

BLOODLINE: PROPINQUITY AND POSTERITY IN MAYA ANGELOU'S POETRY

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African American men and women poets "share a vernacular culture," declares Fahamisha Patricia Brown, "yet they experience culture, a way of life after all, with a gendered difference. The differences are . . . in the choice of subjects and themes" (101). While African American men poets do write about relationships, Brown identifies relationships as a subject particularly characteristic of the work of African American women poets, and one that constitutes a noteworthy gender difference with men:

African American women poets often enter the discourse as daughters, sisters, mothers, and lovers, that is, in relationship to others, both male and female. Those relationships often become the subjects of their poems. Even more often, though, those relationships constitute the stance from which the women write. (108)

Consistent with Brown's views, Angelou's poetry reflects this particular manifestation of vernacular culture. At the very least, the dedications in her opus imply the premium she places on a wide range of relationships. More importantly, her poetry is replete with compositions which underscore the primacy she places on propinquity and posterity, a consciousness of kinship and connection that points to her blood bonds with that culture and its expression in the poetry of African American women. About thirty percent of the one hundred and sixty-six poems in five of her first six collections have as their subjects family, friends and icons and engage life from such perspectives as those of mates, mistresses, wives, daughters, sons and lovers. Some of these poems and others, implicitly and explicitly, reflect Angelou's concern for succeeding generations and the impact which society is having and should be having on that future. In these, Angelou adopts as herself or as a persona such varying 'stances' as family member, friend, admirer, cultural spokesperson, and the conscience of humankind. These poems are transfused by an admixture of stylistic elements reflective of the syncretic nature of African American vernacular culture that is Angelou's personal and racial artistic inheritance, her 'bloodline.' "Bloodline in Angelou's poetry is literal and figurative, biological, sociological, and artistic. It is the propinquity of family; it is musical and literary legacy; it is cultural lineage typified in subject/theme, persona and point of view. Representative poems in which Angelou's blood relations are her subjects and representative poems in which she articulates a concern for posterity will be considered.

It is not unusual for authors to dedicate a book to someone so this practice by Angelou could be considered mere convention. But such dedications are so pervasive a feature of her work that, in concert with other elements (subject, theme, and point of view), they appear to be genuine acts of appreciation reflective of the priority Angelou places on diverse relationships. Each of her six autobiographies includes a dedication and so do most of her volumes of poetry. They illuminate the bond with her kin; for example, her grandson Colin (The Heart of a Woman), and great-grandchildren Caylin and Brandon (A Song Flung Up to Heaven). They are a public acknowledgement of people Angelou values so much she calls them sister/brother/daughter-friends and has 'adopted' them into her family though there is no biological bond. They are a tribute to artists and icons:

Special thanks to a few of the many
sister/friends whose love encourages
me to spell my name:
WOMAN

Doris Bullard
 Rosa Guy
 M. J. Hewitt
 Ruth Love
 Rita Dove
 Paule Marshall
 (The Heart of a Woman)

and to African Americans joined in the tapestry of struggle and aspiration: "This book is dedicated to Julian and Malcolm and all the fallen ones who were passionately and earnestly looking for a home" (All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes). They are offerings to the young, the mature and the old; to the specific, "My son Guy Johnson," and the metaphorical, "all the Strong Black Birds of Promise" (I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings). They are a praise song to the living and to the dead:

I dedicate this book
 to the memory of my mother,
 Vivian Baxter,
 the most phenomenal.

(Phenomenal Woman: Four Poems Celebrating Women).

They are expressions of gratitude for other people and their attributes that enrich Angelou's life:

Thanks to
 ELEANOR TRAYLOR for her radiance
 ELIZABETH PHILLIPS for her art
 RUTH BECKFORD for her constancy
 (Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?)

In some instances, the dedications are an extensive catalogue of over ten specific individuals (as in Gather Together in My Name and The Heart of a Woman). Angelou's dedications thus become a literary witness to her esteem of these people and relationships in her present. In And Still I Rise, the dedication is itself formatted to resemble a poem:

The book is dedicated
 to a few
 of the Good Guys

You to laugh with
 You to cry to
 I can just about make
 it over

JESSICA MITFORD
 GERARD W. PURCELL
 JAY ALLEN

It is a celebration of some of the interpersonal qualities that make of Angelou's life the "poetic adventure" she told Robert Chrisman she wanted it to be (Chrisman 55). In The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou, we read the following dedication:

This collection gratefully acknowledges the gifts of all
 of my ancestors. It is dedicated to my great-grandchildren,
 CAYLIN NICOLE JOHNSON
 and

BRANDON BAILEY JOHNSON.

Clearly, Maya Angelou recognizes that, as Jehovah declares, "the life of all flesh is the blood thereof" (KJV Prophecy Marked Reference Study Bible, Lev. 17.14). And so the various volumes of her poetry and her autobiographical opus are a literary legacy conferring continuity to her bloodline.

Three of the pivotal familial figures in Angelou's life, (to judge from the autobiographies), that she memorializes in her poetry are her mother, brother and paternal uncle. The poems for/about these blood relations reflect a diversity of emphases. Through them all, though, flows the capacity for survival which Angelou has repeatedly noted as a major theme of her work (Weller 15).

In "Call Letters: Mrs. V. B.," Angelou offers a possibly ambivalent portrait of her mother Vivian Baxter. Across the four verses, several of Vivian's virtues are affirmed. However, familiarity with the autobiographies prompts us to perceive the piece as a less than unqualified encomium.

Through the title, "Call Letters: Mrs. V. B.," Vivian is first presented as a radio station, announcing herself to the world in a metaphor suggestive of her communicative skills and social influence noted in I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings. This characterization of Vivian as a larger than life entity as great as a form of mass media reminds us of the estranged mother-daughter relationship in Angelou's childhood during which she and her brother Bailey were exiled to the care of their paternal grandmother Annie Henderson in racism-rife Stamps, Arkansas while Vivian "lived separately in a heaven called California" (Angelou, Collected Autobiographies 43). And it prompts a memory of Maya's dehumanized image of her mother as a "rainbow" and "hurricane" whose stunning beauty and forceful personality assail the unprepossessing Maya (Collected Autobiographies 49).

Rather than employing a typical lyric format using the first person that might suggest the warmth of personal fondness and admiration, Angelou has Vivian "sing her own praises" in the call-and-response pattern characteristic of African American expressive musical culture. Vivian opens each verse with a one-word question reflective of her succinct conversational style communicated in the autobiographies then swiftly answers that question with the frankness and self-assurance also depicted in the prose works. Hers is an adventurousness and the daring to set precedents (traditionally associated with men) as she did in becoming the first woman merchant marine:

Ships?
Sure I'll sail them.
Show me the boat,
If it'll float,
I'll sail it. (1-5)

She is willing to share her passion and flair with men on her own terms, provided they can contribute their share of dash and laughter:

Men?
Yes I'll love them.
If they've got the style,
To make me smile,
I'll love them. (6-10)

With the unforgettable joie de vivre rendered in the autobiographies, Vivian declares:

Life?
'Course I'll live it.
Let me have breath,

Just to my death,
And I'll live it. (11-15)

She is heiress of Tennyson's Ulysses, intent to "drink / Life to the lees" (6-7). And in the closing assertion, she affirms the indomitability of her spirit:

Failure?
I'm not ashamed to tell it,
I never learned to spell it.
Not failure. (16-19)

In the confidence of Vivian's tone and the buoyancy of the rhythm and rhymes, this poem engages us as the vivacious Vivian enchanted men in her own life. From the autobiographies, Vivian may have been portrayed as a neglectful mother in Maya's formative years, a woman incapable of bonding with her own small children. But in this tribute to her, to borrow Lorna Goodison's phrase from "For My Mother (May I Inherit Half her Strength)," "that has no place in the memory" (60) of Angelou. Interviewed by Stephanie Caruana in 1974, Angelou says, "it seems to me life loves the *liver*. I see it in my mother. She loves life. When I was thirteen or fourteen, I remember her saying, 'Baby, if I die today or tomorrow, the world don't owe me shit!' And she's just out there *doing it*. That's the joy" (Caruana 36). Here, Angelou recreates Vivian not as a mother but as a quintessence of vitality, self-reliance and insuperability; defining attributes in Vivian's eyes.

Vivian is one of the strong women whom we meet in Angelou's opus, the survivors confronting life's challenges/setbacks rather than succumbing to failure and devastation. Only from external sources though does the reader realize that this poem is actually about Angelou's mother for the poem itself includes no explicit indication that it addresses any blood relationship. True, Angelou's mother is her subject but Angelou's 'stance,' to employ Brown's term, is not overtly that of a daughter. On the surface, this poem is about Vivian rather than Angelou's relationship with her.

When Angelou comes to memorialize the relationship with her brother Bailey, the presentation differs markedly from the treatment of her mother. Angelou appends the words "For Bailey" beneath the title "Kin," so the reader is explicitly informed that the poem is about Angelou's brother, not just a generalized familial link, and the title openly directs attention to their blood ties. In evocative imagery, the persona (Maya) declares:

We were entwined in red rings
Of blood and loneliness before
The first snows fell
Before muddy rivers seeded clouds
Above a virgin forest, and
Men ran naked, blue and black
Skinned into the warm embraces
Of Sheba, Eve and Lilith.
I was your sister. (1-9)

In contrast to the propinquity between Maya and Vivian which the reader must infer, the rich imagery of this verse affirms Maya's blood bond with Bailey as a powerful physical and psychological reality predating our planet's primordial days and the very birth of man in Africa, the cradle of creation. Subsumed in this conception is the implication of a potent spiritual connection and sense of destiny between Maya and Bailey that recalls Jehovah's assurance to the prophet Jeremiah that He knew, sanctified and ordained him a prophet before he was formed in his mother's womb (Jer. 1.5). So too the mutual estrangement of

Maya and Bailey from their parents is a joint destiny reaching back before the dawn of Judeo-Christian antiquity.

For the next two verses, the persona highlights the divergent life paths that brought them pain:

You left me to force strangers
 Into brother molds, exacting
 Taxations they never
 Owed or could ever pay.

You fought to die, thinking
 In destruction lies the seed
 Of birth. You may be right. (10-16)

As with "Call Letters: Mrs. V. B.," the reader benefits from familiarity with the autobiographies where the details of the subject's story, in this case Bailey's drug addiction, are presented. But such knowledge is not needed, for it is the impact of the separation on Maya that the persona stresses in the above stanzas and those to come. No other male relationship can satisfy the need for familial intimacy while Bailey is enthralled in a paradoxical quest for life through death. There is in the persona's phrasing an ambivalence about this phase of her relationship with Bailey. The first two "You" statements seem possibly accusatory, a heart-cry at perceived abandonment; the last appears concessionary; an admission of uncertainty about the viability of her brother's seemingly suicidal search for a new life ("birth"). This concession will be echoed in the verse that follows.

But it is not pain and possible death that endures with Maya. Instead, she claims that recollections of childhood's shared time and confidences with Bailey will be a lasting treasure:

I will remember silent walks in
 Southern woods and long talks
 In low voices
 Shielding meaning from the big ears
 Of overcurious adults. (17-21)

Here again acquaintance with the autobiographies enrich the reader's appreciation for the significance of this stanza for, estranged from their birth parents, Maya and Bailey were much more of a lifeline to each other than siblings normally are. Theirs was a bond of both blood and need.

The penultimate verse presents Bailey as a survivor too, like Vivian. He does "return from / Regions of terror and bloody / Screams" (23-25). However, the slowness and pain of that recovery elicit a profound physiological (and implicitly psychological) reaction from Maya during the worst phases of his illness. This bespeaks her profound attachment to Bailey. Just as in their pre-birth existence, so in the struggle against the demons of drug dependency the futures of Maya and Bailey are "entwined," an apt term implying the organic bond of their kinship.

As with the poem about her mother, Angelou again uses art to shape actuality and the legacy it leaves. In reality, Bailey does not overcome the drug addiction foreshadowed in the verse one allusion to Lilith, a female demon from Jewish folklore haunting deserted places to prey on children. It will plague him for the rest of his days. As she does with the impression of Vivian constructed in "Call Letters: Mrs. V. B.," Angelou here presents a 'poetic' complement to the prose 'truth' / version of a second blood relative. It is not

impossible that for Angelou poetry (sometimes) serves a cathartic function. It appears to enable the reconsideration of lived experience and an imaginative metamorphosis that makes it more palatable. While the literal centre of the poem addresses the pain in Maya's and Bailey's lives, the poem closes with a memory and a vision of childhood's joy and nature's splendour:

I hear again the laughter
Of children and see fireflies
Bursting tiny explosions in
An Arkansas twilight. (26-29)

But maybe reality/truth is too potent and/or art is too honest. The image of the fireflies that seem to explode reminds us of Angelou's autobiographical picture of intelligent, handsome Bailey whose life literally and metaphorical 'goes up in smoke.'

"Willie" is an even greater expression of the capacity for survival that Angelou values and sees in some of her blood relations. It is also a more substantial manifestation of the transformative power of art and its potential for immortalizing "this quintessence of dust" of which Shakespeare's Hamlet speaks (Hamlet 2.2.308). It is, too, more daring in conception and style. Like the poem about Vivian, the 'stance' of this one does not overtly present Angelou as a blood relative of her subject.

Through this highly patterned poem, Angelou (re)presents a dialogue between the world and Willie based on the call-and-response pattern. In the first three lines of verses one, two and four which share the same rhyme scheme (aaaba), the persona voices the 'facts' about Willie as he appears to the world, as the world 'calls' him. In the last two lines of each verse, Willie voices his own 'response.' Angelou reinforces this interplay by having Willie's last line rhyme with the first three (the call) to which he responds.

Against every social limitation, physical defect, mental challenge, emotional deprivation, and verbal assault, Willie opposes a particular source of strength. Near total social anonymity and irremediable physical handicap, he confronts with strength of will and persistent though pained physical movement: "I keep on movin' / Movin' just the same" (4-5). Mental isolation and romantic emptiness he defies with the fortitude derived from a knowledge of history and the visionaries of his race: "I keep on followin'/Where the leaders led" (9-10). Emotional vulnerability and death's inevitability he counters with a transcendent conviction that he is the revitalizing force manifest in nature's seasonal pattern of renewal, and a presence in the musical expression of children: "my spirit is the soul of every spring, / Watch for me and you will see / That I'm present in the songs that children sing" (12-14). Denigrating public insults he repudiates with a reaffirmation of his transcendent certainty that he lives in children's games and songs and is as unstoppable as natural forces and sounds:

You may enter my sleep, people my dreams,
Threaten my early morning's ease,
But I keep comin' followin' laughin' cryin'
Sure as a summer breeze.

Wait for me, watch for me.
My spirit is the surge of open seas.
Look for me, ask for me,
I'm the rustle in the autumn leaves.

When the sun rises

I am the time.
 When the children sing
 I am the Rhyme. (20-31)

This is a compelling act of mythologizing on Angelou's part. A cripple is presented as the embodiment of the indomitable spirit of survival and creativity in the elemental imagery of nature – spring, summer breeze, surging seas, rustle of autumn leaves, sunrise – and the dynamic imagery of vibrant, playful children abounding in movement, emotion, and energy. In this poem, Greek myth also infuses Angelou's art. Her portrayal of Willie is reminiscent of the Greek god Hephaestus, also lame and loveless, the butt of jokes by the Olympians, yet the creative artisan of their heaven. Likewise, the impaired Willie becomes a symbol of African American creative forms – songs, games - and the way these preserve some of the cultural lifeblood in the continuity of children's play.

In her handling of form, Angelou makes the poem itself an expression of the creative force Willie claims for/as himself. Both ballad and blues song, blending narrative and dialogue, call and response, this rhythmic and rhyming poem embodies the spirit of Willie and authenticates his self-conception. In the poem, Willie speaks of his future in the present tense. This is artistically valid for he lives through the nameless persona (and Maya Angelou) as she narrates his story and quotes him.

For Angelou, blood means more than her immediate, biological family. It also means her racial bloodline. According to an Akan proverb, "Only a fool points at his origins with his left hand." The attitudes African Americans, writers included, have towards their slave ancestors (and contemporaries) are by no means homogeneous. One reflection of this is the concept of the Uncle Tom, a denigration of what is perceived to be a craven compliance with white America, a gutless deference, a shameful lack of self-respect and a betrayal of racial pride. But Angelou's poems about her forefathers are a repudiation of that outlook. When she writes of them, it is not contempt but commendation that she expresses. This stance is epitomized in "Song for the Old Ones" which she identified as her then favorite poem in a 1975 interview with Walter Blum (Blum 44).

Just as she does in "Willie," Angelou draws on her vernacular heritage by blending the ballad and the blues to memorialize her ancestors in a poem permeated by pathos and an undercurrent of satire. It too is a dialogue that juxtaposes a common view which the poet will challenge us to reject with an alternative way of seeing she will invite us to accept. This time though, the persona will herself experience a transformation of perception.

Through the vivid figurative language of the first three verses Angelou simultaneously evokes our pity for her ancestors and illustrates the limited understanding many African Americans have of them. Looking at the old ones sitting on their benches, the speaker initially appears to see little beyond the facts of their physical deterioration represented by their "withered flanks" (4). In them she sees a bodily wretchedness reminiscent of Macbeth's despairing dismissal of life: "broken candles / all waxed and burnt profound" (5-6). At a slightly deeper level of insight, she perceives the entire history of African-American slavery and its terrible bodily toll writ deep in their visages:

There in those pleated faces
 I see the auction block
 the chains and slavery's coffles
 the whip and lash and stock. (9-12)

For individuals such as the persona, the condition of ancestral African Americans is a human picture of nothing but tragedy. This is a manifestation of the limitations of physical

sight and the necessity of insight as Angelou illuminates over the rest of the poem.

It takes the words of the forefathers themselves for the persona, and the words of the poet for (some of) us Angelou implies, to see the triumph as well:

My Fathers speak in voices
that shred my fact and sound
they say 'It's our submission
that makes the world go round.' (13-16)

Angelou's art is thus a rewriting/ 're-righting' of our conception of ancestral lives. Now the persona can affirm what the poet herself does. The lives of the old ones were living acts of signifyin' - deploying the indirection of wit and word, as well as the inescapable life sentence of work- for the survival of the young and the yet unborn:

They used their finest cunning
their naked wit and wiles
the lowly Uncle Tomming
and Aunt Jemima's smiles.

They've laughed to shield their crying
then shuffled through their dreams
and stepped 'n' fetched a country
to write the blues with screams. (17-24)

These words of the persona mark a paradigm shift in her perception of her ancestors. Now she can testify that adaptability is not abasement, that subtlety is not sycophancy. They are also Angelou's succinct but potent indictment of all who are ashamed of their bloodline. Her allusions to Uncle Tom and Aunt Jemima highlight the powerful and controversial ways in which African American lives and history have been variously (mis)represented and/or (mis)interpreted and exploited in literature, entertainment and business. They symbolize the difficulties of discerning the truth about the characters and experiences of African Americans too. We must not, the poet avers, confuse the truth of our ancestors with the stereotypical caricatures of minstrel shows nor the fictions of paradisiacal plantation life for slaves in America's South.

In the closing verse, the persona concludes with new vision:
I understand their meaning
it could and did derive
from living on the edge of death
They kept my race alive. (25-28)

Comparable to the poems for and/or about her mother, brother and paternal uncle, the motif of African American resilience infuses Angelou's tribute to her forefathers. Again it is their capacity for survival she celebrates.

As is true of "Willie," Angelou's use of form in "Song for the Old Ones" is especially appropriate. Its ballad quality points to the poet's concern with the (hi)story of her people and its interpretation. It reminds us that, as Bujubanton sang in "Untold Stories," for many descendants of African Americans "the full has never been told." It reinforces our awareness that like the broadside ballad, much African American literary art is rooted in actuality, in this case what Stephen Henderson calls the "Black Experience" (10). The fact that ballads were originally sung reinforces the link between African American slave experience and music declared in Angelou's title. As Houston A. Baker has argued, African American lives "have always been sharply conditioned by an 'economics of slavery'" (3). Out of this, they have created the blues music which offers "a phylogenetic recapitulation .

. . of species experience" (5). It is on this "signal expressive achievement of blues" (11) that Angelou draws as well to craft a praise song for her ancestors' self-sacrifice. In the imagery of their pain already referred to, the poet has incorporated one element of the blues. In their act of laughing to hide crying she has articulated a typical behavior of which the blues is a musical expression. Above all, the assertion that the old ones wrote 'the blues with screams' testifies to the apparently innate ability of black people (in this instance) to birth creativity from the crucible of pain. In Kathy Essick's summation, "Angelou again captures the mood, spirit, and feel of the African-American music form known as the blues" (52).

Relationships with her immediate and ancestral bloodline are only two of Angelou's subjects and the perspectives from which she writes. Another distinguishing feature of the participation of African American women poets in vernacular culture which Fahamisha Brown notes is that "[w]omen writers seem to have a more personal investment in future generations than do male writers" (109). Furthermore, they "also worry about the nature of the world they are leaving to their children" (110-111). Such concern about the state and fate of children and the younger generation, their present circumstances and the legacy adults will bequeath them, is just as much a part of Angelou's poems too.

American society, Angelou implies in the didactic "Take Time Out," is excessively absorbed in a lifestyle that leaves it oblivious to the needs of posterity. In each of the first three verses, Angelou uses an adverbial sentence to caution that the presence of specific categories of people, identified by their attire, possessions and lifestyles, is a wordless 'call' that should prompt societal consideration of powerful failings of which these people's existence is symptomatic. The uncounted, nameless ones who embrace the hippie or peace and free love values of the 1960s and spend their lives hitchhiking (to nowhere?) are human interrogatives about the violence and pleasure-seeking to which humankind is addicted:

you ought to ask
 What's all the
 warring and the jarring
 and the
 killing and
 the thrilling
 all about. (5-11)

So too is the male veteran or vagrant whose meagre possessions impugn society's ubiquitous aggression, dishonesty and greed:

you'd better ask
 What's all the
 beating and
 the cheating and
 the bleeding and
 the needing
 all about. (17-23)

Along with these, the drug drunk female walking shoeless in the rain is a living query about pervasive deceit, death, frenetic activity and violence:

you need to ask
 What's all the
 lying and the
 dying and

all the running and
 the gunning
 all about. (29-35)

Most or all of these groups seem to be people who have rejected the status quo, those inhabiting the social periphery, outcasts with no fixed place of abode. The urgency of the social plight they embody is highlighted by the variations Angelou uses to reprove the indifferent society: "ought," "better," and "need." It is also underscored by the capitalization of each word in the ringing refrain that constitutes the one-line warning response in this poem patterned on the traditional call-and-response structure. If the future is not to be subverted, the command declares, it is imperative that society invests that most precious and elusive resource of the modern age: 'Take Time Out.'

As in several other poems, Angelou (or her persona) finds in the Bible both the diagnosis and prescription for the widespread social ailment. In a more directly imperative tone, she openly asserts in verse four:

Use a minute
 feel some sorrow
 for the folks
 who think tomorrow
 is a place that they
 can call up
 on the phone.
 Take a month
 And show some kindness
 for the folks
 who thought that blindness
 was an illness that
 affected eyes alone. (37-49)

Like Christ, she commands society to acknowledge the blood bond we share one with another. The fortunate must sympathize with the (self-)deluded just as Paul taught that we should "Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep" (Rom. 12.15). They must extend love to those who lack insight for "Where there is no vision the people perish" (Prov. 29.18). Angelou's poem clearly endorses Christ's teaching that human harmony and social upliftment abide in a personal consciousness of a spiritual obligation to see Him in all humanity and treat them as one would God himself: "Inasmuch as you have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matt. 25.40). Conscious of the tremendous challenge doing so might be for many, Angelou encourages them to begin with a "minute" and a "month" to increase their capacity for more sustained Christian charity.

Less the reader/society perceive the charge as a personal affront by someone with a delusion of moral superiority, the persona shifts pronouns from "you" to "we," as (black) preachers have done for generations, thus acknowledging personal culpability and the self-referential application of her admonition:

If you know that youth
 Is dying on the run
 and my daughter trades
 dope stories with your son
 we'd better see
 what all our

fearing and our
 jeering and our
 crying and
 our lying
 brought about. (50-60)

Angelou climaxes this poem from the 1975 volume Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well by highlighting drugs as not only a principal scourge afflicting youth in general and thus humanity's future but also a tremendous social leveller that puts the persona and the adult reader, Americans of all walks of life (and people elsewhere too) at risk of implosion if they are callous to the death culture to which they have contributed and which threatens to devour posterity. Unless, that is, we "Take Time Out" (61).

Among black people, children's games often include an agreed strategy (a 'time out') enabling a weary player to take a break during which the rules no longer apply and/or the game is suspended. Perhaps Angelou's title and refrain are an ironic commentary, a highly compressed criticism that we are playing games with our future, and that unless we take our situation seriously and return to 'normality,' we might have no future at all.

But Angelou has lived too long, has read too much, has seen too much and is much too honest to have us think that social apathy is all that imperils posterity. To anyone who has lived through the second half of the twentieth century, so many sub-Saharan African states, and for so long, have been plagued by famine, to say nothing of disease and poverty, that the crisis must seem irremediable. Despite massively successful humanitarian efforts like USA for Africa and Band Aid which raised millions of dollars, the horror of hunger still haunts Africa. For Africa's black children, imminent death is ever a clear and present danger. This is what Angelou considers in "Televised" which seems the counterpoint to "Take Time Out" for while the latter reproves social indifference, the former reflects individual sympathy.

For people thousands of miles away, a "half-used day" may be turned into "a waste of desolation" through the power of television to transmit news featuring devastating images of Africa's famine-stricken black children whose physiques are a parody of plenty:

the sad-eyed faces of
 bony children,
 distended bellies making
 mock at their starvation. (7-10)

Here, Angelou highlights the emotional and intellectual reverberations the plight of this massive swath of humanity can and does have. In contrast to "Take Time Out," the persona/poet can offer no indictment of society. Nor can she propose any redress. The speaker of "Take Time Out" could declaim confident cautions and affirm Christian counsel, such certainty reinforced by the rhythm and rhymes of that piece, suggestive of some 'poetry' still being possible in our endangered future. The persona of "Televised," however, is stymied by the state of Africa's black children, in whose lives no 'poetry' appears possible. Her sense of impotence is reinforced by the free verse form. She can only ask questions as unanswered and perhaps unanswerable as Vladimir and Estragon's about Godot's arrival:

Why are they always
 Black?
 Whom do they await? (11-13)

The plight of Africa's sons and daughters, Angelou seems to suggest, may be no less inscrutable to us than is life to the characters in Beckett's Absurdist universe.

The poet shows that the visual impact of Africa's dying future may be so deeply distressing that its reverberations can be as potently visceral as they are intellectual. Similar to Angelou's persona, we who live in a country of plenty may be revolted by the very meals we are about to eat:

The lamb-chop flesh
reeks and cannot be
eaten. Even the
green peas roll on my plate
unmolested. Their innocence
matched by the helpless
hope in the children's faces. (14-20)

Here, Angelou's olfactory imagery of contaminated meat, her transference of violation from the children to the personified peas and the oxymoron of "helpless/hope" underscore a human capacity for sensitivity that greatly contrasts with the callousness she deplors in "Take Time Out."

Angelou ends this engagement with posterity with the same dual focus and tone that characterize it:

Why do black children
hope? Who will bring
them peas and lamb chops
and one more morning? (21-24)

The persona's questions are again unanswered and probably unanswerable. They bespeak her puzzlement (and ours) in the face of perhaps ineradicable privation. They voice her compassion and ours. The first query points to the aforementioned potential for survival valued by Angelou and celebrated in the poems about her immediate blood relations already discussed. Grim as their condition and future, if they have any, undeniably are, Africa's black children look toward the world with hope. The second question seems to point to a common (Western) perception, valid or otherwise, that Africa's saviour must come from outside that continent itself. It appears to hold in equipoise the possibility of revitalization for these children and the possibility/probability that there will be none. It is evocative of that paradoxical commingling of loss and uplift typical of Shakespearean tragedy. Even more, it is reminiscent of the aphorism Samuel Beckett is said to have attributed to St. Augustine: "Do not despair - one of the thieves was saved; do not presume - one of the thieves was damned" (Hutchings 48). For Angelou too, the future of Africa's children may ultimately be a comparable conundrum.

Angelou's poems on propinquity and posterity explored here are reasonably representative of her opus and vision. They reveal her consciousness of the challenges her ancestors have faced. They acknowledge and/or acclaim the resilience and strength her foreparents have shown. They represent her not always straightforward attitudes to family. They are expressions of caring and criticism. The poems show too some of the varied artistic genes, now dominant, now recessive, that flow through Angelou's creative veins. They say blood matters.

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