

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings: **African American Literary Tradition** **and the Civil Rights Era**

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Maya Angelou wrote *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* at the end of the civil rights struggles of the 1960s, one of the most turbulent times in modern American history. After the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* outlawed school segregation in 1954, the Civil Rights movement gained power as increasing numbers of people rose up against bigotry and racism. As the movement gained momentum with sit-ins and marches, African Americans were also viciously attacked. Across the South, there were beatings, church bombings, and lynchings. The violence continued when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963, sending the nation into a state of grief and anxiety about the future; two years later, on February 21, black nationalist Malcolm X, whose fiery views had transformed to be more accepting of whites, was assassinated.

Despite these tremendous losses and the terror many African Americans faced, the hope for change and equality prevailed. The momentous March on Washington in 1963 helped lead to the passage of the most important pieces of legislation in the 1960s: the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In addition, the success and energy of the Civil Rights movement inspired other movements, including the women's movement and the gay and lesbian movement. Tragically, with hope for the future in the air, on April 4, 1968 (coincidentally Maya Angelou's fortieth birthday), civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated. The nation was stunned and saddened, and his death set off a series of riots across the country.

Maya Angelou, active in the Civil Rights movement and friends with both Malcolm X and King, was, like so many others around the world, devastated by their deaths, yet she did not give up her hope for a

better, more just world or her belief in the power of art to create change. Throughout the era, the Black Arts movement, the cultural wing of the Black Power movement that was started by the poet Amiri Baraka in 1965, was extremely influential in the work and development of many writers, including Angelou. Activist, poet, and performer, Angelou did not start writing until she was in her thirties, and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* was not published until she was forty-one.

Angelou did not set out to write her autobiography, but some of her friends—the famous writer James Baldwin, cartoonist Jules Feiffer, and Feiffer’s wife Judy—were convinced that Angelou should write about her childhood after they heard her stories about growing up in Stamps, Arkansas. When Judy Feiffer connected Angelou with Robert Loomis, an editor at Random House, Angelou at first refused Loomis’s request that she write her autobiography:

Loomis called me two or three times, but I continued to say that I was not interested. Then, I am sure, he talked to Baldwin because he used a ploy which I am not proud to say I haven’t gained control of yet. He called and said, “Miss Angelou, it’s been nice talking to you. But I’m rather glad that you decided not to write an autobiography because to write an autobiography as literature is a most difficult task.” I said, “Then I’ll do it.” (quoted in McPherson 22)

By the time *Caged Bird* was published, the Black Arts movement was essentially over, but the work appeared at the beginning of a prolific period for African American authors, especially women—it is often referred to as the “renaissance” of black women writers. Toni Morrison, Nikki Giovanni, Angela Davis, Alice Walker, June Jordan, Toni Cade Bambara, Sonia Sanchez, and Lucille Clifton all began their careers around the same time. When *Caged Bird* appeared, many saw it as a turning point in African American and women’s literature. Popular with both white and black audiences, the book received glowing reviews in *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, and the *Wall Street Journal*

and was nominated for the National Book Award. Further, “before the end of the year, other critics were heralding *Caged Bird* as marking the beginning of a new era in the consciousness of black men and women and creating a distinctive place in black autobiographical tradition” (McPherson 22). Scholar Sondra O’Neale notes:

With the wide public and critical reception of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* in the early seventies, Angelou bridged the gap between life and art, a step that is essential if Black women are to be deservedly credited with the mammoth and creative feat of noneffacing survival. Critics could not dismiss her work as so much “folksy” propaganda because her narrative was held together by controlled techniques of artistic fiction as well as by a historic-sociological study of Black feminine images seldom if ever viewed in American literature. (42)

What made *Caged Bird* distinct from the many other contemporary autobiographies by African American writers? What propelled its success, with critics such as Harold Bloom commenting, “Angelou’s autobiographical tone is one of profound intimacy and radiates good will, even a serenity astonishingly at variance with the terrors and degradations she suffered as a child and as a very young woman” (7)? Critics have examined the work from a number of different perspectives—as a traditional African American autobiography, as a female coming-of-age story, as a rape-survivor’s story, as a literary biography—and while *Caged Bird* is all of these, it also is a documentation of African American history and heritage. Though it incorporates many themes common in autobiographies by African American women—which critic Joanne M. Braxton describes as “the importance of the family and the nurturing and rearing of one’s children, as well as the quest for self-sufficiency, self-reliance, personal dignity, and self-definition”—with her “unified point of view,” Angelou focuses on “inner spaces of her emotional and personal life,” making her work unlike many of the earlier biographies (*Black Women* 184). Braxton contin-

ues: “Angelou feels compelled to explore aspects of her coming of age that Ida B. Wells (and Zora Neale Hurston) chose to omit” (*Black Women* 184).

Angelou’s focus on the intimate details of her life, along with her documentation of the larger story of African American heritage and racism in the South, draws on traditional black autobiographical form while also, according to critic George E. Kent, creating

a unique place within black autobiographical tradition, not by being “better” than the formidable autobiographical landmarks described [such as Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* or Anne Moody’s *Coming of Age in Mississippi*], but by its special stance toward the self, the community, and the universe, and by a form exploiting the full measure of imagination necessary to acknowledge both beauty and absurdity. (20)

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings tells the story of the first seventeen years of Angelou’s life. She matures as she moves from Stamps, Arkansas, to St. Louis, Missouri, and, eventually, to San Francisco, California. For much of her early life, she feels displaced and isolated in a world that equates beauty with whiteness: “If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat,” she writes as an adult (*Caged Bird* 6). But the book is also very much about the time period itself—a document of the oppression of black rural life in the South during the 1930s. According to Angelou:

When I wrote *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, I wasn’t thinking so much about my own life or identity. I was thinking about a particular time in which I lived and the influences of that time on a number of people. I kept thinking, what about that time? What were the people around young Maya doing? I used the central figure—myself—as a focus to show how one person can make it through those times. (quoted in Tate 153)

The predominant setting for the book—the oppressive Jim Crow South—represents the very bigotry that Angelou was fighting against during the Civil Rights movement when she wrote it. Thus Angelou’s southern roots and civil rights activism contributed to the writing of this book. While *Caged Bird* is deeply connected to the long history of African American autobiography, it grew out of the Civil Rights movement and then carved out a space for itself in the African American woman writers’ renaissance as well as within the larger literary canon; this essay situates *Caged Bird* within the specific time period in which it was written, as well as within the time period in which it is set, in order to underscore these connections and to show why its legacy continues today.

Traditional African American Autobiography Meets the 1960s

To grasp the significance of the African American autobiographical tradition as well as the influence of sociopolitical issues on much African American literature, one need only glance at the history of African American writing. From its beginning, politics, social conditions, and culture have been entwined with such writing. Furthermore, the autobiographical form reflects a long history within the African American community, beginning with the slave narrative, a popular form of protest literature throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As Selwyn R. Cudjoe observes, “The practice of the autobiographical statement, up until the contemporary era, remains the quintessential literary genre for capturing the cadences of the Afro-American being, revealing its deepest aspirations and tracing the evolution of the Afro-American psyche under the impact of slavery and modern U.S. imperialism” (55). Former slaves, including Harriet Jacobs, Frederick Douglass, and thousands of others, wrote narratives about their personal experiences as a way to articulate their individual stories while addressing the larger social issue of slavery and attempting to have an impact on the

conscience of a nation. Scholar Harold Bloom is one of several critics who link these early autobiographies to the structure of *Caged Bird*, calling Maya Angelou “a natural autobiographer who works with considerable skill and with narrative cunning. Her voice interweaves other strands in the African-American oral tradition, but the implicit forms of sermon and slave narrative are ghostly presences in her rhetoric” (7).

After the Civil War ended, several well-known black writers and activists, including W. E. B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, and Marcus Garvey, wrote about the conditions of black lives in the United States, and their work made long-lasting impressions on social and cultural understandings of race. Slowly, African American literature, music, and art began to gain a wider appeal. Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Toomer, and Countée Cullen were all important writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Richard Wright’s novel *Native Son* (1940), which protested the social conditions that white society imposed on African Americans, became an immediate best seller and was also a Book-of-the-Month Club selection. For the first time, African American authors were winning awards and honors that had previously been presented only to white writers. In 1950, poet Gwendolyn Brooks became the first African American to win the Pulitzer Prize for poetry, and Ralph Ellison won the National Book Award for his 1952 novel *Invisible Man*.

The 1950s also saw a rise in autobiographies by African Americans, as Braxton points out, with many penned by black women, including Marian Anderson, Leila Mae Barlow, Ella Earls Cotton, Helen Day Caldwell, and Katherine Dunham (*Black Women* 141). In George Kent’s view, when Richard Wright’s autobiography, *Black Boy*, was published in 1945, it “began the questioning which shook the fabric of the American Dream” (18). Several scholars have drawn strong links between *Black Boy* and *Caged Bird*. Braxton asserts, “Thematic and structural similarities between the autobiographies of Wright and Angelou result from the slave narratives and from the influence of

Russian writers, which both read” (*Black Women* 192), while Susan Gilbert takes a different view: “Much in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and in what Angelou has said about her writing shows her in opposition to Wright’s dogma. Though the girl is lonely and hurt, she finds her way to survival in terms of the traditions of her family, her mother and her grandmother, not in opposition to them” (107).

Autobiography continued to be an important form for African American writers throughout the 1950s and 1960s: such works as Baldwin’s *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), Anne Moody’s *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968), *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965), and Claude Brown’s *Manchild in the Promised Land* (1965) combined individual story, social protest, and historical record. Yet, as Braxton explains in *Black Women Writing Autobiography*, “the pace of development of critical literature for autobiography as a genre did not begin to quicken until the 1960s, and there was little adequate treatment of black literature as a tradition until the 1970s,” whereas women’s autobiography was not examined by academic literary critics until the 1980s or later (6). Although these contemporary autobiographies differed in style and content from the early slave narratives, Sidonie Ann Smith points out similar themes:

In Black American autobiography the opening almost invariably recreates the environment of enslavement from which the black self seeks escape. Such an environment was literal in the earliest form of black autobiography, the slave narrative, which traced the flight of the slave northward from slavery into full humanity. In later autobiography, however, the literal enslavement is replaced by more subtle forms of economic, historical, psychological, and spiritual imprisonment from which the black self still seeks an escape route to a “North.” (5)

In *Caged Bird*, the young isolated Maya at first wants to wake from the “black ugly dream,” but over the course of her literal and figurative journey toward freedom, she discovers a sense of self, black pride,

and community (2). Even in the imprisonment of racism, Angelou still finds her voice and, like the caged bird, makes herself heard in the midst of struggle. That the title of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is from the poem “Sympathy” by late-nineteenth-century African American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar speaks to Angelou’s awareness of the continuum of African American literature and the echoes of tradition.

Similarly, the desire for social change that fueled the slave narratives also influenced African American writing during the period of the Civil Rights movement. Thus, to understand the cultural context of *Caged Bird*, it is crucial not only to examine the African American autobiographical tradition but also to look at the political activism of this era. A strong connection between literary writing and activism existed throughout the 1950s and 1960s, as symbolized by Martin Luther King, Jr.’s famous *Letter from Birmingham City Jail* (1963) and the many writers, such as Baldwin, who advocated civil rights through their writing. Braxton writes that the autobiographical form and the Civil Rights movement were closely linked:

In the 1960s, the new social history and autobiography as a genre emerged as source material for the study of groups whose history had remained unwritten. The fact that the advent of this discovery coincides with the civil rights movement and the women’s movement underscores the close relationship of the autobiographical genre to the political and historical moment; in fact, the political movements of the 1960s fostered an interest in and an attitude of receptivity toward the publications of autobiography by black Americans. (*Black Women* 142)

Many African American writers used fiction, poetry, and nonfiction to fuel social protest and call for change; for example, James Baldwin’s collection of essays *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* (1961) shot straight to the best-seller lists, where it remained for six months, “marking . . . a period of reawakened consciousness in

black autobiography” (Braxton, *Black Women* 142). Baldwin’s writing illustrated the danger of a divided America and challenged both whites and blacks to reach out to each other. The Black Arts movement was also extremely influential in the work and development of many writers, including Angelou, and helped to form black publishing houses, theater troupes, and poetry readings. While much of the Black Power movement came from a male perspective, women writers such as June Jordan, Lucille Clifton, and Audre Lorde also made their voices heard.

Where did Maya Angelou fit into all of this, and how did this vibrant political atmosphere contribute to the writing of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*? Angelou published *Caged Bird* during a critical decade for African American literature, as it began to gain a wider readership and, for the first time, to be defined as a genre and recognized as a crucial part of the larger category of American literature. Angelou wrote that the increased receptivity among publishers was linked “directly to the protest movements of the 1950s and 60s” (quoted in Braxton, *Black Women* 143).

Angelou was actively involved in the Civil Rights movement in several ways, including as a performer and as an organizer. When she was in her thirties, her circle of black intellectual and activist friends grew, and, inspired by writer and social activist John Killens, Angelou joined the Harlem Writers Guild, becoming a member of a group of writers that included Paule Marshall and James Baldwin. In 1959, at the request of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., she became the northern coordinator for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), a job she held for six months. In 1960 she produced, directed, and starred in *Cabaret for Freedom* to raise funds for the SCLC. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, there was no distinct separation between art and activism—each inspired and challenged the other. Angelou recalls the spirited atmosphere:

The period was absolutely intoxicating. The streets were filled with people who were on their toes, figuratively, with alertness. There was a promise in the air, like a delicious aroma of a wonderful soup being cooked in the kitchen on a cold day when you are hungry. It really appeared as if we were going to overcome racism, sexism, violence, hate. (*Conversations* 196)

Angelou deepened her understanding of justice and race after she moved overseas and realized that the struggle for equality included black people across the world. In the period 1961-1962 she was associate editor of the *Arab Observer* in Cairo, Egypt, the only English-language newsweekly in the Middle East. When she and her son next moved to Ghana, freeing themselves from the racist bigotry in the United States, she was an assistant administrator at the University of Ghana's School of Music and Drama and a feature editor for the *African Review*. In Ghana, Angelou met Malcolm X; when she returned to the United States in 1964, she helped him build a new civil rights organization, the Organization of African American Unity, but shortly after her arrival, Malcolm X was assassinated. Engaged in political activism throughout the 1960s, Angelou soon turned to words. Her story of growing up in the oppressive, poverty-stricken Jim Crow South resonated deeply with the times.

What She Came From

To analyze the cultural context of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, it is helpful to understand the period in which the book is set and how Angelou's past connects to the activism in which she was engaged when she wrote the book. Angelou grew up in a place governed by intense racism, violence, and bigotry: "In Stamps the segregation was so complete that most Black children didn't really, absolutely know what whites looked like." Young Maya lives under the threats of terrifying lynch mobs and the daily realities of discrimination and humiliation. Each racist incident contributes to Maya's self-awareness and shapes