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“Nothing Much Happens”: the Process of Constructing Coherent Selves in A Tree Grows in Brooklyn and I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

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"Nothing Much Happens": The Process of Constructing Coherent Selves in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

The foreword of the 2001 edition of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1943) by Betty Smith declares that "In its nearly five hundred pages, nothing much happens" (*A Tree Grows* vi). While satisfying in its brevity, critic Anna Quindlen's statement is not quite true, as she goes on to admit. Betty Smith takes on a tremendous amount of work in developing the place, people, and themes of *A Tree Grows*. Throughout what some might call a random collection of anecdotes, a girl strikingly similar to a younger version of Smith (and indeed, popularly assumed to be exactly Smith's younger self) learns to read, reflects on questions of identity and inequality, and experiences all the specific joys and challenges of life in Brooklyn, New York in the early 1900s.

Maya Angelou's first autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), similarly develops within an anecdotal structure. From Angelou's childhood through the birth of her son, the work focuses more on the development of the main character, Marguerite, and her experiences than on the development of a single, driving plot. As with *A Tree Grows*, careful attention to Angelou's work transforms fragmented events and emotions into sharp and purposeful storytelling as the reader grows along with the characters. Developments of the first few chapters of both books find neat echoes in the final chapters, and along the way, symbols and characters take on richer meaning until their modified return is enough to signal that the protagonists have definitively grown as writers and people.

Smith and Angelou vividly paint the places, people, and customs that contextualize Francie and Marguerite's growth. In fact, the societies that both the protagonists and the authors

talk back to contribute greatly to how they express themselves, whether this means Francie and Marguerite imagining more fair or attractive versions of specific incidents in their lives in the style of melodramas, or the authors addressing historical moments such as the announcement of America entering WWI or the 1935 boxing match between Joe Louis and Primo Carnera. The interplays between past and present and between personal and public all inform how Smith and Angelou describe and develop the stories of their younger selves. While it might sound strange to find such dynamism in something as apparently inert as written word, the works might rightfully be understood as speeches in a conversation: the ideas and experiences presented in both works gain meaning in their historical contexts but also in their reception by audiences and the further legacies that Smith and Angelou built after the publications of their first books.

Movement from passive observers and subjects of their worlds to active participants make Francie and Marguerite into speakers, persons with whom Smith and Angelou might speak to as well as about. Maturity in the characters and the authors requires the successful balance of navigating established convention and asserting a unique and personal claim to their places in life. While it might appear that "nothing much happens," Smith and Angelou accomplish plenty of literary and emotional work, structuring their lives in conversation with influences from their past and audiences of the future as well as continually building on the voice established in their works.

Autobiography: The Role of Time and Theme in Narrative Certainty

The genre of autobiography enacts self-construction through its separation of subject and author by time, permission to consider the self as a character, and narrative certainty. However, as a chosen genre, autobiography is tricky to analyze. The history of criticism concerning autobiography centers largely on deciding what defines it. What, for instance, makes a memoir

different from a diary or distinguishes autobiography from life-writing? The elements of time, self-awareness, and the line between self-construction and self-disguising only begin to introduce the problem. The *Oxford English Dictionary* does not distinguish between memoir and autobiography, and historically, memoir and "confession" both referred to writing that now falls under the category of autobiography. In fact, the latter term did not emerge until the late eighteenth century (Cox 123). However, for the sake of simplicity, this paper defines autobiography as a text in which the subject and the author are the same person, separated by some years, and with a particular focus on the subject's responses and experiences within a given context.

Next, there is the question of fact. Autobiography shares a personal and specific experience with its readers but to what end? Critics Cosslett and Lury acknowledge "a connection between self-writing and self-construction" born of literary and historical inquiry, noting that there is also a "common academic assumption" that the work of the working-class belongs more to the historian than the literary critic, being more fact than artful fiction (26). Assertions of this sort incorrectly limit the creative abilities of all those with non-traditional educations as well as the interests of reading audiences; for instance, they fail to account for figures such as Margery Kempe, considered by some scholars to have dictated the first autobiography written originally in English (Drabble 552), and Harriet Jacobs**,** whose autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* represents only part of her advocacy and relief work and was named by the *New York Times* as one of the most significant slave narratives in the American tradition (Reynolds).

While autobiography implies fact, and the relatively recent rise of creative nonfiction as a genre certainly holds enough space for the subgenres of memoirs and autobiographies, what is

needed to consider *A Tree Grows* and *Caged Bird* as autobiography is something with a little more room for creative license. For this, critics might find the term *autofiction* helpful. Coined by French author and literary critic Serge Doubrovsky, *autofiction* approaches life-writing with a distancing between the author and self that results in the writer treating the self as a subject of fiction (402). When this sort of separation occurs, an author can safely prioritize strict truth below narrative coherence. In Angelou's case, the use of dialogue, well-rounded characters, and deliberate development of several characteristics of fiction such as theme, setting, and language have led several critics to classify her work as beyond strictly autobiographical (Lupton 29). For Smith, the line between fiction and autobiographical fact has been muddied even further. Rather than a character or two assembled from the impressions and quirks of multiple individuals, the project that eventually became *A Tree Grows* was originally submitted to Harper and Brothers' 125th Anniversary Non-Fiction Contest ("Making the Working-Class" 43). After seven publishers' rejections, under the objection that "People want to get away from the poor" (47), Smith understood the implications of the publishers' notes—that they felt the life of a girl from Brooklyn could not sell as a subject for respected life writing—and began pitching her finished novel instead as a fictional "slice of life" piece about the period from 1900 to 1916 (43). Pieces from Smith's own childhood, her mother's childhood, current events, and other observations of contemporary life make the details of the *A Tree Grows,* marketed as fiction, nearly indistinguishable from Smith's own experiences (44). In fact, after *A Tree Grows* was published, a reviewer at *The New York Times,* who had grown up in the neighborhood so vividly described, "challenged the 'publisher's decision to call the book a novel'" (43). Despite various departures from strict fact, both *Caged Bird* and *A Tree Grows* are still considered autobiographical for the purposes of this paper because whatever details become mixed up with the historical or

emotional truth, both texts are written by the subject, about a time in their individual past, and with a focus on the development of their life and their responses to their circumstances.

Another difference between *Caged Bird* and *A Tree Grows* and other foundational autobiographies can be attributed to how the goal of the genre has changed throughout history. While early autobiographies such as *The Confessions of St. Augustine* and *The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* sought to present a unifying meaning to life, concerned with moments from birth to present, more recent works seem content with fragmented and subjective work, featuring what Doubrovsky calls a "broken subject" (Celestin 400). Feminist critic Shari Benstock posited this idea first but in different terms and in opposition to the limits of autobiography set forth by Georges Gusdorf in his essay "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography." While Gusdorf claims that autobiography captures an internal alignment and preserved distinction of self from reflection, as in a mirror, Benstock argues that autobiography deals in smudged lines. More specifically, autobiography under this perspective examines the space where the self and self-image choose consciously not to overlap. Instead, according to Benstock, autobiography uses the discrepancy between the two as a beginning place to explore "the 'seam' of the conscious/unconscious where boundaries between internal and external overlap" (9). The arrangement, narration, and themes highlighted by the narratives of *Caged Bird* and *A Tree Grows* both feature protagonists, Marguerite and Francie, who grow up reflecting on this border.

In *Caged Bird,* Angelou tells the story of her younger self, Marguerite. Over the course of the book, Marguerite and her brother, Bailey Jr. find themselves carted across the country several times to visit their parents and return to their home in Stamps, Alabama where they live with their maternal grandmother, Momma. Each move punctuates a time of fuller understanding and

confidence for Marguerite but also further distance between herself and Bailey, her charismatic protector. In Stamps, the tight-knit community seems to swirl around the strength and generosity of Momma, whose general store sends workers out to the fields early in the morning and watches them trudge back home in the evenings. However, idyllic childhood scenes are punctuated by moments that overwhelm Marguerite with feelings of powerlessness and shame. One incident stands out in which "Powhitetrash" girls harass Momma on her own lawn, but Momma ignores them, determinedly humming a hymn instead. Marguerite hides behind the screen door and seethes. Later, Marguerite's time living with her mother, Vivian, first in St. Louis and then San Francisco introduces Marguerite to the colorful characters of the Black underground but also to Mr. Freeman, the man who would molest and rape Marguerite. Here especially, Marguerite feels a great distance between Bailey and herself; he can no longer come to her aid with a well-placed quip. After Vivian discovers Marguerite's underwear, the case goes to court, and Marguerite's rapist is afterward reported dead, likely murdered by one of Marguerite's uncles. The trauma of presenting in court and the subsequent death of Mr. Freeman causes Marguerite to stop speaking, and she and Bailey are sent back to Stamps from St. Louis. Marguerite remains mute but becomes an insatiable listener: "I discovered that to achieve perfect personal silence all I had to do was to attach myself leechlike to sound. I began to listen to everything" (Angelou *Caged Bird* 87).

Marguerite begins to speak again thanks to the kindly intervention of Mrs. Bertha Flowers, a resident of Stamps. The elegant and well-read lady is one of the first people in Marguerite's life to take an interest in her for her own sake rather than as the soft-spoken sister of Bailey or the charge of Mama, a prominent community member. Flowers asks Marguerite to memorize and recite literature aloud, and over the course of several meetings Marguerite regains

her voice. However, Marguerite finds that life in Stamps no longer holds the rosy feeling of childhood, and a series of observations at a church revival and graduation make it clear to Marguerite that the children are growing too big for their environment. Marguerite begins to take stands against the racism that bewildered and humiliated her before leaving Stamps. While working for a white woman who attempts to call her by a different name, Marguerite breaks the woman's prized dishware and walks out. When Marguerite returns to live with Vivian in San Francisco, school, which once made Marguerite feel important and connected, loses its luster. Instead, Marguerite sets her sights on working as a streetcar conductor. Due to persistence, she becomes the first black woman to run a streetcar. At sixteen, feeling uncertain of her sexuality, Marguerite decides to have sex to prove to herself that she is straight and becomes pregnant. Although fearful of the responsibility of a child, she feels comforted by a mix of gratefulness, love, and possession. Her son will be hers, and despite fears of motherhood's responsibility, her mother tells her that "[i]f you're for the right thing, then you do it without thinking" (Angelou *Caged Bird* 289). The events of *Caged Bird* build up the reader's understanding of Marguerite's increasing ability to become an active participant in her life, using the lessons of her past to raise her son.

A Tree Grows similarly follows the early life of a young girl, Francie Nolan, until she is sixteen. Francie is the oldest daughter to Katie and Johnny. Like Marguerite, she is quiet, interacting with the world mainly by reading and observing the comings and goings of her neighborhood in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Smith details the happenings of Brooklyn from the crush of crowds in line at the butchers to life in the tenements. While Katie, a hard-working, steel-strong sort keeps the family afloat and tries to educate and protect her children as best she can, the children's father, Johnny, works off and on as a singing waiter and comes home drunk

more evenings than not. Francie, taken by stories of all sorts, re-writes the endings of plays, copies down observations about her family, teachers, and fellow Brooklynites, and acquaints readers with the many and various social and political goings-on. Education, family, and storytelling all become themes around which the various characters in Francie's life gather. Notable moments include Francie's vaccination at which a nurse makes a snide comment about the "filthy poor," a teacher who confronts Francie for writing "ugly" stories to remember her alcoholic father, and Francie's transfer to a different school. As she grows, Francie struggles to reconcile the wonder and joy of the world she reads about and watches in plays with the harsh realities she observes daily. Katie and Johnny serve as opposing forces for practicality and imagination in Francie's life, and writing becomes a way to puzzle through it all. For both Francie and Marguerite, the experience of learning to challenge societal standards and process through their own role in their families and their communities is filtered through a love of and use of stories to forge better futures for themselves.

The line between Smith and Angelou as authors and Francie and Marguerite as characters is thin and requires clarification. In order to avoid rabbit-hole-speculation this paper will recognize the separation that the act of writing provides. By committing past events, true or imagined, to writing, both authors construct personas, fixed characters representing parts of themselves but not quite the same. Through these characters, Smith and Angelou can explore the seam between unconscious and conscious by writing themes, historical context, and the beginnings of future personal growth into their pasts. As Benstock points out, language itself serves as a bridge between the internal and the external, a tool that is self-directed but established by cultural, societal, and personal contexts (9). Additionally, time provides a distance that allows reconciliation between subject and writer with the events featured in the autobiography. *A Tree*

Grows and *Caged Bird* cover a nearly identical age range, ending for both Francie and Marguerite at the age of sixteen, giving the authors' adult selves time to turn their own lives into a sort of myth. For both, the present, writing self could become like an "other" in relation to the subject, providing impossible foreknowledge and certainty that the past self's actions will lead to the present. This certainty is crucial because it is only with a fixed end that the events of the past can be sorted effectively into themes that yield greater meaning.

Angelou especially saw and utilized the privilege of distance in constructing her autobiographies, seeking in her writing to speak with the voice of the subject's time rather than her present voice (Angelou "An Interview" 287). In a silent hotel room with all pictures removed, Angelou hunted for a few incidents with a common theme, casting aside those that veered, in her opinion, too close to melodrama (Moore 288). While this careful structuring did not necessarily provide clarity for the author, distance allowed her to place her experiences in historical context with a clearer meaning. As she once told critic Cheryl. A Wall, "[a] good autobiographer seems to write about herself and is in fact writing about the temper of the times…So that a good one brings the reader into an historical event as if the reader was standing there" (Angelou "Angelou at the Algonquin" 13). And so, Angelou's works aim to bridge not only a plurality of time—telling the story of the past for the audience of the dynamic present—but also a plurality of person, connecting her individual experiences with the attitude and impact of historical movements. For example, in *Caged Bird*, boxer Joe Louis' match against Primo Carnera in 1935 becomes a larger symbol of the Black struggle in America. When Louis takes a hit, Angelou writes, "My race groaned. It was our people falling. It was another lynching" (*Caged Bird* 135). This connection between historical events and Angelou's commentary hinges on the crucial plural pronouns.

When Angelou writes of the fight, “We didn’t breathe. We didn’t hope” (*Caged Bird* 135), the “we” reads a larger historical story onto the experience of the subject, Marguerite, from the perspective of Angelou, the writer. Angelou creates a dual effect here by attributing recognition of the social importance of Louis’ performance to her younger self but also as the writer uses the “we” to participate in an African American literary tradition. Angelou describes her participation as “always saying *I* meaning *we"* (*The Art*). Here she refers to the social purpose of slave narratives, using a singular story to invite an estranged audience of white readers to build empathy with the texts’ subjects. This strategy, specifically African American authors inviting an audience that cannot fully understand their experiences into their story stretches back through to slave narratives, perhaps the most well-known of which is Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, A Slave* (1845). Like many other formerly enslaved authors, Douglass presented his experiences with the goal of “pleading the cause of [his] brethren” (69) in a case for their humanity and to confront readers with the cruelty of enslavement. As Milette Shamir notes in her article on the public and private natures of slavery, enslaved peoples were “relegated to a private space that they did not own, were denied full personhood (lacking, as they did, both public voice and private reprieve)” (102). The amount of control and authority afforded by publishing his story enabled Douglass to present his case to a public that might not have otherwise been open to hearing. He cites political anthology *The Colombian Orator* (1797) as introducing him to the tradition of formal cases against slavery (Douglass 23). Similarly, Angelou signals awareness of joining such a tradition as she writes Marguerite to be understood as a part of both the communal and time-bound experience of the fight and the ongoing racial struggle from which Angelou will emerge with a perspective fortified with hindsight. This perspective allows Angelou to return to the events of her past with

purpose and present something cohesive for an audience that might not understand her cultural heritage.

While Marguerite is unable to understand and act from her feelings of mingled shame and pride, the writer Angelou effectively uses an understanding of the historical and personal significance of Louis' match against Carnera as part of her ongoing narrative of development. This section of *Caged Bird* includes incisive observations of Black pride and shame in two particular events that follow the same emotional pattern. A weeknight revival's sermon expresses the black church's comfort in projecting themselves as martyrs and white bosses as rightfully suffering. In both cases, the weary retreat-goers return home all too soon asking "How long, oh God?" (Angelou *Caged Bird* 132), and the town's victory flush from Joe Louis' match is checked by the pragmatism of out-of-town visitors staying overnight to avoid assault on the road from enraged white fans. This deliberate arrangement overcomes feelings of ineffectiveness by clearly communicating the emotions and context of the experience with the certainty of events in which Marguerite moves from an observer to an actor. This process passes without Marguerite's recognition but benefits from Angelou's perspective and audience witness to Angelou's accomplishments as a young person at this specific time and in her many roles assumed in the future. While Marguerite is not aware during her time in Stamps that she will become the first black woman to run a streetcar in San Francisco, Angelou knows, and the knowing makes passive moments and the collective experience of the townsfolk of Stamps a meaningful part of a progression toward action. The something in Marguerite that seethed as she watched a ragtag group of white girls openly disrespect her grandmother and the part that felt personal responsibility for her own rape are blunted not in their emotional impact but by putting feelings of powerlessness into a text that is certain of Marguerite's empowerment in becoming Angelou.

The same confidence in history that grants Angelou's reflections on the Joe Louis match deeper resonance can be read also in Smith's narration of Francie's response to America's entry into The Great War. However, rather than an inclusive, communal remembrance, Smith opts for a highly individual mode of processing for Francie, one that grants an almost too sentimental amount of space for reflection:

> Francie had a vision. Fifty years from now, she'd be telling her grandchildren how she had come to the office, sat at her reader's desk and in the routine of work had read [in the newspaper] that war had been declared…. She decided to fix this time in her life exactly the way it was this instant. Perhaps that way she could hold on to it as a living thing and not have it become something called a memory. (*A Tree Grows* 419)

Francie is deeply concerned here with the difference between stories based in heavy-handed narration and nostalgia and those rooted in experiential detail. After deciding to remember beyond the broad strokes of that morning, Francie takes a few moments to lock in the details of her realization. She listens to the sounds of her work—a sort of custom newsletter service that clips and collects newspaper articles regarding various topics, pays attention to the textures of her surroundings, and clips a lock of hair to seal in an envelope with a newly minted penny, a poem written by a Brooklynite, and the article announcing war. She labels the envelope with her name and date and then prays, "Dear God...let me be *something* every minute of every hour of my life" (420).

Smith marks the historical significance by granting four pages for Francie's response to reading about the war. However, she also highlights the incident for readers by connecting it with another instance of intense emotion and personal importance: Francie's first time seeing a tulip. Both times, she describes feeling an unsteadiness. About the tulip encounter, Francie

recalls that “everything went around like the colors in a kaleidoscope” (405). Readers might compare this to how “the floor seemed to swerve up, colors flashed before her eyes” (422) the morning America enters World War I. As Smith develops Francie’s relationship with beauty and hardships, the overwhelming conclusion is that she should take advantage of what Smith would later call “the fullness of life” in an essay entitled “Fall in Love with Life” (5). Whether through an experience similar to Francie’s or due to this philosophy, formed later in life, Smith brings the reader into the specific historical context by hyper-individual and detailed narration rather than a direct and symbolic use of “we.” The attention Francie gives to this scene is impactful because Smith and her readers already know what comes next, both America’s part in the World War I and its involvement in World War II. However, Smith’s choice here is highly individualist, and the space she allows Francie to process and honor the moment forfeits some of its power for its sentimentality.

Later, as Francie cries over the headline, a co-worker mistakenly comforts her on the assumption she has a boyfriend or a brother subject to the draft. Francie feels unable to explain her tears and answers “truthfully enough” (422) that she does have a brother; although, the readers know he is still too young to be drafted. Rather than clarify to her coworker, Francie feels content in her own way of processing events, collecting various pieces in an envelope to keep her memory alive. That Francie can act with clarity to preserve history and brush off miscommunication is the product of an entire book’s worth of growth. In fact, the majority of both *A Tree Grows* and *Caged Bird* chronicle the protagonists’ struggles to refine and realize their contribution to the personal and political history they are experiencing. While the distance time provides is a crucial enabler to the process, so are the authors’ choices to honor, echo, or exclude cultural influences.

Contextual Selves: Reconciling Internal Development with External Influences

While autobiography effectively reconciles internal discontinuities between Smith and Angelou's past and present selves, there is also continuity created between the authors' internal visions of self and their broader contexts as they choose to honor, echo, or exclude cultural influences. The events of the texts chronicle the authors moving closer to writing their respective autobiographical works, validating and reconciling any disjointed points between feelings of confusion or powerlessness and the authors' present abilities to act and impact their world through their writing.

Smith utilizes the certainty that time provides to smooth over divisions between the way things were and "the way [life] should have been" (Pfeiffer 12). Francie's development affirms the necessity of lived experience in discerning and creating meaning. The central chapters of *A Tree Grows*' Book Three integrate Francie's developing understandings of storytelling and sex, linking the development of Francie's voice with a growing understanding of the neighborhood's, her family's, and her own views on sex, marriage, and dignity. On July 1st, Francie records in her journal the beginning of an essay on intolerance. However, when Francie reads her journal entries aloud, they sound to her "like words that came in a can" (Smith *A Tree Grows* 229) because they leave out the inspiring incident: the near stoning of local single mother, Joanna. Joanna's crime is taking her baby for a walk in a stroller. Provoked by the young girl's pride in her baby, the local married women taunt Joanna, escalating the situation until they throw stones at her, accidentally striking the baby (232-234). The young mother carries her child back to her apartment, leaving the baby carriage behind. Francie's first entry speaks of intolerance in terms of its global impact, attributing to it "most of the viciousness, violence, terror [etc.]… and soul breaking of the world" (229). Far more significant to Francie's growth as a writer and

development of her worldview is Francie's decision to place her only copy of her first published composition in Joanna's baby carriage as Francie returns it to the proper doorstep. When faced with a cruel reality, Francie presents her writing as a comfort and penance, the only response she perceives as authentic. The genre of essay is not yet an authentic and proper response to this confusing grief; she needs years' worth of time to begin sorting through the complex clashes of values and experiences she has just witnessed. However, once that time has been granted, Francie might become Betty Smith and return to the incident with both the details and emotions of the experience and the clarity to sort them into a story.

Within the frame of the incident with Joanna, Francie begins to form an opinion about societal responses to single mothers and women in general. However, outside the scene, Smith uses, as Angelou does, the careful juxtaposition of personal experience against the certainty of the story's conclusion to make the disgust and confusion of Joanna's near-stoning valuable. The adult voice of *A Tree Grows* plays a more active role than in *Caged Bird*, perhaps because of the further distance that third-person narration permits. Because of the removed point of view, Smith can both show the limitations of Francie's knowledge of Joanna's circumstances and also make a broader statement on the nature of all women. The narrator's observation that women "stuck together for only one thing: to trample on some other woman" (*A Tree Grows* 237) gives voice to what Francie's direct response, a diary entry in the first person fails to say. By presenting both Francie's attempt at processing the incident and a statement delivered by her older self, Smith both preserves and justifies Francie's limited perspective and response. Smith's combined use of removed description, "objective" narration, and first-person narration signal to the reader a cohesive purpose to scattered and often confusing coming-of-age events in the same way that

Angelou uses historical context to give order and purpose to the events of her childhood such as the Joe Louis match.

Having established that Smith and Angelou use their work to justify their experiences, the next question is to whom? While Angelou seeks a more internal reconciliation between the actions and emotions of her past self and her present self, the distinctive voice that spoke from the podium at Bill Clinton's Presidential Inauguration Ceremony, interviews with Oprah, and even the pavement of PBS' "Sesame Street" developed in conversation with her audience and publishers. In fact, Angelou told *The Paris Review* that writing in search of personal clarity "doesn't alleviate anything" (Angelou *The Art of*). Rather, Angelou said that "the facts can obscure the truth, what it really felt like" (*The Art of*). The internal reconciliation that takes place in *Caged Bird* is affected by and made possible through interactions with external influences. Similarly, Smith demonstrates an awareness of her audience and broader culture when she writes in the notes prefacing her autobiography, *A Tree, A Book, A Child* (1964)—a work whose original text was first reassembled as *A Tree Grows*—that she would record only what might "put me in an admirable light" (i). For both authors, composing a coherent self does not end with the published product but consists of an ongoing evolution, in which truth extends beyond fact, and their conversations with the characters of their past selves play out with an awareness of an attentive audience.

As rhetorician Ian Barnard writes, "While a voice's composer can form a self-audience, meaning becomes magnified and multiplied in the processes of reception by other audiences" (68). Through publication, Angelou and Smith demonstrate how the lessons and experiences of their past bring real change in their present through narrative certainty but also reconcile their matured self-vision with the world that challenged each author as a child. Each protagonist,

through the progression of scenes and reflections on their developing relationship with writing, come to answer (of course indirectly) a question posed by Irene Clark to academic writers: "Can people become proficient academic writers without accepting the values of a particular scene and perhaps the social inequities embodied in that scene?" (191) As students and children, Smith and Angelou begin as passive observers, taking in and imitating the voices and values of their respective cultural scenes. However, as they grow in confidence and practice, the authors produce works that are both thoroughly products of their historical place and also able to confront the values and social inequities found within. The works are crafted purposefully from lived experience, and the choices Angelou and Smith make, from which anecdotes appear to how they contextualize their experiences against history and cultural moments, constitute their voices.

In his essay "Looking and Listening for my Voice," Toby Fulwiler concludes that while style is certainly part of voice, "the writing topic itself contributes to the sense of voice" (219). Furthermore, traditions he had relegated to the past continue to inform his voice but now through a more conscious effort. Both Francie and Marguerite craft their voice from the cultural traditions of the past, but more importantly, in their lived experience of those traditions in their present. Standards outlining what is acceptable to write about, to think about, and to tell others about change as they inherit the confidence to enter the conversation.

At the beginning of *A Tree Grows*, Francie's relationship to storytelling is mostly one-sided, a wide and indiscriminate consumption with little critical engagement. Francie has set the goal of reading every book in the library in alphabetical order (Smith 22), even going so far as to begin copying a favorite book into her own two-penny notebook (26). She desperately wants to own a piece of literature. The best way to do this, she believes, is by keeping its physical presence. She values consistency—i.e. the physical experience of a library book defining the

story within it. Examples of this worldview in which the symbol is the object include a mental game in which she imagines pets and their owners as similar physically and by personality and a more serious moment when she first confronts the realities of aging and death while imagining a backstory for fellow bakery customers (15, 27). The physical and social isolation and slow decay of an old man waiting on a bench limits for young Francie his potential for a flourishing mental or emotional life.

At this early stage, storytelling is a way to establish consistency between the stories Francie reads and her lived experience, a goal accomplished by unquestioning acceptance of the standards set by these stories. This approach to storytelling mirrors Gusdorf's proposed definition for self, using story to define place clearly through roles. On the most literal level, Francie directly appropriates the language of established voices. Owing to a family habit of reading a page of the King James Version of the Bible every night, Francie tells a potential playmate that she will "begat" her jump rope so the two can play (Smith *A Tree Grows* 109). When the other girl accuses Francie of sounding like an Italian, Francie shoots back that she talks "like God talks" (109). From this point, Smith sets out to develop for readers how Francie talks, particularly in contrast with the standards others set for her.

Francie's break with the standards of beauty set by a treasured authority, her teacher, arrives when Miss Gardner confronts the young writer about her "sordid little stories" (Smith *A Tree Grows* 323), essays which reflect on the complexities of her recently deceased alcoholic father. In response, Francie adopts Miss Gardner's phrasing when she asks her teacher, "What does one write about?" (321). The sudden formal and distanced language Miss Gardner uses speaks to her limited view of beauty and truth as "things like the stars always being there and the sun always rising and the true nobility of man" (321). This version of beauty, which had inspired

Francie to write essays about things she had no experience with, is also impersonal, making sweeping statements that exclude certain complexities and realities in the same way Miss Gardner declares there is "no excuse" for poverty beyond laziness (322). Miss Gardner's sharp critique of Francie's essays briefly but effectively returns Francie to the habits of her younger years. However, after the conversation with Miss Gardner, Francie begins to question the gap between the voices she consumes, and the one informed by her experience of the world.

Upon returning home from the meeting with Miss Gardner, Francie sets out to write a novel featuring "the untrue story of Francie's life" (Smith *A Tree Grows* 325), composed of all the fluff and niceties Miss Gardner recommended. However, after reflecting on the initial chapters, Francie begins to critically consider the gap between her teacher's standards of beauty and her own reality. She notes that whether she writes honestly about hunger or spins elaborate descriptions of meals she could never afford, the result is the same. When this dawns on her, Francie burns her "A-compositions," chanting what her teacher instructed her to: "I am burning ugliness" (Smith *A Tree Grows* 324). Burning the compositions represents Francie's first step to constructing her own standards and working toward a more authentic voice.

In her final days before leaving Brooklyn for the University of Michigan, Francie returns to the library and asks the librarian to recommend a book for an eleven-year-old girl. When the librarian gives her the same title as she had each time years ago, Francie breaks the tradition of passively accepting whichever title she receives and instead tells the librarian her story. Francie tells this former authority that the librarian has never once looked Francie in the eye but also lets the librarian know how much the library meant to her as a child (486). Smith layers this final section of the story in perhaps too much nostalgia, but the swiftly changing neighborhood makes a strong point: the neighborhood Francie loves exists now only within her memory and thus

within her power to reanimate through story. Francie leaves Brooklyn equipped to begin crafting her story with purpose, to honor the complexities and beauty of her father and her neighborhood. Francie has come a long way from the girl who once alienated playmates by talking like God. Instead she has confronted the giants of her childhood and even begun curating her own collections of literature: *the Nolan Book of Classical Poems, The Nolan Volume of Contemporary Poetry,* and even *The book of Annie Laurie*, a gift of children's rhymes for Katie's newest child (Smith *A Tree Grows* 415). In becoming an active creator of family culture, Francie has demonstrated the confidence to both navigate the established conventions and make her own way in literature and in life.

Caged Bird's standards set a similar tension between the protagonist and the authorities Marguerite interacts with, especially concerning beauty and voice. The heart of both issues lies in Angelou's lived experience of a place balanced between external pressures and internal visions. When Marguerite comes down with a bad toothache, Momma declares she'll redeem a favor from the white dentist to whom she lent money during the Great Depression. But first, she says, Marguerite must be scrubbed clean, "especially the part that's to be examined" (Angelou *Caged Bird* 186). Already, the reader might predict the ways Marguerite's perspective splits from reality. As a Black woman, Momma will ask something that even young Marguerite recognizes falls outside of convention, visiting a white dentist instead of the Black dentist, twenty-five miles away, so she makes certain to present Marguerite in her best state, scrubbed head to toe. The pair calls at the back door of the dentist's office, and Momma introduces herself by her first name, Annie, a shame that to Marguerite "was equal to the physical pain. It seemed terribly unfair to have a toothache and a headache and have to bear at the same time the heavy burden of Blackness" (188). The dentist is unyielding, and Momma sends Marguerite

downstairs. From here, a new story emerges, more vivid than previous competing realities, over a page long, and set apart by italics.

The redemption story Marguerite tells herself rings with storybook tropes. Momma becomes physically larger and scolds the dentist, who takes on a stutter; as a final judgment, alternate Momma banishes the man from Stamps "before sundown," never to practice dentistry again (Angelou *Caged Bird* 191). However, more notable than the elements of melodrama is the part language plays in this alternate reality. Momma calls the dentist a "contemptuous scoundrel" (189), he addresses her as "ma'am, Mrs. Henderson" (rather than the diminutive Annie), and Marguerite notes that when Momma "slip[s] into the vernacular," it is only because "she had such eloquent command of English" (190). The dentist, concerned especially with the state of the human mouth, is barred from his craft, instructed instead to care for dogs. While Momma later explains reality as extorting "interest" from Dr. Lincoln, Marguerite's version features language that restores the world, and Momma, to their rightful places. This restoration once again falls on Marguerite and makes her feel proud and invincible. Re-writing reality uses language specifically to right the ways racism has refused to acknowledge seemingly unshakable truths to Marguerite, such as Momma's dignity.

The standards set and met by *Caged Bird* reveal a girl imagining her way out of a reality she deems unacceptable. While Marguerite remains the actor in re-writing reality, her specific choices connect her to Francie's desire for personal justice and empowerment through language but also set her apart through the specificity. That the dentist might address Momma as "ma'am" becomes important only in the context of a narrative in which Angelou highlights Marguerite's pride in Momma's role as an important community member. The individual words and the details they come together to highlight take on further meaning in the context of Angelou's

standards and just graze the edges of a cultural significance to titles in African-American narratives and the fact of Angelou's over 50 honorary doctorates (Caged Bird Legacy, LLC "Biography"). The details of Marguerite's fairytale of escape matter because they signal depth in a story only Angelou could have written and a life she would continue to build in light of her past.

Publication and a critically acclaimed reception by critics and a popular audience also prove that the authors' particular perspectives can both honor and enhance the literary scenes by which they were first inspired to write. Angelou pays tribute to the rhythms, themes, and experiences of her literary past in the sound of her work, documenting the events that led to her voice's refining. By the end of *Caged Bird*, Marguerite's two realities no longer compete: she becomes confident in her ability to assert herself and feels grounded in what she sees as possession of her newest work, her son. Rather than one reality replacing the other, the realities of racist and sexist systems being entirely eliminated by a sense of personal capability and confidence, Marguerite learns to navigate both realities together.

In an interview with *The Paris Review*'s George Plimpton, Angelou said that while no one piece of equipment can be "most necessary," it would certainly be the ears "to hear the language." Hearing the language serves as a handy reference to the many influences and cultural fragments from which Angelou formed her speaking self. On the most literal level, Angelou prized the power and connection of language's sound, citing especially the voice of black American ministers: "I loved the melody of the voice and the imagery, so rich and almost impossible" (Angelou *The Art*). Angelou also began writing in the context of a rich musical tradition which has inspired her to "listen for the rhythm in everything [she writes], prose or poetry" ("Angelou at the Algonquin" 16). With the rhythms of blues and spirituals ticking

through her, Angelou reflected in a 2014 interview that "more often than not [my works] are in 3/4 or 4/4 time" ("Angelou at the Algonquin"). She then proved the text's rhythm by reading aloud an excerpt from her fourth autobiography, *The Heart of a Woman* (1981). Reading her own work aloud in her physical voice, Angelou put the rhythms she credits with inspiring her writing back into the audience's experience of the text.

For Angelou, listening also consisted of internalizing the linguistic and literary traditions in which she was raised. In her mute years, Angelou recalled memorizing the language around her, from poetry she had never heard spoken aloud to conversations from her day, and then playing it back, "like putting a CD on" (Moore). Angelou read widely, imagining herself and her world in the terms of Shakespeare, Dickens, and Poe but also James Weldon Johnson, Frances Harper, and Georgia Douglas Johnson. Angelou also honored the place folklore held in establishing the foundations "not just for [her] art, but for the pantheon of moral values: how to act, how to behave, how to interact" ("Angelou at the Algonquin" 15). These principles pepper *Caged Bird*'s depictions of Stamps but also come from an honored source, the woman who helped Angelou regain her voice, Mrs. Flowers. When she tells young Marguerite to heed "mother wit" (Angelou 100), Mrs. Flowers marks the collective wisdom of the southern Black American community as equal to the knowledge of white European traditions. What stands out among Angelou's forty years of interviews is how she locates herself amongst the bright characters of her life and the textbook-worthy historical moments she participates in, the process of transforming the chaos of rich history and lived experience into tightly coiled thematic units.

Smith pays tribute to and incorporates the conventions of the "slice of life" tradition of realism in literature and drama, a medium by which Smith supported herself and her children while single. "Slice of life," refers to a cross-cultural tradition that takes its name (originally

tranche de vi) from the French naturalist scene, which was rooted in realism. Jean Jullien's *Art et Critique* first introduced the phrase ("Slice, n.1"), but Emile Zola, a defining figure of the movement, likely inspired Smith's desire to introduce what she called "a new era in writing coming up—realism without sneering" (Smith "Making the Working Class" 48). Evidence for Smith's interest in Zola's work and philosophy lies in plain sight, the title. In an article entitled "Fall in Love with Life," Smith recalled that a particular quote from an Emile Zola book reoriented her perspective on life when she felt disheartened by what she had accomplished: " 'To have a child, to plant a tree, to write a book.' That, [Zola] said, was a full life! A great stillness grew about me as I realized I'd had a child...I'd planted a tree… in fact, I'd even written a book" (4). The central themes of both Smith's final title for *A Tree Grows* and her temporary title for her unpublished 1967 autobiography, *A Child, A Tree, A Book* arose from the one quote. Smith's connections to the realist movement additionally accounts for another strong influence on *A Tree Grows*, drama.

Smith's daughter, Nancy Pfeifer explained in a reflection on her mother that Smith "wrote interchangeably between narrative and drama" (7) because Smith "instinctively saw anecdotes and people's lives as drama" (10). Many of the stories that would come to round out the world of Francie Nolan first appeared in plays. For instance, the close focus on Brooklyn and several scenes from *A Tree Grows* first appeared in the play *Become A Woman*, and Francie's harrowing near-rape described in Chapter 33 of *A Tree Grows* first appeared in Smith's 1940 play *Fun After Supper* (Pfeiffer 7). Smith even transposed more loosely emotions as they "should have been," writing the Christmas scene of the Nolan children "standing up for" a Christmas tree on a December evening that her girls were visiting their father (Felde). In the absence of a warm family, standing together, Smith righted her world on the page.

For Francie, Smith's love for and involvement with dramatic conventions receives a complicated treatment as Francie moves from unexamined appreciation—treating theater as escapism—to critically considering the local theater's presentation of reality and even positing her own theory of creation in response. The melodramas that play in the neighborhood theaters often feature last-minute rescues, dainty or aimless heroines and heroes, and dastardly but wealthy villains. Francie, with a crush on the leading man of a local company, makes one of the actor's discarded cigar wrappings into an engagement ring (Smith *A Tree Grows* 219). However, in describing the theater, Smith chooses to lay the scene plainly: the actor "lived untheatrically in a modest furnished room" and "even on the street, he had the stiff-legged walk of the old-time actor" (219). As a device, this contrast sets the reader up to understand the imagination of a child. However, one day Francie observes that the problems within the play are contrived and questions why the delicate heroines don't marry the villains for their wealth and (unsolicited) devotion (220). Her resulting conclusions focus on developing and revealing characters' motives through dialogue as a method for storytelling rather than setting characters up to merely react to circumstance. While the actor is a poor imitation of life, with a "face baby pink as though he still had juvenile grease paint on it" (218), Francie's later compositions will be brutally faithful to the details of her father's life. Smith's telling of Francie's development as a writer certainly mirrors her own philosophy. Perhaps it is the very attention to detail Smith shows that has confused critics and readers alike as they try to discern which elements of the book refer directly to Smith's life and which are merely detailed imagination.

Constructed Selves: The Conversational Model in Autobiography

While it might seem as if lives as storied as Smith and Angelou's leap onto the page, the processing and presentation of any well-packaged self takes work. For Smith and Angelou, the question of a "true" self consists of both the work each author did in writing and in the public's preoccupation with the lines between factual truth and emotional truth in *Caged Bird* and *A Tree Grows*. Blurry lines, shared stories, and inconsistent details have yielded entertaining rabbit trails through the history of the novels' reception, whether this means readers addressing Smith's fan letters to "Dear Francie" (Smith *A Tree Grows* x) or Angelou compressing timelines for clarity of theme or multiple people into one composite (Angelou *The Art*). However, more recently, sociologists such as James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium have begun to suggest that self-narration extends beyond the dichotomy of reality versus illusion and that stories instead "take shape through their active narration" (106). Furthermore, in their book *The Self We Live By* (1999), Holstein and Gubrium conclude with sociologists Norman Denzin and Matti Hyvãrinen that the question of whether or not coherent stories of self are "real" should rank lower than the question of what ideologies and structures support the crafted autobiography (106). Examining the social structure of conversation can provide a helpful perspective from which to understand *Caged Bird* and *A Tree Grows*' construction, publication, and subsequent impact on their authors' story of self.

Holstein and Gubrium argue in alignment with George Herbert Mead's concept of a socially constructed self that conversation serves as both setting and method for building and establishing self-image. It is fitting, therefore, that Angelou and Smith's self-narratives each follow the parts of conversational storytelling: incitement, preface, continuation, and ending. The significance of the incitement to conversation lies in negotiating for the space that the call invites

the potential storyteller to take up (Mead 129). In healthy conversation, when one person tells a story, the other parties decide to listen; so, for the storyteller to begin, there must be an understanding that the pending story is both desired by the audience and will receive the time and attention to unfold. The incident or cue that calls on the storyteller to contribute to the conversation is called incitement, and for Angelou and Smith, the inciting events could not be more different. In interviews, Angelou has cited a challenge from James Baldwin and Random House editor Bob Loomis as the catalyst for her decision to write an autobiography (Angelou *The Art*). Baldwin and Loomis' incitement meant an external confirmation that not only was Angelou's story a welcome part of the dinner party she attended, but that the publishing industry would provide the platform from which Angelou might tell her story. In Betty Smith's case, incitement appeared not within the structure of a literal conversation but through a contest for nonfiction works. Here, the promise of incitement is far more limited. Rather than the ear of an editor and the coaxing of well-connected friends, Smith entered the metaphorical conversation on conditional terms. Editors at Harper and Brothers suggested she rework her story into fiction so as not to cross lines of class imposed on literary convention ("Making the Working Class Ordinary" 43). In response, Smith not only reworked what would eventually become *A Tree Grows* but also extended this revisionist approach to her non-fiction autobiography, *A Child, A Tree, A Book* (1964). In an author's note before *A Child*, she freely admits her intentions: "I shall set down only those things which put me in an admirable light" (i). Instead of record keeping, Smith's autobiographical works sought to capture her life, as she told her daughter, "the way it should have been" (Felde).

After the incitement, the storyteller is obliged to lay out the standards for the story in some sort of verbal preface. In conversation, this might look like a pronouncement that the

audience would never believe what happened at such a time or place. In the conversation of Angelou and Smith's self-narrated works, preface has largely to do with the metaphors and themes established in the opening pages. Angelou establishes the standards of beauty and belonging in which she felt trapped (*Caged Bird*), and Smith presents in her opening chapter the metaphor of a tree that grows "lushly, but only in the tenements districts" (*A Tree Grows* 6).

Preface includes not only the standards but implies a contract between speaker and audience, answering the question "How will we know when it's over?" In conversation, both the speaker and the audience signal an ending. The storyteller might return to the language established in the preface to conclude their piece, and the audience might interject that a story introduced as the "most unbelievable thing" is indeed unbelievable (Holstein and Gubrium 142). In *A Tree Grows* and *Caged Bird*, the contractual promise of the story is revisited in the final chapters of *A Tree Grows* and *Caged Bird*. Smith answers the tree metaphor with both what is presented as concrete proof of maturity in Francie's enrollment at a university in Michigan and the metaphorical answer to the titular growing tree—it has been cut down, as the neighborhood will soon be rebuilt, but survives, growing first sideways and now again toward the sky (Smith *A Tree Grows* 493). Angelou's standards are also laid out in the beginning. The prologue of *Caged Bird* finds Marguerite struggling to recite a poem from memory. "What you looking at me for?" the poem asks, and Marguerite, having forgotten the next lines, imagines shocking her community with the truth of herself as "a sweet little white girl who [was] everybody's dream of what was right with the world" (Angelou 2), emerging from an "black ugly dream" (2). The problem to be solved is this split self, an incongruent reality that causes Marguerite to imagine an alternate self in order to reconcile who she feels herself to be with who others see her as. Resolution arrives as Marguerite learns to hold both realities together, making something larger

and truer of the difficult parts culminating in the independence and self-ownership that accompanies the birth of her son. Angelou's narration of her past in *Caged Bird*. The story ends when Marguerite feels possession of her body and is confident in her place in relation to the world.

Bounded by the standards, the next feature of conversation is the continuation, which appears in the midst of the conversational story to affirm the pace and direction of the story through collaborative participation from the audience (Holstein and Gubrium 140). These participations might take the form of verbal agreements ("yes, hmm, that's right") or more involved interjections that link the audience's perspectives to the lessons or features of the speaker's story. The function and method of continuations depend on collaboration, the interaction between the story being told and the audience's personal connections, and the audience's ability to track with and expand upon the lessons and the particularities of the speaker's story. In the context of *Caged Bird* and *A Tree Grows*, continuations are represented by other storytelling structures, particularly the formats and perspectives of fiction, poetry, and drama that Francie and Marguerite both process their experiences through. These structures turn the girls toward potential futures and suggest familiar tropes and plot lines for the protagonists to follow in their own lives. In her essay "Role-Playing as Art in Maya Angelou's 'Caged Bird,'" McMurry analyzes the significance of Momma's response to the harassment of some Powhitetrash girls. She proposes that Momma's steady humming of the hymn "Glory, Glory (Hallelujah)" serves as a tactic "to organize feelings she could not otherwise order or express" (108). Using songs to cope with life does not sound groundbreaking, but the lyrics of the hymn additionally re-write Momma's situation by setting a context in which the future promises "All [her] troubles will be over." The hymn's lyrics provide a way out of time's restriction for

Momma. While perhaps not consciously, Marguerite takes up the same future-oriented method for coping when she imagines an alternate version of a showdown between Momma and the white dentist that refuses to see Marguerite. She borrows an external story, that of the dignified hero who banishes the cruel villain, to project a future that fits with her perception of Momma and the social rules that say gentlemen oblige ladies and that respected adults do not permit backtalk. And so, while only one speaker is present in *Caged Bird*, Angelou as the author and Marguerite as the character invite and even depend upon the overlap of other perspectives to direct their storytelling both the narrative Marguerite tells herself and the autobiographical narrative Angelou publishes for an audience.

Francie's turn to depend on an external narrative structure mirrors Marguerite's in its form. Both girls use melodrama to project an ideal future, one in which recognition is properly attributed, onto a present in which authorities have not made space for their presence on both a physical and intellectual level. For Francie, the problem in need of re-imagining is the disrespect her teacher shows to stories about Francie's alcoholic father, Johnny Nolan. After Miss Gardner calls her honest but affectionate pieces "sordid little stories" (Smith *A Tree Grows* 323), Francie launches fully into an imagined interaction in which she brings a published work back and the starstruck Miss Gardner morphs from awed to pathetic as she begs for an autograph and personalized note. In this daydream, Francie confronts a potential threat to her identity as a writer with the structure of a melodrama, the kind she loved to watch as a kid. After graduating high school, Francie imagines her future with a looser grip. Rather than projecting a certain future of marriage with her promised love interest, Ben, Francie relishes the five years' space to make decisions and establish herself at college (492). Although, she does slip briefly into wishful projection, reasoning that "if only [Ben] wasn't so sure of himself all the time...If only he needed

her" (492), she might feel certain she loved him. Francie has moved away from the idyllic yet largely restricted plots of melodrama into more ambiguous potential futures.

For both author-character pairs, the process of constructing and cataloging evolving selves through autobiography follows the pattern of conversational storytelling. The silent conversational partner can refer to either the authors' influences speaking as incitements or to the authors' envisioned audiences, for whom the texts might serve as a resource for crafting their own voices. The process of constructing a coherent self from fragments of the past continued long past the record of both authors' first growths as writers and selves. Betty Smith's legacy as a playwright provides a place for her to continue reconciling her past with her present values and experiences in the same way Maya Angelou's status as a public figure turns various interviews, speaking engagements, and later autobiographies solidify her stories of self beyond *Caged Bird.*

Francie does eventually leave Brooklyn, and if Betty Smith keeps Francie's story on track with her own, the young writer might go on to win awards for her plays, study at Yale Drama School with professor George Pierce Baker, and even inspire both a wildly popular movie and a Broadway musical based on her story. Betty Smith, once a Sophie Wehner from Brooklyn, becomes a fiercely motivated and professional playwright. *A Tree Grows* became the second most requested title of the Armed Service Editions, books printed to fit in American soldiers' pockets during World War II (Rabinowitz 115). Servicemen or otherwise, *A Tree Grows* connected deeply with its audiences, leading one reader to write Smith that "I sometimes forget they are not my own memories" ("Making the Working-Class Family" 49). By recounting her experiences well, Smith helped others bridge gaps within themselves and between themselves and the world with which they felt at odds. Smith received a Certificate of Merit from the New

York Museum of Science and Industry "for accurate portrayal of contemporary American life in novels" (Glover), and her portrait hangs in the Hall Drama School Hall of Fame (Glover).

Maya Angelou went on to become many things: the first Black woman to serve as a streetcar operator (Angelou *Caged Bird* 269), a movie star, musical theater actress, Calypso singer, and poet (Lupton 24). The act of crafting a self in the public eye continued for Angelou, even as she dealt with the messiness where possession of her story met others' rights to their own stories. When the details are wrapped so tightly around simultaneous goals for historic and cultural preservation, readers might wonder about the people that populate Angelou's life. What of the protective, smooth-talking brother remains in Bailey Jr. Johnson? And how do the ex-husbands and role models of these stories feel about their parts in what has become crystallized in American Literature? When deciding what to write, Angelou sorted her narrative episodes based on not only an absence of melodrama and relevant themes but also on the consent of her subjects. As she wrote her fourth autobiography, *The Heart of A Woman*, Angelou received the go-ahead from ex-husband Tosh Angelos on the basis that he believed she would not lie, even if he would argue with her "interpretation of the truth" (Angelou *The Art*).

The ways Angelou relates to family members continue the process she began in writing *Caged Bird*. Bailey and Vivian return again and again in Angelou's life, even if their roles in the autobiographies change and wane. Angelou remembered particularly the way they brought her out from recurring episodes of muteness, that they would "come wherever [she] was, New York or California… and say, 'Hello, hello, talk to me…We'll have a game of Scrabble or pinochle and let's talk. Tell me a story" (Moore). Angelou interprets her family's care across her life all the way back to its origin in *Caged Bird*: "Because they were astute enough to recognize the power of mutism, I was finally astute enough to recognize the power of their love" (Moore). For

Angelou, the process of rewriting and establishing the story of her relationships and life experiences continued into her life as a public figure. Between telling the stories of her interactions and connecting the words of others, Angelou located herself and shared this crafted version as an on-going work.

While she did not give quite as many interviews, Smith similarly continued crafting her life's story in the public eye. Smith's plays and essays instead became the place for this continuing production. Reflecting on her life and work, Smith noted:

> When I was first aware that I would be a woman, I knew I'd have children. When I wept childish tears as they cut down the only tree in our tenement yard, I knew I would plant a tree everywhere I lived. And when at the age of eight, I got my first 'A' on a school composition, I knew I would write a book someday. (5)

At the time Smith wrote this in the article "Fall in Love with Life," she had cemented at least her public-facing personal myth. The way Smith describes both the criteria for a full life and her fulfillment of those criteria—a paraphrase of Zola—demonstrates in miniature the process and results of the autobiographical work she and Angelou undertake in *A Tree Grows* and *Caged Bird.* In evaluating her life, Smith chose a standard, collected the parts of her life that aligned with that structure, and made the connection in writing. The result is a statement that will shape the reading public's understanding of Smith as a person but also as a possibility. Perhaps they, too, might be able to live such a well-rounded and wholesome (as in completely lived and understood) life. Smith's reflections might even be understood as the true products of Smith and Angelou's autobiographical works: gathering the vivid events, people, and themselves at a specific moment and establishing a meaning that will go on to shape others' search for the same sense of fulfillment.

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