Fashioning high-heeled identity: Material culture and identity formation in Maya Angelou’s autobiographies

Sonia Marie Del Hierro
Iowa State University

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Fashioning high-heeled identity: Material culture and identity formation in Maya Angelou’s autobiographies

by

Sonia Marie Del Hierro

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Literature)

Program of Study Committee:
Constance J. Post, Major Professor
Matthew W. Sivils
Jennifer Margrett

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Ames, Iowa
2017

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DEDICATION

To my father’s heart,
for still beating after all this time.

To my mother’s liver,
for failing to fail time and time again.

To my brother’s back,
for carrying us all.
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Thank you to my friends, colleagues, and the department faculty and staff for making my time at Iowa State University an incredible journey.

And thank you to Maya Angelou. A woman who dared.
In 1935, seven-year-old Maya Angelou stopped speaking for five years, believing her voice had killed a man. Eighty-two years later, former United States president Bill Clinton said Maya Angelou “had the voice of God” (qtd. in Hercules and Whack). From a young age, Angelou’s words carried great weight. In her lifetime, she articulated a singular and momentous experience, forging new avenues of storytelling in both poetry and nonfiction works. Her poems contain a rhythm crafted from years as a “calypso performer” and from religious ceremonies where she internalized the “sounds and vowels” of music (Wagner-Martin 56-57). Similarly, Dr. Eugene Redmond calls Angelou’s first autobiography “a literary feat” in the way it weaves nonfiction’s truth with fiction’s imagination (qtd. in Hercules and Whack). Moreover, her work as an activist, actress, and entertainer increased her distinction and societal influence. Earning many titles as the first African American woman to operate a cable car in San Francisco, to become a nonfiction bestseller, and to have a screenplay produced, she became a multi-talented luminary. According to Sondra O’Neale, “Angelou bridged the gap between life and art, a step that is essential if Black women are to be deservedly credited with the mammoth and creative feat of noneffacing [sic] survival” (42).

Essential to this accreditation, literary criticism must analyze the tools that create the struggle, the gap, and the bridge in her autobiographies. Dolly McPherson effectively calls for future study of Angelou’s work, asserting “a study of Maya Angelou’s autobiography is significant . . . [because she] creates a unique place within Black autobiographical tradition. . . [by] adopt[ing] a special stance in relation to the self, the
community, and the world” (6). In her first two autobiographies, Maya Angelou uses fashion products to symbolize the worldly disappointments and personal failures she faced as a young, black woman. This thesis will analyze the significance of clothing, makeup, and apparel in her narrative.

Leaving a Legacy

In her lifetime, Angelou documented her disappointments, struggles, victories and opinions in a wide range of publications. She wrote seven autobiographies recounting forty years of her life. Describing the first sixteen years of her life, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings was published in 1969. Detailing the next four years, Gather Together in My Name was published in 1974. Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas in 1976, The Heart of a Woman in 1981, All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes in 1986, A Song Flung Up to Heaven in 2002, and Mom & Me & Mom in 2013, span the following twenty years of her life. Angelou also published four personal essays, six plays, seven children’s books, nine screenplays, nine recordings and spoken word albums, eleven film and television scripts, and eighteen collections of poetry (Gillespie et al. 186-191). This extensive number of works varies in genre, form, and subject. However, the list of accolades she received in her lifetime is much longer. Angelou earned approximately 80 honors, appointments, and awards; most notably, she received the Lifetime Achievement Award for Literature in 1999, two National Association for the Advancement Colored People Image Awards in 2005 and 2009, and the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2011 along with a Pulitzer Prize nomination in 1972, an Emmy Award nomination in 1977, and a Grammy Award in 2002 (Thursby
412-413). She also earned 39 honorary degrees from universities across the nation (Thursby 413). These accolades display the wealth of Angelou’s achievements, proving that her writing was only one facet of her life. Over the years, she became “Maya the calypso singer and the six-foot-tall jazz dancer. Maya the actress, Maya the young mother of her talented son Guy, Maya the head of Martin Luther King, Junior’s Northern Office in New York City, Maya the diligent Christian believer, Maya the autobiographer and poet...[and] Maya the teacher” (Wagner xii). Her voice resists restriction to an exclusive title or role, even in death.

In 2014, Angelou’s life ended at eighty-six years old, but her legacy continues to educate, entertain, and enlighten. In February of 2017, PBS aired the first documentary to tell her story; Maya Angelou: And Still I Rise inducts her into their acclaimed American Masters series. The groundbreaking documentary contained rare photos and interviews with Angelou, recreating her life and legacy. It also included numerous interviews from celebrities attesting to the influence Angelou had in their lives, such as Oprah Winfrey and Common, to politicians, such as Hillary and Bill Clinton. Her life, however, was rarely an easy experience. Three-year-old Marguerite Ann Johnson and her four-year-old brother, Bailey, traveled alone by train to their grandmother’s home in Stamps, Arkansas. There, Angelou learned strictness from the southern, black culture as well as grimness from the southern, white segregation. Four years later, the children returned to California to live with their beautiful, divorced mother, Vivian Baxter; at the age of seven, her mother’s boyfriend raped her. Sent back to Stamps, Angelou swore herself to silence, and without a voice, she read. In an interview, Angelou remarked, “When I decided to speak, I had a lot to say” (Hercules and Whack). Literature provided
her with a knowledge of lifetimes before her, and, along with her determination to survive, she withstood temporary homelessness, an unplanned pregnancy, single motherhood, poverty, prostitution, and broken relationships. All of which she discusses in her first two autobiographies with a personalized writing style that has drawn much literary criticism.

Discussing Angelou’s Work

When asked of her craft, Angelou said she wrote to make her readers say, “I’ve never thought of it that way before” (Hercules and Whack). While she writes of her own life events, Angelou’s voice portrays the human experience. She considered her works a lesson about persevering when life becomes difficult. Her autobiographies include elements of fiction to effectively produce this message. Thus, literary critical commentary of her narratives must consider how she crafts her stories and how that fits into the tradition of black autobiography.

Angelou’s autobiographies blend the true events of her life with elements of fiction to engage her readers with her experience. Scholars have analyzed the “vividly conceived characters and careful development of theme, setting, plot, and language” (Lupton 30). According to Eugenia Collier, Angelou’s autobiographies may sound like Casual storytelling, [but] actually they are carefully crafted...Her characters are vivid. Her relationships with her family are as ambivalent and complex as such relationships always are...the various characters whom she meets along the way are real because she makes them so and because they resemble people we have
known all our lives. Plot, theme, setting — aspects of fiction which are often part of fiction analysis — are developed. (2)

The use of these characteristics strategically bond the reader with the text, creating space for literary criticisms concerned with the figurative language. My thesis examines the symbolism behind the fashion products Angelou frequently describes in her autobiographies. The symbolism develops Angelou’s transition from childhood to motherhood, innocence to awareness, and reticence to transparence. According to Ira Silver,

People undergoing role transitions must devise ways to retain continuous identities because such periods involve profound changes in both their physical and social landscapes...Objects can stand alone as critical testimony about the self during role transitions because people can invest objects with meanings that give coherence to these otherwise incoherent and unsettled periods in the life course. (Ira Silver 2-3)

Her life constantly fluctuated: geography, homes, people, and careers; yet clothes, makeup, and shoes consistently appear throughout her narrative. This imagery provides further commentary on the true events of her life.

Nonetheless, many scholars refuse to categorize her works as autobiography, calling them “autobiographical fiction” instead (Lupton 29). However, these scholars must consider the tradition of black autobiography before recategorizing Angelou’s narratives. According to Sewlyn Cudjoe, “Any discussion on the Afro-American autobiography is always likely to raise this question: ‘Is it really true?’ and almost always the author must present strong evidence that the work is unquestionably
autobiographical” (7). Cudjoe explains that the “truths” of “Afro-American” fiction remains interchangeable with the truths of autobiography, because they “are simply different means of arriving at, or (re)cognizing the same truth: the reality of American life and the position of the Afro-American subject in that life” (8). The truths of Angelou’s works are of that of a black woman living in America’s racist patriarchy in the early twentieth century. In a personal essay, Angelou says, “As for truth, I’m quiveringly uncertain of it...I write for the Black voice and any ear which can hear it...I write because I am a Black woman, listening attentively to her talking people” (3-4). Thus, while symbolism, plot, and characterization represents a constructed narrative, Angelou’s autobiographies still provide a truthful commentary on life as a minority female. Therefore, my analysis of I Know Why the Cage Bird Sings and Gather Together in My Name considers the fictional elements as fundamental components of her autobiographies, because the physical objects signify a deeper understanding of both Maya Angelou the person and the autobiographer.

Reviewing Previous Literature

Previous literary scholarship about Angelou’s autobiographies and material culture has produced a wide range of analysis. Many scholars have written about both subjects separately, but few have applied material culture to Angelou’s works. Instead, literary scholarship has focused on the study of race, gender, or trauma in her narratives. Thus, my analysis of her autobiographies includes many of these previously explored topics.
Mary Jane Lupton recognizes clothing’s importance in Angelou’s work. She never introduces material culture as a part of the analysis, but her brief study of the purple taffeta dress in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* delves into apparel’s significance. Lupton says “Maya’s ugly purple frock [is] a sign of her humiliation” (92). This point of analysis establishes a shift towards studying Angelou’s work with a material culture lens. Lupton further speaks to the frequency of clothes in *Gather Together in My Name* when she astutely notices that the first pages of this autobiography and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* begin with “the theme of clothing” (92). She continues to list scenes when clothing becomes “a tool of the trade,” when Angelou is surrounded by clothing, and when “clothing takes on special significance when she returns to Stamps” (Lupton 93). Though her analysis concludes within two pages, her examination introduces Angelou’s symbolic use of apparel.

Further examination of clothing in Angelou’s works includes Lilliane K. Arensberg’s article that asserts the same taffeta dress as a metaphor for death and rebirth. Arensberg’s analysis of the apparel itself is brief but provides an important perspective about symbolism and dress. She states, “Believing it to be the most beautiful dress she has ever seen, Maya attributes to it magical properties;” however, “on Easter morning the dress reveals its depressing actuality” (115). Arensberg describes the biblical notions of rebirth seen in Angelou’s inability to realize her fantasy of being a blonde, blue-eyed white girl. In this analysis, Arensberg describes the same passage and subsequent disillusionment as Chapter I’s “The Lavender Taffeta Dress.” However, Arensberg directs the symbolism to represent a metaphor of death, believing “Maya’s body...becomes a symbolic hearse” (116). Her scholarship uses a different lens
or framework to analyze the dress than my thesis, but her study of clothing greatly contributes to the literary conversation about fashion in Angelou's autobiographies.

Venturing further from material culture, some scholars examined the varying anthropocentric cultures Angelou presents in her later volumes. Dolly McPherson's work analyzes Angelou’s written and imagined self as she attempts to understand the way Angelou reproduces herself as a memory and how that memory interacts with the world around her. Furthermore, she studies how Angelou explores and presents African culture in the fifth autobiography, *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes*. McPherson's use of the term "culture" describes Angelou’s "personal recollection and... historical documentation" of Ghana, West Africa, during the 1960s (104). The analysis includes an examination of “Black Americans” looking to “identify in a positive way with their ancestral home,” but Angelou only finds “African bias and hostility against American outsiders” (McPherson 112). McPherson’s analysis of Angelou's incongruence with her society remains a significant motif in all her autobiographies.

Other scholars, such as Sondra O’Neale and Selwyn Cudjoe, influenced my understanding and study of Angelou’s life by examining the gender and racial issues that she experiences. O’Neale examines Angelou’s portrayal of black women in her autobiographies, asserting Angelou’s work reimagines an archetypal black female—one who is “a new mold of Mother Earth... who repositions herself in the universe so that she chooses the primary objects of her service” (52). O’Neale suggests that Angelou’s greatest victory over the world is the very act of writing her story, controlling what the world views or has yet to view of black women. Furthermore, she discusses Angelou’s degradation of her own appearance not as self-loathing but as “the throes of probing
self-discovery, deliberation common to adolescence,” especially in her attempts to
“withstand real—not imagined—rejection, disappointment, and even onslaught from
the adult world” (31). Whereas O’Neale discusses Angelou’s portrayal of black female
bodies, Selwyn Cudjoe analyzes Angelou’s experience simply as a black autobiographer,
noting how “Angelou wants to suggest that the power, the energy, and the honesty
which characterized our examination of our relationship with our oppressor... must
now be turned inward in an examination of some of the problems which seem to have
inhibited our own level of social development” (15). Cudjoe’s article observes the
obstacles Angelou faced at the quarter of the century as well as her decisions as she
wrote about her life. These scholars have produced significant literary criticisms that
strengthened my analysis of her narratives’ material culture.

Although few scholars discuss dress in Angelou’s work, many literary critics
analyze other examples of literature and material culture. Notably, Stephen Greenblatt
published *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* in 2005, which examined the physical structure
of self-hood in sixteenth-century England. His work has become a critical literary text
for studies of the Renaissance, English literature, and, as it pertains to my thesis, new
historicism. His work helped me understand the impediments of approaching a literary
text with a new historicism lens. For example, I analyze the historical influence of
makeup in relation to Angelou’s use of makeup in her narrative, but I must acknowledge
that my modern understanding and relationship with cosmetics influences my analysis
of the work. Concerning this idea, Greenblatt explains that “cultural poetics...is
conscious of its status as interpretation... this consciousness must extend to an
acceptance of the impossibility of full reconstructing and reentering the [past] culture”
(5). Essentially, cultural poetics is Greenblatt’s term for New Historicism, which considers the society or ideology of a literary text’s history (Veenstra 177). Instead, Greenblatt writes that his work is not significant because “we may see through them to underlying and prior historical principles but rather that we may interpret the interplay of their symbolic structures...[coming] closer to an understanding of how literary and social identities were formed in this culture” (Greenblatt 6). His analysis of a text’s symbolic structures aided my understanding of how fashion can symbolize several aspects of Angelou’s narratives. Furthermore, Howard Felprin’s criticism of Greenblatt’s new historical approach when analyzing appearance formed my application of historical facts to my current understanding of the culture in Angelou’s works. Felprin says, “Greenblatt’s cultural poetics relinquishes its potential for an [sic] historical understanding that might exert political influence upon the present...[instead] the study of past cultures must have present import and consequence” (155). Considering this critique, my examination of the material culture in Angelou’s autobiographies considers the social environment as a continuation of current conversations about fashion and identity.

**Defining Material Culture**

The study of material culture examines “that sector of our physical environment that we modify through culturally determined behavior” (241). It has attracted an increasing number of literary scholars’ interest in the representation of ostensibly minor objects in texts. Material culture attempts to analyze “why things were made, why they took the forms they did, and what social, functional, aesthetic, or symbolic
needs they serve” (Schlereth 3). Some approaches to material culture address the impact humans have on physical objects, looking less at “culture but its product... that sector of our physical environment that we modify through culturally determined behavior” (Deetz 35). The material turn provides limitless insights into various parts of society. Some scholars study material culture in the economy, in Archaeology, or in consumerism. Archaeologist Christopher Tilley said material culture “systematically refuses to remain enmeshed within established disciplinary boundaries” (vii). The breadth of this study allowed my analysis to pull from a variety of fields to analyze nonfiction literature.

Specifically, my use of material culture analyzes the social and cultural anthropology of the narrative. Gottdiener’s explanation of “socio-semiotics” influenced my understanding of material culture, which “explicitly relates symbolic processes to social context and, in addition, seeks to ‘socialize’ the domain of culture” (vii). Gottdiener produced a 1995 study of a California high school where students formed social groups by race. The study analyzed the internal and external socio-semiotics of white, African American, and Mexican American students. Within each race group, Gottdiener found a hierarchy based on appearance, such as African American men falling into two subcultures of “Thugs or Gangstas,” who wore “street clothes: [backwards] sports caps...basketball shorts, T-shirts,” and “GQ” males, who were considered classier, wore “slacks [and] fashionable tops” (199). However, appearance could only create subcultures in the respective race groups. The African American males who “dress for success” wore the same “designer clothes” as the white males who were in the “Frat” subculture yet the two races “all sat separately” (Gottdiener 199-
201). Therefore, Gottdiener’s study deduced “racial and ethnic distinctions are the most powerful way in which students differentiate amongst themselves, while class is important primarily in the case of blacks” (207). This study reveals the power of clothing within a race as well as its ineffectuality outside of race. The sociological study of clothing strengthened my analysis of Angelou’s fashion. Similarly, an anthropological study of the historical implications of apparel items offered complexity to Angelou’s use of the symbolic imagery.

Furthermore, various scholars influenced my vocabulary when discussing Angelou’s identity. Greenblatt’s use of “self-fashion” and Ira Silver’s term “self-identity” describe one’s creation or understanding of a desired appearance. For example, Greenblatt notes that “the verb fashion...[meaning] the action or process of making, for particular features or appearance, for a distinct style or pattern” changes in the sixteenth century to include “a way of designating the forming of a self” (Greenblatt 2). Furthermore, self-fashion suggests “the achievement of a less tangible shape: a distinctive personality, a characteristic address to the world, a consistent mode of perceiving and behaving” (Greenblatt 2). Greenblatt’s “fashion” refers to a constructed self. This term represents Angelou’s clothing as well as her desire to be successful, beautiful, and intelligent. On the other hand, self-identity is “the individual’s subjective sense of his or her biography being continuous, coherent, and unique” (Silver 3). Self-identity speaks to Angelou’s own understanding of herself—before and after she fashions her identity. According to Stuart Hall,

There can be no true self hiding ‘inside’ or behind the artificial or superficial because self and identity are constructed ‘within, not outside discourse.’ The
analytical project, therefore, is not one of discovery but deconstruction. To deconstruct the self is to challenge essentialist assumptions and lay bare the manner in which the self is wholly dependent upon discourse. (qtd. in Callero 117)

Therefore, Angelou’s struggle should be read as a deconstruction of her identity rather than a found self. The strength she gathers at the end of her second autobiography develops as she breaks down social constraints, such as beauty ideals. Her struggle with self-identity resonates as particularly important because “African men, women, and children summarily lost control of their bodies, their appearance, and their identities. The road back to self-identification has been difficult and central to understanding African-American [sic] expressive culture and experience” (Lynch 82). Angelou’s fashioned self and self-identity emphasize contentions with white people, particularly with those from the south. To contend with them, she creates a confidence in her appearance that ultimately fails her, demonstrating her “road back to self-identification.”

**Defining Fashion**

Fashion studies can encompass the overarching study of material culture. However, this term has countless definitions and has created multiple areas of study, such as fashion consumerism, fashion advertising, and fashion psychology. Fashion refers to "many different kinds of material and non-material cultural products" as well as “a fashion cycle of introduction, mass acceptance, and obsolescence” (Roach-Higgins and Eicher 10). Many scholars have rejected fashion as a frivolous area of study even
though most consider it “a mechanism or ideology that applies to almost every conceivable area of the modern world” (Svendsen 11). Fashion reflects identities and how people present identities to the world. According to Mary-Ellen Roach-Higgins and Joanne B. Eicher, fashion differs from the terms “dress,” “clothing,” and “apparel.” Dress does not connote any “positive and negative value judgments” while clothing and apparel exclude “body modifications and supplements,” such as makeup (Roach-Higgins and Eicher 10). Thus my thesis attempts to use the terms accordingly.

Similarly, when discussing makeup, my language considers fashion theories’ vocabulary. Created and used nearly 5,000 years ago, makeup is a cosmetic product that changes the appearance or perception of body and facial skin, including “lipsticks, eye shadows [and] mascaras” (Korichi and Tranchant 391). In parts of my analysis, I may use ‘cosmetics’ when discussing a broader topic that requires a comprehensive idea of body modifications and supplements, such as the idea of glamorousness. For example, “the FD&C Act defines cosmetics by their intended use. . . ‘articles intended to be rubbed, poured, sprinkled, or sprayed on, introduced into, or otherwise applied to the human body or any part thereof for cleansing, beautifying, promoting attractiveness, or altering the appearance without affecting structure or function’” (Baki and Alexander 19). The term ‘cosmetics’ encompasses many fashion products, including makeup. To analyze the significance of dress in an autobiography, my language borrows from the discourse of both the study of material culture and fashion.
CHAPTER I

“THE GROWNUPS’ BETRAYAL:” APPAREL OF DISILLUSIONMENT IN *I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS*

If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat. It is the unnecessary insult.

— Maya Angelou

Introduction

Amid the childlike comfort of warm bodies and red, Arkansas clay, Maya Angelou faced the worldly disappointments of the 1930s American society in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Some far harsher than others, Angelou develops an aperture between reality and imagination to cope with situations of rape and racism entangled in the lofty, formidable idea of adulthood. As a child, Angelou dreams of a greater life than the one she lives—to be prettier, to be richer, to be loved by all. In her imagination, her skin is pristine white and her hair shines candied blonde. However, her illusory realism provokes moments of disillusionment, framing her eventual self-actualization. According to Maureen Ryan, “the female bildungsroman,” or coming-of-age narrative, “[offers] a tale of compromise and disillusionment...the chronicle of a young woman’s recognition that, for her, life offers not limitless possibilities but an unsympathetic environment in which she must struggle to discover a room of her own” (qtd. in Kim 76). In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, many instances of substantial disillusionment form as a result of an adult’s cruel judgment. In these moments, Angelou displays her recognition of an unsympathetic
environment through articles of clothing, fashioning a conduit for her disillusionment. Clothes act as markers of both her secret, imagined world and the cruelty she must cope with.

The Red-and Yellow-Stained Drawers

The foremost significant moment in which clothes fashion disillusionment coincides with one of most harrowing scenes in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. In 1936, Vivian Baxter’s boyfriend, Freeman, rapes seven-year-old Maya Angelou after cultivating an insidious relationship that she misperceives as loving and fatherly. Her initial, desperate love for a father figure, calling him Freeman, relays further importance through the subsequent disillusionment of his abuse. Freeman's violence against her body symbolically festers in the underwear she hides, suppressing the truth of the situation and, temporarily, separating Angelou from reality.

She imbues the underwear with the significance of her disillusionment by creating intricate relationships between their cultural influences or symbolic connotations and her own narrative. Historically, underwear has created and subsequently symbolized a uniquely female disenchantment, from corsets to cotton panties, drawers to silk lingerie. Fashion, as an entire industry, has historically “functioned as a technology of social control legitimizing social distinctions. But in the case of women, fashion was regulated along lines of gender and sexuality rather than lines of social distinction” (Tseëlon 14). Notably, women were active participants in the class structures of underclothes, fostering a directly proportional relationship between undergarments and a woman’s dishonorableness. Dating prior to the 17th century, women embraced the nobility of corsets; in the nineteenth
century, corsets were considered “the hallmark of virtue among the middle classes... so much so that ‘the uncorseted woman reeked of licence; an unlaced waist was regarded as a vessel of sin’” (Davies 619). Even if a woman did not believe the undergarment carried such virtue, the fear of social stigmatism continued female participation in corsets, which were essentially equivalent to the bodily disfiguration of foot binding. In 1885, “social commentator Ada Ballin... noted that Englishwomen wore tight stays all day and prided themselves on being ‘always fit to be seen [for women in society] dread and have reason to dread ridicule and they would endure torture rather than appear unfashionable’” (Davies 620). Women embraced underclothes as a societal function—a diagnosis of class and morality. Although physically and socially restraining, underwear presents a materialization of behavioral and ideological values.

The significance of underwear as a private representation of social circles provoked eventual disillusionment. Monica Smith borrows T.S. Turner’s term “social skin” to comment on underwear’s identification with “the person before they put on the clothes that constitute their ‘social skin’” (414). The critical morality of underwear bears special consequence in its complexity, rendering this clothing article potentially dangerous. In many ways, women struggled within the confines of this social skin, which Turner defines as:

The social boundary between the individual actor and other actors... the internal, psychic diaphragm between the pre-social, libidinous energies of the individual and the ‘internalised others’... [and as] categories or classes of individuals. The ‘social skin’ thus becomes, at this third level of interpretation, the boundary between social classes. (503)
The relationship between their social skin and their underwear created avenues of dissent because of its inflexible limitation. In the 1870s, Margaret Oliphant, a Scottish writer, called “the painful spectacle of the whole female race more or less tied into narrow bags” (Finch 346). Prior to that, in the 1850s, Amelia Bloomer, known for her unorthodox campaign for a divided skirt—essentially, loose-fitting trousers—“was greeted with ridicule and social ostracism” (Lurie 221). In fact, many early nineteenth century women considered open drawers, a fashion of underwear that also mimicked trousers, “immodest because they imitated male garments” (Lurie 219). Nonetheless, drawers invited resistance because the clothing article “served as an ‘inoculation’ against the new regime of rigidly enforced gender and sex differences. In other words, women could wear a divided garment if it were feminized and sexualized, and this feminization of the garment assured that ‘real’ trousers would still be worn only by ‘real’ men” (Fields 25). Eventually, the 1880s birthed Dress Reform Movements that fostered relentless yet gradual change (Lurie 221). The oral and nonverbal manners with which women protested to the social stigmatisms of their underwear expose a disillusionment with the self-representation previously attached to this clothing. Applying a similar moment of captivation and disenchantment to Angelou’s complex feelings for Freeman forges a connection between the history of undergarments and her personal narrative.

Initially, Freeman plays a patriarchal figure as her mother’s boyfriend who “brought in the necessities” (Angelou 57). She describes him as faintly pathetic in his love-sick feelings toward her mother; thus, their initial relationship remains innocuous as two people connected through Baxter. Then it morphs into an ugly and abusive corporeality as Freeman—on three respective occasions—molests her, uses her body for frottage, and,
ultimately, rapes her. However, Angelou experiences Freeman’s early, sexual perverseness as neither abusive nor destructive. Instead, under Freeman’s attention, she vacillates between awed adulation and nervous confusion.

In the first instance of abuse, her lack of negative response sets up her eventual disillusionment because her unawareness of Freeman’s insidiousness manifests as enjoyment of his attention, noting that he did not hurt her. Her positive response is a normal reaction to sexual abuse for some children because “the sexual contact is...accompanied by affection and the children confuse this physical contact with love” (Sgroi 131). In the moments after he molestes her, Angelou feels “at home” and sure he would “never let [her] go or let anything bad” happen to her; she ventures that Freeman “was probably [her] real father and [they] had found each other at last” (59-60). The betrayal of this agonizingly hopeful naiveté fully breaks her with Freeman’s escalating abuse.

Instilling a disturbing sense of culpability in seven-year-old Angelou, his betrayal further presses her toward eventual disillusionment. In child sexual abuse cases, often the mental trauma of an adult’s betrayal surpasses the physical pain of rape in its lasting effect. In Angelou’s situation, her disillusionment deals with her previous “[accommodation of] not only... escalating sexual demands but [of] an increasing consciousness of betrayal and objectification by someone who is... idealized as a protective, altruistic, loving parental figure” (Summit 184). After Freeman molests her, he tells her she had an accident, wetting the bed with water, and in the same breath, demands her silence, threatening harm to her brother. Angelou recognizes it as “the same old quandary” in which “there was an army of adults, whose motives and movements [she] just couldn’t understand and who made no
effort to understand mine” (60). Her understanding of Freeman’s sexual abuse remains a misunderstanding in every way, especially confusing her notion of adulthood as it pertained to her own dominion as a child—or lack thereof.

By the second instance, in which Freeman uses Angelou’s body for frottage, she has internalized his abuse and the subsequent blame, developing a desire to be near him. She begins “to feel lonely for Freeman and the encasement in his big arms” (Angelou 61). Her misperceived idea of Freeman’s love and attention exposes a desire within Angelou to feel special to someone. The idea that a “child may enjoy part of the abuse scenario” pertains to “the [child’s]… favored position with the family… the child, being a normal child, enjoys and wants to hold on to that status… the wish to be special… contributes to a child’s internalization of being bad or guilty” (Weiland 11). While Freeman forcibly rubs her small body across his lap, he demands she stop her squirming, further blaming and perplexing Angelou about his attentions. Afterwards, he does not speak to her for months at a time, leaving Angelou hurt and “lonelier than ever” (61). The need to be special strongly reverberates in the rest of Angelou’s narrative—in her dealings with her brother, mother, and most adults. Her greater desire to be special, in addition to Freeman’s confusing attentions towards Angelou, increases her growing disenchantment.

When Freeman breaks his long silence, it is with the painful, traumatic act of rape. Along with his exploitation of her body, he also transfers his silence in the form of more threats to kill her brother, signaling the peak of her disillusionment, which Angelou funnels through the pair of underwear he first strips her of then dresses her in. Angelou’s disenchantment appears in these simple words: “No, sir, Mr. Freeman” (63). It is the most she has ever said in the totality of the three abuse incidents. In this scene, her underwear
acquires substantial symbolism as Freeman explicitly forces them off her body then back onto her after “a breaking and entering... [where] the senses are torn apart” (Angelou 63). She imbues the clothing article with the pain of the rape as well as the betrayal of her patriarchal figure. Angelou highlights the loss of this father image by stating that the “panties... fell at Mother’s feet,” revealing the truth a couple days later (66). The language of this sentence evokes biblical imagery. Specifically, it recalls a passage from Luke in which a woman falls at Jesus’ feet, who absolves her of her sins and allows her to “go in peace” (New International Bible, Luke 7:36-50). During Freeman’s trial, Angelou lies, denying his prior abuses of frottage, because she fears “the court would stone [her] as they had stoned the harlot in the Bible” (68). This particular passage not only reinforces the traumatic victimization of child sexual abuse, but also solidifies the idea that the underwear falling to her mother’s feet begs for her redemption. Additionally, the combination of these two scenes illustrates the complete dissolution of the loving father, conclusively replaced with a maternal figure who, for a moment, holds her and “the terror” abates (Angelou 66). However, her mother’s absolution was not enough, thus perpetuating and heightening that constructed wall between the adults in her life and herself. Ultimately, the stained underwear represent a cruelty too overwhelming for Angelou to cope with in its immediacy, thus she separates herself from the reality of the rape by hiding the clothing and the truth.

Angelou’s narrative contains significant historical relationships between underwear and disillusionment; continuing this connection, she uses the notion of her divided mind to reflect the duality of undergarments’ representation of the female body. This connection is especially important as it embodies the lasting effect of Freeman’s rape and her subsequent
disenchantment with him. Angelou experiences a dichotomy that generations of females have experienced in the same process of disenchantment she displays in her autobiography. This idea of a split reality in which Angelou is a victim of rape contrasts with the secretive world created by the hidden underwear; the history of undergarments exposes a similar notion of duality.

After incorporating the term social skin under the weight of social ideals, behaviors, and symbolism, undergarments become wholly dualistic. For decades, scholars have analyzed the dualism of underwear as a private yet public article of clothing in relation to its formation of female identity. Though undergarments have changed physically and symbolically over the centuries, they ultimately became “private and sexualized... essential to the shaping of the publicly viewed silhouette, intimate apparel— a term in use by 1921— is critical to making bodies feminine” (Fields 3). Scholarship on self-identity and underwear has concentrated particularly on the role of corsets in feminine fashion.

Used as both underwear and outerwear, the corset invokes much analysis focusing on its representation of femininity. Although the undergarment has proven itself a non-display article of clothing that promotes displayed morality or a lack thereof, its dualistic nature projects much further into its gendered nature. Many scholars argue that masculinity entrenched corsets because they romanticized debilitation to stroke male egos, creating weak and fragile women wholly dependent on men for physical and social mobility. Corsets’ constructed gender reveals how society literally formed women’s bodies and identities. Additionally, corsets modified social behaviors because women “were considered the frailer sex not only physically but morally: their minds and their wills as well as their backs were weak” (Lurie 219). The gendered notion of a female garment
reveals the inherent dualistic nature. Even more so, corsets simultaneously affirmed “female beauty” and denied “female sexuality” (Kaiser 110). Kaiser discusses social theories that address the physical debilitation caused by corsets that suppressed women’s menstruation for the sake of attractiveness. Corsets, she asserts, “both heightened women’s secondary sexual characteristics with the goal of attracting the male gaze, [sic] and controlled women’s sexuality by limiting access to their flesh” (Swanson 66). The corsets attracted men and, consequentially, marriage with the primary goal of reproduction, but simultaneously, negated the process of reproduction. This paradoxical nature of female undergarments continues as a notion of underwear in a private yet public sphere.

Ultimately, the dualistic nature of female underwear lends itself to Angelou’s use through its divided public and private domains. In these notions of secrecy, she enhances the traumatic effect of the rape by creating a dualistic coping mechanism channeled through the stained underwear. Related to this discussion, D. A. Miller suggests that a “secret subject is always an open secret,” rhetorically asking: how can we know about a secret subjective content if it is so well concealed? (204-205). Historian Casey Finch applies this theory to conclude that the term “underwear” itself incorporated a complex connotation of underwear suggesting nakedness through its denotative definition of the need to be clothed.

No doubt the metaphor for this impossible oscillation between the "truth" of the interior and the "truth" of the exterior... a term which in the pre-modern period might have been an oxymoron... but which by the end of the Victorian period had become emphatically redundant (because now it goes without saying that just
beneath clothing, and just beneath the surface of the social environment, lies another kind of garment). (Finch 360)

Finch analyzes late nineteenth century paintings to assert his schematic idea that underwear somehow worked as both a known truth and a secret. He remarks, “the truth...now became covert: a secret, like underwear, only mysteriously connected with and buried beneath the accoutrements of the cultural environment... Yet the ‘secret,’ paradoxically enough, was not only out; it was everywhere brazenly figured and reiterated” (Finch 359). His idea that underwear presents a public and private truth creates the crux of the argument that Angelou’s underwear represents her dual awareness of her cruel reality.

The history of underwear’s dualism creates an opening for the hidden undergarments in Angelou’s narrative to operate in divisive, contrasting ways in response to Freeman’s rape. Notably, Angelou felt deep regret for “allowing” the rape to happen, as well as for Freeman’s ensuing murder, thus creating increasingly yet understandably complex emotions (65). Angelou’s proneness to transform her world from reality into a fictionalized experience intensifies these natural emotions of survivors of rape. Myra McMurry states that Angelou presents an “almost novelistic clarity of Caged Bird [that] results from the artistic tension between Angelou’s recollected self and her authorial consciousness. Implicit in this dual awareness is the knowledge that events are significant not merely in themselves, but also because they have been transcended” (106). Angelou consistently employs her dual awareness of reality throughout her narrative, creating fictionalized events, such as an entire scene in which her grandmother censures a racist dentist, to override the overwhelming adversity of the situation. In this fashion, the hidden underwear expose Angelou’s attempt to cope with the trauma of sexual abuse.
When Angelou hides the red-and-yellow-stained underwear, she attempts to suppress the reality of Freeman’s abuse, thus dividing her world into Finch’s notion of underwear’s interior and exterior truth. These truths seem interchangeable or unreachably intermeshed. The underwear symbolizes the act of rape, so when they are hidden, the truth becomes an interior secret. But when Angelou embeds the underwear with this privatized knowledge, she ejects it from herself, creating an exterior truth in its physical essence. Therefore, using Miller’s same notion that a secret subject remains open, the underwear represents the dualistic realities of Angelou’s trauma. She fears Freeman’s threats of murder, swearing herself to complete silence, but she has also sent her secret into the world. Specifically, she inserts the underwear and her knowledge of the event between her mattresses, which symbolizes a double rejection of the truth: to return the sexualization back to the initial location of Freeman’s onslaught. In this scene, the underwear temporarily represent a reality in which the rape did happen and one where it did not. Recognition and analysis of this dualism helps readers to better understand the overwhelming guilt Angelou feels in the aftermath of the rape.

Additionally, the underwear represents the perplexing disillusionment of sexual abuse in which the child questions his or her own adolescence. This confusion arises when she feels the wetness and pain between her legs, which triggers an intricate dualism juxtaposing Angelou’s explanation and actions. After reeman rapes her, he instructs her to go to the library, but she says she cannot abide the hard seats because “they had been constructed for children” (64). Angelou writes this quote in parenthesis, providing a seemingly unnecessary explanation. First, uncomfortableness from sitting after her assault would be natural. Second, at seven-years-old, Angelou is still a child. Thus this quote raises
questions about her perceived adulthood: Does she no longer view herself as a child? If the answer is no—that the rape stripped her of her naiveté and adolescence—Angelou immediately belies this with her intent to seek out Bailey at his regular baseball lot, illustrating imagery of youth playing baseball. Her search produces a childlike image of a younger sister watching her older brother run around “dusty diamonds” in an “empty lot,” eliciting further juvenile imagery of boys essentially playing sandlot ball (Angelou 64). Her actions undermine the idea that she cannot sit in a seat made for kids, creating a paradoxical state of a child feeling unfit in her own environment and body. A common consequence of child sexual abuse, psychologists explain that society declares sexual abuse “the end of childhood and yet sexually abused children continue to be seen as innocent and remain part of the childhood category,” which promotes “an inclusion/exclusion dynamic...structured along the lines of childhood, morality and gender” (Meyer 95). In other words, society says sexual abuse obliterates innocence yet the child remains the victim in the situation—free of guilt. Thus Angelou simultaneously feels included and excluded in childhood. Symbolic in the wetness of her underwear, her actions, confusion, and innocence aids our understanding of the lingering disillusionment and dualism.

The Lavender Taffeta Dress

Not only does Maya Angelou use the historical and social significance of underwear to represent disillusionment, she also harnesses the cultural significance embedded in the multi-faceted lavender taffeta dress in order to construct foundational themes of racism, adult betrayal, and, ultimately, self-identity. The preface’s first line of I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings conveys the following passage’s overall tone: “What you looking at me
for? / I didn’t come to stay” (Angelou 7). Self-conscious with a desire to avert the gazes of those around her, Angelou presents these ideas foremost to establish the fundamental themes of her narrative. According to Sidonie Ann Smith, the strategy of opening with this moment displays “the autobiographer’s self-image at the moment of writing, for the nature of that self-image determines the nature of the pattern of self-actualization he [or she] discovers while attempting to shape his [or her] past experiences” (5). By beginning with a passage that focuses on apparel contrasting with a fantasy beauty, Angelou establishes a pattern she continues throughout her autobiography. The fantasy remains important to understanding the symbolism of the dress. Carol E. Neubauer believes Angelou’s fantasies “demonstrate [her] undiminished strength of character” (Bloom 195). Neubauer’s quotation references a fictionalized passage with a racist dentist, but it aptly describes the duality of Angelou’s writing that presents a shamed self in contrast to a transcended image. The lavender taffeta dress channels Angelou’s frustrations with her identity and the authority of the adults in Stamps by creating a fictionalized image of herself transformed by this dress—a transformation that leaves her disillusioned.

Angelou’s arrangement of this scene establishes the elemental nature of the subsequent disillusionment. First, she provides a rigid consternation by repeating the biting line, “What you looking at me for?” three times, reinforcing her frustration with the situation. Furthermore, Angelou’s narration bolsters the claim by saying “they” needed to accept “the truth of the statement” and leave her to her “well-known forgetfulness” (7). The conjoined aspects of child Angelou’s actions and adult Angelou’s words, another example of contrasting duality in the text, work in tandem to press the immediacy of her emotion into the words. Much may also be said about the first line introducing an ungrammatical phrase
spoken by Angelou conflicting with the “biographia literaria” presented less than ten pages later that Christine Froula describes as a “childhood romance” with literature (102). In addition to the pride she takes in articulate speaking, this ungrammatical phrase seems to redirect Angelou’s frustration to the community around her—the adults who phrased it with the dropped verb in the written text and in everyday oral communication. She organizes her narrative to include these motifs to set up the consequential disillusionment of fictionalizing her identity in this frustration.

Following her stammering, frustrated forgetfulness, Angelou conveys her hopes of being an enchanting beauty, envisioning a white antithesis of herself; however, she experiences an intense disillusionment that Angelou conveys with her lavender taffeta dress. When she watched her grandmother fashion her church outfit, she imagined she would look like “a movie star” (Angelou 7). The fabric was silk taffeta, and her grandmother carefully tucked and ruffled the hems, hanging it gingerly over the sewing machine. Angelou could have simply remarked on the dress’s color or overall appearance to express its beauty, but she exhibits distinct ingenuity with this specific garment, using every aspect of its symbolism to create an enchanting image of the dress. Silk taffeta is an extremely delicate fabric; it creases or unravels quickly and can be permanently damaged or “easily bruised by folding...Most taffeta fabrics are chosen for their beauty, not their durability” (Shaeffer 246). The care with which Angelou’s grandmother treats the dress reveals the painstaking beauty Angelou imbues the dress with.

Her grandmother seems particularly important in this passage because taffeta requires “extra patience” when dealing with the fabric (Willard 78). Claire Shaeffer even suggests people with “rough hands” rub their hands with sugar and cooking oil prior to
sewing to stymie the high chance of ruining the dress (247). Although Angelou’s grandmother exhibited patience multiple times throughout the narrative, the attention she gave this dress stands out as remarkable given her grandmother’s rejection of pride in appearance. Additionally, Angelou later describes her grandmother’s hands as “rough,” suggesting even further the great care she must have taken (90). It also suggests the fabric to be of a higher caliber, conspicuous in its rich nature, than her grandmother’s rough hands.

Nonetheless, silk taffeta emits the radiant hope of Angelou’s dreams of beauty; it “is considered a ‘noisy’ fabric since it rustles with [one’s] every move, and it is famous for its iridescent luster and shine” (Willard 78). The noisy brightness of the silk taffeta symbolizes the vision of extroverted charm Angelou wants to exude. The frilly delicateness of the dress appeals to her desire to appear distinctively feminine yet her ideal, female beauty remains just as fragile as the fibers of the silk taffeta. The fabric of this dress illustrates how desperately she wishes to be attractive in a physicality much different than her own.

Looking back on Angelou’s depiction of precisely what the dress meant to her young self parallels the underwear. In both instances, she creates a separate reality, creating two separate worlds to cope with her disappointment. The dualism produces the image of Angelou as a “sweet little white girl” who everybody believed to be “what was right with the world” (8). She describes her fantasy self as long, blonde-haired with light-blue eyes, claiming she “was really white” (Angelou 8). Foremost, this idea augments the larger narrative’s message about discrimination. Four chapters after the preface, Angelou admits to “never believing that whites were really real,” thinking of them as “strange pale creatures that lived in their alien unlife...[not] considered folks. They were white folks”
These contrasting statements of claiming to be white and not believing in them opens another mode of dualism—one that shows how deeply Angelou clung to her fantasy life. This paradoxical impression of the white race stems from Angelou having rarely interacted with anyone outside of her own race (proven by her misconstrued understanding of a “Chinaman” and the complete segregation of Stamps). She would have mostly seen little white girls in advertisements on television and, possibly, her grandmother’s store. In the 1920s, an abundance of advertisements for foods, such as National Oats or Wilbur’s Cocoa, “targeted children” by displaying “healthy” white children (Parkin 211-212). Katherine J. Parkin explains a later shift in advertising focused “almost exclusively on girls...appealing to girls’ preferences” (211). On the other hand, advertising research found an abysmally low two percent of African American models from the 1960s-1980s (Parkin 85-86). This segregation reinforced Angelou’s perception of picturesque little white girls, though she rarely saw them, importuning her dualistic coping mechanism to handle such weighty discrimination. Ultimately, this fantasy identity constructs Angelou’s disillusionment, inducing a severe recognition of her insecurities, for which her wearing the taffeta dress serves as a trigger.

To Angelou, the garment no longer represents a high caliber article of clothing; instead, it compresses her self-doubt into elucidation, transforming the symbolism of the dress and exposing her disillusionment. She feels absolute dismay:

Easter’s early morning sun had shown the dress to be a plain ugly cut-down from a white woman’s once-was-purple throwaway. It was old-lady-long too, but it didn’t hide my skinny legs, which had been greased with Blue Seal Vaseline and powdered
with the Arkansas clay. The age-faded color made my skin look like dirty mud, and everyone in church was looking at my skinny legs. (Angelou 8)

This passage shows her disenchantment with the dress and the reaffirmation that she is not white, blond, or blue-eyed. Instead, she describes herself as “a too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair, broad feet, and a space between her teeth” (Angelou 8). More insecurities arise when she later describes the church elders saying “unkind things about my features” wondering aloud to Angelou “how [she] came about” in such a “handsome” family (21). In that quote and in the other examples of her anxieties, Angelou finds herself judged by an intruder “they,” such as the elders and churchgoers. While not as drastic or horrific as Freeman’s betrayal (or even close at all), the adults play a role in her struggle that foment her necessity of a dual awareness.

In most cases, she fears their perception of her. This anxiety appears in her taffeta dream where her whiteness earns her the solicitation of “people” begging for her forgiveness, calling her “dear Marguerite” (Angelou 8). Her answer would be biblical: “No, you couldn’t have known. Of course I forgive you” (Angelou 8). She seeks their better opinion of her, but she does not contest their judgment. Some scholars indicate that Angelou acquiesces to the cultural laws of etiquette, such as proper titles for her elders, her social performance, and abiding silence, because it is simply who she is. McMurry states, “In Marguerite’s world, rigid laws govern every aspect of a child’s life… Marguerite is an obedient child. Her transgressions come, not of willful disobedience, but from loss of control in confrontations in which she is physically overpowered by a larger force” (107). Understandably, Angelou experiences the negative remarks from the adults around her as much more of a burden than Bailey—a naturally independent, strong-minded person.
Therefore, these moments where she finds herself jarred by reality, forced into a fantasy world, and subsequently disillusioned are fashioned by grownups who mold her youth as well as her future adulthood.

The taffeta dress conveys the complexity of Angelou’s feelings about herself, her race, and the adults around her; it reinforces the idea of her fantasy self, mirroring what or who she wishes to be rather than her actual existence. McMurry asserts that this moment of dualism exposes the birdcage from the title, “which conceals and denies her true nature;” Angelou feels this displacement, splitting her world in two to cope with the overwhelming shame (107). These crucial moments create the overarching themes of self-identity and disillusionment. Thus, her taffeta dress, which triggers and circumscribes the fantasy and disenchantment, remains unmitigated as an essential point of analysis.

Conclusion

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* contains many moments in which Angelou harnesses the cultural significance embedded in articles of clothing to invoke complex emotions, imagery, and meaning. Furthermore, not all of these incidents appeal to the theme of disillusionment; for example, in the trial scene against Freeman, Angelou finds immense comfort in a “navy-blue winter coat with brass buttons” that hugged her like a friend “in the strange and unfriendly” courtroom (67). In this passage, clothes summon a fortitude within Angelou that strengthens the implications of material culture in a far more positive fashion.

Clothes, in this sense, contain friendliness and support rather than the shreds of ruined hopes and naiveté. Even the detail about the brass buttons elicits connotations from
the word “brass,” illustrating a bravery and boldness Angelou does not truly feel. Similarly, in a separate passage, she graduates from eighth grade at twelve-years-old and finds tremendous self-confidence in the beautiful “butter-yellow piqué dress” that “fitted perfectly and everyone said... [she] looked like a sunbeam in it” (136). Her graduation and confidence confers success to the dress. Evoking Shakespearian poetry, she is the sun, blinding and handsome, circling back to Angelou’s academic success and familiarity with classic literature. These examples demonstrate the illustrious yet overlooked technique in which Angelou uses fashion to create a greater understanding of her identity. They also invite further examination as possible motivations or symbolic pillars in the hope she eventually discovers at the end of the narrative.

In this first autobiography, Angelou creates unique, intricate, and complex usages of underwear and taffeta to augment her narrative’s primary themes of self-identity, racism, and sexism. Looking further to contemporary autobiographies, clothing can continue to convey a distinctly revolutionary femininity. The importance of dress in other narratives resonates as singular yet diverse. The specificity of using clothing articles as a metaphoric or physical vehicle to express emotion creates a definitive literary tool. Yet this tool may be used in innumerable respects. Angelou’s dress represents the experience of a young, African American female in the 1930s, but dress varies by geography, gender, and race. Current debate about the freedom Muslim women find or do not find in hijabs perfectly communicates how apparel can represent a significant experience. Thus to disregard the symbolism in fashion is to overlook an influential aspect of identity. Underwear and taffeta create a rich symbolism that fosters a more profound understanding of Angelou’s coming-of-age narrative as it relates to her gender, race, and individuality. As she continues to
write about her life, the frequency and importance of analyzing the material turn in her works increases.
CHAPTER II

“SHOWING OUT:” APPAREL OF FAILURE IN *GATHER TOGETHER IN MY NAME*

*Pretty women wonder where my secret lies.*
*I’m not cute or built to suit a fashion model’s size*
*But when I start to tell them,*
*They think I’m telling lies.*

— Maya Angelou, “Phenomenal Women”

Introduction

Tapping out power down the stems of high heels with a “pan-caked” face and fitted gloves, Angelou probes adulthood as a young mother, searching for success yet finding much more disappointment in *Gather Together in My Name*. Her narrative presents numerous scenarios in which Angelou fails in her career or relationships; thus moments of failure strategically establish “a strength of character that differs from the repeated disillusionment and frustration with the adults around her (Lupton 86). Angelou says of the failures, “It is important to encounter defeat—in order to best oneself. It demands precision in order to develop the brilliance of a diamond” (Randall-Tsuruta 105). *Gather Together in My Name* especially focuses on her experience as a process of failure leading to her eventual success. Her second autobiography embraces “the more universal concerns about independence, self-reliance, and self-fulfillment” (McPherson 62). Furthermore, whether her failure emanates from her family, career, or love interests, her character growth exposes a scrutiny of the archetypal femininity when she cannot successfully use fashion products. Items such as Vinylite high heels
and Max Factor foundation create a paradigmatic beauty that disorients, distorts, and complicates Angelou’s self-identity. Leslie Rabine asserts fashion has an effect of “the male/subject—female/object structuring of the symbolic order, constitute[ing] woman as paradigmatic object” (65). Angelou encapsulates this fashion paradigm and her subsequent perplexity of it by juxtaposing a failed relationship or business venture with expensive clothing or makeup.

In this juxtaposition, Angelou presents a facet of what Sandra Bartky names “the fashion-beauty complex, a gaze that deprecates and evaluates a woman's body” (qtd. in Young 201). Bartky explains further that the fashion-beauty complex “shapes one of the introjected subjects for whom [she] exists as object,” sensing herself deficient when “all the projections of the...complex have this in common: they are images of what I am not’” (qtd. in Young 201). This feeling of not fitting into the paradigm or projected images of beauty resonates louder for minority women. Deborah Willis and Carla Williams note the stereotypical fashions or images of black women: “the naked black females (alternatively the ‘National Geographic’ or ‘Jezebel’ aesthetic); the neutered black female, or ‘mammy’ aesthetic; and the noble black female, a descendant of the ‘noble savage’” (ix). Angelou does not fit any of these stereotypes, but without a category to fall into, she seems to fall endlessly. Mary Jane Lupton briefly speaks to the theme of clothing in Angelou’s work, saying “Angelou tends to use clothing as a form of deliberate costuming that either covers up or augments her character’s body, often conveying her bad taste and inexperience” (92). In Gather Together in My Name, dress represents Angelou’s insecurity and failure of a beauty ideal she cannot achieve.
Vivian Baxter’s Fashion

Angelou’s perception of beauty is rooted in Vivian Baxter’s role as her fashionable, pretty mother. Prior to *Gather Together in My Name*, Angelou presents the mother-daughter relationship fraught with bitterness and miscommunications. Sent alone with her brother to Stamps, Arkansas, at the age of three, Angelou felt abandoned by her parents, and she later said in an interview that Baxter “was a poor mother for a child” (Paterson 121). However, in her second autobiography, she creates a new dynamic with her mother. Angelou no longer feels bitterness towards Baxter but sees her as “one of the greatest human beings ever” (Oliver 136). She later speaks of Baxter’s extroverted personality, recalling how her mother would say, “They spell my name W-o-m-a-n” (Oliver 136). This statement’s confident femininity echoes the tone of Baxter’s presence in *Gather Together in My Name*. Specifically, it resonates with Angelou’s perception of Baxter’s physical presence. Thus Baxter’s fashion—the clothes and makeup she wears—invites analysis as an embodiment of Angelou’s beauty ideals and influence on Angelou’s developing identity. While Angelou’s seventh autobiography, *Me & Mom & Me* (2013), focused on the relationship with her mother, Chapter II only uses *Gather Together in My Name’s* references to Baxter. Nonetheless, in most of her autobiographies, Angelou “frequently contrasts Vivian [Baxter’s] delicate stature to her own awkward size, [Baxter’s] beautiful face to her own solemn countenance, [and] [Baxter’s] bravado to her own reticence” (Lupton 27). These contrasting aesthetics prove the basis of Angelou’s understanding and relationship with her own fashion and beauty.
In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou notably struggles with her perception of beauty based on white skin and blonde hair. Her concern with beauty permeates her second autobiography as well, especially in the importance she confers on her mother’s example of modeling expensive clothing, high heels, and the head-held-high confidence a black woman can exude. In an article for *The New Yorker*, Hilton Alys writes, “Like most girls, Angelou wanted to define herself by not becoming her mother. But how could she compete with a woman who was so smart and cunning, whom so many men found irresistible?” Angelou may not have sought to become her mother, but she unquestionably held her as an embodied image of success and beauty. Angelou fashions herself after the confidence and style she sees in her mother. The intoxication of Baxter’s fashion sense manifests itself in the roughly 35 pages that refer to Baxter, either briefly or when she is a predominant character in a scene; of these references, Angelou explicitly mentions Baxter’s fashion or beauty 14 times. Furthermore, an additional six pages contain a reference to Baxter in conjunction with a description of the physical aesthetics of her various lovers, her son, Bailey, or Angelou, herself. Angelou creates a pattern of associating her mother with beauty, even if it comes from someone else; she describes Baxter’s boyfriends by their expensive coats and Bailey by his “plum pretty black color” and “teeth...white like promises” on these pages (303). This pattern confirms that Baxter surrounds herself with beautiful people. However, Angelou’s description of herself does not reflect the same beauty as Baxter, her boyfriends, or Bailey. In *Gather Together in My Name*, Angelou associates beauty with her mother’s presence yet excludes herself from this dynamic.
Many of these scenes depict Baxter’s personality, especially her high self-esteem, along with her appearance. Baxter’s lips frequent the pages of Angelou’s narrative. In one scene, Angelou states her mother “reached for her lipstick tube (never far away),” establishing a relationship between Baxter and makeup that borders on fixation (297). Further in the scene, Angelou recalls how her mother exuded self-assurance prior to stepping out on a date.

She pasted a waxy kiss on my forehead and draped her kolinsky over her shoulders.

“How do I look?”

“Beautiful.”

She tugged the furs into a more casual drape and laughed, “You only say it ‘cause it’s true.”

Her high heels tapped toward the door in a drumming rhythm. (Angelou 299)

The description of waxy lips indicates Baxter wore lipstick, meaning Angelou remembers her mother’s kisses covered in makeup. Although lipstick manufactured with “a base of oil and wax came into limited use before World War I,” early “indelible” lipsticks were made with “waxes and alcohol,” because wax provides lipstick’s structure and solidity (Lauffer 366). Lipstick’s cultural history invites distinct associations to femininity. In the early twentieth century, “wearing lipstick was largely seen as morally questionable and of the realm of prostitutes and actresses” (Eldridge 175). The taboo nature of lipstick simultaneously incited government attempts to ban all cosmetics at a state level and defiance from the women’s rights movement (Schaffer 22). Carol Dyhouse writes, “The reddened mouth had become what Angela Carter defined as one
of the great glamour conventions of the twentieth century, and the very act of putting
on lipstick had acquired multiple meanings, from self-assurance through provocation to
defiance (67). By World War II, “women were actively encouraged to paint their lips
bright red and glossy in order to keep up morale. Red lipstick was a mark of patriotism
and showed a will to win” (Eldridge 175). Angelou mentions her mother wearing red
lipstick once more, right after Baxter undergoes a hysterectomy. Angelou reasserts her
mother’s strength, even in the hospital bed, by remarking on her “red lips” (356). In this
scene, Baxter’s red lips represent her willingness to conquer any illness; they also
reestablish any femininity that some women feel they lose with a hysterectomy. Thus
her bedridden state signifies both a weakness of being seen in a hospital bed and a
pathos of losing her uterus, so the allusion to her red lips reaffirms Angelou’s
perception of her mother’s confidence, emotional strength, and defiance.

Angelou further establishes the connection between Baxter’s lipstick and her
self-assurance in a dramatic passage where Angelou returns home to find a chaotic
scene of ambulances and policemen. She notices Baxter’s outfit first, recalling her
mother “slipping into her suede coat” and continuing her association with fashion
(Angelou 318). Then she describes Baxter’s quiet smile despite the alarming disarray
when Baxter calmly “checks her makeup in her compact mirror” (Angelou 318). As Lisa
Eldridge observes, “The glamorous act of touching up one’s lipstick with a beautiful
mirrored compact became an important cultural gesture” (174). Susan Keller explains
the importance of this act as “one of the quintessential images of urban modernity
[which] was also highly scandalous: the figure of a woman applying powder or lipstick
in public, transforming the city into her boudoir... Powdering in public...epitomized
new attitudes toward self-sufficiency and one's civic identity" (300-301). Angelou
details Baxter's self-sufficiency, symbolized in the image of her fixing her makeup, when
her mother explains the situation. Her mother’s boyfriend tried to threaten Baxter with
a knife in a fit of jealousy, but she cut him before he could harm her. Baxter called the
police and ambulance for her bleeding ex-boyfriend. When she finishes her story,
Baxter impresses the importance of never letting someone control her, telling Angelou
to be independent and self-assured always.

People will take advantage of you if you let them. Especially negro [sic] women.
Everybody, his brother and his dog thinks he can walk a road in a colored
woman’s behind. But you remember this, now... Let them catch it like they find
it. If you haven’t been trained at home to their liking tell them to get to
stepping...Stepping. But not on you. (Angelou 320)

Baxter’s considerable attempts to instill pride and self-assurance in her daughter
present her as a redeemable mother or, at the very least, in juxtaposition to the mother
presented in the first autobiography. Even if her beauty alienates Angelou, this mother
figure provides stability and reassurance amidst Angelou’s struggle to secure her self-
identity.

In Angelou’s treatment of fashion as a constant in Baxter’s life, apparel becomes
a reprieve from a taxing or emotional situation. Both previously mentioned scenes
reinforce the relationship between personal distress and staunch fashionableness. In
the passage before Baxter leaves for her date, Angelou describes the furs and heels her
mother wears. While her mother’s confidence is apparent, her question, “How do I
look?” suggests the slightest hint of nervousness most people might feel on such an
occasion. However, Angelou reasserts Baxter’s confidence with the sway of her furs and drumming of her heels. Baxter seems in tune with her apparel. After Angelou says Baxter looks beautiful, the Kolinsky drapes more casually. The fur offers her a comforting reassertion of her beauty. In the 1930s, “animal fur epitomized [sic] glamour. You could writhe on it, sit on it, or drape it on and around your body. In a number of films, women show just how rich they are by walking on it…a fur coat arouses fear and loathing, lust and desire as no other garment can” (Dyhouse 35-37). Baxter’s ease with fur exemplifies her ease with glamour and beauty. Prior to this scene, Angelou steadily links Baxter’s emotional state and apparel by describing a conversation with her mother around the time Baxter’s marriage was crumbling. In this passage, she intently recounts how Baxter’s “fingers still glittered with diamonds and [how] she was a weekly customer at the most expensive shoe store in town, but her pretty face had lost its carefree adornment and her smile no longer made me think of day breaking” (Angelou 247). Angelou sees a clear connection between her mother’s declining happiness and increasing attention to fashion. As Alison Guy and Maura Banim note in their study, fashion can create mood-incongruent outfits. For example, a woman may dress up when she feels emotionally down.

Women talked of their aspirations relating to their clothes and of attempts to create images which were perceived as successful. Success was measured on two levels, feeling positive because they ‘looked good’ and the feeling of being able to achieve that image through the correct choice of clothing. Comments about ‘The woman I want to be’ reflected instances where women’s understanding of their identities and their bodies ‘clicked’ with the use made of a particular set of
clothes. 'The woman I want to be' is physically realised \(sic\) as the woman I feel I am when I look good. (Guy and Banim 316)

Additionally, the women in their study felt more positive about who they were if they simply imagined clothing that they did not yet possess but would make them feel successful. Guy and Banim concluded that clothes create three views of self: “The woman I want to be, the woman I fear I could be, and the woman I am most of the time” (316). In Angelou’s narrative, Vivian Baxter's clothing represents the view of “‘The woman I want to be’ [which] reflects images that have already been, and could be, achieved—it is realised \(sic\) and it is aspirational” (316). Baxter wore diamond rings and expensive fur shawls to realize a success in love she had not yet achieved.

Her mother's attractiveness extends beyond her own physicality and emotions, strengthening Baxter's influence on Angelou's relationship to beauty. For Angelou, physical attractiveness began to denote the inheritance of a discernible beauty and intrinsic success. She first establishes a generational beauty by recalling how her mother declares Guy Johnson’s “every virtue as a mirror of her [Baxter's] own” (Angelou 231). By forming a connection between the beauty of her son and the beauty of her mother, Angelou purposefully sets up a contrast between their seemingly innate splendor and her lack of it. Later, Angelou accentuates this hereditary beauty when she describes the Baxter family's praise of her son’s physical features as derived from Baxter. Her aunts and uncles pass the baby between them admiring the roundness of his head, but Angelou believes the physical feature to be “more than a symbol of beauty. It was an indication of the strength of a bloodline” (250). Additionally, her family notes the high arches of Johnson's feet similar to Baxter’s earlier praise of his high instep; the overlap of their compliments emphasizes the
importance that Angelou attaches to Johnson’s beauty descending from her family rather than herself. Angelou reasserts this idea when she describes two ex-classmates incredulously observing Johnson’s beauty, insisting that he looks more white than black, that Angelou “ought to pay [Johnson’s father] for giving [her] that baby,” and that “a crow [gave] birth to a dove” (237-238). This scene degrades Angelou’s appearance and belabors her perceived lack of beauty.

Furthermore, Angelou asserts physical features not only as a marker of DNA but also as an internal empowerment. For her, the fashion-beauty complex’s elitism works as an endowment to those who have it and unattainable to those who do not. Physical appearance remains a collective to those who fit into the complex yet impenetrable to anyone who cannot. Baxter’s beauty separates her from that of Angelou, particularly as someone who Angelou felt had all the physical characteristics of a beautiful black woman: short stature, light skin, and a pretty face. Angelou had to fight against a feminine beauty expected of black women, which her glamorous mother embodied in the 1920s with her fur coats and diamond rings. During that time, “all the major periodicals...featured attractive Black women on their covers...negro [sic] women who [were] unique, accomplished, beautiful, intelligent, industrious, talented, and successful. This momentum continued during World War II as beauty contests and pageants flourished in black communities” (Willis and Williams 172-174). However, “these competitions celebrated a type of black beauty based on a Western ideal, in contrast with the natural hair and dark-skin” aesthetic that emerged in the 1960s (Willis and Williams 174). Baxter, with her light-skinned beauty, becomes the celebrated woman while Angelou still finds herself on the outside.
Nonetheless, Angelou’s inheritance from her mother resonates especially important when considering the collective. In an interview with Bill Moyers in 1973, Angelou spoke about the effect of slavery on parental inheritance:

We were brought here from societies which had matrilineal inheritance in West Africa, which—our matrilineal inheritance still obtains in West Africa. That is, children inherit from their mother’s family, so that things stay in the mother’s blood line. . . . Well, slavery obviously ruled out any chance of patrilineal control. But there was the matrilineal dominance. (Moyers 20)

Angelou’s father, mostly absent from her life, makes no appearance in her second autobiography, so Baxter becomes especially important as the epitome of beauty and success. Statistically studies have shown “most African American girls derive their body image from models and lessons taught by other black women they know rather than form media images” (Willis and Williams 169). Baxter’s presence was critical in understanding Angelou’s perception of herself. In an interview with Judith Paterson in 1982, Angelou recalls a time when her mother told her, “I think you are the greatest woman I have ever met...because you are intelligent and merciful. Those two things don’t often go together (119). At first, Angelou does not believe her mother, but she convinces herself that Baxter would never lie to her. Seeing its truth, Angelou feels an overwhelming, mind-numbing gratitude. Baxter’s affirmation carries incredibly important value to her daughter. *Gather Together in My Name* describes the distance or boundary between herself and her mother, but asserts Baxter’s importance in developing Angelou’s identity. The narrative concludes with Angelou’s return to Baxter’s home.
Angelou’s Use of Fashion

Angelou uses fashion to represent her insecurities in *Gather Together in My Name*. The narrative emphasizes Angelou’s perception of her physical appearance as lacking, making it impossible for her to fit within the fashion-beauty complex that her mother so easily slips into and dominates. Yet her fashion choices in these moments invite analysis because “an understanding of dress in everyday life requires [an] understanding [of] not just how the body is represented within the fashion system and its discourses on dress, but also how the body is experienced and lived and the role that dress plays in the presentation of the body/self” (Colls 587). Angelou strategically describes the clothing and makeup she wears to present a facet of herself she has analyzed in her writing, found significant, and to which she attaches literary symbolism.

In an interview with George Goodman in 1972, Angelou remarks of her own beauty, “My looks don’t fit the current fashion in terms of feminine beauty. I am a woman who is black and lonely” (7). Pressured by the beauty of her son, brother, and mother, Angelou yearned for success to thrive. Françoise Lionnet explains this anxiety as reflection of the “British narrative tradition . . . because [Baxter] is an unattainable ideal, distant and out of reach for her ‘ugly’ daughter,” creating the classic “sympathetic yet inescapably alienating” heroine (151-152). Her alienation manifests in her inability to appear the way she imagines she will with her clothes and makeup. In a passage, shortly after her lover deserts her, Angelou imagines herself “as the heroine, solitary, standing under a streetlight’s soft yellow glow. Waiting. Waiting . . . a gentle rain falls but doesn’t drench her. It is enough to make her shiver in her white raincoat (collar
turned up)” (246). Angelou romanticizes her sorrow, presenting the raincoat as a protective layer against the rain and against her sadness. Although Angelou revels in this fashionable solitude, her brother Bailey demands she return to reality. Her narrative explores similar relationships with dress as she attempts to succeed yet subsequently fails.

**Makeup**

Throughout her narrative, Angelou explicitly references makeup 15 times, ranging from the theater makeup she calls “grease paint” to specific brands of foundation such as “Max Factor’s Pancake No. 31” (Angelou 252 & 315). The makeup represents Angelou’s attempt to cohere to the beauty paradigm she sees other women fitting into, particularly her mother. However, just like she cannot force a confidence with her clothes, she cannot force makeup to change her identity; thus makeup represents her struggle to cement her self-identity and puzzle out her perception of her physical self.

In *Gather Together in My Name*, Angelou feels she “was locked into a too-tall body, with an unpretty face”; however, in literature, ugliness has a mythical quality that Angelou uses to signify her evolving identity (327). According to Sarah Halprin, traditional stories sometimes use ugliness as a transition:

While beauty is usually an ambivalent concept, symbolizing both good and evil, innocence and experience, appearance and reality, ugliness almost always symbolizes badness or evil. In rigid systems, where bad is bad and good is good, ugliness doesn’t usually transform. . . But our human tendency toward change
appears in traditional stories, such as... Sun Pu-erh... ‘Beauty and the Beast’ ...
‘Gawain and the Lady Ragnel.’ In these stories ugliness is understood to be a phase of identity, a temporary disguise to be dropped when the spirit is able to manifest itself. (157)

From passages in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *Gather Together in My Name*, Angelou reveals her deep knowledge of classic literature, so her awareness and subsequent use of this tradition makes sense. For example, in her second autobiography, Angelou mentions how much she loves Russian literature. Her favorite writer was Maxim Gorky, who received critical acclaim for his short stories, novels, and plays in the nineteenth century. Gorky wrote a short story called “Her Lover,” in which he creates a “friendless, abandoned, ugly, and outcast” woman who finds peace in her imagination (Güneş 108). Therefore Angelou’s use of ugliness follows a literary tradition seen in the literature she read. Angelou’s work especially embodies Halprin’s idea that ugliness “is essential to the attainment of fluidity, the ability to encompass more than one role in a moment or in a lifetime” (157). In *Gather Together in My Name*, Angelou recalls that she held a variety of jobs from cook to chauffeurette to waitress and Madame. These jobs critically affect her developing self-identity, particularly her perception of her own beauty.

Notably, Angelou has great self-assurance about her intelligence. In a scene where she fails a vocational exam for a telephone operating company, Angelou refuses to believe the results, saying “her outsized intellectual conceit had led [her] to take the test for granted” (232). She says she did not fail the test because she was unintelligent but because she was too arrogant. Thus most of her confidence derives from her mental
capacities. However, society still holds “the ugly woman, even if she too is brilliant, accomplished, and rich” to a “relentless standard,” which she “almost always internalized” (Halprin 158). Here, lies Angelou’s struggle.

Angelou highlights her use of makeup as a barometer of her success with her careers, or the lack thereof. For example, her direct usage of Max Factor’s Pancake No. 31 establishes makeup’s presence as well as signifies Angelou’s insecurity about her attractiveness. The makeup industry hailed Max Factor as a revolutionary businessman who developed the “first true facial foundation... in 1936...as a cake makeup” for the film industry (Davis 9). Though developed as theater makeup, Max Factor “Pan-Cake” foundation became the “fastest- and largest-selling single makeup item in the history of cosmetics” so much so that his foundation became a star feature of certain films, “singled out with raves in the reviews” (Basten). Hollywood glamour became synonymous with Max Factor’s brand. In the narrative, Angelou claims herself to be “a product of Hollywood upbringing,” which emphasizes the glamour of using Max Factor’s makeup (251). She even references the beauty of friend by calling her “the neighborhood’s sepia Betty Grable” (Angelou 296). Betty Grable was one of many “luminaries...to team up with Max Factor,” further cementing Angelou’s perception of the foundation as glamorous (Basten). Jack Bustelo, who claims Hollywood glamour has fetishized cosmetics, points out that “one look at the radiance of movie stars in their mid-forties, achieved solely through a higher standard of living and the alchemy of the modern beauty temples, is enough to convince millions of women that this is something they want too” (91). Therefore, the manner in which Angelou employs the foundation in the narrative fails to provide a glamorous appearance.
Although Angelou considers the Max Factor makeup glamorous, like most women of the 1940s, her language and associative failure provides the opposite effect for her. When Angelou first mentions makeup in the introduction, the reference explicitly associates Max Factor's Pancake No. 31 with glamorous women. She remarks, “Those glamorous women, only slightly older than I, who wore pounds of Max Factor No. 31, false eyelashes and talked out of the sides of their mouths, their voices sliding around cigarettes which forever dangled from their lips” (Angelou 230). These smoky women with faces caked in the foundation present a dazzling, confident appeal to Angelou. However, when she wears the foundation, another character mistakes her for a prostitute and makes Angelou feel cheap. In the passage, an older woman asks her, “How come you got so much powder and lipstick?” (Angelou 252). Angelou feels self-conscious because “that morning [she] had bought a complete cosmetic kit and spent over an hour pasting [her] face into a mask with Max Factor's Pancake No. 31...The makeup was supposed to make [her] look older” (252). She felt cheapened instead. The failure to live up to the fashion's product self-perceived glamour connects back to Guy and Banim's argument that women use clothes to be women they picture in their fantasies. Guy and Banim conclude that a fantasy “theme...linked 'The woman I want to be' and 'The woman I fear I could be'...about their appearance in their clothes” (324). Max Factor Pancake No. 31 represents the beauty Angelou dreams of having as well as the fear that she does not and will not ever possess such glamorous attraction.

Angelou’s insecurity reverberates in the language she uses to describe her makeup; it becomes an opportunity to hide, which contrasts with both her mother’s guidance as well as her own fortitude when dealing with outside forces. Makeup reveals
an aspect of herself she would rather conceal as a young adult. This desire to mask self-perceived flaws remains common with women who use makeup, no matter their age. Efrat Tseélon says makeup can mask, disguise, or masquerade by “adding cosmetics,” “impersonat[ing], hid[ing], or tak[ing] a social role that will be seen as more desirable,” or “show[ing] a false outward appearance” (qtd. in Davis 68-69). In many of the passages in which Angelou references her own makeup, as well as that of other women, she refers to the foundation as a mask. Her first application of Max Factor’s foundation leads to her eventual profession as a Madame; her subsequent failure and embarrassment of this job correlates to the symbolism of her makeup. Similarly, Angelou describes the makeup of a prostitute she works with as “a heavy makeup mask [that] cracked into seams at her delight” (334). When speaking about a different prostitute, she claims the “carefully applied make-up [sic] did not disguise the woman’s hard features;” this statement provokes a negativity unseen in other characters’ cosmetics (Angelou 345). The prostitute, Bea, represents someone Angelou feels cannot hide her “flaws” though she does still see “a glint of glamour” in the prostitute (345). In her, she sees a little of herself, especially when Bea washes her face and appears “ten years younger” (Angelou 348). The Journal of Cosmetic Science categorizes women who wear makeup into “one who wore makeup primarily to conceal flaws, and another who wore it as a way of revealing or enhancing themselves” (Whitefield-Madrano 61). Bea and Angelou fall in to the former category. While Bea and Angelou conceal themselves behind a “mask,” Vivian Baxter represents the woman who uses makeup solely to augment or reinforce a confidence and beauty innate in her being. The same cannot be said for Angelou, even though she depends on the use of makeup as well.
Following Angelou’s failed experience managing prostitutes, she fled to her grandmother’s protection in Stamps, Arkansas, looking for refuge from her fear and finding further failure instead. Angelou’s time in Stamps mirrors her Californian retreat because she stands up to white store clerks, subsequently endangering her family. The clothing that inspires Angelou to speak out against their racism symbolizes both her struggle as a black woman and her failure to mimic the confidence she sees in her mother.

First, considering her mother’s influential fashion choices, it remains unsurprising that Angelou’s description of her own apparel represents Baxter’s supreme self-assurance and bold attitude. However, the amount of description she devotes to displaying that fashion style may be surprising. Cumulatively, Angelou mentions her apparel in approximately 36 pages, only slightly more than she mentions Baxter’s fashion. While the descriptions range from a brief mention to extended scenes, Angelou discusses her apparel in just over 20 percent of the narrative. Excluding the previously calculated percentage of Baxter’s clothing or makeup, Angelou describes other characters’ fashion an additional 18 times. Thus 34 percent of Angelou’s page count draws attention to the role fashion plays in her narrative. Moreover, when she focuses on her own apparel, she creates a pattern of associating an ostensibly empowered fashion product with failure.

Angelou’s failure begins as a gradual descent, starting with the realization that her San Francisco clothes do not represent the worldly woman she feels she has become. In addition to being a mother, she feels that her travels have increased her
status in the south: “Age and travel had certainly broadened me and obviously made me more attractive.... Although I had no education, my California past and having a baby made me equal” (Angelou 284). She stresses that her social status in Stamps has made her more attractive to men and women who had paid her little attention before she left town.

Angelou, however, soon discovers her mistake when a true friend explains that the men and women believe Angelou to be a joke for returning to Stamps looking exactly as she left. Her appearance remains essential to understanding why her peers felt she had not increased her stake in the world. At first, Angelou refuses to believe her friend; intent and carelessly drunk, she remarks, “They couldn’t be laughing at me. Not with my sophistication and city ways” (286). However, her friend asserts, “No. You’re funny to them. You got away. And then you came back. What for? And with what to show for your travels? ... You come back swaggering and bragging that you’ve just been to paradise and you’re wearing the very same clothes everybody here wants to get rid of” (Angelou 287). Even though Angelou emits the bravado of her California mother, her clothes undermine her attempts to establish herself in the town. Reflecting on her friend’s assertion, Angelou decides the “loud-flowered skirts and embroidered white blouses [that] caused a few eyebrows to be raised in San Diego” were “the bulk of most girls’ wardrobes in Stamps” (287). In this instance, clothes work as a marker of who Angelou wants to be—someone who stands out amongst her peers with a bold personality and outfit to match. Her clothes reveal her failure to do so, intimating a lack of success in her life. Referring to Guy and Banim’s study, this scene represents Angelou’s view of “The woman I fear I could be,” which she physically realizes as the
woman she does not want to be, the woman she wants to hide from others, and the woman she fears she has become (319). Her Californian clothes should make her fashionable and successful in her childhood community, but they reveal her stagnation instead.

Venturing outside of her community and, subsequently, her race, Angelou provides a different example of apparel symbolizing an unfulfillment—this time, with detrimental consequences. She ascribes a power and status to her San Francisco style gloves and high heels that juxtaposes the reality of her situation as a black woman in the south. This juxtaposition reveals Angelou's inability to successfully use fashion as she desires; again, she is caught on the outside.

Although Angelou acknowledges that she wants to be beautiful simply because it is a common human wish, the contrast of this desire with her entry into the white part of Stamps is richly symbolic. Much scholarship has argued that apparel addresses an outer and inner layer of self; Nathan Joseph says, “The external and the internal, the public and the private are expressed in these attitudes toward layers of dress as they are toward layers of the self” (81). Angelou wears high heels on the three-mile walk to the fabric store to establish a level of power and invoke a femininity and confidence she does not quite feel; her external and internal layers contradict each other, thus the imagery of the molding, melting plastic. Her primary reason for establishing a sense of power stems from a necessity to showcase confidence in “White Town” (Angelou 289). Similar to the way Baxter’s fashionableness heightens Angelou’s desire for beauty, Angelou believes her neat appearance can elevate black women in the eyes of the citizens of Stamps. She states,
[My] neat attire and high headed position was bound to teach the black women watching behind lace curtains how they should approach a day’s downtown shopping. It would prove to the idle white women, once I reached their territory, that I know how things should be done. And if I knew, well, didn’t that mean that there were legions of Black women in other parts of the world who knew also? Up went the Black Status. (Angelou 289)

In this passage, fashion works as a rebellious outer layer. Ilya Parkins notes fashion’s historical function as not only “escape and play, but also as a key to economic independence...fashion has generally enabled women's freedom rather than restricting it...fashion and beauty products were used strategically in gaining social respectability for heretofore marginalized Black and working-class women” (366). In the narrative, Angelou strategically uses the high heels and gloves to dissent from normative, racial beauty. Toni Morrison expresses a similar sentiment in in her observation that

Black women have always considered themselves superior to white women. Not racially superior, just superior in terms of their ability to function healthily in the world....Black women have been able to envy white women (their looks, their easy life, the attention they seem to get from their men); they could fear them (for the economic control they have had over black women's lives) and even love them (as mammys and domestic workers can); but black women have found it impossible to respect white women...Black women have no abiding admiration of white women as competent, complete people.

Angelou clearly shares the same inclination when she describes the white women as “idle.” The contrasts between black and white women necessitate a public and private
self. In a later chapter, Angelou says she was trained to “never let white folks know what you really think. If you’re sad, laugh. If you’re bleeding inside, dance” (301). The clothes represent the same ideology. Therefore, Angelou the autobiographer uses fashion to critique a beauty paradigm while Angelou the character employs fashion to resist racial archetypes.

Angelou the autobiographer foreshadows the altercation with the employees by describing the southern setting as “deceitfully mild,” suggesting the Arkansas afternoon held more for her than a simple trip to the fabric store (288). Angelou, who explicitly describes the two essential fashion products she employs to assert her confidence, comments first on the importance of accessories, noting that “short, white gloves were as essential a part of the shopping attire as girdles, which denied cleaved buttocks, and deodorant, which permitted odorless walkings [sic] up and down the steep hill” (Angelou 288). She describes the San Francisco fashion required by the California terrain to contrast the foreboding southern environment. Similarly, she wears “postwar Vinylite high heels which were see-through plastic [and] crunched two inches into the resisting gravel” (Angelou 289). Her outfit, tailored for California, symbolizes her inability to use clothing to her advantage in Arkansas.

Nonetheless, her first encounter with the white store clerks passed without incident as she ordered her fabric, though it “prodded [her] into exaggerated awareness and dignity” (Angelou 290). This awareness continued three days later when she went to retrieve her order, walking down the road “impelled by missionary zeal” (291). Her state of high emotion amplifies the fashion products she wears in tandem with the blistering southern sun. She states that the plastic of her high heels “seemed to have
melted to the exact shape of [her] feet” (Angelou 291). This hyperbolic statement creates the image of apparel fusing to her skin. High heel shoes, which have significant symbolism in fashion psychology, denote elegance and style but also eroticism. High heels “date back to the late sixteenth-century” as a nongendered shoe that signified nobility, but the Victorian era transformed into “gendered signs of female beauty and sexuality” (Danesi 12). Because of its history, high heels “reverberate with nobility, stylishness, fetishism, and eroticism” (Danesi 13). When the heels melt into her feet, all of these positive associations end up smothering Angelou in her attempt to appear attractive.

Angelou’s loss of control over the apparel foreshadows the incident at the fabric store where she offends two white clerks who question her confidence. In an aisle, Angelou and a clerk “jockey” to move past each other; the woman smiles at Angelou and says, “You stand still and I’ll pass you” (292). The smile does not soften the command to Angelou’s ears. Instead, she hears a “hard mountain voice [that] gave [her] an order” (Angelou 292). Indignant, Angelou references her clothes as a marker of class and authority. She thinks to herself, “To whom did she think she was speaking? Couldn’t she see from my still-white though dusty gloves, my starched clothes, that I wasn’t a servant to be ordered around?” (Angelou 292). In Angelou’s mind, her clothes warranted a level of respect, and when the women do not give it to her, she censures them, leaving the fabric she ordered and congratulating herself for the victory. She practically floats back to her grandmother’s store. However, her grandmother feels enraged by Angelou’s “showing out,” referring to Angelou’s act of standing up to the fabric store clerks (294). Angelou attempts to explain to her grandmother that the principle of the situation
demanded she stand up to them, but her grandmother, fearing the indignant retribution of the white citizens of Stamps, commands Angelou and her son go back to California. Her banishment connects the fashion products she meticulously chose with her inability to triumph successfully over her situation. Thus both the white and black parts of Stamps expose her failure with her dress, her fashioned self, and her careers.

Conclusion

Fashion marks multiple significant moments in this narrative not yet discussed. Generally, clothing signifies important emotions that Angelou cannot quite put into words. When she slips into prostitution, she cannot remember her first experience, only the “scratching of the man’s zipper on my upper thighs” (348). His apparel literally marks her body and memory. Similarly, Angelou uses makeup to correlate her physical appearance with her inability to succeed throughout the narrative. The way Angelou places symbolism in clothing represents a more complex view of herself. Her voice refuses to reject the moments of failure, so she shows the embodiment of them instead.

Analyzing the clothing and makeup that represent her struggles in Gather Together in My Name reveals a deeper complexity in Angelou’s narrative. Angelou, who has repeatedly stated, that her desire to tell her story was a desire to speak of the human experience. Commenting at length about the experience of black women, Angelou describes her experiences as “the black American female [who] has nursed a notion of strangers—literally. And has remained compassionate. This, to me, is survival. She is strong. And she is inclusive, as opposed to exclusive. She has included all the rest of humanity in her life and has often been excluded from their lives” (Weller 17). This
quote represents the lives of black women who, like Angelou, do not find empowerment in apparel and makeup. Until recently, foundation has ignored the varying skin tones of minority women. Although Max Factor’s Pancake formula enhanced Baxter’s lighter-skinned beauty, Bea and Angelou’s darker skin tones would have required a different formula. In LaPorschia Davis’s 2013 study, she found that African American women with darker complexions had great trouble finding foundation to match their skin tone. She states that makeup can empower women in accordance with Rose Weitz’s definition of “‘power’ as having the ability to control or influence others to reach desired goals” (Davis 58). Although “some African American women discovered the power of cosmetics...[when they] achieve a flawless look or change their appearance from day to night at any given time while using cosmetics,” a large group of women, neglected by the beauty industry, are unable to feel similarly empowered. (Davis 58). Davis’s study emphasizes the importance of studying Angelou’s inability to maneuver the world of beauty.

*Gather Together in My Name* simultaneously embodies Angelou’s inclusion and reveals her exclusion from the feminine world of fashion. The clothes and makeup present an alienating beauty paradigm—even though it surrounds her in her friends and family. Even so, the simple act of revealing this exclusion speaks to the autobiographical notion of “probing yourself so deeply and then admitting what you find” (Weller 16). Angelou’s desire to encapsulate the prevailing human spirit resonates in this narrative as she overcomes her insecurities about her appearance and the obstacles of her young adult life. The fashion products that represent these insecurities
and obstacles become emblematic of a larger class struggle, revealing far more about Angelou than she explicitly writes.
According to Efrat Tseëlon, “To engage in research on dress is to place oneself on the fringes of academic respectability” (qtd. in Twigg 287-288). Even so, Maya Angelou’s use of clothing, makeup, and high heels illuminates complexities of self-identity that she chose to not put in words. As much as Angelou thinks herself ugly, the dress she fashions herself in exposes her aspirations of surpassing her insecurities, but as a coming-of-age narrative usually does, she must first learn failure first. Fashion cannot help her confidence if it masks her identity. Her beauty must come from within—an idea she learns in her later autobiographies.

Angelou continues using dress in her following autobiographies as she further develops her self-identity. The second page of Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas, Angelou’s third autobiography, contains a description of Louise Cox’s clothes, a white woman who confused Angelou with her kind personality. Angelou draws a line between the two women, noting Cox’s “cashmere sweater and pearls...her slick hair and pink lips” (392). Cox’s appearance speaks louder than her kind words, telling Angelou that the two women were different in every way. According to Selwyn Cudjoe, Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas deals directly with "what it means to be Black and female in America," noting that Angelou contends with her relationships to white people (21). Angelou’s appearance becomes increasingly important, thus a study of the dress she describes would provide a better understanding of who she was.

Studying the material turn can edify similar works, such as the fiction of Helena Maria Viramontes. Viramontes earned acclaim for her novel, Their Dogs Came with Them, a story about four women and the difficult conditions of Chicano life in Los Angeles during
the 1960s. In her novel, she uses dress and appearance to symbolize class struggle. One character called Mama dreams of “pretty boots” that “fastened with button and hook and lace, buffed so fine, they shone like mirrors” (Viramontes 41). Her desire for fashionable shoes indicates her aspiration to escape poverty. Even so, her fashion reasserts her life’s poor conditions. Instead of hair gel, she uses lard to “slick her hair and braid it tight,” and instead of lipstick, “she pricked a finger to bleed some red on her lips” (Viramontes 41). Her crude makeup symbolizes both her determination and her inability to leave her Chicano community behind.

Material culture in literature provides an examination of a character or person’s interactions with the social and cultural environment. It also reveals inner complexities that remain unsaid. The interactions and fashion of minority, female writers or characters can reveal far deeper feelings and connections than the text itself discloses. Historically, women of color limited their speech and expression, creating invisible languages to communicate. Dress and appearance lends itself to examining these communications in works of both nonfiction and fiction. Therefore, in her autobiographies, Angelou presents dress and makeup as tokens of class struggle. Scholars have extensively examined gender and race issues in her narratives, but fashion has been neglected as a signifier of these conflicts. As Angelou rose from the red clay of segregated Arkansas to the fame and success we associate her with today, she strategically fashioned herself in her memories, in her struggles, and in her writing. To analyze her fashioned identity is to further understand how a young, black woman overcame rape, prejudice, and sexism. Furthermore, a recognition of Angelou’s identity formation—as well as other female, minority writers—can develop current understanding of the complex reality of women of color. The dualism
represented in Angelou’s relationship with dress and makeup has barely changed as proven in recent scholarship about minority women’s relationship with hijabs and the color of foundations. Further analysis of her autobiographies can reveal how Angelou formed her identity in later years, opening her works up to conversations about femininity, material culture, and aging. The fashion products in Angelou’s works provides a significant understanding of her identity, both as she experienced the memories and as she wrote them, and an examination of how dress, makeup, and apparel form her identity will create additional nuanced complexities in this phenomenal woman.
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