surely a Black woman, Lynne Cheney, then Chair of the National Endowment of the Humanities, saw Angelou's ability to allow the" 29 Sonnet" to speak to her situation as evidence that race, gender, and class do not matter. Erickson disagrees, seeing instead within the poem the articulation of a "social dynamic that works against simple transcendence. The poet's expressions of love do not triumphantly dissolve the class barrier; rather the class difference helps to underscore the love's wishfulness and

pathos" (117-18). The child Maya surely had a much simpler perception and easy identification with a poet who could write of the pure pain of seeing and knowing while never having. The child who shared with her brother, Bailey, Jr., the love of both Shakespeare and of the Black writers, who at the same time longed to wake up white, and who lived the terrors of not belonging, not once but over and over, certainly knew all there was to know about difference, and pathos. "If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl", she wrote," being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat "(CB.6).

Displacement is a recurring theme in Angelou's work, a theme that began in her earliest reality. At the age of three, accompanied only by her four-year old brother,Bailey, Maya was sent across country by train, her name and destination pinned to her dress. They arrived in Stamps, Arkansas, to be raised by their paternal grandmother, Momma Annie Henderson and her crippled son, Willie.

Stamps was a highly segregated and stratified town. Across the tracks from her grandmother's store, the white community, with its painted houses and fancy yards, might well have been foreign territory. White people were not so much feared as totally ignored in daily dealings, as if by blotting out their reality all need for acknowledgement of one's own station could also be ignored and the Black community could just "be". "People in Stamps used to say that the whites in our town were so prejudiced that a Negro

couldn't buy vanilla ice cream," and the emotions of the Black community centered around "fear-admiration-contempt" for whites (CB.47). Angelou later said:

> All of childhood's unanswered questions must finally be passed back to the town and answered there. Heroes and bogey men, values and dislikes, are first encountered and labeled in that early environment. In later years they change faces, places, and maybe races, tactics, intensities and goals, but beneath those penetrable masks they wear forever the stocking-capped faces of childhood (CB.19).

This was not the only contradiction life held, nor were these the only masks Maya encountered in her childhood. At the small country store her grandmother owned, the only Black-owned business in town, the white cotton growers would converge to hire pickers. They picked up at dawn and let off at dusk. She remembered for Bill Moyers:

> The people would fold out of the wagon, dead, beat. But on Saturday...that was a big day, Saturday at the store; they would talk, and they would be so sassy. And if a white person would come, they would become meek: 'Sho, yes suh, that's right', and you would see this thing that happened, this mask or these masks, and Paul Laurence Dunbar helped me to understand that with the poem:

'We wear the mask that grins and lies.
It shades our teeth and hides our eyes...'

Silence provided another type of mask, the most profound response of a child to intolerable conditions, a sure knowledge that life should not be this way. When Maya was around seven and Bailey eight,their father arrived to take them to live with their mother, from whom he was divorced. Perhaps wanting to restore a sense of belonging to the children, Momma sent them off with him to live with their mother in St. Louis. There was, for Maya, the possibility of adventure, and of being enfolded in her mother's large family of grandmother and brothers, and a chance to experience her mother's love. But if Maya had hoped to be rescued from displacement by this glorious mother whom she found so beautiful, she received instead only new layers of isolation and a sad message about the meaning of being female. At the age of seven, Maya was raped, not by a stranger, but by her mother's boyfriend in whose care she had been left. The pain was excruciating to the child who was physically ravaged and full of the guilt of thinking herself responsible. She was also burdened by the insecurity of knowing this forceful woman, her mother, had not the power to protect her own child. Then, it all became worse. There was a trial, and Maya named her attacker. He was found dead within a day of his release, and Maya learned with a child's awful misperception the power and strength of her own words. To Bill Moyers she said

of that time: "I thought it was my voice that killed him. I just refused to put out my voice and put anyone else in danger." She became mute, a self-imposed condition that lasted for over a year. Removing herself effectively from the life in that home, she and her brother were soon sent back to Stamps. "I have never known if Momma sent for us, or if the St.Louis family just got fed up with my grim presence. There is nothing more appalling than a constantly morose child" (CB. 86).

The muteness, the affirmation of the power of the word, was indeed the first conscious work of Maya Angelou to express her identity as a poor black female, her first conscious rage against powerlessness. She "sopped around," she said, "like an old biscuit, dirty and inedible" (CB.90). Selwyn Cudjoe, in speaking of Angelou as autobiographer, begins with a quotation from Muntu, by Janheinz Jahn, who argues for the vital importance of the word in African thought:

> Everything comes into being only through the word,[or *nommo*]...*Nommo* does not stand above and beyond the earthly world... *Nommo*, on the other hand, goes on unceasingly creating and procreating, creating even gods (272).

Cudjoe tells us that "in African thought the control over the word signified the African's possibility in this world... The fact that Afro-Americans had to use the full power of the word when all other elements of resistance had

ceased temporarily also helped cement its magical importance in their cosmology " (281).

The loss of words not only left the young Maya with little to use to resist the oppressions of her world, but became also the first exercise of her personal autonomy as a means to impose control over the ambiguities and inequalities in her life. She became a fighter, telling Bill Moyers: "I had a rage I kept in my teeth. As soon as one of them [white kids] looked at me, I would hit him or her...and quite often got beaten up, too. And it wouldn't clear me of my rage. I could never get enough to get my rage out." She spoke of being conscious of white people looking at her with "loathing", and asked, "What scars does that leave on somebody? When I reached for the pen to write, I had to scrape it across those scars".

In her grandmother, Maya found a source of uncompromising strength that helped her bear the psychic bruises, and later informed her concept of female pride. In Stamps as a child, however, Maya had two clear perceptions: "I thought at one time; I may have been the only one that knew it...I thought at one time she was God" (Moyers). She knew, too, that "As powerful as her grandmother's presence seems ...Momma uses her strength to guide and protect her family, but not to confront the white community directly" (Neubauer, 117-18). The dichotomy for Maya, the source of pain, was that Momma could not, within the structure of society, change the inequality, nor did she

seem to need to visibly prevail over white disrespect and injustice. From Momma she learned endurance, recounting in Caged Bird an instance at the store where a group of "powhitetrash" girls mocked Momma, turned flips without wearing underwear in front of her, and perhaps worst of all, called her 'Annie' only to be called "Miss" respectfully in return, and met with Momma's only other reponse: the singing of hymns. "Something had happened out there, which I couldn't completely understand, but I could see that she was happy... Whatever the contest had been out front, I knew Momma had won" (32). From this woman, Maya learned courage and the power of quiet strength, but not without childish pain.

From her grandmother, Maya also learned a life defined by the church. She told Moyers they went to church on Sunday and stayed all day, then they attended Missionary Society meetings, Bible Study, choir practice...on and on, all week long. It was not so much a love of religion she gained, though surely that had been her grandmother's hope; it was a love of the songs.

> Always in the Black spirituals is a promise", she told Moyers, "and incredible poetry. I don't know why I knew it was great poetry...Lines like this:
> 'Green trees a bendin'
> Poor sinner stands a tremblin...'
> ...it still does, it can bring tears to my eyes.

Promise, to a child, is bittersweet, for while it guarantees relief later, it also highlights the fact that the present reality is so in need of that relief.

Angelou was in Stamps as an adult during the Bill Moyers interview. The year was 1982, and it was her first visit back since childhood. Much in the reunion was clearly painful to her, but not so the scene in her old church, where she had been asked to speak. She told the congregation of being asked to sing at a gathering of thousands of Algerians while on tour in the fifties with the opera company, <u>Porgy and Bess</u>. She had to explain she could sing no opera, being trained as a dancer. "A spiritual?" they asked, and so she sang for them one of the old songs. They sang back to her, she tells the group, with still palpable awe, "Deep and Wide" *in Arabic*:

> I didn't know what to say. Then I understood. When they gave out the big parcels of land, and money, my people had none of that to give me...no names that would make people shake in the marketplace. But look at what they gave me [the songs]. My Lord, look at what they gave me; it opened doors for me all over the world. It's a great blessing.

Consciousness of the power inherent in possessing the music informed Angelou's character, Philomena, a blues pianist, in the short story, "The Reunion", who uses its command as a way to claim superiority over the wealthy white

woman her family had once worked for:

> She had the money, but I had the music. She and her parents had had the power to hurt me when I was young, but look, the stuff in me lifted me up high above them. No matter how bad times became, I would always be the song struggling to be heard (Gingher, 15).

The music became metaphor for racial distinction,and for strength, an image that may be traced directly to Momma Henderson singing hymns on the porch of the store. Houston Baker stated the metaphorical power of music best :

> Indeed, if you have ever heard the blues righteously sung, you know that it sounds of and from fields burning under torpid Southern suns, or lands desolately drenched by too high rivers. The intended audience is black people themselves defined by the very blues tones and lyrics as sharers in a nation of common concern and culturally specific voice (93).

Metaphor is, however, an adult's image, and cultural specificity an adult's nice way of referring to exclusion. The child Maya needed no fancy concepts to define her clear perception that there was, outside of her experience, a different world of which she had no part. That world was dangled before her in a particularly painful manner on the evening of Maya's 1940 grammar school graduation, one that in later years became associated with issues of autonomy and

power, race and expectations. A top student, Maya's pride had risen to heights unknown just prior to the graduation. As she sat at the ceremony, a white politician spoke to the children at her all-Black school about strides in educational reform soon to be effected at the nearby white school, and about their own athletic prowess. As Angelou records it:

> The white kids were going to have a chance to become Galileos and Madame Curies and Edisons and Gaugins, and our boys [the girls weren't even in on it] would try to be Jesse Owenses and Joe Louises....
>
> The man's dead words fell like bricks around the auditorium and too many settled in my belly.... Graduation, the hush-hush magic time of frills and gifts and congratulations and diplomas, was finished for me before my name was called. The accomplishment was nothing... it was for nothing. Donleavy had exposed us.
>
> We were maids and farmers, handymen and washer-women, and anything higher that we aspired to was farcical and presumptuous...(CB 175-6)

The young Maya responded as a child in deep pain from a brutal assault might be expected to:

> It was awful to be Negro and have no control over my life. It was brutal to be young and already trained to sit quietly and listen to charges

> brought against my color with no chance of defense. We should all be dead (176).

The caterpillar seems not to be aware when the upheavals of metamorphosis begin. The spontaneity of the following actions on that graduation evening should not belie their importance as a turning point for Angelou, a shift from perception of pain with resultant rage to a position of anger that fueled action, even unexpected action. In Angelou's words:

> There was shuffling and rustling around me, then Henry Reed was giving his valedictory address, 'To Be or Not to Be.' Hadn't he heard the whitefolks? We couldn't *be*, so the question was a waste of time. Henry's voice came out clear and strong. I feared to look at him. Hadn't he got the message? There was no 'nobler in the mind' for Negroes because the world didn't think we had minds, and they let us know it. 'Outrageous fortune'? Now, that was a joke. When the ceremony was over I had to tell Henry Reed some things. That is, if I still cared. Not 'rub,' Henry, 'erase.' 'Ah, there's the erase.' Us (CB.178).

Suddenly, in the midst of this bitter reverie, there was a hush. Suddenly, the conservative and predictable Henry did the audacious, the unpredictable. He turned his back to the audience and began to sing to the graduates the "Negro National Anthem", by James Weldon and J. Rosamund Johnson.

The parents in the audience took up the song, as did the graduates and even the kindergarteners. Maya tells us she and all the children learned the song with their ABC's, but she had never before really listened or applied the words to her own situation:

> 'We have come over a way that with tears
> has been watered,
> We have come, treading our path through
> The blood of the slaughtered.'
>
> ... We were on top again. As always, again. We survived (179).

Maya was lifted by the words, by Henry's courage, and the strengthening support of the community. She concludes:

> If we were a people much given to revealing secrets, we might raise monuments and sacrifice to the memories of our poets, but slavery cured us of that weakness. It may be enough, however, to have it said that we survive in exact relationship to the dedication of our poets [include preachers, musicians, and blues singers] (CB. 180).

Erickson speaks to the dichotomy in this situation as it must have been perceived by Maya: The failed, planned allusion to Shakespeare by the valedictorian was rescued by the poem by James Weldon Johnson sung by the crowd, and the passage was concluded by Angelou with allusion to another of Johnson's works, "O, Black and unknown Bards." The book

which contains this account, her first, draws its title from the Paul Laurence Dunbar poem, "Sympathy". The child who had spent years reading, travelling to other and better worlds in her books, especially "her" Shakespeare, "her" Dunbar, "her" Johnson; who became, in her words, "an ear" when her outrage made her mute, and who then heard and saw with heightened clarity the inadequacies, hatreds, and fears of her world, was brought, through a single evening's events, face to face with their convergence in a painful reality.

The anger of the child had begun to spark the actions of a woman, no longer able to record discrepancy without attempting remedy. That her responses were often audacious and at times self-destructive in no way diminishes this stage as a new phase in Angelou's coming to terms with her political identity as a Black woman in America.

Phase Two: Anger, Audacity, and Action

Like Paul Laurence Dunbar's caged bird, with the urge for freedom singing in her soul, Maya Angelou left Stamps, Arkansas. Soon after the grammar school graduation, in the year 1941, her brother Bailey saw more than he should have of a black man's lynching, and the result; doubtless to shield the children from further effects of the South's racial hatred, Momma sent them both to live with their mother in San Francisco.

Maya loved the vibrance of San Francisco. It was the beginning of wartime,just after Pearl Harbor, and as the Japanese were moved out, Blacks moved right in, seizing opportunities for business and housing, working in the booming wartime industries. She wrote:

> The air of collective displacement,the impermanence of life in wartime and the gauche personalities of the more recent arrivals tended to dissipate my own sense of not belonging. ...The city acted in wartime like an intelligent woman under seige. She gave what she couldn't with safety withold, and secured those things which lay in her reach. The city became for me the ideal of what I wanted to be as a grownup (CB.205-6).

Angelou's emerging sense of femininity became tied up in pragmatics, due to the influence of the city and her mother, an eminently practical and hard-working woman who

had recently married a successful man, instantly upwardly mobilizing the family.

In this atmosphere, Maya became a risk-taker. Poverty was no longer an immediate threat, and the strong example of her mother, known as Vivian Baxter throughout her multiple marriages, was ever-present. Baxter was a woman who lived her life using only active verbs. In myriad ways and in myriad circumstances, her advice stood: "Expect the best and prepare for the worst". This was a woman who trained as a registered nurse, worked the card tables with professional gamblers, ran a series of restaurants, and tried to look, act, and dress as if she were a person of means. Most of the time, she was. That this fast and hard life-style was only possible because she had not slowed to raise her two children from her failed first marriage, and was therefore not only a panacaea for her daughter's sense of displacement but in a very real sense its cause, only underlined the potential for reconciling dichotomy through action to the young Maya.

At the end of I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Maya Angelou reflected on the growing-up experience of Black women in general, but aptly described the woman she was becoming:

> 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.
>
> The fact that the adult American Negro female emerges a formidable character is often met with amazement, distaste, and even belligerence. It is seldom accepted as an inevitable outcome of the struggle won by survivors and deserves respect if not enthusiastic acceptance (265).

The path to adult formidableness was strewn for Maya with action taken in the face of adversity, often enacted hastily, but taken nonetheless. A catalogue of her behaviors might appear in many ways to be a collection of rashness, but in San Francisco, in the early forties, under the non-watchful eyes and strident role-modeling of Vivian Baxter, all made perfect sense: the logical outcomes of "preparing for the worst". Thrown in was a large measure of luck, or fate.

It was most likely her good grades that allowed Maya to be transferred soon after her arrival to a high school where she was one of only three other Black students. "In that rarefied atmosphere", she said,"I came to love my people more" (CB.209). She also came to love learning and information, tools that proved invaluable in later life. She never knew what luck it was that allowed her to be given a scholarship to study drama and dance at the California Labor School, but the art she practiced there informed her

later life both creatively and practically, giving her a means to earn a living.

Anger at inequity, a visitor from her years in Stamps, returned but found host in a Maya armed with both an openness to education and a creative outlook on problem-solving. The first instance centered around her fifteenth summer, when she was invited to spend the months off from school with her father and his girlfriend, Dolores, in southern California. The girlfriend expected a cute nine-year old (Bailey,Sr. was an inveterate liar when it served his interests), and she got a six-foot tall adolescent who instantly saw through the couple's shallow pretentiousness and pseudo-perfection. Long accustomed to a less-than-perfect family situation, Maya refused to become entwined in the pretense and bided her time to gain a position of control over the situation. It came when her father invited her to travel with him to Mexico on pretext of securing authentic ingredients for his gourmet cooking. In reality, spending time with Maya was an affront to the insecure Delores, and both Maya and her father meant it to be so. On the trip, it became obvious that Bailey, Sr. had traveled this road often, including the *cantina* where they stopped, and where he evidently had many friends of both sexes. The friendships were of such

intensity that he disappeared for a time, leaving his daughter to her high-school Spanish and her own devices. When he finally arrived only to pass out in the back seat of

his car, what had gone from fear to anger very quickly became for Maya resolve. "I was superbly intelligent and had good physical coordination. Of course I could drive. Idiots and lunatics drove cars, why not the brilliant Marguerite Johnson?" (CB.230). So reasoned Maya as she drove all the way to the border and handled the guard there with her Spanish, as well as the family in the car she smashed, with great aplomb. "As I twisted the steering wheel and forced the accelerator to the floor I was controlling Mexico, and might and aloneness and inexperienced youth and Bailey Johnson, Sr., and death and insecurity, and even gravity" (CB.232).

Control is a heady experience, especially when triggered by righteous anger, and three additional youthful attempts to control destiny were accomplished in rapid order. Each left an impact on Maya as she tried to come to terms with her race, her sex, and her class.

The return from Mexico brought a showdown with Dolores that ended with Maya being stabbed by the girlfriend and then effectively abandoned by her father who found it all somewhat amusing and greatly embarrassing to his reputation. Rather than risk returning to her mother and the resultant violence she would be sure to enact upon her former husband, Maya ran away. She spent a month living in a junkyard in an abandoned car, part of an established group of homeless young people, bound by a camaraderie and caring that knew no racial boundaries.

Sometimes great change, even of metamorphic proportion, is effected quite smoothly. Angelou writes:

> After a month my thinking processes had so changed that I was hardly recognizable to myself. The unquestioning acceptance by my peers had dislodged the familiar insecurity. Odd that the homeless children, the silt of war frenzy, could initiate me into the brotherhood of man. After hunting down unbroken bottles and selling them with a white girl from Missouri, a Mexican girl from Los Angeles and a Black girl from Oklahoma, I was never again to sense myself so solidly outside the pale of the human race. The lack of criticism evidenced by our ad hoc community influenced me, and set a tone of tolerance for my life (CB.247).

Returning home, life seemed rather dull for Maya, who came to the realization that some time off from school (she had been put ahead a year anyway) and a full-time job would enrich her life and her pocketbook. The theme of taking action to right a problem had taken hold quite firmly. The most appealing job to the young woman was that of streetcar conductor, a field newly opened to women at the war's outset. The fact that the field had not been opened to women of color fazed the new Maya not at all. She was fed in her determination by another of her mother's aphorisms, "Can't do is like Don't Care". Maya persevered, even when consulting Negro organizations in town proved fruitless.

She merely kept returning and requesting. Perseverance paid off, followed by well-woven lies on the finally-proffered application form, and for one semester, Maya Angelou was the first Black conductor on the San Francisco Streetcars. The lessons learned about action, fortitude, and the audacity to refuse defeat and lie when necessary lasted longer than the job.

Such audacity became a much needed way of life, because Maya's third dabbling into action to right wrongs had a much longer-lasting consequence that caused her to be an employment seeker of ingenuity for the rest of her days. She read a book about lesbians, and being tall of stature, deep of voice, totally devoid of suitors, and incredibly naive, began to fear she might be one herself. Rather than mull overly, she sprang to action, and brazenly, verbally seduced a handsome young neighborhood bachelor. What she proved of her own sexuality was small compared to what she learned about sex: after one joyless encounter, she was pregnant. Concealing her pregnancy from her family for almost nine months, she managed to graduate with her class; when she finally did confide her status, she found her mother and step-father to be both non-judgmental and supportive. By this point, however, she had become too much used to living by her own actions, and soon took her infant son to strike out on her own.

In an adulthood that began very quickly, with a child to support and a fierce sense of independence, Angelou

surrounded herself with people and experiences that enhanced her own formidable nature. Her outlook on race, gender, and class were shaped by them, infusing her later work with a sense of the struggle and tensions produced in her own life, as well as the growth that resulted.

Maya met the writer John Killens in California. He had come to work on the screenplay of his novel, Youngblood, at a time when she had begun experimenting with writing: sketches and songs and short stories. He began, at her request, to read and critique her work, and finally to urge her to move to New York to join the Harlem Writers Guild. He was her first contemporary literary influence, and her first guide into the anger-turned-energy that fueled her civil rights work.

In a conversation one evening at his home, Maya asked him about the sense of anger his whole family shared about whites in general. She felt the situation in California to be unlike that of the rural South and was unable to conjure the appropriate anger. Killens replied:

> Girl, don't you believe it. Georgia is Down South. California is Up South. If you're Black in this country, you're on a plantation. You have to deal with masters. There might be some argument over whether they are vicious masters, but be assured that they all think they are masters" (Heart 33).

The Harlem Writers Guild in New York accepted Angelou in 1960. Its one rule was that anyone could sit in on three meetings but after that must read from a work in progress and be critiqued. After a grueling reading, she was one of them; a heady mix of talents that included Killens, John Clarke, Rosa Guy, and Paule Marshall.

The Guild was a base, an encouragement, and in many ways a family. It was, above all else, committed to two aspects of art that became precious to Maya: the push towards excellence, and the sure knowledge that Black artists must be socially and politically involved. Action fueled by anger could be tied to her creativity. This phase of Angelou's metamorphosis is a transition, a move toward a more disciplined but equally audacious action rooted in her artistry.

The literary and political philosophies of two people then close to Maya Angelou bear study. In 1959, both John Killens and Julian Mayfield, leading spokespeople for the community of Black artists in New York, presented papers at the Conference of the American Society of African Culture. The conference was a milestone for the emerging political voices of young Black writers, giving a forum and a voice to a new crop of talented people. Although Angelou was not yet a part of the Guild, or yet more than peripherally associated with either Killens or Mayfield, both became for her mentors in her art and her political action within the year. Their words at the conference touched on themes often

studied and shared in both formal meetings and friendly living rooms in the years to come, and represent philosophies the young author new to New York surely heard often and responded to positively.

If the concept of identity politics begins with an awareness of the categories by which we name difference, then Killens's challenges to Black writers to speak from and seek their greatness within their heritage, to heighten rather than submerge that awareness must be viewed as an early point of entry into Angelou's work. It is evident that she heeded the challenge, and evident too that only after the changes wrought in her perceptions by her life in California was she able to do so with honesty.

John Killens spoke of "Opportunities for Development of Negro Talent", developing two major themes: the lack of opportunity for Black writers in all the media, and the need for Black writers to create new aesthetic values and affirm the human spirit. He addressed the problem of rejection by publishers and producers of distinctly "Negro" work, the admonition to "Write universally." He continued:

> What is actually being said to the Negro writer is: In the expression of your creative talent you must deny any relationship to your roots; you must not go to your frame of reference for your artistic inspiration...it is not so much a question of whether the writer is a Negro as it is a question of what the writer says about what it

> means to be a Negro...Content is the key question facing the Negro writer, and at the core of his content is a criticism of a society which has rejected him and his people...
>
> The challenge to the Negro writer in the era of the new Southern Negro is to dig and dig for an artistic reality much bigger than the apparent truth, a reality which is sometimes ugly and at the same time contains a terrible beauty (Selected Papers 65-67).

Julian Mayfield spoke at the same conference. His subsequent influence on Maya Angelou was exerted in two realms. A vocal member of her circle of friends, he was also, some years later, the leader of an informal group of expatriates living in Ghana who became her mentors and support there. He spoke of younger writers' perceptions that the climate was right for a breakdown of racism in America, and therefore literature did not need, as it might once have, to address itself solely with its attack. Instead, younger writers needed a newer way to define themselves. He noted a reluctance of these writers to immerse themselves totally in the push for integration, saying:

> This is to be applauded...For it is not uncommon to hear nowadays that the American Negro and the white are forever bound together and must, perforce, pursue a common destiny.

> ...If the dream he has chased for three centuries is now dying even for white Americans, he would be wise to consider alternative objectives...The Negro writer may conclude that his best salvation lies in escaping the narrow national orbit--artistic, cultural and political--and soaring into the space of more universal experience (<u>Selected Papers</u> 29-34).

When Mayfield urged adopting universal themes, he was not asking that Black writers forget their heritage, but rather that they remember it, and let the memory keep them from merely melting in to society. This is the tension between acknowledging gender, race, and class and wholehearted admission into a perceived common culture that Angelou began to explore in later works.

During the time of writing in New York, Maya supported herself for a time by coordinating the Southern Christian Leadership Conference office there. She was moved quickly from intellectualizing about civil rights to a world of action:

> The weeks ran together, the days raced. White and Black people were changing as Martin Luther King traveled to and from jail and across the United States, his route covered by the national media. Malcolm X could be seen stripping white television reporters of their noise on the evening news" (<u>Heart</u> 91).

Both of these men exerted strong and continuing influence on Angelou.

About Dr. King she wrote: "Looking at him in my office, alone, was like seeing a lion sitting down at my dining-room table eating a plate of mustard greens." When she confided in him her pain over her brother, then in prison, his answer touched her heart:

> ' I understand. Disappointment drives our young men to some desperate lengths.' Sympathy and sadness kept his voice low. 'That's why we must fight and win. We must save the Baileys of the world. And Maya, never stop loving him. Never give up on him. Never deny him. And remember, he is freer than those who hold him behind bars.' Redemptive suffering had always been the part of Martin's argument which I found difficult to accept. I had seen distress fester souls and bend peoples' bodies out of shape, but I had yet to see anyone redeemed from pain, by pain" (Heart 92-93).

Against the theme of redemption, there was Malcolm X, first heard on a street corner in Harlem with some Writers Guild friends:

> 'The black man has been programmed to die. To die either by his own hand, the hand of his brother or at the hand of a blue-eyed devil trained to do one thing: take the black man's life'

> Rosa and I nodded at each other. The Muslim tirade was just what we needed to hear. Malcolm thrilled us with his love and understanding of Black folks and his loathing of whites and their cruelty" (<u>Heart</u> 145).

When a demonstration against white control in Africa and the death of Patrice Lumumba, planned by Angelou and others as a peaceful protest, grew ugly and violent, and threatened to consume the people of Harlem with rage, Maya and Rosa Guy arranged to meet with Malcolm X to ask for his help in re-directing the anger for positive growth in Harlem. They were hugely disappointed when he refused, saying:

> The Honorable Elijah Muhammad teaches us that integration is a trick. A trick to lull the black man to sleep. We must separate ourselves from the white man, this immoral white man and his white religion. It is hypocrisy practiced by Christian hypocrites" (<u>Heart</u> 168).

The conflicting philosophies of the two Black leaders remained with Angelou, and did not reach resolve until later, in Africa. As a Black woman, however, she knew "...the entire country was in labor. Something wonderful was about to be born, and we were all going to be good parents to welcome the child. Its name was Freedom" (<u>Heart</u> 71).

Phase Three: Chrysalis

Metamorphosis implies speed, a "shazaam" quality, but that would be news to a butterfly. Much in the way of feeding and flying has occurred prior to emergence of the new. For Maya Angelou, there was not a single turning point, but two experiences worked together to provide her chrysalis: going to Africa and playing the role of the Queen in the play, The Blacks, by Jean Genet, a role she created in May of 1961 and reprised four years later. The play framed both her arrival and departure and gave needed form to her journey. There was a continuum in this change, a sense that the old was never completely shed to create the new. This next phase in Angelou's development contained much anger at times, and generous portions of audacity, but at this point her responses to questions of race, class, and gender and how these conditions informed her life tended to seek answers within the realm of her own burgeoning creative powers.

In the midst of the Harlem Writers Guild activities, the S.C.L.C., protest, and social ferment, Angelou was introduced to a South African freedom fighter, Vusumzi Make. While her friends thought her whirlwind approach audacious, Angelou responded to her need for action. Within weeks they were married; within a year they were on their way to Egypt, where Make established a base of operations for his appeals for African support for the freedom fight.

00252702

During that first year, there was much change for Angelou. At Vus's urging, she quit her job, established a lavish apartment in Manhattan to be used for entertaining and impressing those whose influence was thought necessary to the fight, and struggled to become a good African wife. She cleaned, cooked, and cleaned again. She became, up to a point, obedient. When her friends Max and Abby Roach asked her to read a script for which they had worked on the music, she agreed, if only out of boredom. A preliminary reading did not bring understanding:

> During the third reading, I began to see through the tortuous and mythical language, and the play's meaning became clear. Genet suggested that colonialisn would crumble from the weight of its ignorance, its arrogance and greed, and that the oppressed would take over the positions of their former masters. They would be no better, no more courageous and no more merciful.
>
> I disagreed. Black people could never be like whites...Our mercy was well-known...We had cooked the food of a nation of racists, and despite the many opportunities, there were few stories of Black servants poisoning white families...
>
> The Blacks was a white foreigner's idea of a people he did not understand. Genet had superimposed the meanness and cruelty of his own people onto a race he had never known, a race

> already nearly doubled over carrying the white man's burden of greed and guilt, and which at the same time toted its own insufficiency . I threw the manuscript into a closet, finished with Genet and his narrow little conclusions (Heart 171-3).

When offered the part, Angelou refused, based on her dislike of the content. Vus concurred, for a vastly different reason: "No wife of an African leader can go on stage... Can you imagine the wife of Martin King or Sobukwe or Malcolm X standing on a stage being examined by white men?" (Heart 174) Now Angelou was angry. Max Roach was called upon to suggest that Vus read the script. When he had, he pronounced the play "great" and told her she must perform.

When Maya told her husband she could not agree that Black people could ever become like whites, his response was strong:

> Dear Wife, that is reverse racism..Black people are human. No more, no less. Our backgrounds, our history make us act differently... We are people. The root cause of racism and its primary result is that whites refuse to see us simply as people....My dear wife, most black revolutionaries, most black radicals, most black activists, do not really want change. They want exchange. This play points to that likelihood (Heart 175).

So Angelou began a successful off-Broadway run of a disturbing absurdist play, begun by Angelou for reasons of personal autonomy and rebellion, but the bearer of powerful messages that stayed with her long after the play's run.

The Blacks is an outrageous play. It reiterates and embraces all the ugly stereotypes ever mouthed about Blacks, but puts the lines in the mouths of Blacks. The Negro is "Majestic and smelly", whites are as "Livid as the droppings of a man with jaundice" (57). It is about appearance and reality: "An Actor...a Negro...who wants to kill turns even his knife into something make-believe" (114). It resonates with a theme Angelou had known since childhood Saturdays at the store and her reading of Paul Laurence Dunbar, one that informed all her experiences of interracial exchange: it is about the wearing of masks. The masks in the play are palpable; a heavy and stylized aspect of the costuming. The director's note says: "Each actor playing a member of the court is a masked Negro whose mask represents the face of a white person. The mask is worn in such a way that the audience sees a wide black band all around it, and even the actor's kinky hair"(8). Late in the play, a character speaks to the reason the rape-murder of the white woman is achieved off-stage. "Greek tragedy, my dear, decorum " (84). The reader or viewer knows, then, he has seen these masks before. There is an execution, and at once, the five members of the Court remove their masks. From this point on, Angelou's role is signified in the script as "The One

Who Played The Queen", and the others are similarly designated. Her lines read:

> We masked our faces in order to live the loathsome life of the Whites and at the same time to help you sink into shame, but our roles as actors are drawing to a close.... I have made the journey. It was a long one. Your warmth is inhuman, and I prefer to depart... (114-15).

And, at the very end, putting the white mask back on:

> Farewell, and good luck to you. Decent girl that I am, I hope all goes well for you. As for us, we've lived a long time. We're now going to rest at last... We're going, we're going, but keep in mind that we shall lie torpid in the earth like larvae or moles, and if some day...ten thousand years hence...(126).

Maya Angelou learned all she needed to know about masks long before at the store in Stamps. If the implication was that whites were going to bury in the ground awaiting metamorphosis, she, too, was ripe for change in the near future.

That future arrived quickly. Within a few weeks of her last performance, Maya Angelou Make and her son arrived in Cairo at the apartment Vus had prepared. Of this time, she wrote:

> I was the heroine in a novel teeming with bejeweled women, handsome men, intrigue,

> international spies, and danger. Opulent fabrics, exotic perfumes and the service of personal servants threatened to tear from my mind every memory of growing up in America as a second-class citizen (Heart 216).

Maya Angelou lived in Egypt from 1961-63. It was a time for maturing, and also for learning her true mettle. When repossession of their luxurious furnishings seemed imminent, an indignity already suffered once under Vus's financial mismanagement in New York, and when sitting at home being wifely was no longer bearable (conditions that emerged simultaneously and rather quickly after arrival), Angelou recovered her damaged but not destroyed sense of autonomy and used the contacts made through her husband to get a job. She became a journalist, with the help of David DuBois, stepson of W.E.B. DuBois,and a friend then working in Cairo. That he felt compelled to tell her, however, that nice women in Cairo did not work, gives an idea of the atmosphere in which Angelou found herself. Vus was enraged, but too broke to protest realistically. The rage fed her determination to be a professional success and carried the seeds of the marriage's end.

It was the beginning of the end of this relationship that caused Angelou to begin to realize consciously the power of sisterhood, the strength of Black female support that actually began long before in her relationship with her

grandmother. She entered into her marriage with Make filled with a naive belief in her ability to become whatever he needed to win the South African struggle and his heart, but soon realized Vus's position: "I am an African. I do not scare easily and I do not run at all. Do not question me again. You are my wife. That is all you need to know" (Heart 187). This was made more threatening by her son Guy's ready identification with the stong male figure, his willingness to see his mother, in her words, as "a kind and competent family retainer" (Heart 187). The marriage ended.

At about this time, Angelou began to appropriate the trappings of family by designating certain exceptionally close friends as "Brother" (David DuBois and later, Julian Mayfield), and especially, as "Sister". It denotes a spiritual kinship, and seems to evolve from her African friends' habit of prefacing remarks to each other by "Sister,..." as well as the Black church custom of doing the same (and the tenor of much of Angelou's African visit implies that this is no chance coincidence). As a child, her grandmother routinely referred to her, with affection, as "Sister", and even the nickname "Maya" derives from her brother's refusal to call her "Marguerite" as a very small child, but "My Sister", shortened to "My", and finally "Maya". The term evokes all that is loving and enabling in that context, and for Angelou, the loss of her marriage threw her consciously and even gratefully on the

caring support of these few. In Egypt, her Sisters were Hanifa Fathy, a poet and wife of a judge; Banti Williamson, wife of the Liberian Charge d'Affaires, and Kebidetch Erdatchew, wife of a member of the Ethiopian embassy staff. All were young, intelligent, and African, important to Angelou's growing realization of the importance of sister-support. She discussed this strength later:

> Sisterhood is the one way Black women have survived. We have had to depend on each other. And the weight, the value, we give to our friendship is so large that once it is given, once the hands are taken, it is very hard to lose. You can give up a lover much easier. Much easier...A sister is no play thing. (Feminine Face 211-213).

This intentional melding of a tradition common to two cultures was centered in a perceived lack of family support, creatively adapted to serve a very real need. It was for Angelou a way to deal positively with the strength of women in a culture that often did not do so. It was a means of appropriating a positive aspect of the common culture by celebrating a tradition on its periphery.

The African sojourn intensified at this point for Angelou, as she determined to leave Egypt in 1963. She chose to enroll Guy at the University of Ghana and to seek her fortune and her roots in Africa. As their plane flew over Egypt she cried:

> I made no attempt to explain that I was not crying

> for a lack of love, or certainly not the loss of Vus's affection. I was mourning all my ancestors...It all began here...
> Every ill I knew at home, each hateful look on a white face, each odious rejection based on skin color, the mockery, the disenfranchisement, the lamentations and loud wailing for a lost world, irreclaimable security, all that long-onerous journey to misery, which had not ended yet, had begun just below our plane (Heart 257).

Ghana was for Angelou a dizzying experience. It was a land of dichotomies, a place where the best and the worst of cultures collided, and it was a land where Angelou was forced to apply creative solutions to her needs. It was a land where pilots and policemen, poets and politicians all were Black. "For the first time in our lives," she wrote, "the color of our skin was accepted as correct and normal" (Shoes 3). And:"...Whites had been wrong all along. Black and brown skin did not herald debasement and a divinely created inferiority.... Whites were not needed to explain the working of the world, nor the mysteries of the mind" (16).

The sense of homecoming predominated, and even obliterated reality to Angelou and her circle of friends, who included Julian Mayfield from her New York days and an assortment of other Black American expatriates, who she

called the "Revolutionist Returnees". Of them, and their needs, she wrote:

> Each person had brought to Africa varying talents, energies, vigor, youth and terrible yearnings to be accepted...We did not discuss the open gutters along the streets of Accra, the shacks of corrugated iron in certain neighborhoods, dirty beaches and voracious mosquitoes. And under no circumstances did we mention our disillusionment at being overlooked by the Ghanians... We had come home, and if home was not what we had expected, never mind, our need for belonging allowed us to ignore the obvious and to create real places or even illusory places, befitting our imagination.... So, I had finally come home (18-21).

Neubauer speaks to the presence of these emotions both in the African experience and in Angelou's work: having suffered geographic displacement as a child, going from Stamps to Saint Louis to San Francisco to Southern California,and New York, and now a not-entirely welcoming Africa, she sees <u>All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes</u> as an exploration of the theme of displacement, and the difficulties involved in creating a home for oneself, one's family, and one's people, pointing out that Angelou's adult moves "... represent worlds completely different and even foreign to the pace of life in the rural South" (118,128).

In the differences, she seeks to impose order creatively, both in solutions to life's problems and through the medium of her writing.

Neubauer claims that by the end of _Traveling Shoes,_ Angelou has "regained her innocence" (122). It was by failing to experience the homecoming she had expected in Africa that Angelou was forced to reevaluate the place of race, gender, and class in her life stripped of prior expectations. In the mother country, many women did not have the right to work. Her own husband had tried to mold an "African wife" from an independent American. That failure, was, after all, how she had arrived in Ghana. In a totally Black land, there were still shacks and open gutters; maybe not mentioned, but recorded. And all that comprised her sense of self was not enough to find solace with this Mother. In an essay by Adrienne Rich called "Resisting Amnesia", in her book, _Blood, Bread, and Poetry_ she quotes Lerone Bennett:

> The totalizing force that seizes you and throws you down here instead of there, with this color instead of that color, with this task instead of that task... There is nothing you can do in history that will free you of the historical responsibility of being born at a certain time, in a certain place, with a certain skin color" (145).

The reality of this historical responsibility dawned on Angelou, restoring innocence in the form of renewed outlook, and even optimism, at the end of two years in Ghana following a series of dramatic events.

Martin Luther King, Jr., led the famous march on Washington, and the "Revolutionist Returnees" agreed that as radicals they should simultaneously march on the American Embassy in support. Maya Angelou had ideologically removed herself from the "delusion" that love was to be America's cure, but, "When it came to action we were in the church where we had been baptized"(122). As the midnight march began, word reached them that Dr. W.E.B.DuBois, then living in Accra, had died. The political intent was suddenly secondary, and the crowd began spontaneously to sing "Oh, Freedom", one of the old spirituals. In the dawn, two soldiers came out of the Embassy to hang the flag. The marchers had been thinking of home but began to jeer the flag. Angelou wrote:

> Many of us had only begun to realize in Africa that the Stars and Stripes was our flag and our only flag. We could physically return to Africa... but we were born in the United States; it was the United States which had rejected, enslaved, exploited, then denied us. It was the United States which held the graves of our grandmothers and grandfathers. It was in the

> detail, that those same ancestors had worked and dreamed of 'a better day, by and by'... I shuddered to think that while we wanted that flag dragged into the mud and sullied beyond repair, we also wanted it pristine, its white stripes, summer cloud white. Watching it wave in the breeze of a distance made us nearly choke with emotion. It lifted us up with its promise and broke our hearts with its denial" (Shoes 127).

In the spring of 1964, Malcolm X arrived in Accra. He had just made a pilgrimage to Mecca, the *Hadj*, his first after repudiating Elijah Muhammad and embracing the true Islam faith, and his ideas were shocking to those who had known him previously. He explained that he no longer believed all whites were devils, and that he did not any longer believe any human beings were inherently cruel. He was attempting to gather support in Africa for his plan to take the cause of Black Americans before the United Nations; during his stay in Ghana, Maya Angelou was his driver to many functions and had many opportunities to talk with him. He encouraged her to be more tolerant of others who "don't do what you do, or think as you think, or as fast... The country needs you. Our people need you...you should all come home. You have seen Africa, bring it home and teach our people about the homeland (139). The thought began to stick.

Then came the telegram, asking Angelou to travel to Berlin and Vienna with the original company of The Blacks.The fare was paid. The pay was good, and the timing was right. The opportunity to return by way of Cairo to attend a conference and reunite with her brothers and sisters there made the trip impossible to refuse.

The play ran with all its audaciousness intact, and Maya realized a major difference between Black Americans and Africans:

> Black American insouciance was the one missing element in West Africa. Courtesy and form, traditional dignity, respectful dismissal and history were the apparent ropes holding their society close and nearly impenetrable. But my people had been unable to guard against intrusions of any sort,so we had developed audacious defenses which lay just under the skin. At any moment they might seep through the pores and show themselves without regard to propriety, manners, or even physical safety. I had missed those thrilling attitudes, without being aware of their absence (Shoes 158).

When Roscoe Lee Browne, a cast member and friend, told her good-bye at the end of the run, he added, "Be careful, sweet lady. You went to Africa to get something, but remember you did not go empty-handed. Don't lose what you had to get something which may not work" (177).

There comes a point in life when innocence is no longer required. If anything is to be lost it should not be the self, or a precious balance will tip irrevocably. It was time to leave Africa:

> If the heart of Africa still remained allusive [sic], my search for it had brought me closer to understanding myself and other human beings. The ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned. It impels mighty ambitions and dangerous capers. We amass great fortunes at the cost of our souls, or risk our lives in drug dens from London's Soho, to San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury. We shout in Baptist churches, wear yarmulkes and wigs and argue even the tiniest points of the Torah, or worship the sun and refuse to kill cows for the starving. Hoping that by doing these things, home will find us acceptable or failing that, that we will forget our awful yearning for it (<u>Shoes</u> 196).

The insular child of Stamps who kept rage "in her teeth" is not in this statement, though the child who has internalized the pain of not belonging informs it. The strength of Momma Henderson was needed for this breaking-away, and also the strength of sisters and a few brothers along the way. The woman who returned to the United States to teach and write may just have stretched newly emerging wings of her own for the journey back home.

Phase Four: Creativity: Finding the Balance

> The task of the spokesperson who would engage the sound of folk conversion is to situate himself or herself in productive relationship to a field marked by awesome strategies of deformation and mastery. It is this discursive field that links us, bone of the bone flesh of the flesh, and note by resounding blue note to contours of those transforming African masks that constitute our beginnings " (Baker 95).

Houston Baker not only wrote of those who preceded Maya Angelou in <u>Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance</u>, he established the tone for the discourse of the present and future. On her return from the transforming years in Africa, she was able to add her voice unreservedly to those links. Erickson says:

> Angelou does not adopt the prematurely self-congratulatory view of an American society whose major conflicts have been substantially moderated and resolved. Appealing instead to James Baldwin's phrase, 'these yet to be united States', she implies that the nineteen-sixties she so vividly recalls in <u>Heart of a Woman</u> are not over, that the issues raised in the sixties are still outstanding".

Her work, then, presents always "dual traditions in tension" (Erickson 122).

The traditions in tension, the evident dichotomy between what is and what ought, are the very heart of the identity politics rationale: that is, it is in the recognition of "otherness", or even its celebration, that one achieves an ultimate universality and pushes foward the arrival of "what ought" with each work. Maya Angelou is a major celebrant.

The concept of universality bears discussion. It should not be interpreted as "sameness", implying that there is a single American (or female, or Black experience). "The problem" as Erickson sees it, "is how to maintain some form of the idea of common culture-- culture held in common-- without eviscerating, compromising, or downplaying the idea of difference" (172). In 1959 John Killens admonished Black writers to find their greatness within the Black tradition, to seek a universalism not by blending but by glorifying the differences that humanity holds in common. The paradox is one that may only be solved by one aware of the tension between the concepts. "Identity politics", Erickson tells us, "Is not reader-response criticism, understood as individual psychological explorations with no reference to the social constituents of identity. The identity in view is rather self as shaped by larger historical and political forces" (175).

For Maya Angelou, those larger forces were perceived and internalized in stages. Her movement in understanding, ranging from a childish perception of difference, through

anger and bold action, and on to creation of a body of poems and prose that seek to reconcile her membership in the human family with the particularities of her race, her gender, and her class, has been a metamorphosis. The change in perception has, in each stage, incorporated past responses but in totality it is a new being who has written the later body of prose and poetry. Speaking to Claudia Tate, Angelou spoke of her outlook:

> I'm a human being. I refuse to indulge any man-made differences between myself and another human being, I will not do it. I'm not going to live very long. If I live another forty years, it is not very long. So I should indulge somebody else's prejudice at their whim and not for my own convenience. Never happen! Not me! (7).

Conclusion

Maya Angelou's later writings are made possible only by an acceptance of "otherness" held in tension with a sure sense of the reality of a "different", and by a certain joy in one's place as "other". Henry Louis Gates, in an essay entitled "African American Criticism" in the book, Redrawing the Boundaries speaks to this issue:

> Theorists often imply that the margin, or the other, is inevitably the endangered target of annihilation or assimilation...Yet this argument does not acknowledge that the margin is *produced* by the center, the other, by the self or same and proceeds as if the two did not define a mutually constitutive system. Our characteristic stance on these matters - as champion of the politically disenfranchised- constantly blinds us to the ways in which the margin (that is, its positionality) is an effect of the cultural dominant rather than an autonomous agency of subversion, the dissolution or cooptation of which is the dominant's dearest wish. Since (as Michel Pecheux argues) the very meaning of discourse subsists on such conflictual relations, the periphery is, as it were, never someplace else...
>
> The threat to the margin comes not from assimilation or dissolution- from any attempt to denude it of its defiant alterity- but, on the

> contrary, from the center's attempts to *preserve* that alterity, which result in the homogenization of the other as, simply other (314-15).

After her metamorphosis, Angelou escaped this paradoxical designation. Returning to the United States in 1965 involved both a physical and a spiritual journey of exploration, a journey that has not yet ended but has enabled her increasingly joyful participation in both alterity and centrality. The poet has found a balance in her identity politics that allows both celebration of difference and acceptance of a universal humanity. The productive tension between these states should continue to enrich and inform her future works in ways yet unexplored.

Appendix

We Wear the Mask by Paul Laurence Dunbar

We wear the mask that grins and lies.
It shades our teeth and hides our eyes...
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subleties.

Why should the world be overwise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.

We smile, but O great Christ, our cries
To Thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh, the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask.

Poems by Maya Angelou

Remembering

Soft grey ghosts crawl up my sleeve
to peer into my eyes
while I within deny their threats
and answer them with lies.

Mushlike memories perform
a ritual on my lips
I lie in stolid hopelessness
and they lay my soul in strips.

Miss Scarlett, Mr. Rhett and other Latter-Day Saints
Novitiates sing Ave
Before the whipping posts,
Criss-crossing their breasts and
tear-stained robes
in the yielding dark.

Animated by the human sacrifice
(Golgotha in black-face)
Priests glow purely white on the
bar-relief of a plantation shrine.

(O Sing)
You are gone but not forgotten
Hail, Scarlett. Requiescat in pace.

God-Makers smear brushes in
blood/gall
to etch frescoes on your
ceilinged tomb.

(O Sing)
Hosanna, King Kotton

Shadowed couplings of infidels
tempt stigmata from the nipples
of your true-believers.

(Chant Maternoster)

Hallowed Little Eva.

Ministers make novena with the

charred bones of four

very small

very black

very young children

(Intone DIXIE)

And guard the relics

of your intact hymen

daily putting to death,

into eternity,

The stud, his seed,

His seed,

His seed.

(O Sing)

Hallelujah, pure Scarlett

Blessed Rhett, the Martyr.

Caged Bird

A free bird leaps
on the back of the wind
and floats downstream
till the current ends
and dips his wing
in the orange sun rays
and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks
down his narrow cage
can seldom see through
his bars of rage
his wings are clipped and
his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.

The free bird thinks of another breeze
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn-bright lawn
and he names the sky his own.

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.

Reverses

How often must we

    butt to head

Mind to ass

    flank to nuts

    cock to elbow

    hip to toe

    soul to shoulder

    confront ourselves

    in our past.

On Working White Liberals

I don't ask the Foreign Legion
Or anyone to win my freedom
Or to fight my battle better than I can,

Though there's one thing that I cry for
I believe enough to die for
That is every man's responsibility to man.

I'm afraid they'll have to prove first
that they'll watch the Black man move first
Then follow him with faith to kingdom come,
This rocky road is not paved for us,
So, I'll believe in Liberal's aid for us
When I see a white man load a Black man's gun.

For Us, Who Dare Not Dare

Be me a Pharaoh

Build me high pyramids of stone and question

See me the Nile

at twilight

and jaguars moving to

the slow cool draft.

Swim me Congo

Hear me the tails of alligators

flapping waves that reach

a yester shore.

Swing me vines, beyond that Bao-Bab tree,

and talk me chief

Sing me birds

flash color lightening through bright green

leaves.

Taste me fruit

its juice falling from

a mother tree.

Know me

Africa.

These Yet to be United States

Tremors of your network
cause kings to disappear.
Your open mouth in anger
makes nations bow in fear.
Your bombs can change the seasons,
obliterate the spring.
What more do you long for?
Why are you suffering?

You control the human lives
in Rome and Timbuktu.
Lonely nomads wandering
owe Telstar to you.
Seas shift at your bidding,
your mushrooms fill the sky.
Why are you unhappy?
Why do your children cry?

They kneel alone in terror
with dread in every glance.
Their nights are threatened daily
by a grim inheritance.
You dwell in whitened castles
with deep and poisoned moats
and cannot hear the curses
which fill your children's throats.

On the Pulse of Morning

A Rock, A River, A Tree
Hosts to species long since departed,
Marked the mastodon,
The dinosaur, who left dried tokens
Of their sojourn here
On our planet floor,
Any broad alarm of their hastening doom
Is lost in the gloom of dust and ages.

But today, the Rock cries out to us, clearly,
forcefully,
Come, you may stand upon my
Back and face your distant destiny,
But seek no haven in my shadow,
I will give you no hiding place down here.

You, created only a little lower than
The Angels, have crouched too long in
The bruising darkness
Have lain too long
Facedown in ignorance,
your mouths spilling words

Armed for slaughter.
The Rock cries out to us today,
You may stand upon me;

But do not hide your face.

Across the wall of the world,
A River sings a beautiful song. It says,
Come, rest here by my side.

Each of you, a bordered country,
Delicate and strangely made proud,
Yet thrusting perpetually under siege.
Your armed struggles for profit
Have left collars of waste upon
My shore, currents of debris upon my breast.
Yet today I call you to my riverside,
If you will study war no more.

Come, clad in peace,
And I will sing the songs
The Creator gave to me when I and the
Tree and the Rock were one.
Before cynicism was a bloody sear across your
brow
And when you yet knew you still knew nothing.
The River sang and sings on.

There is a true yearning to respond to
The singing River and the wise Rock.
So say the Asian, the Hispanic, the Jew

The African, the Native American, the Sioux,
The Catholic, the Muslim, the French, the Greek,

The Irish, the Rabbi, the Priest, the Sheik,
The Gay, the Straight, the Preacher,
The privileged, the homeless, the Teacher.
They hear. They all hear
The speaking of the Tree.

They hear the first and last of every Tree
Speak to humankind today.
Come to me,
Here beside the River.
Plant yourself beside the River.

Each of you, descendant of some passed-
On traveler, has been paid for.

You, who gave me my first name, you.
Pawnee, Apache, Seneca, you
Cherokee Nation, who rested with me, then
Forced on bloody feet,
Left me to the employment of
other seekers-- desperate for gain,
Starving for gold.

You, the Turk, the Arab, the Swede,

The German, the Eskimo, the Scot,
The Italian, the Hungarian, the Pole,
You the Ashanti, the Yoruba, the Kru, bought
sold, stolen, arriving on a nightmare
Praying for a dream.

Here, root yourselves beside me.
I am that Tree planted by the River,
Which will not be Moved.
I, the Rock, I, the River, I, the Tree
I am yours--your passages have been paid.
Lift up your faces, you have a piercing need
For this bright morning dawning for you.
History, despite its wrenching pain,
Cannot be unlived, but if faced
With courage, need not be lived again.

Lift up your eyes
Upon this day breaking for you.
Give birth again
To the dream.

Women, children, men,
Take it into the palms of your hands,
Mold it into the shape of your most
Private need. Sculpt it into
The image of your most public self.

Lift up your hearts

Each new hour holds new chances

For a new beginning.

Do not be wedded forever

To fear, yoked eternally

To brutishness.

The horizon leans foward,

Offering you space

to place new steps of change

Here, on the pulse of this fine day

You may have the courage

To look up and out and upon me,

The Rock, the River, the Tree, your country.

No less to Midas than the mendicant.

No less to you now than the mastodon then.

Here on the pulse of this new day

You may have the grace to look up and out

And into your sister's eyes,

And into your brother's face,

Your country,

And say simply

Very simply

With hope--

Good Morning.

Notes

The tall black woman moved gracefully and used her expressive hands to eloquently emphasize points of importance. I had come to Greensboro that May evening in 1990 to hear some good poetry, and I was not disappointed, but I also heard much to ponder in terms of the value of literature, its accessability to those who might love it, and the very susceptibility to falling in love we all might rightfully claim as we open a new book or hear an unfamiliar poet speak. That night, Dr. Angelou leaned in towards us and spoke of a little girl unwilling to speak due to the trauma of rape but determined to compete in her church's oratorical contest. She gathered the courage by leaning on the words of a beloved friend. As she practiced, her grandmother listened, and finally asked who had written the words she spoke about the rape of Lucrece? Wasn't that William Shakespeare a white man? And when had young Marguerite Johnson grown too uppity to recite James Weldon Johnson? The hands were moving as the woman recalled her young pain, and then they grew very still as she made her point: "And it wasn't until years later, when I outgrew the mindset that was Stamps, Arkansas, that I came to know that James Weldon Johnson wrote for you (and her gesture came right to me), and William Shakespeare wrote for me" (Address, UNC-G).

In the space of those years, in the continuum that encompasses a process of creation as well as that of

outgrowing, a transformation occurred, one that assumes the proportions of a metamorphosis.

The term is used to suggest not only a change in attitude but a transformative reassessment that reflects in a deepening productive tension when counterbalanced with the ideal of a common culture within Angelou's work.

Erickson writes extensively of this tension in Angelou's works, using as his referrent a speech given by Lynne Cheney, then Chair of the National Endowment of the Humanities, who, in his opinion, deliberately takes a similar Angelou anecdote out of context to make a case for continuing educational emphasis on a closed canon of traditional, white male authors. Cheney frames the Angelou excerpt, a reading of Shakespeare's "Sonnet 29", after which the poet exclaims "I knew Shakespeare was a black woman!" (111) with the following: "What gives them [the humanities] their abiding worth are truths that pass beyond time and circumstance; truths that, transcending accidents of class, race, and gender, speak to us all"(117). Erickson writes that the term "accidents" "trivializes and dismisses the conceptual significance of gender, race, and class" (117). "For we are differently positioned," he explains, "with respect to our common culture, and these different locations are defined in part by the politics of our identities" (171). He uses the phrase "common culture " to "evoke this sense of participation as access and responsibility to all of our culture's literary production.

In this sense, *common* does not do away with difference but rather calls attention to it" (170).

Erickson questions the belief that acknowledgement of a common culture, universalism, "works as a hedge against multiculturism; universalism preserves a notion of transcendence that curtails and vitiates the full force of cultural difference. My goal is to formulate a model of culture that is both strongly multicultural and common, yet does not resort to universalism to mediate between the two" (172).

It is certain that the little girl who thought:

> wouldn't they be surprised when one day I woke out of my black ugly dream... Then they would understand why I had never picked up a Southern accent, or spoke the common slang, and why I had to be forced to eat pigs' tails and snouts. Because I was really 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" (CB.4-5)

was a child who knew all there was to know about differences. It is equally certain that her journey towards becoming the "Phenomenal Woman" is nothing less than a metamorphosis:

> Now you understand

Just why my head's not bowed.

I don't shout or jump about

Or have to talk real loud.

When you see me passing

It ought to make you proud.

I say,

It's in the click of my heels,

The bend of my hair,

The palm of my hand,

The need for my care.

'Cause I'm a woman

Phenomenally.

Phenomenal woman,

That's me. (Poetry 130-32)

Works Cited

Anderson, Sherry Ruth and Patricia Hopkins. The Feminine Face of God. NY: Bantam, 1991.

Angelou, Maya, "Look Where We've All Come From," Address, UNC-G, Greensboro,NC, 2 May 1990.

- - -. All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes. NY: Vintage Books, 1986.

- - -. The Heart of a Woman. NY: Bantam Books, 1982.

- - -. I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings. NY: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1969.

- - - . On the Pulse of Morning. NY: Random House, 1993.

_ _ _ . The Poetry of Maya Angelou: Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'For I Diii; Oh, Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well; And Still I Rise; Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?; and I Shall Not Be Moved. NY: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1993.

Baker, Houston. Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987.

Cudjoe, Selwyn. "Maya Angelou: The Autobiographical Statement Updated." Reading Black, Reading Feminist. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. NY: Meridian Books, 1990. 272-306.

Erickson, Peter. "The Administration of the Humanities in the Reagan-Bush Era: Shakespeare, Angelou, Cheney." Rewriting Shakespeare, Rewriting Ourselves. California: U.Cal Press, 1991.

Gates, Henry Lewis, Jr. "African-American Criticsm". Redrawing the Boundaries. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Giles Gunn. NY: Modern Language Association of America, 1992.

Genet, Gene. The Blacks. Trans. Bernard Frechtman. NY: Grove Press, 1988.

Gingher, Robert, Ed. The Rough Road Home: Stories by North Carolina Writers. Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1992.

Killens, John. "Opportunities for Development of Negro Talent." Selected Papers from the First Conference of Negro Writers. NY: American Society of African Culture, 1960. 64-69.

Martin, Jay, and Gossie Hudson,Eds. The Paul Laurence Dunbar Reader. NY: Dodd Mead and Co., 1975

"Maya Angelou". Portrait of Greatness. Prod. Bill Moyers. Creativity. PBS. C.E.L. Communications. NY: 1992.

Mayfield, Julian. "Into the Mainstream and Oblivion." Selected Papers from the First Conference of Negro Writers. NY: American Society of African Culture, 1960. 29-34.

Neubauer, Carol E. "Maya Angelou: Self and a Song of Freedom in the Southern Tradition." Southern Women Writers. Tonette Bond Inge, ed. Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press, 1990.

Rich, Adrienne. Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985. NY: W.W.Norton and Co., 1986.

Tate, Claudia. Black Women Writers at Work. NY: Continuum, 1983.

Works Consulted: Secondary Sources

Angelou, Maya. Gather Together In My Name. NY: Bantam Books, 1974.

- - - . Foreword. I Dream a World. By Brian Lanker. NY: Stewart, Tabori, and Chang, 1989.8-9.

_ _ _ . Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas. NY: Random House, 1977.

_ _ _ . Wouldn't Take Nothing For My Journey Now. NY: Random House, 1993.

Carby, Hazel. Reconstructing Womanhood: the Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist. N.Y., Oxford Press, 1987.

Garner, Shirley Nelson. "Constructing the Mother: Contemporary Psychoanalysis." Narrating Mothers: Theorizing Maternal Subjectivities. Brenda D.Daly and Maureen T. Reddy, Eds. Knoxville: U.Tenn. Press, 1991.

Gates, Henry Lewis, Jr. Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars. NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992.

Haley, Alex, and Malcolm X. The Autobiography of Malcolm X NY: Ballantine Books, 1964.

Holte, James Craig. The Ethnic I: A Sourcebook for Ethnic-American Autobiography. NY: Greenwood Press, 1988.

Showalter, Elaine. Consulting Ed. Modern American Women Writers. NY: Charles Scribners and Sons, 1991.

Periodical

Rich. "Maya Loves Bill Clinton-- and Kwame". National Review. 45: (Feb.15, 1993): 36.