

## AN INTERVIEW WITH MAYA ANGELOU

*Carol E. Neubauer*

NEUBAUER: I see autobiography in general as a way for a writer to go back to her past and try to present what is left in memory but also to recover what has been lost through imagination and invention.

ANGELOU: Autobiography is for me a beloved which, like all beloveds, one is not given by family. One happens upon. You know, you turn the corner to the left instead of to the right. Stop in the parking lot and meet a beloved, or someone who becomes a beloved. And by the time I was half finished with *Caged Bird* I knew I loved the form—that I wanted to try to see what I could do with the form. Strangely enough, not as a cathartic force, not really; at any rate I never thought that really I was interested or am interested in autobiography for its recuperative power. I liked the form—the literary form—and by the time I started *Gather Together* I had gone back and reread Frederick Douglass' slave narrative. Anyway, I love the idea of the slave narrative, using the first person singular, really meaning always the third person plural. I love that. And I see it all the time in the black literature, in the blues and spirituals and the poetry, in essays James Baldwin uses it. But I've tried in each book to let the new voice come through and that's what makes it very difficult for me not to impose the voice of 1980 onto the voice I'm writing from 1950, possibly.

NEUBAUER: And so when you say you look for a new voice you don't mean the voice of the present or the time of writing the autobiographical account, but rather of that period of your past. That must be difficult.

ANGELOU: Very. Very difficult, but I think that in writing autobiography that that's what is necessary to really move it from almost an "as told to" to an "as remembered" state. And really for it to be a

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In February, Maya Angelou came to Bradley University to talk about Black American literature as part of the celebration of Black History Month. During her visit, I had the pleasure of discussing the art of autobiography with her and her progress on her new book.

## *Interview with Angelou*

creative and artistic literary art form. I believe I came close to recreating the voice in *Gather Together* of that young girl—eratic, sporadic, fractured. I think in each case I've come close. Rather a sassy person in *Singin' and Swingin'*.

NEUBAUER: It seemed that in *The Heart of a Woman*, either the voice was more complex or else there was more than one voice at work. There seemed to be the voice of that time in your life and yet another voice commenting on that time.

ANGELOU: It seems so, but I looked at that quite carefully and at the period I think it is the voice because I was really coming into a security about who I was and what I was about, but the security lasted sometimes for three or four days or maybe through a love affair or into a love affair or into a job. I think it would be like smoke in a room. It would just dissipate and I would suddenly be edgewalking again. I would be one of those children in the rye, playing very perilously close to the precipice and aware of it. I tried very hard for the voice. I remember the woman very well.

NEUBAUER: What I saw in *Heart of a Woman* was not so much that there were two voices talking against one another, but rather that a voice from a more recent time commented ironically on the predominant voice of that time in the past. The irony of you as the writer and the autobiographical presence coming through.

ANGELOU: It is really one of the most difficult. First, well, I don't know what comes first in that case. Whether it is the insistence to write well while trying to speak in a voice thirty years ago. I'm now writing a new book and trying to speak in that voice—the voice of 1963 and what I know about writing in 1984. It really is difficult.

NEUBAUER: Does it become more difficult the closer you get to the present?

ANGELOU: Yes, absolutely. Because by '63 my command of English was *almost* what it is today and I had been very much influenced by Vus Make. He had really influenced my thinking, and his English was exquisite. My reading in other languages also by that time had very much influenced my speaking and I was concerned about eloquence by 1960. So this book is really the most difficult and I've been ducking and dodging it too. I know this morning I should call my editor and tell him I have not forgotten him. He's very much on my mind and the work is very much on my mind. I don't know what I'm going to do when I finish this book. I *may* try to go back and pick up some of the incidents that I left out of maybe

*The Massachusetts Review*

*Caged Bird* or *Gather Together* or any of the books. I don't know how to do that.

NEUBAUER: Are you thinking of autobiography?

ANGELOU: Yes.

NEUBAUER: That's fascinating. One of the things I'm interested in particularly is how the present influences the autobiographical past. I think what you're engaged in doing now and have been since *Caged Bird* is something that's never been done before in this scope. Each volume of yours is a whole and has a unity that works for that volume alone. If you were to go back to the period of *Caged Bird* that would add another wrinkle in this question of time and different voices.

ANGELOU: I don't know how I will do it, and I don't know if I'll be able to do it. But I think there are facets. When I look at a stained glass window, it's very much like this book. I have an idea that the books are very much like the Everyman stories so that there is greed and kindness and generosity and cruelty, oppression, and sloth. And I think of the period I'm going to write about and I try to see which of the incidents in which greed, say it's green, which of these that happened to me during that period will most demonstrate that particular condition. Now some are more rich, but I refuse them. I do not select them because it's very hard to write drama without falling into melodrama. So the incidents I reject, I find myself unable to write about without becoming melodramatic. I just can't see how to write it. In *Gather Together* there is an incident in which a man almost killed me—tried to, in fact—and kept me for three days and he was a mad man, literally. My escape was so incredible, literally incredible, that there was no way to write it, absolutely, to make it credible and not melodramatic.

NEUBAUER: Have you ever chosen to take another incident in that case, perhaps one that might not have even happened, and use that as a substitute?

ANGELOU: No, because there are others which worked, which did happen, and which showed either cruelty or the irony of escape. So I was able to write that rather than the other.

NEUBAUER: I see, So you didn't have to sacrifice the core of the experience.

ANGELOU: No, I never sacrificed. It's just choosing which of those greens or which of those reds to make that kind of feeling.

## *Interview with Angelou*

NEUBAUER: It's a beautiful metaphor, the greens, the reds and the light coming through the window. Because in a sense, memory works that way; it filters out past work. And yet an autobiographer has a double task—at least double, probably triple or quadruple—in some ways the filtering has been done beyond your control on an unconscious level. But as a writer working in the present you, too, are making selections or choices, which complicate the experience.

ANGELOU: There is so much to talk to you about on this subject. I have, I think, due to all those years of not talking, which again, I chose to minimize in *Caged Bird* because it's hard to write that without, again, the melodramas leaking in. But because of those years of muteness, I think my memory was developed in queer ways, because I remember—I have total recall—or I have none at all. None. And there is no pattern to the memory, so that I would forget all the good and the bad of a certain time, or I will remember *only* the bad of a certain time, or I will remember *only* the good. But when I remember it, I will remember *everything* about it. *Everything*. The outside noises, the odors in the room, the way my clothes were feeling—everything. I just have it, or I remember nothing. I am sure that is a part of the sort of psychological problems I was having and how the memory went about its business knitting itself.

NEUBAUER: Almost as a treasure chest or a defense.

ANGELOU: Yes, both, I guess. But in a sense, not really a defense, because some of the marvelous things I've not remembered. For instance, one of the promises I've exacted from every lover or husband who promised to be a permanent fixture was that *if I die in the house, if something happened, get me outside. Please don't let me die in the room, or open the window and let me see some rolling hills. Let me see, please.* Now, my memory of Stamps, Arkansas, is flat, dirt, the trees around the pond. But everything just flat and mean. When I agreed to go to join Bill Moyers for his creativity program, I flew to Dallas and decided to drive to Stamps because I wanted to sneak up on Stamps. It's, I guess, 200 miles or more. When I drove out of Texas into Arkansas, Stamps is 30 miles from Texas. I began to see the undulating hills. I couldn't believe it! I couldn't believe it! It's beautiful! It's what I love. But the memory had completely gone.

## *The Massachusetts Review*

NEUBAUER: When you're working, for example, on your present book, are there things that help you remember that period or any period in the past better?

ANGELOU: Well, a curious thing has happened to me with every book. When I start to work—start to plan it—I encounter people whom I have known in that time, which is really queer. I've wondered if I would encounter them anyway, or if it's a case of "when the student is ready the teacher appears." If I simply wouldn't see their value if I would encounter them and wouldn't see their value for what I'm working on, because I wouldn't be working on that. That is one of the very interesting things. I'm working on Ghana now and this summer I went to London to write a play. I saw a sister friend there from Ghana and suddenly about fifteen Ghanaians; soon I was speaking Fanti again and they were reminding me, "Do you remember that time when?" and suddenly it all came right up my nostrils. But what I do is just pull myself away from everything and everybody and then begin the most frightening of the work. And that is going back. I'm always afraid I'll never come out. Every morning I wake up, usually about 5:30 and try to get to my work room. I keep a little room in a hotel. Nothing on the walls, nothing belonging to me, nothing. I go in and I try to be in by 6:30 and try to get back, get back. Always, for the first half hour is spent wondering if anybody cares for me enough to come and pull me out. Suppose I can't get out?

NEUBAUER: That's a difficult road to retrace—to find.

ANGELOU: Like an enchanted . . . I know that sounds romantic, but you know how I mean. But I do get back and I remember one thing and I think, "Yes, and what are the other things like that that happened?" And maybe a second one will come. It's all there. *All of it* is there.

NEUBAUER: Even down to the finest details and the dialogues, what you said to the people you were with.

ANGELOU: The sound of the voices. And I write wurrrrrrrrrrrrrrr.

NEUBAUER: How long do you write if you go in at 6:30?

ANGELOU: Well, I'm out by 12:30, unless it's really happening. If it's really happening I'll stay till 2:00, but no longer. No longer. And then get out and go home and shower and make a lovely lunch and drink a lot of wine and try to come down. Get back. Stop in a shop, "Hi, how are you? Fine. . . ." So I can ascertain that I do live and people remember me.

## *Interview with Angelou*

NEUBAUER: Do you leave it in the middle of an incident so that you have a way back, or do you write to the end of each one?

ANGELOU: No, I can't write to the end of the incident. I will write to a place that's safe. Nothing will leak away now; I've got it. Then at night I'll read it and try to edit it.

NEUBAUER: The same night?

ANGELOU: The same night. Try to edit it for writing, a little of it. And then begin again the next day. Lordy.

NEUBAUER: Is it a frightening journey because of the deep roots from that time to the present? Do you feel a kind of vulnerability?

ANGELOU: I am not afraid of the ties. I cherish them, rather. It's the vulnerability. It's like using drugs or something. It's allowing oneself to be hypnotized. That's frightening, because then we have no defenses, nothing. We've slipped down the well and every side is slippery. And how on earth are you going to come out? That's scary. But I've chosen it, and I've chosen this mode as my mode.

NEUBAUER: How far will the fifth volume go?

ANGELOU: Actually, it's a new kind. It's really quite a new voice. I'm looking at the black American resident, me and the other black American residents in Ghana, and trying to see all the magic of the eternal quest of human beings to go home again. That is maybe what life is anyway. To return to the Creator. All of that naïveté, the innocence of trying to. That awful rowing towards God, whatever it is. Whether it's to return to your village or the lover you lost or the youth that some people want to return to or the beauty that some want to return to.

NEUBAUER: Writing autobiography frequently involves this quest to return to the past, to the home. Sometimes, if the home can't be found, if it can't be located again, then that home or that love or that family, whatever has been lost, is recreated or invented.

ANGELOU: Yes, of course. That's it! That's what I'm seeing in this trek back to Africa. That in so many cases that idealized home of course is non-existent. In so many cases some black Americans created it on the spot. On the spot. And I did too. Created something, looked, seemed like what we have idealized very far from reality. It's going to be a painful, hard book to write, in that not only all the stuff that it cost me to write it, but there will be a number of people who will be disappointed. So I have to deal with that once the book is out. The main thing is getting it out.

*The Massachusetts Review*

NEUBAUER: Are their opinions becoming more and more of a consideration as you move closer to the present in your autobiographies?

ANGELOU: Yes, indeed, because in some cases I can't use names. When I use names I have to get permission from people who are alive. I called Vus Make just when I was about half way through *Heart of a Woman* and I told him. He lives in Darsalan now. And I said I'm writing a book in the time which you featured. So he said, "I will sign any permission. I will give any rights to you, for I know you will not lie. However, I am sure I shall disagree with your interpretation of the truth."

NEUBAUER: I know I speak for many in saying how much I am looking forward to your next book or your next "interpretation of the truth."