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MAYA ANGELOU'S M E M O I R S

in the “Gastronomic Contact Zone”:
Seriality and Citizenship

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This article posits Maya Angelou’s discussions of recipes, food, memories, and culinary practices in her memoirs as a compelling way to think about citizenship: her representations of the serial, material realities of everyday life—in written and oral tradition, the kitchen, the family archive, or the scrapbook—have implications for both home and nation.

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Content is of great importance, but we must not underestimate the value of style. That is, attention must be paid to not only what is said but how it is said; to what we wear, as well as how we wear it. In fact, we should be aware of all we do and of how we do all that we do.

—Maya Angelou, *Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now*

Maya Angelou is often criticized for what some scholars and reviewers believe is her evasion of a political position, given that taking a political position is often expected of African American life writers. Hilton Als of the *New Yorker*, for example, argues that *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* in particular, and Angelou's writing in general, "strays far from the radicalism of her contemporaries" and instead presents the "homespun, and sometimes oddly prudish story of a black woman who, when faced with the trials of life, simply makes do." Als continues, writing that her texts are a "serial soap opera that fascinat[es] in the compulsive way that soap operas do." The conflation between the "homespun," the daily, and serialized soap opera serve to distinguish her texts from those that fall more squarely in the tradition of autobiography, written by politically active (and visible) men. Measuring Angelou against celebrated writers and activists such as Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., however, ignores the fact that Angelou's autobiographical mode is distinct from theirs. In fact, I argue that the "homespun" qualities of her writing and her emphasis on the everyday are directly related to a Pan-African element in her texts. In particular, I posit Angelou's discussions of food and culinary practices as a way to think about citizenship, as a "gastronomic contact zone" wherein the everyday practices of eating are transformed into both more political and more confrontational acts (Gardaphé and Xu 7).

In fact, Angelou's engagement with the serial structures of daily life suggests that "simply mak[ing] do" is far more complicated—and potentially radical—than Als recognizes. Significantly, Lynn Marie Houston argues that "making do" as a practice performed by Caribbean women is "an act of creation using any available resources"

(99), a strategy that allows those authors—as well as Angelou—to use examples from their everyday material culture. Like the texts Houston examines, Angelou’s memoirs foreground the everyday in order to make a claim for the seriality of African Americans through contemporary theories of foodways and consumption. By calling attention to the daily and the mundane, Angelou’s serial memoir asks readers to become aware of their own particular social situation and their own embodied realities.

It is significant that, historically, ethnic Americans have been involved in the arenas of food production and services. According to Fred Gardaphé and Wenying Xu, the links between food and ethnicity in the United States are imbued with “historical, social, cultural, economic, political, and psychological significance” (5) and that, in fact, “ethnic Americans have fed and built this nation” (8). Angelou’s use of the culinary as metonym implicates both the domestic and the diaspora; she reveals that she is aware of her position in the African American literary tradition of self-narration, and she extends that tradition through her emphasis on the seriality of self and of nation. Examining the ways in which seriality and memory work using theories about collecting, following Jean-Paul Sartre’s theorizing of social or serial collectivity outlined in *Critique of Dialectical Reason* and Iris Marion Young’s related idea of gender as seriality, I argue that Angelou’s serial memoir project highlights the social collectivity of African Americans as she grounds seriality in the global implications of culinary practices. Contemporary life writing is not autonomous; rather, it exposes the hyper-relationality of subjectivity. Angelou’s self-referential series goes well beyond the traditional genre of autobiography in order to illustrate a new way to understand self-construction and the self in relation to others via the materiality of food.

In particular, I ground serial collectivity in contemporary foodways studies and “the everyday,” connecting Angelou’s self-representation to an embodied, lived experience. Angelou’s recent culinary memoirs, *Hallelujah! The Welcome Table: A Lifetime of Memories with Recipes* and *Great Food, All Day Long: Cook Splendidly, Eat Smart*, are examples of how Angelou’s texts expose the serialized work of food preparation and consumption, whose implications extend beyond the home, and indeed, the nation. As Amy Kaplan illustrates in her essay, “Manifest Domesticity,” the idea of the domestic is not limited to discussions of the hearth or the “domestic sphere,” but also extends to its opposition with the foreign. Aligning domesticity with the nation, Kaplan underscores the significance of

repositioning subjects: “when we oppose the domestic to the foreign, men and women become national allies against the alien and the determining division is not gender but racial demarcations of otherness” (582). Angelou’s serial memoir frequently focuses on gender opposition, most famously in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, but she simultaneously details her lived experiences as an African American, both within the United States and abroad. As scholars have suggested, many of Angelou’s texts foreground a search for home through the motif of journeys.¹

However, it is also through foodways that Angelou searches; in Angelou’s memoirs—as Kaplan theorizes—the nation at large is conceived of as home, one that must be protected, civilized, and maintained. Home and nation are frequently understood through particular food and consumption habits that also help readers understand themselves as embodied subjects, since these habits are inextricable from larger cultural contexts. Collecting recipes works as a form of self-collection—we gather the foods that we have incorporated into our bodies, and thus presenting a collection of recipes is a version of self-presentation. Consumption of food works as participation in ritual, too. Angelou’s memoirs, exemplified by *The Welcome Table* and *Great Food*, expose the ways in which those rituals are serial, communal, and frequently political. Because eating is a daily and often an unremarkable activity in Western cultures, Angelou’s readers gloss over these moments in her texts, but it is through these quotidian episodes that Angelou’s self-representation as a member of the African Diaspora is most powerful.²

Moreover, because food preparation and consumption are often social endeavors, the serial work of eating has implications that extend out to the larger community and through an individual’s lived and inherited experience.³ Angelou’s culinary memoirs include personal anecdotes, along with passages about her relatives and the variety of communities of which she has been a part. She contextualizes the stories with recipes and photographs of the completed dishes,⁴ some of which are previously published selections of her other memoirs, filtered through the lens of food.⁵ “Here is the recipe,” Angelou writes at the end of the first section of *The Welcome Table*, titled “Pie Fishing.” “In fact,” she continues, “here are the recipes for Mrs. Townsend’s *entire* Young-Man-Catching Sunday Afternoon Dinner” (6; emphasis added). As this example illustrates, Angelou’s personal anecdotes are community specific—readers would not have any other knowledge of Stamps, Arkansas, the community in which Townsend lives, inhabitant Mrs. Townsend

or her dinners—but they reach out to readers, as if, by making Mrs. Townsend’s *entire* dinner, they could understand the story, or stories, more completely. With her recent publications, I contend, Angelou has crafted two culinary memoirs that can fruitfully be read as part of her series of self-representational texts.⁶ Like the act of cooking, *The Welcome Table* and *Great Food* textually revel in what Clara Junker calls “the pleasures of experimentation” while they also extend narratives of inheritance and the significance of foodways narratives to the task of self-representation (134).

In this essay, I use *The Welcome Table* to analyze the ways in which seriality is figured in theories of collecting and in the technologies of food and the everyday, specifically in the written recipe. Cookbooks are suited to provide a cultural critique, as Anne Goldman asserts, because they exhort “readers to gloss text[s] not only as a *series* of declarative statements (if one were to peruse it without actually trying the recipes) but as a set of *performative acts* as well (provided one not only reads the recipes but reproduces them)” (183; emphasis added). In *The Welcome Table*, Angelou provides the recipes and the memories, but what gets performed or enacted beyond the text is up to the reader. Indeed, the consumer of *The Welcome Table* can make the dishes, materializing the performative, serial, and relational nature of memory-making. Combining the genres of memoir and cookbook thus allows Angelou to perform and to propose a new way to engage in life writing. The relationship audiences have with Angelou and her texts directly relates to how Angelou characterizes herself as a social being; she clearly understands herself as a member of distinct communities, such as the rural town of Stamps, Arkansas, or as an expatriate American living in Ghana. Representing herself as an individual within multiple collective groups becomes especially significant as she demonstrates the ways in which seriality influences social interaction.

Passages of Memory and Recipes to Try: *The Welcome Table* as Memoir

Random House categorizes *The Welcome Table* as “cooking/memoir,” a seemingly strange combination for both genres. And yet, reading cookbooks as life writing, folklorist Janet Theophano points out, makes sense because they celebrate identity and preserve the past: “Often cookbooks have served as a place for readers to remember a way of life no longer in existence or to enter a nostalgic re-creation of a past culture that persists mostly in memory” (8).⁷ Cookbooks are episodic by nature: they are read in conjunction with the

recipes, marginal comments, photographs, regional inflections, and memories embedded therein. Angelou's cookbook is no different: *The Welcome Table* presents its readers with passages of memory—reprinted and thus recontextualized.⁸ In cookbook form and read alongside Angelou's more conventional autobiographical texts, *The Welcome Table* emphasizes the serial nature of daily experience, the permeability of history, and the shared aesthetics of (re)collecting. "The root of *recipe*—the Latin *recipere*," Susan Leonardi reminds us, "implies an exchange, a giver and a receiver. Like a story, a recipe needs a recommendation, a context, a point, a reason to be" (340). Much like a collection, the recipe is, in Leonardi's terms, an "embedded discourse" (340), which does not have the same sort of power or significance without context. The collection of memories Angelou presents in *The Welcome Table* is evidence of simultaneous giving and receiving. In *The System of Objects*, Jean Baudrillard argues that individuals want to be both "entirely self-made and yet be descended from someone" (88), and that in collections, the "objects bear silent witness to this unresolved ambivalence" (88). In *The Welcome Table*, Angelou provides contexts that both present her as descended from someone—Momma, Vivian Baxter, unknown enslaved ancestors—and also as self-created. These parallel desires are articulated in *The Welcome Table* as Angelou illustrates the innate connection between cooking and writing.

The Welcome Table insists that consumption and foodways are essential repositories for memory, although the book is presented, through its packaging and marketing, as a relatively straightforward cookbook: the cover is glossy, the plastic spiral binding allows for the text to be placed flat on a counter, and the index organizes the text by ingredients rather than by memories.⁹ Moreover, Angelou dedicates *The Welcome Table* "to every wannabe cook who will dare criticism by getting into the kitchen and stirring up some groceries."¹⁰ Thus, the readers of this book, at least from the book's physical properties and paratextual apparatus, are figured as "wannabe cooks," instead of as the usual readers of her poetry or memoir.¹¹ The book's overall organization, however, is not traditional. Mark Knoblauch at *Booklist* writes that *The Welcome Table* is a "memoir of significant meals" (35); in their review, *Publishers Weekly* points to the "collection of tear- and laughter-provoking vignettes" (Rev.); and the reviewer for *The Oakland Tribune*, on the back cover of the comb-bound volume, writes that "[e]ach recipe is thoughtfully conceived and made even more enticing by the personal history attached to it" (qtd. in *The Welcome Table*, n. pag). Also on the back

cover, the reviewer for the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, however, writes that it is only “a cookbook in a sense that there are recipes.”

Other readers share the *Journal Sentinel*'s perspective. One reviewer posted on *Amazon.com* that his or her “only quibble . . . is that the descriptions of the recipes and what makes them special appear in a chapter preceding the recipes, rather than above each recipe—and the recipes are organized by family event, rather than type. That makes it awfully difficult to find anything” (Twain). The text is organized by “family event,” but not by general or typical events that families might have, like dinner parties or holiday celebrations.¹² Instead, *The Welcome Table*'s “events,” or sections, include “The Assurance of Caramel Cake,” “My Big Brother's Savings Account,” and “Oprah's Suffocated Chicken.” Without Angelou's mediating anecdotes, these “events” are rendered almost meaningless. Rather than the recipes (and subsequent dishes) providing the instructions, variations, or memories for the chefs and diners, the dishes are figured as central to the stories told. In other words, the “events” have already become memories—have already happened—and here's what they ate. Additionally, the sections are not presented in a chronological order that would follow the progression of Angelou's life; the anecdotes are recursive and episodic. In her compelling examination of African American culture and food, Doris Witt suggests that a text like *The Welcome Table* demands “that we perform and consume it—that we cook and eat its recipes as an integral part of our experience with the work” (11). Audience participation becomes necessary in *The Welcome Table*, as readers are encouraged to incorporate the text into their daily lives by making the recipes and sharing Angelou's stories.¹³

Materiality, via bodily consumption and serial performance, is thus related to collectivity as well; Angelou presents the different audiences for this book with alternative ways of reading, understanding, and appreciating the text. Additionally, she attempts to attract new readers to her previous memoirs and collections of poetry and as she continues to expand the possibilities for memoir. *The Welcome Table*, to quote Mary Jane Lupton's assessment of Angelou's serial project as a whole, embodies “an ongoing creation . . . in a form that rejects the finality of a restricting frame.”¹⁴ In addition, a larger autobiographical project is at stake in how readers and scholars approach the many texts Angelou has written. “I think I am the only serious writer,” Angelou told interviewer Jackie Kay in 1987, “who has chosen the autobiographical form as the main form to carry out my work, my expression” (qtd. in Elliot

195). While there are certainly other authors who have made life writing their focus, here Angelou experiments with the limits of autobiographical representation.

The mosaic of anecdotes and recipes, moreover, place Angelou squarely within the African American communities of which she was a part during her life. The first seven chapters in *The Welcome Table* present Angelou's childhood memories, as she interacts with her grandmother, her brother, and the rest of the African American community in Stamps, Arkansas; "Early Lessons from a Kitchen Stool," "My Big Brother's Savings Account," and "Mother's Long View" center on the relationships she has with her mother, her son, and her brother, and various moments in her career are presented in "Good Banana, Bad Timing," "Saving Face and Smoking in Italy," and "Oprah's Suffocated Chicken." Further, she gives readers an indication of her commitment to the ways in which her text—and her recipes—are indebted to others. In "M. F. K. Fisher and a White Bean Feast," for example, Angelou gives readers a story in which she prepared a cassoulet for the celebrated author and cook, admitting to her audience that "the owners of the cookery shop were shocked that I would cook for her" (151).¹⁵ Memoir is often as much about the community as it is about an individual, and the culinary memoir is no different; if anything, the form of the culinary memoir allows Angelou to illustrate the number of communities and lineages of which she is a part, and the friendships—and traumas—she experienced.¹⁶

For all of these approaches, however, Angelou does not let her reader forget the centrality of memory to cooking. Avid Angelou readers will recognize many of the excerpts presented in *The Welcome Table* from other books, indicating that she is not solely invested in presenting new material.¹⁷ For example, in *The Welcome Table*, the section "Independence Forever" provides an anecdote about Angelou's grandmother, Annie Johnson Henderson, or "Momma," and her entrepreneurial spirit.¹⁸ Here Angelou recounts the tale of Momma's desertion by her husband, and how she was "left with a two-room shack, a lively four-year-old who would later become [Angelou's] father, and a two-year-old boy who was crippled" (57). She continues:

She looked around at her situation. She was a colored woman in the South at the beginning of the twentieth century. She had herself and her sons to feed, house, and clothe. She would not work as a maid, for that would mean leaving her tots, espe-

cially her crippled one, in someone else's care. She decided to make use of the two largest employers in Stamps. They were the cotton gin, and three miles away, the lumber mill. She devised a plan that would let her make money and at the same time mostly stay at home with her "darlings." . . . Carrying her fresh raw pies, her coal pot, lard, and a fold-up chair, she would arrive at the factory. She placed herself and supplies on the ground adjacent to the door the black workers used. She would begin frying pies a half hour before noon. (57–58)

Within the context of the cookbook, Angelou emphasizes Momma's agency, her resourcefulness, and her cooking—indeed, even the title of the section places this anecdote squarely in the tradition of the Horatio Alger myth. Momma was able to think of a need that she could fill with her cooking, and ultimately was able to build a "hut" between the two factories. This hut became the store where Angelou spent a great deal of her childhood and where the African American community of Stamps purchased their goods and congregated socially. Contained in this section, readers will find only one recipe—the only recipe significant for this anecdote—for fried meat pies. If readers think of the two factories as the two established modes of prose, fiction and autobiography, it becomes clear that Angelou has created an in-between space for her serial memoir. The expansion of traditional forms of life writing is spatially rendered in this anecdote, as Angelou and her grandmother both present safe spaces for African Americans to gather together to fortify themselves.

Angelou's dedicated readers, however, would recognize this story as "New Directions" from *Wouldn't Take Nothing*. The stories are not identical, which is significant to Angelou's serial, recursive memoir project. In "New Directions," Angelou writes:

Annie, over six feet tall, big-boned, decided that she would not go to work as a domestic and leave her "precious babes" to anyone else's care. There was no possibility of being hired at the town's cotton gin or lumber mill, but maybe there was a way to make the two factories work for her. In her words, "I looked up the road I was going and back the way I come, and since I wasn't satisfied, I decided to step off the road and cut me a new path." She told herself that she wasn't a fancy cook but that she could "mix groceries well enough to scare hungry away and keep from starving a man." . . . [S]he left

her house carrying the meat pies, lard, an iron brazier, and coals for a fire. Just before lunch she appeared in an empty lot behind the cotton gin. As the dinner noon bell rang, she dropped the saviors into boiling fat and the aroma rose and floated over to the workers who spilled out of the gin, covered with white lint, looking like specters.” (22–23)

In this section, Momma is still characterized by her resourcefulness and her children are still seen as precious, but Angelou also provides Momma’s physical description here, which does not happen at any point in “Independence Forever.” Momma is seen in both passages as caring for the workers, but in “New Directions,” the workers are described as “specters” covered with the remnants of the cotton gin. In “Independence Forever,” the employees of these factories are described solely in terms of their economic relation to Momma: they are “customers” and “hungry workers.” Momma’s body, compared to the absent bodies of the consumers, reflects Angelou’s own attempt to write for an audience she does not see; like Momma’s pies, however, Angelou also wants her texts to be held and consumed.

Moreover, Momma is given voice differently in the passage from “New Directions” than she was in the section from *The Welcome Table*. In fact, in “Independence Forever,” Momma does articulate a similar message, but it is positioned rhetorically as a lesson for Maya to learn from, rather than as a decision she made in her personal life, for her own reasons. At the end of “New Directions,” Angelou writes: “Each of us has the right and the responsibility to assess the roads which lie ahead, and those over which we have traveled” (24), thereby taking a “dear reader” approach with her audience. The rhetorical situation, as it often is in *Wouldn’t Take Nothing*, features a narrator who shares pieces of “homespun” wisdom based on personal experience to a general readership. Presented in *The Welcome Table*, however, we see an intimate moment between grandmother and granddaughter, as Momma tells Maya: “Sister, the world might try to put you on a road that you don’t like. . . . If nothing ahead beckons you enough to keep you going, then you have to step off that road and cut yourself a brand-new path” (58). Because the anecdote is told in the form of a cooking memoir, however, Maya and the reader are put in a similar position of listening audience; moreover, Angelou’s decision to make this invective in the form of direct address, repeating the second person and providing the recipe from which her grandmother was able to make a living, underscores the power of recursive memory.

The structure of these anecdotes supplies a narrative recipe for intergenerational independence that Maya and her readers can follow. “Like a narrative, a recipe is reproducible, and, further, its hearers-readers-receivers are encouraged to reproduce it and, in reproducing it, to revise it and make it their own,” explains Leonardi. “Unlike the repetition of a narrative, however, a recipe’s reproducibility can have a literal result, the dish itself” (344). Indeed, providing readers—an anonymous, general audience—with the recipe is an intimate, material, familial act. Rosalyn Collings Eves writes that as the “alternate and older form of the word *recipe*—*receipt*—suggests, these written records also become a witness to something received and passed down through generations” (288). Through the recursivity of memory textualized in serial memoir, readers are given more and more of the family’s generational history, even to the point of vicariously participating in the familial lore. Ultimately, Angelou presents herself as a witness to her family’s past, and readers, too, become witnesses.

Reading *The Welcome Table* as a part of her series of self-referential texts allows for a new space of reading to emerge, one that emphasizes the materiality of the passages and stages of life in Angelou’s lived experience. Memoirs are frequently occasional, focusing on one particular moment; Helen Buss suggests that narrowing the lens on such an event “helps create the dramatic nature of memoir with its scenic quality, which de-emphasizes linear narratives that are necessary to telling a whole life” (23). *The Welcome Table* works in relation to the rest of Angelou’s texts simultaneously to reiterate an episodic or occasional understanding of one’s own life, and to challenge the forms that self-reflexive texts can take. Indeed, the prose fragments that accompany the recipes underscore Angelou’s commitment to deconstructing traditional forms of autobiographical texts. As she tells Kay, using language that mimics kneading dough, she is invested in “really manipulating and being manipulated” by autobiographical forms, “pulling [them] open and stretching” (qtd. in Elliot 195).

The transparency of ingredients for a recipe, like tiles in a mosaic, parallels the position Angelou takes as she presents herself as a construct within language. Angelou is no stranger to the idea that to name a thing is to brand it, as she herself went through a series of names before becoming “Maya Angelou.” One oft-cited example involves a ten-year-old Maya, working as a domestic in Arkansas. Mrs. Cullinan, the homeowner, was from Virginia, and Miss Glory, “a descendant of slaves that had worked for the Cul-

linans” (*Caged Bird* 105), was to help Maya learn the ways of the kitchen and other domestic duties. Mrs. Cullinan continually called Maya “Margaret,” and was advised by one of her close friends that calling Maya/Margaret “Mary” would be more suitable (107). Angelou recounts her experience of being called Mary, writing: “Every person I knew had a hellish horror of being ‘called out of his name.’ It was a dangerous practice to call a Negro anything that could be loosely construed as insulting because of the centuries of their having been called niggers, jigs, dinges, blackbirds, crows, boots and spooks” (109). In order to appease Maya, Miss Glory explains that Maya will get used to the new name, as she did—her name was originally Hallelujah. The episode ends with Maya breaking Mrs. Cullinan’s heirloom dishes, and Mrs. Cullinan’s response: “‘Her name’s Margaret!’” (110), but this part of her text offers readers an important perspective on the value Angelou and other African Americans (“Every person I knew”) give to their names. Historically, enslaved African Americans were named according to the status they achieved in American society, frequently only given first names. Last names, which Western cultures generally associate with lineage, were withheld or bestowed by the slaver—creating a false sense of heritage.¹⁹ Accordingly, the name by which Angelou is addressed, through which she enters into dialogue with another, she holds in high regard.

In addition to delineating her heritage and emphasizing its matrilinearity, she also indicates to readers that she understands herself through her relationships with others. Angelou compares herself to Scheherazade, placing herself squarely in the tradition of serial storytellers. In one episode, readers see Angelou go into a costume shop in order to prepare for a stage performance. The sales clerk asks, “Who are you, dear? . . . I mean what’s your act? Who are you?,” and Angelou is forced to create the characters she would embody on stage (*Singin’ and Swingin’* 61). Immediately, she thinks of two historical, glamorous, black women: Cleopatra and Sheba. After a brief pause, she continues: “‘And Scheherazade.’ If I felt distant from the first two, the last one fitted me like a pastie. She also was a teller of tall tales” (61). Angelou’s physical and erotic portrayal of Sheba and Cleopatra—“two queens” (60), as the clerk points out—does not exemplify her authentic art; Angelou is more attracted to the figure of the storyteller. Further, while Sheba and Cleopatra represent glamorous black women in history, they also suggest fetishization and eroticization. On the other hand, for Angelou, Scheherazade, the serial storyteller of *One Thousand and One Nights*, “fit[s her] like a

pastie,” physically covering the most historically fetishized part of an African American woman’s body. Rather than solely sustaining audiences with her body, Angelou’s choice of Scheherazade indicates a desire to feed audiences with her stories.

Scheherazade is implicated in a tale of gendered and national struggle. The frame narrative for *One Thousand and One Nights* presents the story of a king who was betrayed by his first wife. In order to exact revenge against women, he would marry a new woman each day, and on the following day he would behead her. By the time he was introduced to Scheherazade, the vizier’s daughter, he had killed three thousand women. Scheherazade decided to tell the king a new story each night in order to keep his interest, and he was so enamored with her storytelling that, night after night, he postponed her execution in order to hear the succeeding installments in her narrative. She embodies serial storytelling and uses many elements that are frequently associated with serial narratives: recurring characters, embedded and complicated plotlines, episodic structures, and a clear resistance to closure. For Angelou, Scheherazade was a teller of “tall tales,” but she is also significant in Angelou’s self-creation because she was a “glamorous Black wom[a]n in history”; while Scheherazade’s physicality is significant in *One Thousand and One Nights* because she tells stories in order to preserve her physical being, it is also significant in Angelou’s identification with her as a woman of African descent.²⁰ The persona of Scheherazade, whom Angelou would portray in her dance act in *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas*, was an act of self-creation which “fit” Angelou in a way more personal than if she “fit like a glove”; that the character of Scheherazade “fit [her] like a pastie” speaks to Angelou’s identification with Scheherazade as a black, female, serial storyteller.

Angelou chooses these three women as an ensemble of individuals whom she could portray on stage because of the way they fit into the group: glamorous black women in history. In *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Jean-Paul Sartre uses the term “series” to refer to an ensemble made up of members who are understood as separate from other members of the series. In this way, the separate members of an ensemble—those who ultimately form a series—are described in much the same way as individual elements that make up a collection; each addition to the whole makes the final assemblage more complete. Sartre places *series* in opposition to *group*, an ensemble whose members are understood as reciprocal or related (65). Sartre does not set out to figure out whether series precedes groups, or vice

versa, but rather his goal is to “display the transition from series to groups and from groups to series as constant incarnations of our practical multiplicity, and to test the dialectical intelligibility of these reversible processes” (65). The idea of “practical multiplicity” and the transition between different kinds of ensembles is crucial to my examination of serial memoir because so much of twentieth-century identity formation—and, more importantly, self-creation and self-representation—hinges on how we understand ourselves as relational. Moreover, Sartre’s theory of seriality privileges theories of alterity and multiplicity; in Angelou’s serial memoir, the tension between presenting her self and presenting an ensemble of which she was a part propels the narrative series.

It is important to note that, within Sartre’s theorizing of seriality, individuals remain individuals even as they are physically among a group; each person lives his or her reality separately, even as all, at the same moment, wait for the bus, for instance. Sartre takes the idea of individuality farther, suggesting that “to the extent that the bus designates the present commuters, it constitutes them in their *interchangeability*: each of them is effectively produced by the social ensemble as united with his neighbours, in so far as he is strictly identical with them” (259). Sartre’s ideas about a series of individuals, interchangeable solely because of their autonomy and alterity, is significant to Angelou’s serial self-representation because she often presents herself simultaneously as a member of different groups and as an *être-unique*. In 1977, just after the publication of *Singin’ and Swingin’*, she told Judith Rich: “What I represent in fact . . . is myself. That’s what I’m trying to do. And I miss most of the time on that: I do not represent blacks or tall women or women or Sonomans or Californians or Americans. Or rather I hope I do because I am all of those things. But that is not all that I am. I am all of that and more and less” (qtd. in Elliot 83). As Angelou suggests, being a part of each of these groups—or, rather, these series—helps individuals have a clearer sense of who they are by aligning themselves with others to whom they can relate.

Angelou thus emphasizes her embodied participation in these groups, materially manifested through *The Welcome Table*, which presents her “self” not in a static state of formed individuality, but in what, in postmodern parlance, is presented as a subject position. This tentative position is *subject to* multiple contexts and experiences, which demonstrate the subject position forming and re-forming itself in relation to others. Deborah Lupton’s study of food, in line with other postmodern examinations of food and culture, defines

subjectivity as fragmented and contingent rather than as unified. She writes that, because food and eating are foundational to our sense of self, how we live in and through our bodies is inextricable from subjectivity (1). The everyday experience of eating food is thus embodied and culturally situated in such a way to help ensure the individuality and alterity of each member in a series. And yet, membership in groups such as those that Angelou mentions is undefined: how tall are “tall women” in her estimation? “While serial membership delimits and constrains an individual’s possible actions,” Young points out, “it does not define the person’s identity in the sense of forming his or her individual purposes, projects, and sense of self in relation to others” (727). Or, as Angelou articulates, members of groups are “all of [those] and more and less” (qtd. in Elliot 83).²¹

National Narratives through Spicy Sausages: Angelou’s Pan-Africanism

In *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes*, readers find Angelou living in Ghana and, while she writes that she “had finally come home” (21), she moves back and forth between the positions of speaking for herself and speaking for a larger group of people. Upon returning to Africa, Angelou expresses her simultaneous joy and ambivalence about this arrival, where less than one hundred years since the emancipation of African Americans in the United States, “some descendants of those early slaves taken from Africa, returned, weighted with a heavy hope, to a continent which they could not remember, to a home which had shamefully little memory of them” (20). In her memoirs, Angelou provides the reader with many stories about her experiences as an African American living in Africa in the 1960s, many of which underscore the similarities she finds between cultural customs in Africa and those she remembers from her youth in Arkansas, but many of which also relate a profound feeling of homelessness. She often feels that, while she may have finally found a home, she is not a native African and has many associations—familial, political, cultural—with the United States.

Marianne Hirsch’s theory of postmemory is an appropriate and effective framework within which to read Angelou’s relationship to Africa. Postmemory is a form of second-generation memory that, as Hirsch explains, “characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood or recreated” (22).

While Hirsch developed the concept of “postmemory” in relation to Holocaust survivors and their descendants, she also writes that postmemory could be helpful with regard to other groups who have inherited the memories of cultural or collective trauma.²² In particular, extending the concept of postmemory to describe the narratives of African Americans helps to contextualize Angelou’s ambivalence about her “return” as a descendant of enslaved Africans to Africa. The impulse to remember, to preserve cultural heritage and customs among multiple, varied groups, is one way Angelou continually attempts to create a home for herself in these texts and, perhaps more importantly, to create a home for her son who is a synecdoche for future generations of African Americans.

In Angelou’s texts, cooking, writing, and exercising of a socially aware consciousness transform the serial daily work of cooking and of food preparation into behaviors that are aligned with political resistance, postmemory, and memorialization. For example, in *Traveling Shoes*, Angelou recounts an episode in which her friend, Julian Mayfield, returns from a trip to the United States. She writes: “Homesickness was never mentioned in our crowd. Who would dare admit a longing for a White nation so full of hate that it drove its citizens of color to madness, to death or to exile? . . . We chewed the well spiced pork of America, but in fact, we were ravenously devouring Houston and Macon, Little Rock and St. Louis. Our faces eased with sweet delight as we swallowed Harlem and Chicago’s south side” (120). Here, the sausage signifies the United States generally, but in particular it stands in for the African American communities from which they feel exiled. Following the meal, Mayfield shared the American magazines and newspapers he brought back from the United States, and his wife announced the failing health of W. E. B. Du Bois. The conversation quickly turned to possibilities for activism and action, and the group of Americans in Ghana (of which Angelou was a part) decided to gather at the same time that Americans in the United States would gather in Washington, giving the Americans in Ghana the energy to act in defiance of an oppressive governmental regime. “Our arrangements were made and agreed upon,” she writes, concluding the section, “and we broke up our meeting, our heads filled with a new and exciting charge and our fingers still smelling of spicy pork sausage” (123). Du Bois’s association with this group—as an intellectual and political ancestor to African Americans living in Ghana—underscores their desire to memorialize him. As Gregory D. Smithers suggests, Angelou presents herself as a “black American

woman whose emotional energy was drawn back to the civil rights struggles of African American people in the United States” even as she was in Ghana (493). The sausage in this scene acts as a representation of unity: unity of origin, of their expatriate community, and of cultural memory.

This episode features the consumption of spicy sausage as a manifestation of geopolitical seriality, and the active nature with which the members of the crowd, “we,” ingest the “pork of America”—to chew, to devour, to swallow, ravenously—underscores the unity of the group at this moment. Sartre writes specifically of the significance of the unity found at a gathering, explaining that “if, in special circumstances, it is possible to see a symbolic relation between the gathering, as a visible assembly of discrete particles (where it presents itself in a visible form), and its objective unity, this is to be found in the small visible crowd which, by its presence as a gathering, *becomes a symbol* of the practical unity of its *interest* or of some other object which is produced as its inert synthesis” (264). Portraying herself as one in a “crowd” of expatriate African Americans, Angelou makes it possible to connect her presence in this group and an objective unity: together they eat the food of America before they, as a gathering, discuss how to mobilize as activists and participants—across the globe—in support of the group gathering together in Washington.

Angelou frequently engages with the ways in which that national identity is simultaneously foundational and restrictive, as illustrated by this moment of communal consumption. The nation, however, is constantly in flux, and the time period covered by Angelou’s serial memoir emphasizes many of the changes the United States underwent socially, culturally, and politically between 1940, when the action of *Caged Bird* begins, and 2010, when she published *Great Food*. As Jason Dittmer argues in his essay on seriality and geopolitics, national narratives can be described as serial in and of themselves; national narratives have “a continually shifting storyline in which the characters change, grow, and interact but certain plot elements remain the same” (258). The fact that we learn or understand history in general, but the history of nations in particular, in serialized episodes of a nation’s story, reinforces the fact that those narratives make up nationhood. Dittmer further observes that “American history unfolds with a changing cast of villains/Others (the British, Native Americans, Nazis, Communists, Red-baiters, etc.) and a relatively unchanging protagonist, ‘America’” (258). When we read the national narrative as serial and domestic,

understand national figures as continuing characters in a compelling national plot, and present the conversations we have about what American identity is or how it is constructed, it seems clear that the serialization of self-life-narratives is not easily separated from serial narratives about nation.

To describe Angelou as an African American female serial memoirist places her within several different, occasionally competitive ensembles, each of which presents to its members a different lineage. She recognizes and claims many of those series, invoking Scheherazade, James Baldwin, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Oprah, among others, and ultimately presents her serial memoir as a collection of communities. Reading her texts as serial memoir is significant because it reveals their clear emphasis on the relationality of self-creation and experience, and their active resistance to the boundaries placed on them by traditional forms of autobiography. If, as Theophano asserts, cookbooks are archives of women's domestic lives (8), Angelou also asserts that they are receipts of public lives as well. Angelou's serial memoir is a testament to the seriality of national narratives because those national narratives are formed by the groups that make up the nation, and the interrelationality—and, indeed, the internationality—of subjectivity in the twentieth century. Seriality, so evident in Angelou's memoirs through multiple and often recursive publications, the recurring cast of characters, the refusal of closure, and the episodic and achronological narrative, presents itself in varied ways throughout Angelou's texts.

The autobiographical impulse in Angelou's texts further engages the intersection of the personal and political in the gastronomic sphere as she actively constructs her own self-representation through stories about food, and through the materiality of recipes. As Goldman argues, “[f]iguring the development of an ethnic identity with the metaphor of domestic labor thus provides a means of associating struggle in the political domain with endeavors in the cultural sphere. Because it calls attention to the work involved in cultural reproduction, the culinary metaphor provides writers with a means of reexamining power” (191). Food, recipes, and the transmission of history are part of the language of diaspora, and much of Angelou's narratives center on her experiences as a citizen of the United States and as an active member of the African diaspora. Ultimately, Angelou sees herself as part of a larger series: a descendant of enslaved Africans.

This series aligns with Sartre's theories of "serial behaviour, serial feelings and serial thoughts; in other words a series is a mode of being for individuals both in relation to one another and in their relation to their common being and this mode of being transforms all their structures" (266). In relation to others, in relation to herself, and in relation to her self-representation, Angelou presents her subjectivity as serially constructed and participating in series. Angelou's identification as an African American is central to the tradition of African American autobiographical texts in which she writes, particularly because of her position as a member of a racialized community. Valérie Baisnée, for example, argues that Angelou frequently employs a "communal voice" in addition to her personal voice, ultimately speaking "for a whole generation" (69), while Kenneth Mostern argues that African American self-representational texts are neither entirely communal, as is the case with Latin American *testimonio*, nor are they staunchly individual, like many traditional Western autobiographies; instead, African American life narratives illustrate "the constant and conscious negotiating of the 'I' with a variety of racialized engagements" (45), where the "I" has an actual relation to a racial "we." Rather than assert that Angelou's memoirs speak for anyone beyond herself, reading the multiple voices of the narrator as elements of the tripartite narrator—as a foundationally serial perspective—helps to delineate the distinct perspectives that are simultaneously at work in any memoir.²³ I propose, however, that Angelou's participation in a variety of communities does not mean that she speaks for them; instead, her interest is in exploring and exposing the seriality of her own experiences.

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Notes

1. See, for example, essays by Juncker and Sanford; Lupton, "Singing"; McPherson; and Taylor.

2. In her examination of English serial fiction, Laurie Langbauer suggests that "the everyday" is a category frequently taken for granted, and that it is "because of their expansiveness, their repetitiveness, their complication of closure" that serial texts "seem to mirror and carry properties often defined as essential to everyday life: that it's just one thing after another, going quietly but inexhaustibly on and on" (2). Langbauer's emphasis on repetition and resistance to closure in serial novels is significant to the analysis of any serial text. Indeed,

I argue that because Angelou writes self-reflexively, the ways in which she details the everyday in her memoirs engages with a larger cultural shift in how we understand the self in the twentieth century through the seriality of the everyday.

3. Many scholars of foodways acknowledge the often frequent conflation between female bodies and food. As Patricia Allen and Carolyn Sachs assert, scholars have differing opinions on the ramifications of women's food work: either it gives them power within a familial structure or it reinscribes a subordinate and essential gender role. See also Lupton.

4. In the "Acknowledgments" section of *The Welcome Table*, Angelou "salute[s]" the photographer for the book, Brian Lanker, who helped her "see clearly the images of foods that were becoming fuzzy" in her memory.

5. Selections appear from *Caged Bird*, *Gather Together*, and *Wouldn't Take Nothing*.

6. See, for example, Myra K. McMurray; Dolly A. McPherson; Jan Zlotnik Schmidt; and Pierre A. Walker, who discuss the episodic qualities of *Caged Bird* (Walker writes that "an indication of how episodic *Caged Bird* is is how readily sections from it have lent themselves to being anthologized"); Mary Jane Lupton quotes from reviewers who found *Gather Together* even more fragmented and disorganized than *Caged Bird*; and Juncker writes that *Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now* consists of "a series of expository prose segments" (132) while Suzette Henke remarks that *Caged Bird* is the first volume of Angelou's "serial autobiography" (22).

7. The marginal status of cooking and foodways is frequently associated with the Judaeo-Christian separation of the body and soul, although many scholars have recently established the ways in which cooking and representations of cooking influence literary studies. Andrew Warnes's *Hunger Overcome?* and Doris Witt's *Black Hunger* are two notable exceptions in the exploration of the culinary in African American literature. Additionally, a special issue of *MELUS* titled "Food in Multi-Ethnic Literatures" has helped to raise the profile of food in American literature (Gardaphé and Xu).

8. Warnes argues that the tradition in African American literature, "which includes many writers who loved to cook, provides a striking adjunct to the Western prioritization of writing" (6).

9. The hardcover edition of *The Welcome Table* does not have the plastic binding. Instead, it is published as a maroon, cloth-bound book with gold lettering, and the image that appears on the cover of the paperback appears on the dust jacket.

10. The second part of the dedication is presented to Oprah Winfrey: “To O, who said she wanted a big, pretty cookbook. Well, honey, here you are.”

11. Leonardi argues that a personal or intimate style was “characteristic of nearly all early cookbooks [such as] the first few editions of *The Joy of Cooking*, and it continues to be popular in contemporary cookbooks like Alice Waters’ *Chez Panisse* collections, Jeff Smith’s *Frugal Gourmet* volumes, and Marcella Hazan’s Italian series” (345). Warnes argues that cookbooks from the African American tradition, “by addressing readers individually, by importing phrases from the black vernacular, and by relentlessly apostrophizing and abbreviating, myriad African American cookbook writers nowadays present their recipes less as acts of writing per se than as transcripts that capture the fleeting spontaneity of speech” (11). He looks to Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor’s *Vibration Cooking: Or the Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl*, Bobby Seale’s *Barbeque’n with Bobby*, Jessica B. Harris’s *A Kwanzaa Keepsake*, and Ntozake Shange’s *If I Can Cook / You Know God Can*, as examples of “talking” recipes which “dominate the African American cooking archive” (11). While Angelou spends a great deal of time in *The Welcome Table* narrating and contextualizing the recipes it presents, this text is not as rooted in the vernacular as Warnes’s examples; Angelou’s transcriptions of the recipes are based less on the oral tradition than the stories she provides.

12. Even when recipes for traditional events appear, the recipes are organized under obscure titles. For example, Angelou does include a recipe for Thanksgiving turkey and corn bread stuffing, but they are included in the section “Saving Face and Smoking in Italy.”

13. Indeed, the physical consumption of Angelou’s recipes and memories parallels the impulse behind her Hallmark Life Mosaic collection: to be in the hands of her readers.

14. Other cooks/reviewers comment on *Amazon.com* that *The Welcome Table* is “more than just a cookbook” as they laud Angelou’s self-referential passages (McCray).

15. M. F. K. Fisher was a prolific author and serial memoirist who specialized in writing about food. Her 1943 memoir, *The Gastronomical Me*, is widely considered foundational to culinary memoirs as well as foodways studies more broadly. Angelou tells readers that she received a thank-you note from Fisher which read: “That was the first honest cassoulet I have eaten in years” (151).

16. Buss explains that memoir “may concern itself as much with the life of a community as with that of an individual” (2), and in the Foreword to McPherson’s *Order*, Traylor writes that memoir is “an

account of the Self's experience as that has been shaped by those whom the writer has known and by the world within which the writer/Self has assumed some stage presence" (xi–xii).

17. Angelou presents stories that were also printed in *Caged Bird*, *Gather Together, Wouldn't Take Nothing*, and *Letter to My Daughter*, among others.

18. This excerpt from *The Welcome Table* was also published in the December 2004 issue of *Essence* under the title "Grandma's Plans," literally reiterating the serial nature of Angelou's project.

19. For a more complete discussion, see Smith.

20. In an important way, Scheherazade is also linked to Momma, who is also a teller of tales, and from whom Angelou gets many of her stories and lessons.

21. For Sartre, writing *Critique* in the 1950s in France, the purpose of the text was to provide a theoretical framework for understanding how class works in post-war economies. In the early 1990s, Young revisited Sartre in order to examine how useful his paradigms could be when applied to other socially constructed groups who have multiple identifications, as her analysis applies specifically to women. For the purposes of this study, applying Sartre's theories of series and seriality to Angelou's serial memoir exposes the degree to which she writes about her life as a member of groups and how "membership in a series" influences the ways in which she both understands and writes about her self-construction.

22. Many scholars have investigated the ways in which postmemory can be usefully applied to the experiences of African Americans, in particular. Most recently, see Keizer.

23. The tripartite narrator, theorized by Billson and revised by Buss, examines the position of the autobiographical author/subject of memoir. Billson explains that the narrator in memoir comprises "the eyewitness, the participant, and the historian—employed by the memoir-writer to evoke the historicity of his past and to argue for the truth of his vision of history" (271). Buss's revision delineates the three positions as the participant, the witness, and the reflective/reflexive consciousness; I follow Buss's theorization of the terms.

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