Religion Viewed Through the Eyes of African American Women Writers: The Case of Maya Angelou and Her Autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

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Etant donné que la Bible représente un texte complètement étranger à la spiritualité afro-américaine, cette étude se propose tout d'abord d'analyser les causes qui ont conduit à l'identification des femmes-auteurs de cette éthnie avec le Christianisme. On constate que l'une des causes principales est le contexte historique de l'esclavage. À travers la théorie de l'infériorité raciale et de genre, ces auteurs ont donné au texte biblique des interprétations originelles. Maya Angelou, poète, romancière, auteur dramatique, journaliste, professeur, actrice, metteur en scène et productrice, souvent considérée une personalité renascentiste, est la créatrice d'une oeuvre impréssionante. Son premier roman autobiographique de 1970 contient de nombreuses références religieuses. Cette étude se propose aussi d'analyser comment est présentée la religion dans ce roman, dans le contexte plus large de la littérature féminine afro-américaine.

Mots-clés: littérature afro-américaine, Maya Angelou, Bible

When I try to describe myself to God I say, "Lord, remember me? Black? Female? Six-foot tall? The writer?" And I almost always get God's attention.
—Maya Angelou, 2008

The present study was prompted by a more general question, namely what has led most African American writers to identify themselves so strongly with the Bible, the ancient text which is in fact alien to their spirituality, the faith of their enslavers? The *Numbers* of the Old Testament (22-24) present in an antithesis blind Balaam and his mule, which is endowed with the supernatural gifts of vision and speech, being thus able to see God's angel and enabling his master's meeting with God. Balaam's story enjoyed considerable popularity during the Middle Ages, down to the end of the 19th century and the start of the 20th, in the guise of more than one version: one of the better known is Joel Chandler Harris' folktale "Balaam and His Master", featuring Balaam not as a biblical prophet but as a slave or beast of burden.

In this context, William Andrews (1986) and Kimberly Rae Connor (1995) among others suggest that the idea of a special vision and insight is a key component of black women's spiritual narratives, which has served as the foundation for later poets and novelists. In *The Talking Book* (2006), Andrew Dwight Callahan posits the relationship between African Americans and the Bible in the context of the dialectic between "the poison book" (in more than one pasage, the Bible appears to furnish arguments in favour of slavery and misogyny) and "the

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good book". Because African Americans incarnate "America's greatest contradiction" as slaves in a free land, Callahan observes that they have accepted and assumed the contradictory nature of the Bible as "effective, in measured doses, as its own antidote" (2006: 39). In his study *Conjuring Culture* (1994: 3), Theophus Smith argues that the African American encounter with "the sacred text of western culture" ought to be made sense of in terms of the African sacred cosmos that prompted black American cultural adaptations of Euro-American Christianity. Thus, for African Americans, the Bible is not a treatise of theology, but "a book of ritual prescriptions" for cultural formations of black American culture.

In terms of ideological constructions, although neither the Old Testament nor the ancient world contain moral judgments concerning the colour black (cf. Hood 1994; Felder 1989), all the three major religions associate Africa and its descendants with Noah's curse of Canaan: "a slave of slaves shall he be to his brothers" (*Genesis* 9: 25). Even though the Bible does not include references of a racial nature to Cain and Abel, "the mark of Cain" has been associated with blackness, first in early rabbinic writings, and then in Christian Europe beginning with the 12th century (Clay Bassard 2010: 14). Clay Bassard (2010: 15) notes that in the case of African American women the curse pronounced on Eve in the Garden is almost prophetic, given the fact that the cursing of humanity is clearly gendered: Adam's curse is in the area of production (*Genesis* 3:17-19), while Eve's curse is in the area of reproduction and a restricted sexuality : "In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband and he shall rule over thee" (*Genesis* 3:16). African American women slaves stood under both curses.

In her study "White Women's Christ, Black Women's Jesus", theologian Jacqueline Grant (1989: 11) writes that black people have "opened the Bible wider" than others, while Renita Weems (1991: 60) suggests that they **"**continue to view reading as an act clouded with mystery, power, and danger", a remark that obviously does not exclude the Bible. Similarly, in „Interpreting Biblical Scholarship for the Black Church Traditions" (1991: 19-21), Thomas Hoyt Jr describes what he terms "proof-texting", similar to interpretation, or "taking a text completely out of context in order to validate one's own subjective views (pretexts) or one's understanding of doctrine, tradition and the like". Thus, unlike 19th century African American abolitionists, black women writers have made use of "proof-texting", selecting radical interpretations of biblical texts in various literary genres. In his *Canon and Creativity* (2000)*,* Robert Alter writes of the tension in modern writing between creativity as a modernist value and canon as a sign of scriptural authority: "The engagement of modern writers with the Bible….cuts sharply two ways. They frequently translate biblical motifs and themes into radically redefining new contexts…. At the same time, the Bible remains for them a value-laden, imaginatively energizing body of texts, helping make possible the novels and poems they write through the powers of expression and vision that inhere in it" (2000: 8).

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On the other hand, it should be noted that most, if not all African American writers have authored texts with a perceived political impact. The books of Maya Angelou (born Marguerite Johnson in 1928) have never gone out of print. Her first autobiographical novel, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,* the first book in what was to be a serial autobiography, was written in the late 60's under the impulse of the assassination of her friend Martin Luther King Jr, and published only after autobigraphy writing was presented to Angelou as a challenge. Her ambition was to write a book that would honor the Black experience nd affirm the human spirit. Critical appraisals have appeared in large numbers only in the last two decades. Angelou was the first African American writer included on the *New York Times'* bestseller list. "I will not allow anybody to minimize my life, not anybody, not a living soul—nobody, no lover, no mother, no son, no boss, no President, nobody" is what Maya Angelou declared in 1982 to writer Judith Patterson in an interview for *Vogue* magazine (cf. Oden 2011: 2); this unambiguous attitude was to underlie her whole literary career. Under the influence of feminist and African American studies, such critical appraisals have centered on questions of race, gender, identity, alienation, or important episodes such as young Maya's rape at the age of 8, followed by her self-imposed silence, graduation, or the month spent in a junkyard. In most cases the juxtaposition of apparently disparate episodes, which appears to undermine the chronology of childhood, is ignored.

Maya Angelou is a truly remarkable woman. „And Angelou's life has certainly been a full one: from the hardscrabble Depression era South to pimp, prostitute, supper-club chanteuse, performer in Porgy and Bess, coordinator for Martin Luther King Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference, journalist in Egypt and Ghana in the heady days of decolonization, comrade of Malcolm X, eyewitness to the Watts riots. She knew King and Malcolm, Billie Holiday and Abbey Lincoln" (McWhorter 2002: 37). *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is the childhood story of Marguerite Johnson, a young African American who experiences several epiphanic revelations on the way from childhood to adulthood, which ends with the birth of her child. This passage however proves to be a continuous trauma: "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. It is an unnecessary insult" (Angelou 2009: 1). Angelou – "a spellbinding storyteller" (Bloom 2009: 1) writes her life story with an acute awareness of history, and her own place in this history, that of an African American woman. Maya's transformation from a black, rather unattractive, graceless, morose but dreamy child, to an independent young woman capable of facing racial prejudice places the novel within the favourite American literary themes of the 60's and 70's.

The title of the novel is a line from the poem "Sympathy", by the first universally acknowledged African American poet, Paul Laurence Dunbar. Beginning with its title, Dunbar's poem alludes to the healing power of African American religion which, in the segregated South, helped alleviated suffering akin to slavery. From the start, Angelou assumes two authorial voices, that of childhood

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and adolescence, plus that of adulthood, objectively and introspectively, thus introducing an original perspective in American autobiography (Lupton 1998: 52-53). In memoirs written about life in the segregated American south, repeated references to geographical space reveal a great deal about the southern worldview, and critics have identified here what they call 'segregated spaces". In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,* Maya Angelou captures the impact of segregated spaces on her psyche by comparing herself to a "caged bird" (see Wallach 2006: 458). Angelou's prose is filled with rich, sensual, dazzling images evoking tastes, aromas and the childhood atmosphere more generally, combined with humour and colourful dialogue. "I try to pull the language into such a sharpness that it jumps off the page" (quoted in Cox 2006: 7).

Harold Bloom, a professor of literature at Yale, made famous by his popular critical introductions to the major authors, deems Maya Angelou's first autobiography to be closely connected to the main forms of African American (auto) biographical writings, the slave narratives and the sermons. Bloom (2009: 1) notes that her extraordinary and persistent sense of self goes back to the African American paradigm of what he calls the American Religion. What survived of West African spirituality after the African slaves' passage to America is, according to Bloom, the certitude of "the little me within the big me": "the "little me" or most inward self did not stem from the harsh space and time of the white world, but emanated ultimately from their unfallen cosmos that preceded the Creation-Fall of the whites" (Bloom 2009: 1). In turn, Mae Henderson (1989: 20) suggests that contemporary Black women's writing amalgamates Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia with African American religious practices of glossolalia to produce a unique combination of "testimony" and "testifying. In a larger context, African American "voices" express "memory" and its "counter histories", according to Werner Sollors (1994: 8), a counter history that rejects the sweeping generalizations of exclusivist "History". In a culture dominated by white voices, African Americans experience a vital need to present their contribution to American history, by breaking the silencing canons imposed by slavery and perpetuated by means of segregation and discrimination.

Autobiography represents such a "voice", besides other cultural products such as political speeches, jazz, spirituals, rap music, film, etc. Angelou's autobiographies have been described as 'autobiographical fiction', while the author herself speaks about "the sometimes slippery notion of truth in nonfiction" and memoirs (cf. Rogers 2006), although she insists that the facts and stories in her autobiographies are all true, albeit presented to make an impact with the reader. Hilton Als (2002: 72) describes Angelou as "a pioneer of self-exposure", who is not afraid to speak about the darker aspects of her own personality. It is interesting to note that the literary form of autobiography has special significance. Arthur R. Gold, for example, argues that the Bible itself, the Book of Exodus in particular, cannot be properly appreciated until its autobiographical character is well understood. The Hebrew scriptures in particular, Gold writes, are "a people's

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description of itself, a national autobiography, in which a people investigates, affirms, and perpetuates its own complex identity." Similarly, many American autobiographers blend their own story with that of their society and their nation. An inner, private history becomes a window through which to see more clearly the complexities and ironies of the modern world.

In 1931, Virginia Woolf had predicted that it would be fifty years before "Woman's freedom to tell her own stories—and indeed [...] to know them fully herself would come". Maya Angelou has cut short that predicted time by more than a decade. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is in fact a bildungsroman, but an African American bildungsroman made up of a prologue plus 36 episodic chapters which gradually build up to Marguerite's assertion of identity, learning words, and rejecting racism, in ever more subtle ways. Angelou says that hers is not only the black experience, but human experience in general. From the very first chapters, it can be noted that various significant life episodes are interpreted and weighed in biblical terms, e.g. "If on Judgment Day I were summoned by St. Peter to give testimony to the used-to-be sheriff's act of kindness, I would be unable to say anything in his behalf" (Angelou 2009: 19).

The prologue preceding the first chapter begins with a quote: - "What you looking at me for? I didn't come to stay . . ." (Angelou 2009: 7), which establishes from the start of the narrative the theme of "something to look at"; thus Dolly McPherson, a professor of literature and Angelou's friend, suggests that since the persona is reciting an Easter poem, the "something to look at" is the persona as Christ. "What the prologue actually augurs for and emphasizes is the suffering and descent preceding the rise and resurrection ultimately experienced by the maturing persona herself" (1990: 19). Religion is a major influence in Maya Angelou's life and work, and the whole book contains frequent references to religion; from the very beginning we are introduced to recollections of the 6-hour service in the Methodist Episcopal Church that she attended with her grandmother. Faith and the healing power of religion are a major theme of the book, while the protagonist realizes the role religion plays in her own life and that of the community. Maya's grandmother, "Momma" Annie Henderson, a constant presence in church and a fervent Christian, gets up at 4:00 every morning to open up her shop and say her prayers, thanks God no matter how small the gift, and constantly sings hymns, while talking to God like he was her uncle. Despite the odds, her grandmother instilled pride in Maya with religion as an important element in their home. With her mother away, "Momma" and her religion become the two major influences in little Maya's life. In fact, religion lies at the centre of the whole African American community in Stamps, Arkansas in the fourth decade of the last century, and it is what keeps the community together. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* also shows that the Church has always been an element of support and solace for the African American culture (see also Angelou 2009: 202-203), and later contributed to a great extent to the shaping of their self-consciousness.

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Annie Henderson, the book's most independent character, furnishes Maya with the tools for survival and the power to discover herself, all centered on God. Religion is an all-pervasive element in the community, and no chapter of the book is without reference to it, quotations from the Bible or from religious hymns. Chapter 18, which is dedicated to the restoring power of religion, includes a conversation between Annie and a cotton picker, who remarks: "I find it interesting that the meanest life, the poorest existence, is attributed to God's will, but as humans become more affluent, as their living standard and style begin to ascend the material scale, God descends the scale of responsibility at a commensurate speed" (Angelou 2009: 94). During prayer meetings, the downtrodden secured themselves divine care as well as the punishment that the whites fully deserved. McPherson (1990: 30) notes that "through the purity of her life and the quality of her discipline, [she] demonstrates that, by centering one's being in God, one can endure and mitigate the effects of an unjust world" (McPherson 1999: 27).

Lupton (1998: 260) remarks that grandmothers have always been major elements of stability and continuity in black families and communities. The status of woman indicates society's cultural aptitudes. Annie Henderson is also at the same time a symbol of ancestral history, as keeper of traditions and histories passed down orally through the generations. More than this, she adapts various biblical passages to all sorts of daily situations: "Didn't Moses lead the children of Israel out of the bloody hands of Pharaoh and into the Promised Land? Didn't the Lord protect the Hebrew children in the fiery furnace and didn't my Lord deliver Daniel? We only had to wait on the Lord" (Angelou 2009: 152). While "Momma" Henderson symbolizes black gospel traditions, rooted in religion and stoic resignation, Vivian Baxter Johnson, Maya's long-estranged mother, represents black blues with its provocative spirit (Kent 1993: 166). By interacting with the black community of Stamps, with uncle Willie, reverend Thomas, Mr. McElroy and aristocratic Mrs. Flowers, among others, Maya shapes her personality and intelligence. The chief literary influence that contributed to her growth was Shakespeare ("Shakespeare was a black woman", says Angelou, because of his identification with marginalized people, cf. Sawyer 2003: 82); also slave narratives, black folk traditions, as well as the Bible which Maya read twice as a child and memorized passages. The Methodist Episcopal Church put Maya into contact with the African American oral traditions which, together with the vibrant language of sermons, have influenced her writing.

In her religious feelings, however, Maya Angelou can be seen as standing somewhere between her ardently religious grandmother and her "worldly" mother. African Americans both in the revival meeting and the "gay house by the railroad tracks" (2009: 104) "asked the same question: "How long, oh God? How long?". Thus at this stage, Angelou records the joining of blues and religious tradition. The agony in the barrelhouse blues and the agony in religion have a connecting point. "A stranger to the music could not have made a distinction between the songs sung a few minutes before (in church) and those being danced to in the gay house by the

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rail road tracks" (2009: 104). In the same vein, she presents reverend Thomas, "ugly, fat, and [who] laughed like a hog with the colic", who visits the community four times a year, when he "eats like a pig". Maya and her brother despised him because he was obese, never remembered their names, and ate the biggest, brownest and best parts of the chicken at every Sunday meal" (2009: 31-2). Maya also "finds comedy in the Sunday performances of 'sisters' possessed by the spirit" (Braxton 1989: 190), while the children in fact only picked up the comic elements hat the adults themselves perhaps unwittingly provided: "She screamed at Reverend Taylor. "Preach it. I say, preach it." […] The Reverend kept on throwing out phrases like home-run balls […] Then she caught the minister by the sleeve of his jacket and his coattail, then she rocked him from side to side" (2009: 34-35). At the end of chapter 6, we find these musings: "Laughter so easily turns to hysteria for imaginative children. I felt for weeks after that I had been very, very sick […] Each time Bailey said 'Preach it' to me, I hit him as hard as I could and cried" (2009: 44). More recently, when one interviewer asked Angelou if she has always had strong religious beliefs, she answered that she is a religious person, and after spending some time with Zen Buddhism, Judaism and Islam, she found that she really wants to be a Christian (cf. King 1992).

In her study "Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women 1860-1960", Mary Helen Washington writes that black women autobiographers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had been "frozen into self-consciousness by the need to defend black women and men against the vicious and prevailing stereotypes", and so they found it difficult to rewrite themselves as central characters. Angelou was the first writer to have the audacity to make public such stories. An autobiography is an artistic piece where the charm of imagination characteristic of a story merges with the honesty of self expression, writes Hemalatha. Hilton Als, himself an author, while deeming"I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" an important contribution to the wave of black feminist writing in the seventies, finds important similarities between Angelou and Anaïs Nin, whom he terms "theatrical writers": "they use language, often with great aplomb, to describe and glorify a self that is fulfilled only when it is being observed. Both writers, in their early books, were pioneers of self-exposure, willing to turn a spotlight on their own sometimes questionable exploits and emotional shortcomings" (Als 2002: 73). Hema Nair finds an interesting relationship between Angelou's writing and the blues "Angelou manipulates all the techniques of the Blues numbers - of the repetition, of the whoop (the slave holler used to uplift the spirit of the slaves) of the changes of rhythm and of the dropping of the oppositional mode of address in her autobiographical narrative in five volumes. [...] Like the traditional blues, the black autobiography expands the solo-the voice of a single, individual singer, yet retains the tone of the tribe".

According to Jerome Bruner (1993), Angelou takes what she read in her youth and builds on that "memoir" tradition, which in turn creates an autobiography of her life as literature. Eagleton (1983: 201), on the other hand, argues that there is

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no real difference between 'ordinary and 'literary autobiography. One aspect that distinguishes Angelou's book is that strong female characters play prominent roles in the story, which has led a number of critics to conclude that she writes in the feminist tradition, constructing an image of a matriarchal society. Angelou in fact chooses to focus on Maya's relationships with other African American women, with her grandmother in particular, who helps position Maya's life on moral principles, teaching her to confront adversity – characteristics of the African American female bildungsroman (Kurkowski 2004); men are either handicapped, rapists, hooligans or family deserters, all emotionally unstable, and need women to rely on. Hagen (1997: 69) suggests that in this, Angelou strives to "counter unflattering female types described in the earlier literature by James Fenimore Cooper and Washington Irving," in which "grandmother matriarchs are depicted as silent, post-forty, corpulent, and passively working in the kitchen".

Another strong character in the story is Bertha Flowers, who manages to persuade Maya to break the five years of self-imposed silence following her rape, as self-imposed punishment for having lied in court, causing, she thought, the death of the rapist, Mr. Freeman. Like Shakespeare's Iago, she had decided never to speak another word. "Just my breath, carrying my words out, might poison people and they'd curl up and die" (Angelou 2009: 73). The words that had imprisoned her at the age of 7 turned into the instruments of liberation from the self-imposed silence. "Language is man's way of communicating with his fellow man and it is language alone that separates him from the lower animals. . . . Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning", Mrs. Flowers teaches Maya. She shapes up Maya's education with poetry and philosophy, while Maya, thinking about the poems' deeper meanings, manages to transcend immediate reality. The force of words is in fact a central theme of the book. Maya and her brother, Bailey, take to reading when very young, with Shakespeare the first man "I fell in love with" (Angelou 2009: 16). Books provide comfort and solace, and the power of words and literature bring Maya closer to the community. Her unabated search for learning and literacy parallels the central myth of African American culture, that of the connection between freedom and literacy. Speaking of the importance of language in her development as a writer, Angelou takes into consideration the importance of the Bible to her: "I decided when I was very young to read the whole Bible and I did so twice. I loved its cadence. And in church when the minister would make the Bible come alive... I could see it. And the tonality and the music and the old people...all that. For me, it was going to the opera".

"Theme, form and the underlying rhythms build to a full throated song of herself that enthralls the reader - a celebration of survival, of the forging of identity, of courage, of persistence and of the renewal of innocence against overwhelming odds" (Nair). The conclusion of this first autobiography is comical and triumphant at the same time. By giving birth to her accidentally conceived child, Maya symbolically reintegrates into the African American community to

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which she belongs. “Her victory suggests an implicit triumph over the white bourgeoisie, whose values have been flagrantly subverted” (Henke 2009: 116). *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* alongside the subsequent autobiographies are first and foremost narratives of liberating identity, which go beyond traditional marks of identity. Questions concerning the notions of *woman, man, child, foolishness, wisdom, sin, virtue, power, powerlessness* lie at the center of all these books. A Christian-oriented reading may induce compassion, without finding in their protagonist a model of a Christian lifestyle. Thus Nancy Tischler (1987: 82) concludes that *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* presents its readers with the antithesis between good and evil, given that a fallen woman always appears more ’colourful’ to readers. The fascination of evil is stronger that that of good, however both good and evil are mirrors of the values of human society. Nevertheless, it is doubtful whether the protagonist can really be considered a fallen woman in the first place. Other critics believe that the ending symbolizes Maya’s reaching a point of maturity (Kurkowski 2004), while the plot problems are “resolved within the strictures of society” (Buss :107). African American literature scholar Dolly McPherson (1990) states that Angelou, in her demonstration of the passage from childhood to young adulthood, creatively uses "the Christian myth" and presents the themes of death, regeneration, and rebirth. From the perspective of the main obstacle that the protagonist is forced to contend with throughout her life, racial prejudice, in the end she appears as the embodiment of heroic spirit, and in this she symbolically rejoins divinity. Her belief in God shaped her writing and gave her the courage to sing in a caged racist society.

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