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The power of writing: resistance in Maya Angelou's *Visit to the Dentist*

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Abstract. *"I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" (1970) is the first of Maya Angelou's autobiographical volumes. A recount of her personal life, the book is a testimony of racism in southern society and a statement of both the possibilities and the limits of resisting and fighting it. "Visit to the Dentist" is one of its chapters that have been published autonomously as a short story. The narrative cohesion of "Visit to the Dentist", together with its structure and language, make it representative of Angelou's writing pattern in terms of autobiography. This article sets out to examine how autobiographical writing is exploited both for political and for aesthetic purposes, and how this short story in particular illustrates Angelou's canonical characteristics – thematically, artistically and as protest.*

Key words*: race, gender, racism, black women's writing, slavery, autobiography*

1. INTRODUCTION

In a text included in *Black Women Writers – 1950-1960*, Maya Angelou stated: "I write because I am a Black woman, listening attentively to her talking people" (Angelou 1984b, 4). This principle, reiterated thereafter on different occasions, is borne out by Angelou's writing pattern – not only does it define her identity in terms of race and gender, but it also states her allegiance to her own people and the commitment to reflecting their speech and nature in her literary work.

Black women writers have been ascribed a core role in the shaping of Black American literature, precisely because their experience has been determined, simultaneously, by race and gender issues. As Stephen Henderson (1984) points out, they were victims of injustice and discrimination because of each of these conditions, thus suffering prejudice both from inside and outside (xxiii). This dual pattern, together with

the upsurge of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s, paved the way for black women's awareness of their power and triggered their willingness to fight for liberation (xxiv).

Maya Angelou's first autobiographical volume, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (*CB*), was published in 1970, at the very beginning of a decade that saw the flourishing of African-American literature and of black female writing, in particular, with works by Toni Morrison, Louise Meriwether, Alice Walker, Michelle Wallace or Mary Helen Washington (Cudjoe 1984, 11) − all of whom would become prominent writers in the overarching context of American literature. Equally important is the fact that most of these writings fell into the genre categories of novel, short story and autobiography (11). *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* covers Angelou's childhood and adolescence up to the age of seventeen, when she lived in Stamps, Arkansas, with her grand-mother and her brother, Bailey. The autobiographical nature of the book might suggest, as Selwyn Cudjoe (1984) maintains, the authenticity of what she describes: the experience of "growing up Black and female in the American South during the second half of [the] century" (11-12). But the importance of the book goes beyond its truthfulness; its in-depth representation of racism is attained, to a great degree, through its narrative structure and the use of language. As far as the first is concerned, although there is a chronological criterion linking the thirty-six chapters, the events described in each of them can be read independently and even sometimes lack time references of any sort. According to Walker (1995), relevant events or memories are juxtaposed, thus making each chapter a single thematic unit (99). Angelou herself acknowledges this in an interview with George Plimpton for the *Art of Fiction* section of *The Paris Review* (1990, n. p.): "I try to remember times in my life, incidents in which there was the dominating theme of cruelty, or kindness, or generosity, or envy, or happiness, glee… (…). Then I select the one that lends itself best to my device and that I can write as drama without falling into melodrama" (Angelou 1990, n.p.). Because of that, some of the chapters in *CB* have been published as autonomous short stories, as is the case with the sixteenth and the twenty-fourth chapters, republished several times under the titles "Names" and "Visit to the Dentist" (*VttD*), respectively[1].

This essay sets out to examine "Visit to the Dentist" as a striking example of Angelou's autobiographical writing. I suggest it stands for the writer's pattern, considering a) her experience and depiction of race and gender issues in the realm of Black American fiction; b) the characteristics of her narrative style and language; and c) her rationale for her own writing.

2. AUTOBIOGRAPHY: REPRESENTING THE INNER AND THE OUTER WORLDS

The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2000) briefly defines autobiography as "the story of a person's life, written by that person" (69). But this meaning, however true, attains conceptual complexity when used for purposes of literary classification, raising questions related to genre definition and to the boundaries between fact and fiction.

Angelou herself showed awareness of the gap separating the semantic meaning of autobiography from the literary one, when defied by her editor, Robert Loomis, to write a

[1] Considering this, I will use the terms "chapter" and "story" interchangeably throughout the essay.

literary autobiography, something that he presented her as "a formidable challenge", almost impossible to meet (Angelou 1990, n.p.). Determined to prove Loomis wrong on that score, Angelou responded to his call with *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, the first of a series of seven volumes written and published from 1970 to 2013, describing the various stages in her life.

Academic literary criticism has given increasing attention to the study of literary autobiography in particular in terms of its scope and definition as well as of its classification as a literary genre and mode. In his seminal essay "The Autobiographical Pact", Philippe Lejeune (1989) defined autobiography as "retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality" (4). But, as he further states, an autobiographical text has to meet specific requirements as regards the form of language, the subject treated, the situation of the author and the position of the reader: in other words, it has to be prose narrative dealing with one's individual life; author, narrator and protagonist coincide; and the narrative rests on a retrospective point of view. All conditions have to be satisfied in an integrated way, or else the text might be of a different, though closely similar, genre, for example, a memoir or a diary (4). Lejeune (1989) himself raises important questions on the variants that may defy the exactness of his criteria, such as the correlation between grammatical person and identity, or the difference between autobiography and autobiographical novel, which also touches on the limits of fiction (13). *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* apparently fits into Lejeune's (1989) basic framework, because, as in classical autobiography, the narrative is written in the first person and identity is verifiable through what he calls "the autobiographical pact": "the affirmation in the text of this identity [author-narrator-protagonist]" (17). As for the veracity of the facts narrated, *CB* recounts relevant facts and episodes from Angelou's actual life: clearly, it is not a work of fiction.

However, both aspects – the use of the first-person narrative point of view and the representation of real events – invite further discussion. The opening paragraph of chapter 23, "Visit to the Dentist" (*VttD*), already illustrates the use of the first person singular to narrate a particular event in her life: "The Angel of the candy counter had found me at last, and was exacting excruciating penance for all the stolen Milky Ways, Mounds, Mr. Goodbars and Hersheys with Almonds. I had two cavities that were rotten to the gums" (Angelou 1984a, 180). In terms of narrative structure, it works as a departure point, setting the context and providing the triggering element – the need to see a dentist – for the upcoming development. Also, the reader understands the situation as told from a child's point of view (the narrator-protagonist), with the reference to different brands of candy or chocolate, the fact of these having been stolen, and the allusion to a children's tale (the Angel of the candy). The auto diegetic point of view is an evident trait in the whole chapter. The term, coined by Gérard Genette for the voices of narration and also used by Lejeune in *The Autobiographical Pact* (1989, 5), means that narrator and principal character are the same. In *VttD*, Angelou often shifts into the first-person plural, "we", so as to include Momma, her grand-mother, in the events described and in which she participates actively.

William Howarth (1974), who proposes a study of autobiography as self-portrait, considers character the key element in the autobiographer's strategy, pointing out the factors that determine it, such as the sense of self, of place, of history, and of his motives for writing (365). Throughout *VttD*, the narrator-protagonist gives a thorough picture of

social, collective life in a southern state in the nineteen thirties, deeply marked by racism and prejudice. References abound: "there was no Negro dentist in Stamps" (Angelou 1984a, 180); "the nearest Negro dentist was in Texarkana" (181); "… the books which showed how she [Momma] had lent money alike to Blacks and whites during the Depression" (181); "how could a toothache pass the calaboose, hear the songs of the prisoners, their blues and laughter, and not be changed?" (182); "On the Greyhound she took an inside seat…" (187). In addition to clarifying the narrative chronotope, these examples provide historical information, namely the existence of racial segregation and discrimination, which are the core elements both in this story and in Angelou's canon. While these types of references are essential to the narrative construction and development of the chapter, they also allow the intersection of the individual and collective worlds, placing individual story in a given slice of history that determines it. The correlation of both worlds – individual and collective – also falls into the characteristics of autobiography.

The particular case of the Afro-American autobiographical statement, according to Cudjoe (1984), illustrates the collective, representative nature of the autobiographical subject (9), where concerns about individual subject are overridden by the collective subjection of the group (9). Furthermore, the use of the first person narration, a convention of the genre, gains a wider significance as it also works as vehicle for thematic representation. The following words by Angelou in the interview with George Plimpton illustrate this aspect: "… I was following a tradition established by Frederick Douglass—the slave narrative—speaking in the first-person singular talking about the first-person plural, always saying *I* meaning *we*" (Angelou 1990, n. p.). Therefore, personal experience becomes representative of that of black people in general, and the narrator a spokesperson for them. This assumption of the extended meaning of the first-person narrator is coherent with Sandra O'Neale's (1984) view of Angelou's autobiographical writing as expression of an inclusive "experiential self", a "composite self", a "multifaceted I" that takes in the indivisible identity of the women about whom she writes, and an archetypal self that reflects the history and memory of Black women for over more than three hundred years (26).

The integration of collective experience into the autobiographical narrative thus complies with the referential character of the genre as suggested by Lejeune (1989), claiming to provide information about a reality exterior to the text, an image of the real, a resemblance to truth, beyond verisimilitude (22). This referential pact, which correlates with the autobiographical pact (22), extends to the thematic framework and to the socio-historical setting of the autobiographical narrative. Theme is one of the strategic elements that Howarth (1974), in turn, considers defining of the autobiography, pointing out that theme brings about a synthesis of the writer's experience and the outer world he or she wants to represent: "Theme may arise from the author's general philosophy, religious faith, or political and cultural attitudes. His theme is personal, but also representative of an era, just as other literary works may illustrate the history of ideas" (366). Themes, Howarth (1974) further states, might be attributed to historical causes (366), a statement that reads especially true in the case of African-American literature. Autobiographies of Afro-American slaves proliferated during the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries as accounts of these cruel experiences. Cudjoe (1984) maintains that "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" (6). Angelou (1990) herself acknowledges her autobiographical writing as a development of the slave narrative tradition as embodied by Frederick Douglass (n. p.). The legacy of slavery has outlived its formal abolishment and race, which lies at the core of slavery and of the oppression of black people by their owners, remains the primary issue in terms of the African-American identity. In the context of slavery, race reproduced the belief in biological differences, but it was also a social construct upon which the relation master/slave rested, legitimating white supremacy (Higginbotham 1992, 256). Such beliefs from the nineteenth century would eventually be defied by the seminal contributions of DuBois, who proposed an idea of racial concept alienated from physical or biological characteristics and shaped by culture and society instead. Race as a social and cultural construction pervades all fields of life, Ian Lopez (2004, 965) maintains in his essay "The Social Construction of Race", in which he rejects the thesis of any physical or biological characteristics as distinctive of races. For Lopez (2004), race is defined as "a vast group of people loosely bound by together by historically contingent, socially significant elements of their morphology and/or ancestry" (966).

A closer reading of *Visit to the Dentist* illustrates how the narrator's point of view, her personal experience and the referential, socio-historical framework are integrated or even overlap. Several references account for geographical separation on grounds of race: ""Crossing the bridge into whitefolks' country..." (Angelou 1984a, 182); "If one was dying, it had to be done in style if the dying took place in whitefolks' part of town" (182), while white people's way of dealing with and addressing black ones illustrate a deeply-rooted racist society: "A young white girl opened it [the door] to show surprise at seeing us there. Momma said she wanted to see Dentist Lincoln and to tell him Annie was there. The girl closed the door firmly" (183). The excerpt vividly shows that black people did not use to go to white people's homes, that they did not deserve being treated politely and that they were not addressed by their last name – all examples reinforce their status of subservience and difference in society. Maya comments specifically on this last aspect: "Now the humiliation of hearing Momma describe herself as if she had no last name to the young white girl was equal to physical pain. It seemed terribly unfair to have a toothache and headache and have to bear at the same time the heavy burden of Blackness" (Angelou 1984a, 19).

The phrase "the heavy burden of Blackness" echoes the legacy of slavery. A person's name is an important aspect of their identity, and back in the times of slavery black people used to be defrauded of their own name, being addressed by white people by any name the latter chose, frequently a derogatory term. The sixteenth chapter of *CB*, also anthologised as a short story precisely titled "Names", poignantly addresses the fact of black servants, including Maya, having their names arbitrarily changed by their white mistresses.

But the central narrative element to the socio-historical framework, around which the whole story, its theme and its meaning revolve, is Dr. Lincoln's refusal to treat a black patient, Maya, which reads as a powerful metaphor of racial inequality, segregation and discrimination against black people. Maya's initial mention of this shows from the outset that it was not an occasional incident, but a common practice in the community, keeping black and white people apart: "...nor had I ever heard of a Negro's going to him as a patient" (181). On arriving at Doctor Lincoln's, his own words confirm Maya's

suspicion: "I don't treat nigra, colored people" (20): and, upon Momma's insistence: "Everybody has a policy. In this world you have to have a policy. Now, my policy is I don't treat colored people" (183). In terms of narrative construction, Dr. Lincoln's subsequent rephrasing of his "policy" constitutes the climax and the turning point:" Annie, my policy is I'd rather stick my hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's" (184).

This racist statement is rooted in a view of race as negative difference. Furthermore, it echoes racial identity based on biological characteristics as mentioned earlier, as Dr. Lincoln's arguments move from what could be seen as general prejudice, based on a commonly accepted practice, to physical repulsion, where black people are placed beneath animals.

Physical pain (Maya's toothache) accompanies the narrative development and deserves analysis here. Following this episode and Momma's decision to take her somewhere else, Maya writes: "I had forgotten the toothache; I only knew she has made her hands gentle in order not to awaken the pain" (186). In fact, Maya's toothache is not only a departure point for the subsequent events, as mentioned earlier; it is also a central metaphor that represents all of black people's pain in American history, thus enacting the juxtaposition of a personal "I" and a collective "we". More importantly, the effectiveness of this figurative trope is attained through its use in the different stages of the narrative. Below, I give a brief overview of such references.

The story opens with the statement of an excruciating pain; when Maya and Momma pass the bridge to the white neighbourhood where they expected to see Dr. Lincoln, pain seemed to weaken in the face of a near solution: "On the other side of the bridge the ache seemed to lessen as if a whitebreeze blew off the whitefolks and cushioned everything in their neighbourhood – including my jaw" (Angelou 1984a, 182). The place seemed more pleasant and although not seeing white people is presented as palliative, hope was still possible. As they move farther, coming across either black or white people finds a parallel in evaluating the intensity of pain: "But my head continued to throb with the measured insistence of a brass drum, and how could a toothache pass the calaboose, hear the songs of the prisoners, their blues and laughter, and not be changed? How could one or two or even a mouthful of angry tooth roots meet a wagonload of powhitetrash children, endure their idiotic snobbery and not feel less important?" (182).

This clear association of race and pain shows that neither race affinity (readers learn that prisoners are most probably black through the reference to the blues, slaves' ancestral tradition of 'letting suffering out') nor outrage in the presence of white kids' attitudes are strong enough to reduce pain. The rising crescendo of pain is interpreted by Maya herself when they were not let in at Dr. Lincoln's house, together with the fact that Momma did not use her last name: here, humiliation equals physical pain, she says (183).

Race and racism thus constitute the common patrimony that connects the inner and the outer worlds represented in autobiography. While content is historical and collective, narrating it is an individual action that selects narrative strategies such as organic unity, characterisation and style in order to rise above individual expression.

3. STORY-TELLING AND LANGUAGE

In her essay about Maya Angelou's construction of autobiography, O'Neale (1984) claims that she is one of the few writers using the genre today for the purposes of racial

and identity affirmation, in the tradition of autobiographical writing from slavery times (26). O'Neale (1984) presents an important idea in terms of Angelou's writing, by arguing that the author "employs the tools of fiction but not its 'make-believe' form" (26). Despite the referential character of autobiography stated by Lejeune or Howarth, the limits of truth, of resemblance to the real as represented, constitute a disputable issue vis-à-vis the definition of the genre. Lejeune (1989) himself admits flaws: the truth, he argues, is the possible truth, limited by the narrator's knowledge and prone to lapses of memory or involuntary errors, for example (22).

In the interview with George Plimpton (1990) mentioned earlier, Angelou explains how she handles referential truth, admitting she has her own methods of selection: "Sometimes I make a character from a composite of three or four people, because the essence in any one person is not sufficiently strong to be written about. Essentially though, the work is true though sometimes I fiddle with the facts. (…) I'm using the first-person singular and trying to make that the first-person plural, so that anybody can read the work and say, Hmm, that's the truth, yes, uh-huh, and live in the work. It's a large, ambitious dream. But I love the form" (Angelou 1990, n. p.).

It is important to note that the representation of facts correlates with the representative character of the autobiographical subject. Truth becomes universal. Angelou herself assumes she is spokeswoman for her people: writing is a social commitment: "I write for the Black voice and any ear which can hear it" (1984b, 3). Another canonical black woman writer, Toni Morrison (1984), stated this collective, representative nature of black autobiographical writing: "The autobiographical form is classic in Black American or Afro-American literature because it provided an instance in which a writer could be representative, could say 'My single and solitary individual life is like the lives of a tribe; it differs in these specific ways, but it is a balanced life because it is both solitary and representative" (339).

This said, it is important to reaffirm that *Caged Bird*, alongside Angelou's other autobiographical works, is non-fictional. However, and most importantly, it relies on narrative techniques and on a language style that bring its form closer to the realm of narrative fiction. *Visit to the Dentist* fits the narrative pattern of a short story: in addition to narrative categories such as time, place, characters and plot, the story develops from a departure point (the need to see a dentist), in a given background context (information about a southern community and its racist way of life, but also elements about the characters or family life); there is a major, triggering event (the dentist's refusal to treat Maya), a climax (his final reason for not doing so) and the denouement, based on Momma's way of dealing with the situation, only disclosed to the reader at the end of the chapter. In this sense, *VttD* meets Edgar Allan Poe's (1846) "unity of effect or impression", one of the utmost criteria of aesthetic judgement, as all elements concur in the preconceived final effect (163).

Angelou writes about her "individual life, in particular the story of [one's] personality", to cite Lejeune's (1989) terms once more, making it resemble a fictional narrative not in terms of its content but of its structure, which, as I have shown, complies with the typical elements of a fictional narrative, namely in its short version, that of the short story. This way she proved herself able to meet Loomis's challenge of writing a literary autobiography, but her tools go far beyond formal aspects. Howarth (1974) defines technique as an interplay of style, imagery and structure, considering it significant in itself and leading to a larger effect (366). *VttD* illustrates how technique rests upon

characteristics of the fictional text without jeopardizing the true potential of autobiography. As she herself states in the interview with Plimpton, keeping the readers interested in what they are reading is part of this rationale and essential to her: "Easy reading is damn hard writing. I try to pull the language into such a sharpness that it jumps off the page. (…) That's when I decided to write. I would write so that the reader says, That's so nice. Oh boy, that's pretty. Let me read that again." (Angelou 1990, n. p.).

And language has to be able to serve that purpose. On this important element, she explains: "I really love language. I love it for what it does for us, how it allows us to explain the pain and the glory, the nuances and the delicacies of our existence. And then it allows us to laugh, allows us to show wit. Real wit is shown in language. We need language." (Angelou 1990, n. p.).

4. FITTING THE CANON

The nineteen sixties and seventies saw the dramatic upsurge of women's Black literature, much in the wake of civil rights movements and women's movements, but the tradition of female black literature goes much beyond that. Stephen Henderson (1984) considers that the true founders of Black American literature were probably Phillis Wheatley, Lucy Terry and Harriet E. Wilson (xxiii). But access to publishing and the attention of scholarship definitely added to this turning point. Black women writers themselves contributed to the affirmation of Black literature not only through their creative works but also because of their own criticism, both in academic terms (Evans 1984, xiv) and on the media. Black Aesthetic owes much to the studies of Carolyn Fowler (*Black Arts and Black Aesthetics: A Bibliography*, 1981) and Barbara Smith's essay "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism", 1998 (Henderson 1984, xxv). For example, Angelou's many interviews throughout her career explained and supported her ideas on life and social issues, but also about her writing techniques and the meaning of writing.

Black women's writing is historically significant in the development of black literature in general (Henderson 1984, xxv), but the particular condition of race and gender is determinant, as Tate (1983) writes: "By virtue of their race and gender, black women writers find themselves at two points of intersection: one where Western culture cuts across vestiges of African heritage, and one where male-female attitudes are either harmoniously parallel, subtly divergent, or in violent collision" (xvi).

Women's subtle resistance to oppression and racism is part of this pattern. O'Neale (1984), who defends the archetypal, symbolic role of black women in American culture, claims that "black people and black women do not just endure, they triumph with a will of collective consciousness that Western experience cannot extinguish" (28). In Angelou's world, O'Neale (1984) maintains, no black woman is a loser: "She is the third generation of brilliantly resourceful females, who conquered oppression's stereotypical maladies without conforming to its expectations of behaviour" (26).

In *CB*, Momma, as well as being the central figure in her female characterization in *VttD*, incidentally, works as a role model for Maya that meets this strong, archetypal, resistant pattern. Also, in *VttD*, her love, strength and pride make up for much of Maya's ordeal. Had it not been for Dr. Lincoln's episode, her image would have remained unstained. However, and contrary to what happens in other chapters of *CB*, the denouement of *VttD* has been considered as a statement of defeat that undermines black

women's power in general and that of Momma, in particular. Despite her initial strength and self-determination to confront Dr. Lincoln, Momma proves unable to persuade him to treat Maya. Even resorting to strategies that she herself considers not very decent, all that she attains is ten dollars as due interest to pay for the fare to Treksana where they would eventually see a black dentist. Her negotiation tools rely on the superiority of her economic status vis-à-vis Dr. Lincoln's, and her small victory remains limited to that scope. Although being paid the ten dollars seems to provide the practical solution to the problem, nothing changes in terms of racial segregation. Her gesture is read as an assumption of failure.

This chapter makes use of the "story-within-the-story" strategy to shed some light on its final import. Unaware of what had happened in Dr. Lincoln's office, Maya creates her own imaginative version of the events, which she later on tells Bailey. This section of the text is graphically differentiated in italics, and gives an almost fantastic, unrealistic picture of Momma as a superhero. But even in this version Dr. Lincoln, though showing fearful respect when confronted with Momma, addressing her as "Mrs. Henderson" and agreeing to leave the town on her orders, is not defeated – that is, Maya can't change the ensuing fact that he did not treat her. Walker (1995) suggests that this chapter introduces a discordant note in the pattern of subtle, but effective resistance that pervades the book (12). Here, he maintains, Maya's imagined version of the events highlight the contrast between what she would like Momma to have done and the actual limits of her power (12). This reading is supported by Carol Neubauer (1990), who maintains that despite her superpowers all that she attains is a ten-dollar compensation. But, while the alternative episode underscores the extension of the child's humiliation, it also accounts for the "undiminished character" of Momma in the eyes of her granddaughter (118).

Walker (1995) also suggests that despite this defeat, the episode allows a description of open confrontation between black and white people, hinting that at least that is a possibility (12). But more importantly, the passage suggests the power of fantasy and storytelling in resisting racism (12). Yet, Walker's (1995) interpretation on this particular point is easily undermined by the text itself as soon as the reader perceives that it is only a fantasy shortly to be denounced by the "real" version of events. However, taken in a broader sense, it still suggests that, in the absence of actual power, language remains the ultimate weapon and its power, though subtle, is undeniable. The denouement allows such a reading. There is a multi-level telling of the story (Maya to Bayley, Momma to Uncle Willie, and Maya to the reader) that adds to the artistry of the narrative structure and, at the same time, highlights the importance of story-telling and of language. And even if the story ends with Maya's assumption of failure ("I preferred, much preferred, my own version" – 23), Momma handles it with humour and a sense of moral superiority. Her wit made up for the lack of superpower that would be the only way of fighting racism. All this becomes written word. This is the power of writing and of autobiography.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In her seminal work, "Playing in the Dark", African-American writer Toni Morrison (2004) refuses the established belief that American literature can exist independent from black presence. Defending what she calls "American Africanism" (1006), she also clarifies her dual status: "My work requires me to think about how free I can be as an

African-American woman writer in my genderized, sexualized, wholly rationalized world" (1005-6).

As mentioned earlier, the interplay of race and gender is essential to an understanding of female black literature. *CB* reflects this particular condition and *VttD* exposes the female strengths and limitations in the context of facing and resisting racism. That the denouement of the narrative is read as defeat seems secondary. The means and not the end become more relevant even if we consider the social, pedagogical, protest dimension of *CB*. By means I imply the writing itself. What matters in the end is the description of a cruel, inhumane event, and the crudity of its resolution.

As Tate (1983) also writes: "Black women writers do, indeed, celebrate racial victory, but they also acknowledge defeat, not for the purpose of reinforcing a sense of defeat or victimization but to insure that we learn to recognize what constitutes vulnerability in order to avoid its consequences in the future. This recognition originates in acknowledging the source of one's pain and reconciling oneself to bearing, in some measure, responsibility for it" (xxiv-v). Because the central event in *VttD* is true in terms of its referentiality, because it is part of someone's life, it becomes more effective in its purpose. That is the power of autobiographical writing. This way, resistance still dominates the story. Writing about it perpetuates the primeval function of blues in African-American culture as a way of expressing pain, while fulfilling a more comprehensive purpose. Walker (1995) defends the thesis that African-American writing and slave narrative in particular are imbued with a political purpose. *CB*, he further contends, attains literary unity and quality and is politically effective in demonstrating how to fight racism (3).

This political awareness permeates Angelou's writings in all the genres she attempted – her canon is that of individual commitment to the collective, holding her writing as a torchbearer for her people, keeping memory alive as she wrote in the poem "I rise":

> Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
> I rise
> Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear/
> I rise /Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
> I am the dream and the hope of the slave
> I rise
> I rise
> I rise[2].

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