Reembodying the Self: Representations of Rape in "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl and I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings"
Author(s): Mary Vermillion
Source: Biography, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Summer 1992), pp. 243-260
Published by: University of Hawai'i Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/23539450

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

University of Hawai'i Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to Biography.
Mary Vermillion

Reembodying the Self: Representations of Rape in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl and I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

A study of a woman’s written record of her own rape can illustrate the dual consciousness which Susan Stanford Friedman identifies as a primary characteristic of female life-writing. According to Friedman, a woman’s alienation from her culturally defined self motivates the creation of an alternate self in her autobiography. Because patriarchal cultural definitions of a woman center on her body and sexual status, the rape victim not only becomes painfully aware of her culturally defined self, but she also confronts a hideous paradox as she tries to construct an alternate self. In trying to perceive herself as whole and untouched, the rape victim runs the risk of fragmenting her identity, of excluding her body from what she considers as the rest of her self. Such negation of her body is a natural continuation of the actual rape: the victim tells herself that she was not there during the rape—it was not she whom he raped. Unanswerable questions then loom. If she was not there, then who was? Who is this “she,” this “self” who exists bodiless?

The rape victim’s uncertainties about her own subjectivity stem in part from a long tradition in Western patriarchal thought—what Elizabeth Spelman terms “somatophobia,” fear of and disdain for the body. Spelman demonstrates that patriarchal thinkers from Plato onward have channeled most of this disdain toward the female body. I will briefly examine the partnership of misogyny and somatophobia in Shakespeare’s The Rape of Lucrece because his poem influenced the two autobiographers whom I examine in the second and third parts of this essay. Maya Angelou specifically refers to the poem, and it shaped the novels of seduction that Harriet Jacobs critiques in her autobiog-
raphy.  Shakespeare describes the raped Lucrece as privileging her innocent mind over her violated body: "Though my gross blood be stain'd with this abuse, / Immaculate and spotless is my mind." Stephanie Jed describes how somatophobia springs from such a Platonic duality between body and mind: "Implicit in every construct of a chaste or integral mind is the splitting off of the body as the region of all potential contamination." The dire but logical consequences of this splitting off emerge when Lucrece views her violated body through patriarchy's eyes. Perceiving her body as her husband's damaged property, she gives the following rationale for killing herself:

My honor I'll bequeath unto the knife
That wounds my body so dishonored.
'Tis honor to deprive dishonor'd life,
The one will live, the other being dead.
So of shame's ashes shall my fame be bred,
For in my death I murther shameful scorn:
My shame so dead, mine honor is new born.

Informing Lucrece's deadly resolution are somatophobia and two other key aspects of patriarchal ideology: the identification of the female with her body and the equation of female "honor" and chastity. The destruction of Lucrece's body perpetuates these patriarchal conceptions of womanhood.

The woman who records her own rape must—if she does not wish to do with her pen what Lucrece does with her sword—close the distance between her body and whatever her society posits as a woman's integral self (i.e., sexual reputation, mind, soul, desire, or will). She must reclaim her body. While this written reclamation is difficult for any woman, it presents a special problem for the black woman because of the meanings that hegemonic white cultures have assigned to her body. According to Spelman, somatophobia supports both sexist and racist thinking because these hegemonic cultures have posited women as more body-like than men and blacks as more body-like than whites. Within these two hierarchical relationships, the black woman is implicitly perceived as the most body-like, and this perception fosters her oppression in somatophobic societies. Numerous scholars have demonstrated that both the institution of slavery and antebellum writing constructed the black woman as the sum total of her bodily labour and suffering. Antebellum writers—including abolitionists and black males—depicted the black woman as breeder, wet nurse, field laborer, and most significant, as sexually exploited victim. So pervasive were
these images of the black woman’s body that the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs, founded in 1896, targeted for its most vehement attacks negative stereotypes of black women’s sexuality.\textsuperscript{10} Angela Davis and bell hooks illustrate how these nineteenth-century stereotypes inform twentieth-century racist images of the black woman as promiscuous and bestial.\textsuperscript{11} Because of this long history of negative stereotypes, the black woman who records her own rape faces the arduous task of reaffirming her sexual autonomy without perpetuating the racist myths that associate her with illicit sexuality. She must recover and celebrate her body without reinforcing racist perceptions of her as mere body.

This task is, of course, also a crucial project for contemporary black feminists. Reviewing Spike Lee’s film, \textit{She’s Gotta Have It} (1986)—in which a black woman, Nola Darling, is raped—hooks writes:

She [Darling] has had sex throughout the film; what she has not had is a sense of self that would enable her to be fully autonomous and sexually assertive, independent and liberated. . . . A new image, the one we have yet to see in film, is the desiring black woman who prevails, who triumphs, not desexualized, not alone, who is ‘together’ in every sense of the word.\textsuperscript{12}

How two black women who have suffered rape (or its threat) begin to construct this “new image” will be my focus as I examine Harriet Jacobs’s and Maya Angelou’s autobiographies.

* * *

Jacobs, in \textit{Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl} (1861), adopts the pseudonym Linda Brent and describes how, as a young enslaved girl, she coped with the threat of rape from her master, Dr. Flint.\textsuperscript{13} In order to escape this threat, as well as slavery itself, Brent deliberately chooses to have sexual relations with another white man, Mr. Sands. Many critics have argued that Jacobs’s narration of these events echoes and subverts various components of nineteenth-century sentimental discourse—particularly the seduction plot and the basic tenets of “true womanhood” (piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity).\textsuperscript{14} In my examination of these subversions, I will focus on how Jacobs critiques somatophobia and degrading images of the black female body. Brent’s decision to have sexual relations with Sands marks a turning point in Jacobs’s reembodying strategies. Before this point, she obscures her own corporeality in order to counter negative stereotypes about black
women, and after this point, she begins constructing new positive images of the black female body.

For over one hundred years preceding Jacobs’s writing of her autobiography, sentimental novelists portrayed both raped and seduced heroines as believing, like Shakespeare’s Lucrece, that their sexual activities sever their integral selves from their bodies. In Susanna Rowson’s Charlotte Temple (1791), for instance, when the eponymous heroine leaves her paternal home with her seducer, she mourns, “It seemed like the separation of soul and body.” Sentimental heroines who undergo such a separation (i.e., lose their “sexual purity”)—be it by their own choice or not—face a bout of madness or muteness usually followed by a slow, painful death. Inscribing the “fallen” woman’s body as damaged male property, the sentimental novel identifies the female with her body and promotes somatophobia. Furthermore, in dishing out the same “punishment” to both raped and seduced heroines, the sentimental novel as a literary mode obscures seduction’s crucial difference from rape: seduction requires a contest of wills while rape requires the mastery of one will over another. In disguising this difference, the sentimental novel erases female volition. Jacobs, I believe, must have recognized that such an erasure reinforced the slaveholder’s negation of the enslaved woman’s will. In order to reclaim her own volition, she appropriates the sentimental novel’s obfuscation of rape and seduction. By portraying in the language of seduction her former master’s legally sanctioned threat to rape her, Jacobs refutes his idea that she was his property, “subject to his will in all things.”

Jacobs further accentuates her own volition by depicting the unequal contest between Brent’s and Flint’s bodies as an equal contest of words. Observing that Jacobs’s autobiography contains more reconstructed dialogue than any male-authored slave narrative, William Andrews maintains that Brent and Flint’s dialogues pivot on arguments of the slave woman’s rights to define herself. I want to argue that Jacobs also uses dialogue to challenge the hegemonic culture’s perception of her as mere body. Flint tries to control Brent by whispering foul words into her ear, and Jacobs writes that he “peopled my young mind with unclean images, such as only a vile monster could think of” (27, emphasis added). With the choice of the word “peopled,” Jacobs merely hints that Flint would like to “people” his plantation through Brent’s body. She portrays the sexual threat that Flint poses as a predominantly psychological/spiritual one and thus lessens her reader’s tendency to associate her body with illicit sexuality. Jacobs
continues to mystify her former master’s physical power and legal right to rape her by confining it to verbal expressions. She primarily depicts his economic mastery over Brent not as his ability to overpower her physically, but as his power to perpetuate her slavery in his last will and testament. Jacobs further confines Flint’s power to words as she portrays him sending Brent letters, making speeches, and, ironically, promising to make her a lady, a category from which black women were excluded by the white planter culture. Even after Brent runs away, it is Flint’s words, and not his body, that threaten her. In her first hiding place the sight of Flint gives her a “gleam of satisfaction” (100), but the sound of his voice “chills her blood” (103). Brent’s differing reactions to Flint highlight Jacobs’s primary strategy in recording his threat to her body. As Flint’s body nears Brent’s, as he enters the house she hides in, Jacobs describes him as a mere voice. In recording Flint’s attempts to disembodify her, she disembodies him.

In thus obscuring the corporeality of Flint’s threat of rape, Jacobs minimizes her own body and thereby strikes a blow against the racist stereotype of the black woman as sexually exploited victim. The pen with which she strikes, however, is double-edged, and like Lucrece’s dagger, annihilates her own body. In the early part of her autobiography, Jacobs, like Lucrece, privileges an interior self over her body and nearly erases its presence in her text.

Brent’s decision to have sexual relations with Sands, however, begins Jacobs’s rewriting of her body into her life story. Most feminist readers of Jacobs’s narrative interpret her discussion of this incident as her most powerful rejection of sentimental discourse and “true womanhood.” I want to emphasize that Jacobs’s reversals of the seduction plot’s conventions also enable her to reject the body/mind duality that promotes somatophobia. When Flint asks if she loves the father of her unborn child, she retorts, “I am thankful that I do not despise him” (59). Unlike the stock seduced maiden, Brent has no uncontrollable passion for Sands. Reasoning that he will buy and free her and the children they have, Brent exerts her own will to escape Flint’s. “It seems,” she states, “less degrading to give one’s self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you except that which he gains by kindness and attachment” (56). Mary Helen Washington calls this declaration “the clearest statement of . . . the need for control over one’s female body.” Jacobs, I believe, seizes this control by insisting upon a connection between her sexuality and autonomy: “I knew what I did, and I did it with deliberate calculation” (55). By thus emphasizing that
Brent willed her sexual activity, Jacobs critiques the somatophobic sentimental convention that severs a unchaste woman’s body from her integral self, and she inscribes Brent’s union with Sands as a union of her own body and will.

After Brent escapes Flint’s plantation, his pursuit of her is so rigorous that she is forced to hide for seven years in a crawl space in her grandmother’s attic. Of these years in hiding Andrews writes that “her disembodied presence in patriarchal society lets her become for the first time Dr. Flint’s manipulator instead of his tool.” While I acknowledge this power shift, I want to further explore Andrews’s use of the word “disembodiment.” Confined to a coffin-like space and temporarily losing the use of her limbs, Brent is indeed disembodied in her situation. Yet it is, I maintain, in describing this very disembodiment that Jacobs embodies herself in her text. Her descriptions of Brent’s physical sufferings in the attic reinforce the bond between her body and her will. Jacobs engages a pattern of first cataloging Brent’s physical ills, and then comparing them favorably to her state as a slave:

I was eager to look on their [her children’s] faces; but there was no hole, no crack through which I could peep. This continued darkness was oppressive. It seemed horrible to sit or lie in a cramped position day after day, without one gleam of light. Yet I would have chosen this, rather than my lot as a slave. (114)

Here Brent’s physical suffering accentuates not only her ability to choose but also the reason behind her choice—her children’s freedom.

Jacobs also emphasizes this connection between Brent’s will, body, and children by juxtaposing her agony in hiding with the pain of the slave mother whose children have been sold (122). This recurrent figure who has lost both her will and the fruit of her body represents the completely disembodied black woman. She is Jacobs’s anti-type and has no wish to continue her life. “Why don’t God kill me?” asks one (16). “I’ve got nothing to live for now,” says another (70). In Chapter 13, “The Church and Slavery,” Jacobs uses the disembodied slave mother to demonstrate how the somatophobic privileging of an interior self over the body disembodies the black race. In this scene the childless woman not only voices her suffering and loss, but Jacobs also minutely records her physical torment. The woman stands and beats her breast, then sits down, “quivering in every limb.” The white constable who presides over the Methodist class meeting disregards her longing for her sold children, her physical suffering, and the many enslaved people who weep in sympathy with her. He stifles a laugh
and says, “Sister, pray to the Lord that every dispensation of his divine will may be sanctified to the good of your poor needy soul” (70). This “spiritual” advice disembodies the woman and her friends, leaving them only their singing voices: “Ole Satan’s church is here below. / Up to God’s free church I hope to go” (71). While these words disarray the white constable, they also confirm his privileging of soul over body. Critiquing the slaveholder’s religion within her rewriting of the seduction plot, Jacobs juxtaposes the “Christian” slaveholder’s devaluation of the black body with the sentimental novel’s devaluation of the female body and thereby unveils the somatophobia in both discourses.24

She further contests both of these disemboding discourses with her descriptions of Brent’s activities in her attic hideaway. It is in this part of the text that Brent—tearful, hysterical, and sleepless—most resembles the sentimental heroine. Brent’s crawling exercises, her drilling of peepholes, her sewing, reading, and letter writing oddly mimic domestic industriousness. During the second winter, in which cold stiffens her tongue, Brent’s muteness and delirium echoes that of a “fallen” and dying sentimental heroine. Jacobs thus parallels Brent’s attic with the private space that usually confines the sentimental heroine: the kitchen, the parlor, the upstairs chamber, the deathbed, and the grave. Jane Tompkins calls such female space “the closet of the heart,” and observes that sentimental fiction “shares with the evangelical reform movement a theory of power that stipulates that all true action is not material, but spiritual.”25 Jacobs challenges this stipulation by emphasizing the drastic material change that Brent works from within her “closet of the heart.” As Valerie Smith observes, Brent “uses to her advantage all the power of the voyeur.”26 She prevents her own capture by embroiling Flint in an elaborate plot to deflect his attention, and she meets with Sands to secure his promise to free her children. In her hiding place she not only has a mystical vision of her children, but she actually succeeds in gaining their freedom from slavery.

This uniting of spiritual and material action reenacts Jacobs’s earlier textual union of Brent’s body and will, and it situates her maternity as a powerful symbol of her autonomy.27 In her autobiography, Jacobs transforms her body from a site of sexual oppression to a source of freedom—freedom from slavery for herself and her children and freedom from somatophobic racist ideologies that demean the black female body. With one of Brent’s early experiences in the North, however, Jacobs suggests that her maternity is not the only cause for celebrating her body. Brent sees portraits of her friend Fanny’s children
and remarks, “I had never seen any paintings of colored people before, and they seemed to me beautiful” (162). With this statement, Jacobs subtly indicates that her readers must likewise see the black race anew. Jacobs’s autobiography, like Fanny’s portraits, insists that the value and worth of the black female body exists outside of its functions in a patriarchal slaveholding society.

* * *

Important differences obviously exist between Jacobs’s antebellum autobiography and Maya Angelou’s twentieth-century record of her rape at age eight in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969). One important difference is the way in which somatophobia manifests itself in their texts. Because Angelou does not have to contend with the nineteenth-century patriarchal ideology of “true womanhood,” she is freer to portray her rape, her body, and her sexuality. Yet Jacobs describes herself as beautiful and sexually desirable, while Angelou, as a child and young adult, sees herself as ugly. Jacobs posits somatophobia outside herself and critiques it as part of slaveholding culture, while Angelou portrays her younger self internalizing and finally challenging the somatophobia inherent in twentieth-century racist conceptions of the black female body. Despite these differences, Angelou’s text contains reembodying strategies similar to those of Jacobs. Both women contest somatophobia by questioning religious ideologies, rewriting white literary traditions, and celebrating their bodies and motherhood as symbols of their political struggles. In order to challenge racist stereotypes that associate black women with illicit sexuality, both writers obscure their corporeality in the early part of their texts by transforming the suffering connected with rape into a metaphor for the suffering of their race. In Jacobs’s text rape is a metaphor for the severed body and will of the slave, and Angelou similarly uses her rapist’s violation of her body and will to explore the oppression of her black community.

Angelou first connects her rape with the suffering of the poor. “The act of rape on an eight-year-old body,” she writes, “is a matter of the needle giving because the camel can’t.”28 In this description, Angelou subtly links her rapist with the wealthy man whom Jesus warned would have a difficult time getting into heaven, and she reinforces this link by alluding to Jesus’s words in her ironic description of a black revival congregation’s sentiments: “The Lord loved the poor and hated those cast high in the world. Hadn’t He Himself said it would be
easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven?’” (108). As she continues to imagine the congregation’s thoughts, Angelou makes the connection between her rape and the plight of the poor in class society more racially explicit, and, like Jacobs, she also demonstrates that privileging a future world over the present perpetuates black oppression:

They [the congregation] basked in the righteousness of the poor and the exclusiveness of the downtrodden. Let the whitefolks have their money and power and segregation and sarcasm and big houses and schools and lawns like carpets, and books, and mostly—mostly—let them have their whiteness. (110)

With the image of the camel and the needle, Angelou transforms her rape into a symbol of the racism and somatophobia that afflict Maya and her race throughout much of Caged Bird.

Rape in Angelou’s text, however, primarily represents the black girl’s difficulties in controlling, understanding, and respecting both her body and her words in a somatophobic society that sees “sweet little white girls” as “everybody’s dream of what was right with the world” (1). Angelou connects white definitions of beauty with rape by linking Maya’s rape with her first sight of her mother, Vivian Baxter. Angelou’s description of Vivian echoes that of the ghost-like whites who baffle young Maya. Vivian has “even white teeth and her fresh-butter color looked see-through clean” (49). Maya and her brother, Bailey, later determine that Vivian resembles a white movie star. Angelou writes that her mother’s beauty “literally assailed” Maya and twice observes that she was “struck dumb” (49–50). This assault by her mother’s beauty anticipates the physical assault by Mr. Freeman, her mother’s boyfriend, and Maya’s muteness upon meeting her mother foreshadows her silence after the rape. With this parallel Angelou indicates that both rape and the dominant white culture’s definitions of beauty disempower the black woman’s body and self-expression.

Angelou further demonstrates the intimate connection between the violation of Maya’s body and the devaluation of her words by depicting her self-imposed silence after Freeman’s rape trial. Freeman’s pleading looks in the courtroom, along with Maya’s own shame, compel her to lie, and after she learns that her uncles have murdered Freeman, she believes that her courtroom lie is responsible for his death. Angelou describes the emotions that silence Maya:

I could feel the evilness flowing through my body and waiting, pent up, to rush off my tongue if I tried to open my mouth. I clamped my teeth
shut, I’d hold it in. If it escaped, wouldn’t it flood the world and all the innocent people? (72)

Angelou’s use of flood imagery in this crucial passage enables her to link Maya’s inability to control her body and her words. Throughout the text Maya’s failure to keep her bodily functions “pent up” signals the domination of her body by others. The autobiography’s opening scene merges her inability to control her appearance, words, and bodily functions. Wanting to look like a “sweet little white girl,” Maya is embarrassed about her own appearance and cannot remember the words of the Easter poem she recites. With her escape from the church, Angelou implicitly associates Maya’s inability to rule her bladder with her inability to speak:

I stumbled and started to say something, or maybe to scream, but a green persimmon, or it could have been a lemon, caught me between the legs and squeezed. I tasted the sour on my tongue and felt it in the back of my mouth. Then before I reached the door, the sting was burning down my legs and into my Sunday socks. I tried to hold, to squeeze it back, to keep it from speeding. (3)

Maya’s squeezing back in this passage anticipates her stopping the flood of her words after the rape, and Angelou also connects this opening scene of urination with one of Freeman’s means of silencing Maya. After ejaculating on a mattress, he tells her that she has wet the bed, and with this lie, he denies her knowledge about her own body and confounds her ability to make a coherent story out of his actions.

This inability to create a story about her body pervades the remainder of *Caged Bird* as Maya struggles to cope with her emerging womanhood. Angelou, however, is not content to let the mute, sexually abused, wishing-to-be-white Maya represent the black female body in her text. Instead, she begins to reembody Maya by critiquing her admiration for white literary discourse. An early point at which Angelou foregrounds this critique is in Maya’s meeting with Mrs. Bertha Flowers. Presenting this older black woman as the direct opposite of young Maya, Angelou stresses that Flowers magnificently rules both her words and her body. Indeed Flowers’s bodily control seems almost supernatural: “She had the grace of control to appear warm in the coldest weather, and on the Arkansas summer days it seemed she had a private breeze which swirled around, cooling her” (77). She makes Maya proud to be black, and Maya claims that Flowers is more beautiful and “just as refined as whitefolks in movies and books” (79).

Although Maya begins to respect and admire the black female body,
white heroines still provide her standard for beauty, and Angelou pokes fun at the literary discourse that whitens Maya’s view of Bertha Flowers and womanhood:

She [Flowers] appealed to me because she was like people I had never met personally. Like women in English novels who walked the moors (whatever they were) with their loyal dogs racing at a respectful distance. Like the women who sat in front of roaring fireplaces, drinking tea incessantly from silver trays full of scones and crumpets. Women who walked over the ‘heath’ and read morocco-bound books. (79)

This humorous passage demonstrates that Maya’s self-perception remains dangerously regulated by white culture. Angelou treats such regulation less comically when Flowers breaks Maya’s self-imposed silence by asking her to read aloud. The first words Maya speaks after her long spell of muteness are those of Charles Dickens.

Angelou dramatizes the danger that a borrowed voice poses to Maya in her description of Maya’s relationship with Viola Cullinan. Maya makes fun of this white woman, whose kitchen she briefly works in, until she discovers that Cullinan’s husband has two daughters by a black woman. Then Maya—in a gesture of sisterhood and empathy that is never returned by Cullinan—pities her employer and decides to write a “tragic ballad” “on being white, fat, old and without children” (91). Such a ballad would, of course, completely exclude Maya’s own experience: black, thin, young, and (near the end of her autobiography) with child. Through Maya’s speculation that Cullinan walks around with no organs and drinks alcohol to keep herself “embalmed,” Angelou implies that Maya’s potential poetic identification with Cullinan nearly negates her own body. Cullinan’s empty insides echo Maya’s own perception of herself after the rape as a “gutless doll” she had earlier ripped to pieces (72).

Angelou’s most complex and subtle examination of Maya’s attachment to white literary discourse occurs when she lists as one of her accomplishments the memorization of Shakespeare’s *The Rape of Lucrece*. Christine Froula maintains that Maya’s feat of memory suggests the potential erasure of black female reality by white male literary discourse.30 More specifically, I believe, Angelou’s reference to *Lucrece* subtly indicates that Maya’s propensity for the verbal and the literary leads her to ignore her own corporeality. After their rapes both Maya and Lucrece turn to representations of suffering women. Maya reads about Lucrece, and Lucrece, finding a painting of the fall of Troy, views Hecuba’s mourning the destruction of her city and hus-
band, King Priam. Unlike Lucrece, Maya seeks strength not from pictorial representations of female bodies, but from print, and this preference for the verbal over the pictorial suggests her tendency to privilege literature over her own physical reality. Lucrece decides to speak for the mute sufferers in the painting, and Shakespeare writes, "She lends them words, and she their looks doth borrow." Maya's situation is an inversion of Lucrece's lending of words and borrowing of looks. The once mute Maya can borrow Lucrece's words, but she must somehow lend these words her own "looks" if she does not wish Shakespeare's equation of Lucrece's virtue and whiteness to degrade her own blackness. In remembering *The Rape of Lucrece* Maya must also re-member or reconstruct her own body.

One of the ways that she accomplishes this is by celebrating the bodies of other black women. In the only story Maya creates within *Caged Bird*, she augments her grandmother's physical and verbal powers. After a white dentist refuses to treat Maya because she is black, Maya imagines her grandmother ten feet tall, arms doubling in length. As this fantasy grandmother orders the dentist out of town and commands him to quit practicing dentistry, her words, too, metamorphose: "Her tongue had thinned and the words rolled off well enunciated. Well enunciated and sharp like little claps of thunder" (161). With Maya's brief fantasy, Angelou demonstrates how her own autobiography functions. Maya's story, which empowers her grandmother's body and speech, attacks the dentist's derogatory behavior; Angelou's autobiography, which celebrates Maya's body and words, critiques the rape and racial oppression she suffers.

Maya finds, however, that her body and words exist uneasily together. While in the early part of the narrative Maya depends heavily on literature,33 in the text's final San Francisco section, all words, particularly those packaged as literature, fail to account for her adolescent body's changes. Reading Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) leads Maya to mistakenly interpret these changes as signals that she is becoming a lesbian. When Maya confronts her mother with this fear, Angelou further demonstrates the inability of the verbal to explain the physical. Vivian's requiring Maya to read aloud the dictionary definition of the word "vulva" echoes strangely Flowers's asking Maya to read aloud from Dickens. Unlike Dickens's prose, however, Noah Webster's and Vivian's words lose their soothing power as soon as Maya is confronted with a stronger physical reality—her own admiration for her girlfriend's fully developed breasts. This scene in which Maya shifts her attention from words to bodies paves the way for Angelou's concluding celebration of the black female body.
Seeking physical rather than verbal knowledge of her sexuality, Maya determines to have sex with one of “the most eligible young men in the neighborhood” (239). Their encounter, which “is unredeemed by shared tenderness” (240), leaves sixteen-year-old Maya pregnant and alone. The young man quits talking to her in her fourth month, and Maya’s brother, who is overseas, advises her not to tell her parents until she graduates from high school. Yet it would be wrong to see Maya’s motherhood as “a tragic way to end the book and begin life as an adult.”34 While Angelou portrays the pain and confusion resulting from Maya’s pregnancy, she places a far greater emphasis on her newfound autonomy. Even Maya’s naive style of seduction accentuates her feminist stance. She asks the young man, “Would you like to have a sexual intercourse with me?” (239). In posing this straightforward question, Maya claims control of her body and her identity for the first time in the text. Just as Jacobs describes Brent’s union with Sands as a union of her body and will, Angelou celebrates Maya’s encounter with the young man. She accentuates Maya’s reclamation of her body and volition by ironically alluding to the violation she suffered as an eight year old. “Thanks to Mr. Freeman nine years before,” asserts Angelou, “I had had no pain of entry to endure” (240).

By detailing how the pregnant Maya copes with her isolation, Angelou pays further tribute to Maya’s increased autonomy and acceptance of her own body. Beginning to reject the literary myths that led her to deny her own agency, Maya accepts complete responsibility for her pregnancy: “For eons, it seemed, I had accepted my plight as the hapless, put-upon victim of fate and the Furies, but this time I had to face the fact that I had brought my new catastrophe upon myself” (241). This acceptance of responsibility also leads Maya to a greater acceptance of her own body’s powers:

I had a baby. He was beautiful and mine. Totally mine. No one had bought him for me. No one had helped me endure the sickly gray months. I had had help in the child’s conception, but no one could deny that I had had an immaculate pregnancy. (245)

Angelou’s use of the word “immaculate” not only challenges racist stereotypes that associate black women with illicit sexuality, but it also suggests that Maya has shed her earlier conceptions of her body as “dirty like mud” (2) and “shit-colored” (17). Because the eight-year-old Maya perceives her own mother as looking like the “Virgin Mary” (57), the word “immaculate” also indicates that the teenage Maya begins to see in herself the power and beauty she sees in Vivian.

Maya’s lack of confidence in her body briefly returns, however, in
the autobiography’s final paragraphs. Vivian’s suggestion that Maya sleep with her child accentuates her worry that she is too clumsy to handle a baby. Vivian banishes this fear by waking Maya and showing her the baby sleeping under a tent that Maya unconsciously formed with her body and a blanket. “See,” Vivian whispers, “you don’t have to think about doing the right thing. If you’re for the right thing then you do it without thinking” (246). Presenting the mother/child bond as a symbol of Maya’s newfound autonomy, this closing scene reverses her earlier privileging of the verbal over the physical and celebrates the harmonious interaction of her body and will.

* * *

Rape can destroy a woman’s autonomy and self-image, yet Jacobs and Angelou transform this potentially destructive event into an opportunity to celebrate their resistance to somatophobia and negative stereotypes about the black female body. An early scene in Caged Bird serves as a synecdoche for the reembodiment both Angelou and Jacobs accomplish in recording their experiences of rape. Three “powhite-trash” girls ape the posture and singing of Maya’s grandmother, yet she emerges victorious and beautiful from this degradation and calms the enraged Maya. Afterwards Maya rakes away the girls’ footprints in the lawn and creates a new pattern: “a large heart with lots of hearts growing smaller inside, and piercing from the outside rim to the smallest heart was an arrow” (27). These connected hearts, which represent the bond between Maya and her grandmother, encapsulate Angelou’s and Jacobs’s celebration of black motherhood as a sign of personal autonomy. In the grandmother’s triumph over the white girls who mock and caricature her body, and in young Maya’s erasure of their footprints, I see Angelou’s and Jacobs’s refutation of negative stereotypes about their bodies. Maya’s newly raked pattern resembles their autobiographies—their writings (or rightings) of the black female body outside of dominant cultural definitions.

University of Iowa

NOTES


3. Elizabeth V. Spelman, Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988) 30, 126–31. While I assume that disdain for the female body is inherent in patriarchal ideology, I do not perceive this ideology as monolithic, and I discuss somatophobia's differing manifestations in Shakespeare's, Harriet Jacobs's, and Maya Angelou's times.


7. Shakespeare 1184–90. Shakespeare's sources similarly privilege an integral self over the body.


10. Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance," Signs 14 (1989): 917–20. In examining dissemblance, Hine also states that antebellum black women had to "collectively create alternative self-images and shield from scrutiny these private empowering definitions of self" in order to function in white patriarchal America (916). I will show how Jacobs and Angelou make their empowering self definitions public in their autobiographies.

12. hooks, Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black (Boston: South End Press, 1989) 140. hooks's challenge is indeed a difficult one. As Barbara Christian observes, “The garb of uninhibited passion wears better on a male, who after all, does not have to carry the burden of the race’s morality or lack of it” (Novelists 40).

13. All the names in Jacobs’s text are pseudonyms. Dr. Flint is a fictitious name for Jacobs’s former master, James Norcom. In this paper I will refer to the author of the autobiography as Jacobs, and to the actor within it as Brent. In order to avoid confusion, I will call the other people Jacobs writes about by their pseudonyms.


17. As Susan Staves observes, the idea of seduction is incomprehensible “if women have no rights over their own bodies but are simply the property of men to use as they will, as female slaves were the property of slaveowners.” See “British Seduced Maidens,” Eighteenth-Century Studies 14 (1981) 116.


Braxton observes that Brent "uses 'sass' the way Frederick Douglass uses his fists and his feet, as a means of expressing her resistance" (386).

20. Carby’s second chapter in Reconstructing Womanhood, “Slave and Mistress: Ideologies of Womanhood under Slavery” (20–39), is an excellent study of how nineteenth-century conceptions of "lady" and "womanhood" depended upon the exclusion of black women.


26. Valerie Smith 32.

27. For discussions of Jacobs’s depiction of her motherhood as a source of her personal autonomy see Carby 40–61, Tate 107–10, and Braxton passim.

28. Maya Angelou, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (New York: Bantam, 1969) 65. Future references to this text will be inserted parenthetically. I will refer to the author of Caged Bird as Angelou, and to the actor within it as Maya. In my reading of the early part of Angelou’s autobiography, I am indebted to Sidonie Smith’s discussion of Maya’s quest after her “self-accepted black womanhood,” to Liliane K. Arensberg’s analysis of Maya’s dependence on books, and to Francoise Lionnet’s exploration of how Angelou makes her body the source and model of her creativity. See Smith, “The Song of the Caged Bird: Maya Angelou’s Quest for Self-Acceptance,” Southern Humanities Review 7 (1973): 365–75; Arensberg, “Death as Metaphor of Self in I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,” CLA 20 (1970): 275–76; Lionnet, Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture (Ithica: Cornell UP, 1989) 130–68. I differ from these readers in that I discuss the somatophobia and racism in white literary discourse as significant obstacles that Maya must overcome before she can begin to recover from her rape and take pride in her body.

29. For another examination of this opening scene and for a consideration of Angelou’s other images of flowing liquids and rhythms, see Lionnet 134–35, 146. Unlike Lionnet, I emphasize Maya’s attempts to control her body and words.


31. Shakespeare 1498. He devotes over 200 lines to Lucrece’s viewing of this painting (1567–1569) and contrasts the muteness of the painted Hecuba with Lucrece’s venting of grief and outrage at her rape:

On this sad shadow [Hecuba] Lucrece spends her eyes,
And shapes her sorrow to the beldame’s woes,
Who nothing wants to answer her but cries,
And bitter words to ban her cruel foes;
The painter was no god to lend her those,
And therefore Lucrece swears he did her wrong,
To give her so much grief, and not a tongue. (1457–64)

32. The following lines typify the many times Shakespeare makes this equation throughout his poem: “This heraldry in Lucrece’ face was seen, / Argued by beauty’s red and virtue’s white” (64–65).

33. Arensberg 275–76 and Lionnet passim. Neither critic discusses Maya’s dependence on literature in the San Francisco section of Caged Bird.