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## **“Ain’t nothin’ to it but to do it”: The process of constructing an identity as a marginalized subject in Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings***

Teresa Donoso<sup>1</sup>

The concept of the self in contemporary society is one that poses many difficulties mostly due to its seemingly ungraspable nature. Most of the time it is difficult to comprehend the self as an idea, or to even understand its possible structure and characteristics, going as far as to question its truthful existence. Lately, more space has been given to the construction of a fluid self, which has been undoubtedly exploited by artists of all fields. Within the specific field of literature, writers have taken hold of this new approach towards the subject, exploring the ways in which it might serve new purposes. Such is Maya Angelou’s case, an African American author and poet who wrote not only one, but six volumes about her life. The first volume, titled *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, undoubtedly makes use of a steady creation of a fluid self to symbolize the journey the protagonist faces while growing up.

There still exist doubts and questions regarding the construction of the self, especially in terms of the creation of a subject who does not conform to the discourse of the dominant culture. The doubts are even greater in terms of a doubly marginalized subject, as it is seen in Angelou’s

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autobiography. In the text, a young African American woman is subordinated to an American culture which does not take into account her roots and understanding of the world as well as to a patriarchal society tries to silence her. Angelou portrays the first years of her life, from the story of a three year-old girl who travels alone to stay with their grandmother in the town of Stamps to the experience of a seventeen-year-old mother who unexpectedly understands her position in the world. Throughout the narration, the author describes the various inadequacies faced by Marguerite as she tries hard to connect and understand the experiences she goes through while trying to create a sense of self that represents her as an African-American woman. Among these problematic issues, Marguerite's slow comprehension of what her blackness means makes her, little by little, become aware of the distance that separates her from the stereotypical white woman and also from what is expected of her as a black woman. The impact her gender has on her identity is especially crucial since the young girl learns to make sense of the world through the contrasts she voices to herself in her head. In Marguerite's mental map of her world, white women are set apart from black women, and even among black women there are diverse, dissimilar categories. Marguerite will continue experiencing the world as she becomes aware of the implications her gender has both inside and outside her community.

In Angelou's autobiography we are also faced with the importance language has in the understanding and developing of a sense of self. The impact that words and meanings —conveyed through language— have on Marguerite, a character who can be argued to correspond to Angelou's younger self, can be seen as a double-edged tool: language works as a powerful instrument which may make the process of assigning meaning and classifying experiences easier only if the subject belongs to the dominant culture. When it comes to Marguerite, the underlying world view attached to language will prove to be problematic for her as a marginalized subject who is bound to make use of the language available to her. It is important to understand that this language lacks meaningfulness and correspondence with her own self, making the process of identification as an African American woman a real challenge. Even though language will work as her primary tool for construction and evolution, it will also contribute to her awareness of being a marginalized subject, consequently threatening to deny the importance and existence of her own self.

Through the creation of a feminist identity as well as an African American identity paired with the understanding of the unavoidable fragmentation of her sense of self and the comprehension that a certain sense of wholeness is still possible, Marguerite is able to successfully carry out a process of coming-of-age which grants her the opportunity, denied to the women before

her, of breaking free from the margins while renegotiating her own position inside her community and in her life. However, it is still important to bear in mind the fact that this long process is carried through language, and this language cannot be separated from the pre-existing ideologies it brings with it, being this one of the main difficulties faced by Marguerite.

### **LANGUAGE'S HIDDEN IDEOLOGY**

Language is not only a tool but most importantly a social phenomenon that embodies the process of communication among individuals inside a community. Words are, therefore, the first tool to be used in the communication of different thoughts as well as meanings, social realities and personal identities. Communication, according to Kathryn A. Woolard and Bambi B. Schieffelin in “Language Ideology”, “works as a social process” that must be understood to be culturally bound (55-56). The fact that language and communication depend on culture brings to light the understanding that certain social realities get inscribed into language while others are left aside. Language has an ideological aspect that must be handled carefully since “such ideologies envision and enact links of language to group and personal identity” (Woolard & Schieffelin 56). With such insight, it is possible to understand that the ideologies that get inscribed into language are those that belong to the dominant culture. In such a way, dominant individuals exercise power over powerless individuals, marginalizing them from society and making their process of communication, understanding and construction through language a difficult one. Since the powerful individuals are the ones who marginalize the ones who lack power, social domination becomes legitimized. What is even more problematic is the fact that powerless individuals who wish to construct a sense of selfhood must deal with the difficulty of speaking a language that does not represent them. In such a way, it is possible to understand that certain power relationships are enacted through language, as Bonnie Urciuoli explains in “Language and Borders” by asserting that “[i]n minority language situations ... hegemonic relations are reconstituted even through the minority language” (535). In this fashion, by trying to speak a language that does not represent the protagonist as part of a minority, Marguerite re-asserts the hegemony of the dominant culture over herself and her community. Language becomes a double-edged tool, in which communication could easily evolve into self-destruction for the marginalized subject, a topic that will be revised thoroughly taking into account the experiences lived by Marguerite, in her early years.

The construction of a marginalized self through language (re)presents the challenge of going beyond the ideology present in language. The main difficulty faced by Marguerite is related to the

lack of comprehension of the subtleties, or hidden ideologies, which can be found in her own language. An example of one of the many difficulties she faces is the important presence of religious language due to her grandmother. Religious language proves to be rather incomprehensible for her at times especially during the first period of her life in Stamps, in which Marguerite's language is plagued by references to God (8). Her perception of language, however, suffers its first transformation with her return from St. Louis, after having been victim of a traumatic event. Marguerite, then, understands that language offers her no protection for even if she prayed and talked about God at all times, she would have still been victim of rape (72). Being aware of the problematic nature of language, the need for alternatives arises as a crucial stage towards the construction of a sense of self. The options she has are by no means easy, for even though Marguerite already has what is needed to start the process, the question of how to achieve the development of her own sense of self using a double-edged tool still remains as a problem. She must, therefore, find her own, unique way of breaking through language and be able to construct her sense of self.

The first difficulty encountered by Marguerite is how to challenge the dominant ideology. The fact that society does not preoccupy itself specifically with women's needs, forcing and relegating them into silence is one of the main difficulties that the protagonist, as well as other women, suffers. The act of being silenced is something that Marguerite fights against repeatedly through the novel since, as Susan Ehrlich and Ruth King explain in "Feminist Meanings and the (De)Politization of the Lexicon," only one "particular vision of social reality gets inscribed in language – a vision of reality that does not serve all of its speakers equally ... [therefore] language is seen as serving the interests of the dominant classes" (59). In such a way, since language is used to talk about and describe the lives and needs of the ones who belong to the dominant classes only, the place of women, especially of black women, in society is consequently transformed into a 'nowhere', a place of silence in which words lack meaning and purpose. It should still be considered that black women suffer from a different kind of marginalization than their white peers, because even though upper class white women might still suffer from sexism, they have white privilege. The acknowledgment of such disadvantages might be seen as problematic but it also holds a positive side, because recognizing the problem will initiate in her a process described by Woolard and Schieffelin as consisting of a struggle among different conceptualizations that the individual has within himself or herself, as well as inside his or her own community (71). By searching for more appropriate ways to accomplish her mission of constructing her identity as a young woman,

Marguerite will be able to represent herself as an individual who does not feel identified with the dominant ideology, breaking through language and being able to start defining herself in terms of who she really is and not in terms of who she should be.

### **THE CONSTRUCTION OF A FEMINIST IDENTITY**

Marguerite's construction of identity as a woman will be seen as consisting of five different stages that represent her progressive understanding of her position in the world as a young woman. As Nancy E. Downing and Kristin L. Roush propose, these steps constitute the process of constructing a feminist identity and are categorized as such: passive acceptance, revelation, embeddedness-emanation, synthesis and active commitment. It is important to notice that the two middle stages are the most relevant for understanding Marguerite's construction of a female identity. Passive acceptance is defined by Downing and Roush as the stage in which "a woman is unaware of the cultural, instrumental and individual discrimination against her based on her sex" and thus is unaware of the injustices she suffers (quoted in Erchull et al 832). I would like to argue that Marguerite is already past this experience, because she already is on the search for a sense of self. The authors also argue that this stage leads women at a given point "to question her acceptance of the patriarchal system" and as such, they start trying to find ways of defying the dominant ideology (Downing and Roush quoted in Erchull et al 832). Marguerite, by understanding the injustices she suffers as an oppressed woman and as a victim of sexism, will set herself to find ways to make herself free. It could be argued that Marguerite skips the revelation stage, which is mainly characterized by a sudden "anger, and hatred towards men", and instead she goes directly towards the embeddedness-emanation stage where "she seeks to remove herself from the dominant patriarchal culture" since in the narration it is impossible to find any clue that could lead us to think that she, indeed, hates men (Downing and Roush quoted in Erchull et al 833). Therefore, Marguerite starts the construction of her feminist identity in the stage in which she is already trying to set herself free from the dominant culture.

The protagonist starts the process of removing herself from patriarchy by a method which consists of two different modalities; first, without words and second using language again. In the second stage Marguerite will first fail and then succeed and continue to use language to construct her identity. Her first decision of trying to stay away from language could be seen as a direct avoidance of the dominant ideology present in language. When first trying to define herself without the use of words, one of the central ways of doing so for Marguerite has to do with role models because they

offer examples of behavior with which she can identify. In this case, Marguerite will take as role models the most prominent female figures present in her life in an attempt to draw conclusions and understand the meaning of being a woman. The most prominent female figures in her life are her grandmother Momma, her mother Vivian, and Mrs. Flowers, a neighbor for whom Marguerite feels admiration. Although it might seem as if Marguerite truly shapes her world around these figures, what she really does is ponder on how much of any of them she has in herself. Upon understanding that these three women are defined in terms of some sort of beauty or power, two characteristics she does not have herself, she senses the difficulty this type of definition will bring to her. Marguerite reflects about how “[p]eople spoke of Momma as [having been] a good-looking woman”, and how even though her beloved grandmother does not possess those characteristics anymore, she still saw “power and strength” in her (45). In the same fashion, her mother was described as being “too beautiful to have children” (58). Even Mrs. Flowers is described by Marguerite as a kind woman, one of the characteristics Marguerite appreciated the most in her as well as her condition of being “the aristocrat of Black Stamps” (90). The reason why role models become problematic for Marguerite is that, even though she can admire some of the characteristics she sees in Momma, Vivian or Mrs. Flowers, the re-creation of their images does not help her to remove herself from the patriarchal society since these three women still belong to it. Therefore, Marguerite must find her own path as an individual and tries, instead, to define herself through words.

The first difficulty she encounters in this process is that of being silenced: when she tries to define herself through language, she is immediately silenced, which makes her go back to the first stage in which she did not use words. Upon arriving to St. Louis, Marguerite meets her mother’s boyfriend, Mr. Freeman. Even though Marguerite does not see the man as threatening, the young girl finds herself trapped in a confusing sequence of events. Mr. Freeman touches Marguerite, and Marguerite, innocently believing that it was love, quickly developed a sense of pity for the man, “feeling lonely for Mr. Freeman and the encasement in his big arms” (73). Later on, Mr. Freeman takes advantage of these conflicting thoughts to rape Marguerite. This situation, apart from inflicting a trauma on the young girl, also signals the first time she is confronted with the powerlessness that presupposes not being able to speak up or to tell her version of reality. At first, Mr. Freeman coerces her to stay silent by threatening her and saying that “[i]f [she told] anybody what [they had done], [he would] have to kill Bailey” (72). Marguerite feels scared and confused, unable to understand the meaning behind those words as she asks herself what was that “[they had] done,” reaching the conclusion that Mr. Freeman “[o]bviously [could not] mean [her] peeing in the bed” (72). For

Marguerite this entire situation means being trapped inside a lie which she is forced to see as the truth. Even in court, when Marguerite is asked whether Mr. Freeman had touched her before, she is unable to tell the truth, because she feels that what she felt was wrong, and that it was her fault (82). When the rape incident comes to light she naively thinks that saying the truth will save her, but Mr. Freeman's lawyer embodies the violence used by the dominant culture on people that are oppressed. He stares mockingly at Marguerite and laughs at her difficulty at remembering the clothes Mr. Freeman had been using when he had raped her and cruelly asks her whether she knew she had been raped or not (81). As a consequence of this incident, Marguerite decides that the best way of surviving is by staying silent (84-85). This silence differs from the one previously experienced, in which Mr. Freeman had coerced her to stay silent, because it is a self-imposed one which brings with itself the sense of being able to do something out of her own volition. It is not surprising, however, that the first time she decides for herself she is punished for it. After some time has passed and the rape incident has been somewhat forgotten, Marguerite still refuses to speak again, and she narrates her family's reaction "[w]hen [she] refused to be the child they [had known] and [had] accepted [her] to be" and how she was deemed "impudent and [her] muteness sullenness" (85). For the first time, Marguerite fights back and refuses to do as she is told, a way she believes will help her to defy the dominant ideology by stepping away from language, and its reach. After being raped, Marguerite understands that the world as she knows it has disappeared, and therefore, the language she had previously used to describe her reality is even less accurate now. Through her silence, Marguerite also forces her family, who dismiss her experience as unimportant, to "listen" to her lack of words, becoming an uncomfortable presence impossible to ignore, because "[she] walked into rooms where people were laughing, their voices hitting the walls like stones, and [she] simply stood still—in the midst of the riot of sound. After a minute or two, silence would rush into the room from its hiding place because [she] had eaten up all the sounds" (85). Having been exposed to the threats of language, Marguerite feels unsure about how to proceed, but luckily her return to Stamps and her encounter with Mrs. Flowers changes the course of events, pushing her to return to language, which signals the beginning of the second part of the process of constructing her sense of self.

The process of going back to language is started by Marguerite's return to Stamps and her self-imposed silence that, even though ignored by most, is not ignored by Mrs. Flowers. Mrs. Flowers, one of the women she always admired in Stamps, invites her to her house and the girl, surprised by the kindness of the woman, gladly accepts her invitation. Mrs. Flowers' intentions are made evident by confronting Marguerite and saying to her that "[n]o one [was] going to make [her]



talk ... [because] no one [could]" (95). This reference to Marguerite's self-imposed silence signals what Woolard and Schieffelin understand as being the "paradoxical potential" of silence, in which the lack of words, depending on the purpose behind it, can carry some sort of power (60).

Marguerite's silence at first had meant safety, but as her silence took over her and began having an impact on her family, it became a not only a source of power, but also a confirmation that she finally had found a way to acquire power through the lack of language. Once the young girl goes back to Stamps the power of her silence diminishes, the people she affected with it being out of reach. It is in this instance, therefore, that the need for language arises again and it is not by chance that the one person to explain to Marguerite the crucial quality present in language is Mrs. Flowers. At this point, the woman does not come to the girl as a role model, but rather as a messenger. Mrs. Flowers, praising Marguerite's intelligence, seems concerned about her lack of speech and proceeds to gently explain to her that "language is man's way of communicating with his fellow man and it is language alone which separates him from the lower animals" (95). Her following advice might be what finally encourages Marguerite to speak up again: "Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning" (95). The acknowledgment of human voice, of sound itself, being the vehicle towards a new understanding of life is what makes Marguerite realize that language, as a mirror of reality, changes once a new understanding of the world is created. If she decides to create her own sense of reality, language should accompany her and provide words to define her world, her wishes and her identity. This understanding is what sparks in Marguerite the desire to start trying to define herself again, to abandon silence and to trust language as a vehicle through which meaning can be changed, altered and reconstructed.

Marguerite approaches the construction of a new reality still taking into account her old notion of role models, but this time, she sets to look up to people or things she believes are more similar to her than Momma, Vivian and Mrs. Flowers are. In her attempt to evolve into the person she desires to be, the girl needs to find new role models to look up to, while also trying not to abandon the use of words. Marguerite, therefore, uses language to understand new role models in order to construct a sense of self. Her new and most important role models are Louise – her best friend – and curiously enough, not a person but a personified city, San Francisco. The importance of Louise lies not only in the fact that she is Marguerite's first friend, but also in the fact that she is a girl of her age. Louise, thus, represents what a girl their age should be, something foreign to Marguerite due to the events she has gone through. Marguerite heavily relies on Louise for things

that should be simple to a girl of her age such as replying to a boy's love message. For her, it seems as if Louise is fluent in a language she should be able to comprehend by now, but cannot truly grasp yet. Tommy is the boy who wishes to be Marguerite's valentine and the witty girl finds herself at a loss of words to answer the message he sends her:

Dear Friend, M.J.  
Times are hard and friends are few  
I take great pleasure in writing you  
Will you be my Valentine? (139)

She does not comprehend what she thinks is the underlying meaning of the message Tommy sent her, and decides to go to Louise for help. The answer the girl gives to Marguerite does not seem to explain what she wants to understand, for after the short answer given by Louise, "Looks like he wants you to be his valentine", Marguerite questions her further, looking for a different answer (140). Louise, upon finally comprehending that Marguerite does not understand the purpose behind writing such a note, answers her friend's question dismissively by adding that what Tommy wants is to be "[her] valentine, [her] love" (140). Through this answer, Marguerite learns that Louise is not a correct role model for her, because her understanding of Tommy's love note signals that she, as well as the others, has not started the process of constructing a feminist identity, and thus, Louise is unable to help her. In such a way, these two young girls are separated by different world views, one still not understanding the threats and ideologies behind language, while the other fights to impose her own configuration of reality. Even though they are the same age, Marguerite understands they have gone through diverse experiences that have shaped them in different ways.

Marguerite finally discovers a new role model, one that will offer her the freedom and understanding she needs. This final role model, which curiously enough is not a woman, not even a person, but a city, is a crucial point in the construction of a sense of self as a young woman because the city, free from constraints and willing to take any vision of reality, represents not only a role model but also a space of construction for her identity. Marguerite desires to be like San Francisco, "[f]riendly but never gushing, cool but not frigid or distant, distinguished without the awful stiffness" (206). The city also represents the starting point for her journey, the place from which she moves forward, physically and mentally, towards a new sense of self and into the next stage of constructing her identity as a young woman, which will be synthesis. Synthesis, according to Downing and Roush comprises a process in which Marguerite will join her identity as a woman with her identity as a person beyond gender, and will therefore develop values that belong to her alone

instead of values that characterize certain groups of people such as women or black people (quoted in Erchull et al 833). Downing and Rouse also explain that through this process the relationship with men in general improves because they are evaluated by women in terms of individuals, rather than as being part of a group of oppressors (quoted in Erchull et al 833). Marguerite, by identifying herself with San Francisco, can see herself as being similar to the city, being able to internalize some of San Francisco's characteristics. She acknowledges how she has become "dauntless and free of fears, intoxicated by the physical fact of San Francisco", and, in a way, understand that the power the city exerts over her, she can exert over the city as well (206-207). Marguerite reaches a sense of security with the understanding that the city welcomes her to create her own appreciation of reality while at the same time embraces her into society. With the comprehension that she and the city are equals, San Francisco stops being a role model and becomes a companion. Marguerite realizes that human role models, even though helpful at the beginning, were not going to lead her to success in the end, simply because her own sense of self could not be translated into a fixed set of characteristics which belonged to someone else. She also understands that who she is cannot be equated with someone else's identity, being impossible to construct her own sense of self through the understanding of other women. By reaching the synthesis stage, Marguerite has finally evolved into the person she desires to be and even though "[she has] given up some youth for knowledge (...) [her] gain [is] more valuable than the loss" (248). She "[concerns herself] less about everything and everyone" (Angelou 249), because her own sense of self is more important and occupies a more significant place in her life. Synthesis also presupposes "being [reintegrated] to the dominant culture" with the understanding that now she is no longer part of the oppressed minority, because her awareness has separated her from them (Downing and Roush quoted in Erchull 833). In such a way, the city, as her final role model, has aided Marguerite to construct a sense of self and to reintegrate herself, and her new world view, into society.

The fact that Marguerite decides for herself that she wishes to explore sexuality is a further proof of the synthesis stage because she is the one who is in control now. Marguerite chooses her partner and the right moment for the act and even though it would seem that after all her struggle she has failed to herself this is not the case. The reasons she has for such an action show how wrong such a supposition is because the act of openly approaching a man with sexual intentions does not seem to her like a regression, but rather like a proof of her own power. Marguerite is amazed at how the man she chooses thinks he is taking something from her because "[e]ven as the scene was being enacted [she realizes] the imbalance in his values" and the fact that "[h]e thought [she] was giving

him something” whereas in reality “it was [her] intention to take something from him” (274). Marguerite is not at all thinking about her virginity in this passage, but rather about how men seem to think they are so powerful that no one could take something from them. As far as Marguerite is concerned, the power relation has been subdued, her being the one in control. In this fashion, the young woman is changing the course of events, having evolved while still understanding that constructing her identity as a woman is a never ending process, and even though it may be seen as a plea bargain it is the first small step for a whole change in her own life.

### **THE CONSTRUCTION OF AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN IDENTITY**

Throughout the novel, race is also a key factor in Marguerite’s understanding of her identity. The young girl also goes through different stages to achieve a sense of blackness and such stages will be referred to as rejection, comprehension and the final acceptance of what her color means for her. Although Marguerite rejects her blackness by desiring to be white, it could be argued that this longing springs more from a sense of detachment from her own peers than from a real desire to give up her blackness. To prove this point further, it can be observed that her desire for whiteness is plagued with contradictions. Marguerite acknowledges she never thought of white people as real people, a crucial aspect that would prove her desire not a real one, because she believes that “[p]eople were those who lived on [her] side of town”, and everyone outside of it was not considered a real human being (25). Power is also a crucial point to understand Marguerite’s rejection of her blackness. Marguerite’s new found sense of security signals a certain degree of power, at least inside her community. Outside her community, and when confronted with white people, she feels diminished, feeling like “explorers walking without weapons into man-eating animals’ territory” when going to ‘whitefolksville’ (24). To become truthfully powerful, Marguerite first needs to go through the understanding of what her color means for her, because this is the only way in which she will truly comprehend the importance of being a black woman.

The stage of comprehension is not only concerned with simple understanding since it also means that through understanding she will reclaim her position in the world and will learn to stand up for herself. According to Regina Blackburn, the act of speaking up is a crucial aspect towards attaining a sense of identity especially in the case of colored people because through language they are able to communicate what the white world has done to them (134). Blackburn also proposes that every person of color has gone through a moment which evokes “an awareness of their blackness and of its significance”, being this moment crucial in the understanding and possible acceptance of

their blackness (134). With regards to Marguerite's awareness of her color, one of the most essential experiences she goes through is related to the incident in which Mrs. Cullinan, the woman for whom she works, tries to rename her. Mrs. Cullinan, taking into account her friend's advice, who says that "[Marguerite's] name [was] too long [and that she would] never bother [herself] to utter it completely", decides to rename Marguerite as 'Mary' (104). The decision affects Marguerite deeply for, even though she had been called different names throughout her life depending on the occasion, no one had ever arbitrarily given her a different name. As Marguerite narrates, every person she had ever known "had a hellish horror of being 'called out of his name,'" because "[i]t was a dangerous practice to call a Negro anything" that could be insulting for them, as well as the fact of having a name that did not represent who one was (106). The decision to leave her job proves that the fact that remaining at Mrs. Cullinan's house would mean, for Marguerite, to remain as Mary, being trapped in an unfitting new name as a complete stranger. By refusing to be someone she is not, the Marguerite also leaves in the past her longing for whiteness. In such a way, after having understood that blackness cannot be replaced by whiteness because it means something special for her, Marguerite moves on to the final stage in this process.

Marguerite's decision to embrace her color and race strikes her not only as something necessary, but also as the final act of constructing her sense of self. At the same time, the solution to embrace her color has to do with Blackburn's suggestion that women trying to define themselves should unify their identities by merging into one both their public and private images, or in other words, to go back to the community (136). Marguerite, then, goes back to the community, searching for a sense of belonging. The progression of feeling part of something bigger could be divided into two crucial episodes. The first one is concerned with the boxing match that Marguerite and her community listen to on the radio in which Joe Luis, a black man, becomes champion of the world, and the second one has to do with her graduation day. During the first episode, Marguerite seems restless by the fact that a black man is in the boxing ring, fighting to win. She finds herself suddenly interested, as well as everyone else, in the match. The abrupt understanding that this black man represents all of them is what makes her restless. Marguerite understands that he has to win, for if he loses, it will mean a great deterioration in the way white people treat them as well as in their self-images as African American people and in their self-esteem. The young girl firmly believes that if the man does not win, it will be like being "back in slavery and beyond help" (131). She even believes that it could serve to confirm "the accusations that [they] were [a] lower type of human beings" (131). When the black man wins, she understands the difference it means that "[a] black boy

... [s]ome Black mother's son", is the champion of the world, for it means that they can be champions of the world too (132). This episode represents the struggle her race has gone through, while also reminding them of the path they still have to cover. The second phase, graduation, comes after this important event, evoking a rebirth cycle. At first, Marguerite is full of hope because of the bright future that lays ahead of her but after a white man, Mr. Edward Donleavy, unexpectedly comes to give a speech about their future, all her hopes die. The man does not seem to understand that telling these girls and boys that they are only meant to have lower types of jobs means to destroy their dreams. Marguerite believes that all she has ever dreamed about, education and a better future, will not come true and life, momentarily, loses all its meaning. For her, it seems that every encouragement she had ever received had been a cruel joke, her sense of control over her life dissolving into thin air. The proud graduating class, as well as Marguerite, suffers, for now they understand they are only meant to be "maids and farmers, handymen and washerwomen" (176). Since this process is seen as a rebirth cycle, Marguerite's hopes are renewed again, allowed to float freely around her once more. After Mr. Donleavy leaves and Henry Reed steps into the stage to read his speech, Marguerite's body seems to be empty. She listens, from far away, to her classmate's words and suddenly comes to her senses as she realizes that, unexpectedly, he has stopped reciting his speech and has surprisingly started to recite the Negro Anthem. Marguerite admits that she had always sung it out of habit, but had "[n]ever heard the words (...) [n]ever thought they had anything to do with [her]", being surprised and rejoiced by the acknowledgment of how the anthem is key to the understanding of blackness through a new light (179). She feels part of the community now, part of everything they have endured together, as well as everything their ancestors endured before them. Graduation serves as the final stage in which the young woman embraces her blackness and adds it to her sense of womanhood.

Marguerite understands that coming this far is a miracle in all its magnificence because "[t]he fact that the adult American Negro female emerges as formidable character is often met with amazement ... [and] seldom accepted as an inevitable outcome of the struggle won by survivors and deserves respect if not enthusiastic acceptance" (Angelou, 265). This enthusiastic acceptance comes not only from other people, but from within herself as she accepts her blackness not as a defect, as she had thought about it during childhood, but rather as a powerful trait. Marguerite understands that she is not only a black woman "member of the proud graduating class of 1940," but also a part of what she acknowledges to be "the wonderful beautiful Negro race" (179). By arriving at the evolution stage, the girl realizes that even though her community is not free yet, language is their

ally. Language might serve those who try to silence them, but they, as a community, can still sing and speak up while trying to defy the ideologies behind language.

### **DEALING WITH MULTIPLE SELVES**

One of the most important struggles experienced by Marguerite is the act of trying to go beyond language and its ideologies. However, such process may bring into existence the complexity of dealing with a multiplicity of selves which develops as a consequence of creating different identities for different contexts. To comprehend and approach the intricacy present in Marguerite's multiplicity of selves, two crucial aspects must be considered. First, there is a way in which human beings make sense of the world and of others and this may affect their construction of a sense of self, and second is the dilemma of the fragmentation of the self. Human beings make sense of things by interacting not only with the world, but also with other people, being the process of sense making highly interactive as well as contextual due to its dependence on the context in which such interaction takes place (Linell 12). For Marguerite, relationships in general, and family relationship in particular, shape her understanding of herself from a very early age. In one particular occasion in which Marguerite is attending customers at the Store, she describes how she has come to be very accurate at measuring and selling flour and sugar among other goods, and how whenever she does a good job she is praised by the customers (15). The girl also continues to describe how customers comment on Sister Henderson having smart grandchildren (15). This description of her represents that she is seen, in this particular case, not only as a granddaughter, but also as conforming to an indivisible unit with Bailey, her brother. The customers do not praise her own intelligence as an individual but rather as the intelligence shared between the two siblings. Nevertheless, the costumers still recognize her as an individual capable of doing a good job, which makes Marguerite proud of herself (15). Such incident may confirm the importance of the 'other' in the construction of a self-image because it could mean that any self representation is bound to be linked to how others see a certain subject and how this seeing shapes part of their identity. In the same way in which the Store's customers perceive Marguerite, different people have different perceptions of her and the characteristics she possesses, being these perceptions crucial in the understanding Marguerite has of herself.

Every time Marguerite interacts with someone, this person may become 'the other' to whom Marguerite means something in particular. This means that in each interaction, the young girl creates a different self image to adjust herself to the context. Therefore, each interaction results in a

different self image which provokes a multiplicity of selves. In such a way, the young girl is seen as a sister, a daughter and a granddaughter while still being a student and, for a short period of time, a working woman without creating a real conflict on her since each self image can exist on its own without depending on the others. For example, there exist countless occasions in which Marguerite sees herself in terms of Bailey's image, even in something as personal as her nickname Maya, which was given to her when Bailey starts calling her 'My' for 'My sister' and which later on evolved into Maya (66). Even though Bailey is an important figure in her life, this self-image, as well as the other ones, stands on its own, which represents that she is still seen as a separate individual. Such an occasion is depicted when Mrs. Flowers invites Marguerite to her house, which makes the girl realize that at last "[she is] liked" and that "[she is] respected not as Mrs. Henderson's grandchild or Bailey's sister but for just being Marguerite Johnson" (98). In this fashion, Marguerite evidences an understanding of how even though she is sometimes perceived as conforming a unit with her brother, she is also seen as being an individual, providing the first view into what having at least more than one self-images is like. The existence of these images represent the fragmentation of the self, since there does not exist a unique image that represents her as a whole.

It should be considered that the fragmentation process is a fairly normal occurrence. According to Katherine P. Ewing in "The Illusion of Wholeness: Culture, Self and the Experience of Inconsistency", it is possible for subjects to be unaware of their lack of unity and to even experience a sense of wholeness instead of a sense of fragmentation (251). The possibility of wholeness may be seen in Marguerite in terms of her mental image of herself, since whenever she interacts with people, she is aware of one position only, which is the one present in each particular moment of interaction. Ewing names this set of characteristics present in each interaction 'frames of reference' since in each interaction with others or with oneself, people have in mind just one image of themselves which provides a coherent background for the self image that is currently being enacted (215). In such a way, it is possible to talk about a multiplicity of self images, or as Roxanne J. Fand in the introduction to *The Dialogic Self* explains, a multiplicity of positions the subject assumes due to the possibility of there being as many selves as 'I' positions that the self assumes (27). Thus, the main problem lies in how all these different positions can be seen as belonging to the same subject. At the same time, the unity of each self-image or position taken by the subject is possible in an apparent way only, since the unity is experienced whenever individuals are not considering several frames of references simultaneously (251). Therefore the problematic of fragmentation remains with a possible and yet not definite solution, since even though Marguerite's identity remains wholesome



in each separate occasion, as a continuum it is still fragmented. One passage that exemplifies the shift and coexistence of self images is seen when Marguerite travels with Momma and Bailey to California and she sees Vivian and Momma embrace for the first time (196). The girl describes how the image has such an impact on her that it “has been darkly retained through the coating of embarrassment and the now maturity” (196). In such passage it is possible to appreciate how two self images collide into each other. Marguerite recognizes both her grandmother, who acted more as a mother figure than as a grandmother, and her own mother. By being both daughter and granddaughter at the same time it is possible to observe a possible coexistence of her multiple self-images and, in a way, confirm the on-going fragmentation process.

Regarding frames of references, the one that has a paramount importance for Marguerite is related to family relationships and has to do with her status as Bailey’s sister. She spends all her early childhood by Bailey’s side, not only enjoying his company and protection, but also seeing the world through his eyes. The girl acknowledges that her brother “was the greatest person in [her] world” and it is possible to find several times in which she narrates from a perspective that belongs both to her and Bailey, such as the episode in which Marguerite explains the hate they both feel for Reverend Howard Thomas. This episode exemplifies the union she has with her brother, because even though they hate him for different reasons, such as the Reverend’s refusal to shake Bailey’s hand and acknowledge him as a man and the insistence of the man in hugging Marguerite, “[they] hated him unreservedly” (33). In such a way, they belong together as siblings, something that makes it possible for her to recognize her place in this particular frame of reference.

The appearance of different frames of reference is accompanied by a restructuration process and a change in self image for Marguerite who, up to that point, was not familiar with such experience. The first time a restructuration process takes place, the young girl and her brother learn that their parents had sent them gifts for Christmas (50). Even though Marguerite and Bailey do not drift apart after this episode and Marguerite does not lose her status as Bailey’s sister, she does change because she accepts the fact that her parents are alive, even though she “had been confident that they were both dead” (50). The sudden intrusion of her parents in her life represents not only a change in the frame of reference, but also the creation of a new frame. Marguerite had never seen herself as a daughter, but now that she has acknowledged that she is one, she must find a way to act as one. She does not even remember her parents’ faces, and thus, feels uneasy at the discovery of their existence, especially a year later, when their father appears at the Store and Marguerite describes not only how strange it is to have the fantasies she has elaborated about him suddenly

gone, but also the understanding that she is alone in such feeling (52). This is further supported by the fact that, in the very beginning of her relationship to Mr. Freeman, her mother's boyfriend and the man who sexually abused and later raped her, she thought about it as something similar to a father-daughter relationship (71). For Marguerite it is never clear what Mr. Freeman represents for her and she even believed that he "was probably [her] real father and [that they] had found each other at last" (71). In a way, Marguerite's confusion lies in the lack of a proper frame of reference of what mothers and fathers should be like. Thus; her construction of self-image as a daughter is ill-shaped.

As Marguerite continues to progress through life, the frame of reference of being Bailey's sister will gradually decrease its importance and allow her to find other, more prominent self-images, which even though are not necessarily related to family relationships will be a means for her evolution process. Among these different frames, the frame of reference of being a friend is one that is truly important for Marguerite because it signals a meaningful connection with someone outside her family. This prompts Marguerite to feel not only a sense of sharing with someone else but also of seeing herself in a different light. Marguerite's first friend is Louise, a girl from Stamps whose mother lives in an economically reduced situation and yet is very respectful and educated (136). Both girls become friends after sharing an afternoon together and observing the sky and later on teaching one another to speak code languages (138). The importance of Louise as Marguerite's first friend lies in the fact that, for the first time, Marguerite is able to share her doubts, secrets and opinions with someone other than Bailey, something which up to that point has never happened to her. Up to this point, Bailey had always been her hero but not someone who necessarily resembled a best friend. Therefore, Louise's friendship represents a space in which Marguerite can grow up in different ways.

Suddenly enough Marguerite is given an opportunity to understand the importance these two main frames of reference have for her when she has to leave Stamps behind. The girl acknowledges that her "sorrow at leaving [Stamps] was confined to a gloom at separating from Bailey for a month" since they had never been parted and "the loss of Louise, [her] first friend" (195). It is possible to argue that perhaps the sorrow gives Marguerite the opportunity to make a revision of who she has been up to that point and the things she wants. To leave these two people behind also means to step into the unknown. The separation from Bailey and Louise is made even more dreadful by the knowledge that she has to leave behind everything that was once familiar for her and to work in frames of reference that still feel foreign to her. She understands that she is not only going to

California and to “oranges and sunshine and movie stars and earthquakes” but she is also going back to her own mother and to a frame of reference with which she does not feel comfortable.

It is quite clear that one of the most problematic frames of references for Marguerite is that of being a daughter. Through living with her mother, and later on visiting her father for some time, Marguerite is given the opportunity to work on this frame of reference, only to discover that she keeps comparing her parents with Momma’s image. Marguerite says that she and Bailey “went to school and no family member questioned the output or quality of [their work]” and that “[o]n Sundays instead of going to church [they] went to the movies” (199). Such differences represent the confirmation that she is not with Momma anymore, and that the frame of reference has changed due to a change in context. Even though Marguerite has trouble with the frame of reference of being a daughter, her arrival to California is meaningful because it is the starting point for a set of meaningful experiences which further fragments Marguerite’s sense of self. Thus, this frame of reference, even though conflicting for her, in the end signals the beginning of a new stage in her development process.

The next stage in this process begins after Marguerite’s arrival to California, when the girl goes to visit her father. After a trip to Mexico, Marguerite and her father arrive at the house Bailey Sr. shares with his new girlfriend Dolores (236). The experience is not at all what she expected, and after having a discussion with Dolores, her father decides that it would be better if Marguerite stayed with some of his friends (242). Marguerite decides that after everything she has been through, it would be better to leave, and taking very few possessions she initiates herself into the world of the unknown by deciding not to return to her father or mother (244). She decides to spend the night in an abandoned car in a yard, and this decision leads her to be part of the group of boys and girls who live there as well, and who accept her as part of the group (246). The experience brings to her another frame of reference, but this time, it is a frame that has to do with herself only and with the way in which she has started to see the world differently. The girl acknowledges that during the time she spends at the yard “[she] learned to drive (one boy’s older brother owned a car that moved), to curse and to dance”, that is to say, she becomes familiar with different types of relationships and actions that had been foreign to her up to that point (246). She believes that this part of herself will bring her closer to her pals, only to discover that this experience only makes her even more different than her pals. Her multiplicity of selves is incremented by understanding that, after going back to school, she cannot recognize her peers or classmates as friends, being unable to connect to them through the frame of reference of friendship. At the same time, she also understands that the

distance between her and them is further confirmed by the interests and experiences her classmates have, which are completely different from hers. She compares herself to them and understands that while they were concerned and excited over the approaching football games, “[she] had in [her] immediate past raced a car down a dark and foreign Mexican mountain. They concentrated great interest on who was worthy of being student body president, and when the metal bands would be removed from their teeth, while [she] remembered sleeping for a month in a wrecked automobile and conducting a streetcar in the uneven hours of the morning.” (263)

Marguerite, even though disappointed, has to acknowledge that she has not only changed but also evolved into a more mature woman, something that clearly sets her apart from her classmates.

The final stage Marguerite goes through in order to achieve a sense of unity is a stage in which she embraces her multiplicity of selves. Marguerite needs to accept multiplicity as a byproduct of her evolution and understand that to accomplish a sense of unity, she does not necessarily need to have in mind every single experience she has gone through throughout her whole life, but rather, to bear in mind only certain representative memories. These representative memories equate to what Ewing refers to as a “symbolic framework” or a kind of summary of a subject’s identity through the consideration of various memories and experiences (Ewing 267). It is through this framework that an individual may come to terms with his or her own self-image as well as the image others have of him or her. In Marguerite’s case these past memories help her to understand her own self-image as well as the multiplicity of it. Marguerite’s embrace of her multiplicity of selves could be most powerfully seen after she becomes pregnant and delivers the child. At first, she does not feel confident enough to think that she will take good care of her son, feeling clumsy in comparison with her confident mother (280). The embrace of her multiplicity might be equated with becoming convinced that even if she feels she will not be able to take care of the child she is still indeed capable being a good mother, something that Marguerite finally understands when her mother says to her that “[she didn’t] have to think about doing the right thing [because if she was] for the right thing, then [she would] do it without thinking” (281). In a way, being a mother means standing up and being brave enough to confront several fears she had dealt with since she was a child and acknowledging her present self as the result of her old, young and scared self. In a way, the important things is not really imitating her own mother or being as confident as she seems to be, but rather defying her own fears and going beyond them. In the end, Marguerite’s identity remains fragmented since she will continue to be recognized as granddaughter, daughter, sister or friend, but what is possible to achieve is a sense of wholeness, a sense that in each specific context she is still

herself (Ewing 273). As long as she stays truthful to who she is in any given situation, Marguerite will achieve a sense of wholeness that encompasses every aspect of her life.

In conclusion, and considering the analysis that has been done, it is possible to say that through the narration of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* the construction of a fluid self is given a crucial importance. One of the main reasons for this is that it embodies a possibility for the main character to construct a sense of self that embraces multiple positions and characteristics that represent her. At the same time, Marguerite restates her position in the world as a woman through the construction of a feminist identity and as an African American woman through the creation of an identity that represents her blackness, as well as the understanding of the fragmentation such construction implies. Simultaneously, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* functions as an example of what happens with contemporary autobiography and the importance of understanding the construction of the identity as a fluid process. These findings enhance the understanding of the instability of the self, as well as the constraints the creation of an identity may suffer as a consequence of the inequalities of power still present in our everyday society.

Such evidence is further supported by Marguerite's creation of a sense of self as a woman, which even though remains a never-ending process, gives her the power to decide for herself and fight against the inequalities she faces. Something similar happens in Marguerite's acceptance of her blackness where the girl arrives at the conclusion that even though language continues to hold a certain amount of power over her and her community it may be possible for them to defy the ideologies behind language if they refuse to be silenced and instead decide to work with language to rename and re-enter the world in the ways they deem more appropriate. In this fashion, after the construction process is completed, even if the fragmentation of the self becomes more evident, the fragmented approach gives to her the possibility of including every single aspect of herself in this process.

Marguerite, therefore, remains as the bird which once was inside the cage but never stopped singing. In a way, she now belongs to the open air where she can fly away while still taking as fuel for her journey the knowledge of why such a bird, which was once imprisoned, would continue to sing under such circumstances.

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