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**The Caged Bird Sings On:
The Political Voice of Maya Angelou's
Autobiographical Oeuvre**

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another university for the award of any other degree (This excludes the submission of this thesis prior to revisions for the purpose of the same degree).

Signature:

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Summary

While Maya Angelou has been recognized as a feminist icon and a successful author, publishing more than thirty books and winning numerous awards, the aim of this research is to bring attention to her role as a writer/activist. This thesis analyses her six-volume serial autobiography, which was written over 33 years, and traces the development of Angelou's activism through her life writing. In so doing, this project argues that the success of the first volume, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* has obscured the integrity of the series, which consists in the use of Angelou's political voice that has not been recognised before. This research places Angelou in the African American political autobiography tradition, which combines life writing with consciousness raising from the slave narratives onwards. Following the conceptualisation of Patricia Hill Collins, this research theorises Angelou's political voice as a mode of intellectual activism. Adopting an American Studies approach, it shows how Angelou's self-representation as a black artist seeks to intervene in the social and political context of its writing and demonstrates how her life writing is in turn shaped by African American history and activism. While she is known as a pioneer of black feminism, this research, building on recent scholarship in intersectionality, argues that Angelou's work not only addresses the intersection of race and gender, but also class through what Patricia Hill Collins calls the "matrix of domination". Angelou started her writing career with the Black Arts movement, and this thesis traces the influence of this movement beyond the Black Arts era and shows how the debate of art versus propaganda continued to inform her autobiographical work. Since one of the movement's main principles was "art for people's sake", this thesis reads Angelou's life writing through differentiating the narrating "I" from the narrated "I", in which the former functions didactically as a vehicle for Angelou's political consciousness raising of a younger generation.

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Introduction

Still Maya Angelou Rises: A Writer's Activism

[S]he was, among other things, such an artist that could not only create worlds on paper, or in a listener's imagination, but she also managed, over and over again in her long life, to create and recreate herself.

- Alice Walker's tribute to Maya Angelou, "Maya Angelou was More Beautiful than She Realized"

Maya Angelou passed away on the 28th of May 2014 at her home in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, at the age of eighty-six. While well-known artists, authors and leaders reacted to the loss of this prominent African American author, the above quote from Alice Walker's tribute captures the impact Angelou had as a writer.¹ Walker is not only praising Angelou for her talents in writing and speaking, but also giving credit to Angelou for becoming the role model for many generations to come. Angelou's ability to "create or recreate" herself through her writing is related to her devotion to inspire change in her readers both in their personal and social context. In this thesis, Angelou's role as an activist/writer is explored through examining her political voice, especially in her autobiographical oeuvre, which merges her activism and writing. By taking an American studies approach in regards to the social, political and historical context of her autobiographical series, this thesis demonstrates the significance of Angelou's contribution as a black intellectual activist from the late sixties to the early twenty-first century.

While activism is a broad concept, this research recognizes that writing as activism, which is central to understanding Angelou's political voice, is only one

¹ Hannah Jane Parkinson collected the reactions of these famous people such as Mary J. Blige, J. K. Rowling, and Jesse Jackson in her article, "Maya Angelou: Tributes and Reactions to the Poet's Death on Twitter."

approach in the fight against social injustice. In the introduction to her edited collection *Still Lifting, Still Climbing: African American Women's Contemporary Activism*, Kimberly Springer puts activism into the following two categories:

[A]ctivism takes the form of 'direct action' or activism involving face-to-face interaction with members of the community. Direct action... includes the provision of social services, running for public office, self-help health activism, organizing prison ministries, gender-integrated organizational work, unionization, and paid work in social movement organizations. Activism that might be considered intellectual and, hence, removed from street-level direct action includes writing as resistance, political education, consciousness-raising, autobiography as 'political witnessing,' public statements in major U.S. newspapers, and filing lawsuits. (2-3)

Through this classification, Springer demonstrates that activism takes a variety of forms and each group is equally important in bringing reform to the lives of the oppressed. Although this research focuses on Angelou's intellectual activism, it does not aim to create a hierarchy between the two groups. In order to achieve social justice, both intellectual and direct action activism need to collaborate in helping to raise awareness and building the foundations for future improvements. In her book, *Alice Walker*, Maria Lauret emphasizes that both direct action and intellectual activists depend on each other for their overall cause of social justice to be effective:

Neither form of activism can stand in for the other, but they are complementary: activists who put their bodies at risk often lack time for self-reflection, while the words of those who have that time will be hollow if they are not heard and acted upon as well. (212)

Although grassroots activists need to be appreciated for their presence and perseverance at the forefront of the struggle, Lauret reminds that the contribution of intellectual activists also need to be acknowledged through engagement with their reflections on the future of the struggle. Thus, the aim of this thesis is to demonstrate the important role Angelou plays as an activist/writer in educating and developing the next generation of activists through her autobiographical oeuvre.

Becoming an Autobiographer

During her long literary career, Angelou used different forms of writing such as poetry, personal essays, film scripts, plays, cookbooks, and children's books; however, the form of autobiography became the main platform for her political voice. Her devotion to this specific form of life writing is evident in the creation of her six-volume autobiographical oeuvre, which she completed over more than three decades. In addition to her popular autobiographical series, Angelou's oeuvre includes the following: five poetry collections, collected in *Maya Angelou: The Complete Poetry* (2015), three books of personal essays including *Letter to My Daughter* (2008), and two cookbooks including *Hallelujah! The Welcome Table* (2004).

Angelou was introduced to the literary world with the publication of her first autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, in 1969. As a medium of writing, autobiography is typically not the first choice for authors attempting to break into the realm of literature. In the introductory essay of his famous collection of critical essays, *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, James Olney comments on the extraordinary success of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* in the multiple fields of autobiography, black American writing, and women's writing at the time of its publication. He distinguishes the uniqueness of this text by emphasizing that this was Angelou's first attempt at writing:

Until fairly recently, black writing in general was barely mentioned as literature – if mentioned at all it was usually in some other context – and until very recently, autobiography received much the same treatment. Moreover, women writers have not always been given due consideration as makers of literature. But here we have an autobiography by a black woman, published in the present decade (1970), that already has its own critical literature. ... And here is a most striking sign of the critical/cultural times: *her autobiography was Maya Angelou's first book.*
(15)

Besides the emphasis on Angelou's talent as a first-time writer of autobiography, Olney's observation is critical in contextualizing the importance of the publication of a text like *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* during the late sixties and early seventies, and its role in revitalizing interest in the previously neglected fields of autobiography and black women's writing. Not only did this autobiography help to initiate Angelou's writing career, it also established Angelou as a serial autobiographer, with her oeuvre expanding with another five subsequent volumes. Following the success of the first book, her series expanded with these four volumes over the next two decades: *Gather Together in My Name* in 1974, *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry like Christmas* in 1976, *The Heart of a Woman* in 1981, and *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes* in 1986. The final volume, *A Song Flung up to Heaven*, was published in 2002, concluding the series after a sixteen-year gap.²

It is worth mentioning that initially Angelou did not perceive herself as an autobiographer when she was approached by her future editor at Random House, Robert Loomis, to write her first autobiography in 1968. As she recalled in an interview with George Plimpton for *The Paris Review* in 1990, she had envisioned a different future for herself at the time: "Well, I had written a television series for PBS, and I was going out to California. I thought I was a poet and playwright. That was what I was going to do with the rest of my life" ("Art of Fiction" n. pag.). Even though Angelou had not yet made it as a professional writer, this recounting of Loomis's proposal shows that she desired to be recognized as an author-to-be. In the interview, Angelou identifies her early writing career as that of a poet and playwright, which gives the impression that as a form of writing, autobiography was not considered a priority in the sixties and

² In comparison to the rest of the series, this late addition of the final book raises questions about the reasons for the delay in writing this last instalment, which will be demonstrated later in this research as part of Angelou's overall political intention in writing this series.

seventies, especially by a black woman writer, as discussed earlier. Angelou's preference for writing plays or poetry also stems from the influences of the Black Arts movement, which this research aims to show is central to the development of Angelou as an intellectual activist. The aesthetic element of performance in both poems and dramas is important for the political aims of this literary movement. In the introduction to their anthology *SOS – Calling All Black People: A Black Arts Movement Reader*, the editors, John H. Bracey, Sonia Sanchez, and James Smethurst, explain the importance of these two literary forms:

[T]he most popular genres of the movement were poetry and theatre, since it was comparatively easy to present poems or plays at a political rally, on a street corner, or in a public housing project courtyard or community room. Poetry, too, was particularly important because it easily could be circulated in Black-run journals, newspapers, broadsides, and small-press chapbooks in a way that was not possible with longer fiction. (6)

The accessibility of both forms in reaching a mass of people and their flexibility in terms of performance in front of an audience are the reasons why many black artists/activists such as Angelou preferred to write in these forms during the sixties and seventies as part of their consciousness-raising campaign.

In *Maya Angelou: Adventurous Spirit*, Linda Wagner-Martin makes a similar observation about the status of autobiography's popularity in the early seventies:

[W]hen Random House published *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (which quickly became a best-seller and was translated into many languages), Angelou's methods were unique. There was very little autobiography or memoir published... In the late 1960s, publishers were looking for fiction... and they were content to stay with mainstream (i.e., white) writers. (3)

Wagner-Martin's comment shows that not only Angelou but also the publishing industry of the time was not invested in exploring the potential of writing autobiographies, when fiction was the popular trend. Considering publishers were not open to works by

minority writers even in the late sixties, Angelou's success with her first book becomes even more significant, and it paved the way for many other black women writers, such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Nikki Giovanni, to follow her example and become successful contemporary novelists and poets. In her book *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within a Tradition*, Joanne M. Braxton also affirms the influence black women autobiographers such as Angelou had on "the literary flowering of black women writing" in a variety of literary forms such as autobiography, novels, and poetry (7). She broadens this impact beyond Angelou's own career as not only "a literary renaissance of the study of autobiography", but also "a renaissance of black women writing" (*Black Women* 7). Similar to Olney and Wagner-Martin, Braxton pays tribute to the success of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* as a pivotal point for the resurgence of the fields of both autobiography and black women's writing during the seventies and eighties. In the posthumous publication of *Maya Angelou: The Complete Poetry*, Toni Morrison is quoted as praising Angelou's contribution to the field of black feminist writing: "She [Angelou] launched African American women writing in the United States" (qtd. on the cover of the collection). Although black women's writing in the United States has a long tradition before Angelou, Morrison's choice of the verb "launch" emphasizes the significance of Angelou's role in helping revitalize interest in the field of black women's writing.

While this preference for autobiography over other forms makes Angelou's writing unique, Angelou would not have joined the literary circle as a first time autobiographer without Loomis's ability to change her mind about autobiographical writing. After King's assassination and upon Baldwin's insistence, Angelou attended a friendly party at the Feiffers' house to help lift her spirits. It was in the company of such literary figures that Angelou was persuaded to share her stories of growing up in the

segregated South. Her evocative narrative style entranced her audience to such an extent that Judy Feiffer, also an author-to-be, promoted Angelou's writing skill to Robert Loomis as a new talent not to be missed. Angelou described this experience in the Plimpton interview in this way: "All of them are great talkers. They went on with their stories and I had to fight for the right to play it good. I had to insert myself to tell my stories too" ("Art of Fiction" n. pag.). It is important to consider that this emphasis on her skill of storytelling was part of promoting the literary aspect of the project, not only by critics but also by Angelou herself.

Upon hearing of her talent in "story telling" from Judy Feiffer, the wife of the famous American cartoonist at the time, Jules Feiffer, and with guidance from Angelou's friend and mentor James Baldwin, Loomis's final attempt to convince Angelou was effective. In the same interview, Angelou retold how her reluctance to write an autobiography was overcome by Loomis's persuasiveness:

Jimmy [Baldwin] gave him a ploy which always works with me. ... The next time he [Loomis] called, he said, Well Miss Angelou. I won't bother you again. It's just as well that you don't attempt to write this book. Because to write autobiography as literature is almost impossible. I [Angelou] said, What are you talking about? I'll do it. ("Art of Fiction" n. pag.)

In the retelling of this event, Angelou is emphasizing two points. The first is the "resistant/resilient" element in representing the Maya-narrator/author, which is a trope her readers have become familiar with in all of her writings. This "resistant/resilient" element can be traced as a typical characteristic of Angelou's works and interviews. This type of interpretation is not only limited to critics and her readers but also Angelou herself. By the fourth autobiography, Angelou's self-promotion of this theme of survival and stoicism is evident in an interview with Claudia Tate in 1983:

All my work, my life, everything is about survival. All my work is meant to say, 'You may encounter many defeats, but you must not be defeated.'

In fact, the encountering may be the very experience which creates the vitality and the power to endure. ("Maya Angelou" 152)

The importance of this interview is that it emphasizes the author's role in reinforcing this type of reading of her work. However, as her writing career expanded, this type of reading does overshadow the many other facets of her work, such as her political voice. The type of clichéd quote used in the Tate interview is an example of the way the author marketed her works, which culminated in the joint venture with Hallmark, the *Maya Angelou Life Mosaic Collection* in 2002, and the posthumous publication of *Rainbow in a Cloud: The Wisdom and Spirit of Maya Angelou* by her family in 2014. In both of the mentioned projects, quotations and famous sayings by the author are printed on Hallmark merchandise or collected in the book to maximize her popularity and simultaneously to make it more accessible to audiences. In his introduction to *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Maya Angelou*, literary critic Harold Bloom also argues that the popularity of Angelou's writings is due to the close connection readers feel with the Maya-narrator persona as a role model:

[T]he secret of Angelou's enormous appeal to American readers, whether white or black, [is] because her remarkable literary voice speaks to something in the universal American 'little me within the big me.' Most Americans, of whatever race or ethnic origin, share the sense that experience, however terrible, can be endured because their deepest self is beyond experience and cannot be destroyed. (1-2)

According to Bloom, the transcendent nature of Angelou's writing in confronting life challenges is welcomed by her diverse readers, as it follows in the tradition of the resilient hero in American literature. Based on this tradition, the readers learn from the didactic message of courage and perseverance behind the numerous challenges that the narrator confronts over the course of the series, such as becoming the first female streetcar conductor. While Bloom credits Angelou's writing for its universal appeal, it is noteworthy that his choice of words, "whatever race or ethnic origin", simultaneously whitewashes the significance of the race factor and black culture in her writing. Instead

of devaluing her contribution as a black intellectual activist, this thesis focuses on Angelou's political voice to emphasize the importance of her writing about race in relation to the racial discourse of contemporary America.

The second point in the Plimpton interview is that it distinguishes her autobiographical writing as "literature", high art. As discussed earlier, the significance of this point is in relation to the way the autobiographical oeuvre, especially the first volume, was perceived by critics, and promoted by the author as a literary autobiography. This perception affected the way the whole series was evaluated and criticized. While *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* was a critical success and nominated for the National Book Award in 1970, the rest of the books in the series were never considered for the same accolades as the first autobiography. Because the critics focused on aesthetics in their critique of the remaining volumes, their evaluations gave a limited perspective on this multi-faceted oeuvre. However, such appraisals do not give credit to Angelou's autobiographical oeuvre as a unit and its aim of contributing to the intellectual activism of the time. With the success of her first book, Angelou had met the challenge of writing a literary autobiography. Whereas critics distinguish this project for the aesthetic quality of the first autobiography, this research will demonstrate that it is the oeuvre's commitment to its didactic/political goals, which also needs to be appreciated.

Serial Autobiography: An Act of Activism

Since Angelou's autobiographical oeuvre is the focus of this research, the term "serial autobiography" needs to be defined. According to *A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives: Reading Autobiography*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson describe a serial autobiography as:

[A]n autobiographical work often published in multiple volumes (or films, videos, artworks). Although some writers may consider these as 'chapters' in an ongoing life story, many writers significantly revise their narratives from the perspective of different times of writing. (280)

Smith and Watson refer to the three volumes of Frederick Douglass's autobiography as an archetype for the revised narrative series: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881, revised in 1892). With each revision, Douglass presented additional perspectives of his life account; "the emphasis falls on dramatically different moments and interpretations of their significance" depending on when he was re-writing his narrative (Smith and Watson 280). Angelou's series does fit the above definition as each of the six volumes were a "chapter" of the author's life, each having an organic unity of their own, while providing a cohesive narrative as a series. Throughout her series, Angelou also revised and reconstructed the self-representation of the narrator based on the interpretation of significant events and people at different times of writing. The memoir *Mom and Me and Mom*, published in 2013, is a great example of this revision process. Published twenty-two years after the death of Vivian Baxter in 1991, Angelou revisits her relationship with her mother. While this relationship was covered previously in the series, Angelou dedicates this memoir to her mother in order to reconstruct this relationship, which signifies the impact the loss of her mother had on the way this relationship was interpreted at this later stage in the author's life.

Writing a serial autobiography not only puts Angelou among black American writers who have written a multiple account of their life narrative, such as Frederick Douglass, Richard Wright, and Langston Hughes, but also among a group of contemporary American writers more generally who have published multi-volume autobiographies. In her book *Serial Memoir: Archiving American Lives*, Nicole Stamant

includes Angelou in the latter group, with writers such as bell hooks, Lillian Hellman, and Maxine Hong Kingston, a sign of the growing popularity of the act of serialization in the late twentieth century (3). Stamant describes the reason behind the increase in demand for this serial format of self-representation as follows:

While there have been occasional moments in the history of life writing when individuals have chosen to publish multiple autobiographical texts, the rise of the memoir genre combined with postindustrial American culture allows contemporary American memoirists to think about – and then present – self-construction and self-representation in a new way. (3)

Because of the developments brought on by the post-industrial age and the increasing demand for autobiography in the late twentieth century, contemporary writers like Angelou are not limited to exploring their self-representation in one unified volume. Besides the multi-volume autobiography, Angelou also explored innovative ways of continuing her serial format beyond the series, which resulted in the publication of the joint venture of her cookbook/memoir, *Hallelujah! The Welcome Table* (2004). The contribution this cookbook/memoir makes to the development of Angelou's political voice is discussed in the concluding chapter.

This serial quality of the autobiographies allows Angelou to explore a wide range of topics over a nearly forty-year period of her life. The overall story of the oeuvre revolves around the life of the central narrator, Marguerite Johnson, more famously known by her artistic pseudonym, Maya Angelou.³ Although the six volumes together tell one overall narrative arc, each volume has its own independent arc and covers a certain period of Angelou's life, from her early childhood in the 1930s to the beginning of her writing career in 1968. The series discusses topics such as growing up as a young black girl in Stamps, Arkansas; becoming a single mother; developing an

³ The act of having an artistic pseudonym has a political significance in the modern day as it connects Angelou to the tradition of resistance and resilience dating back to the slave narratives and the act of renaming by ex-slaves, as we shall see in Chapter Three.

artistic career; transitioning to become an activist; travelling to Africa; returning to the United States for her political activism; and eventually combining her activism and writing. To end the series in 1968 and not to extend it further than this crucial year in African American history is noteworthy. The assassination of Martin Luther King during this year marks a critical point in the history of the Civil Rights movement and its later transition to the Black Power movement. By concluding her series with King's assassination and transferring her focus to her writing career, Angelou is also making a political statement about the public and personal consequences of this loss and her views on the future of activism, as will be discussed in Chapter Five.

Not only is the content of her autobiographies related to her activism, but the seriality of her autobiographical writing also accentuates her political aim. As Stamant argues, Angelou's autobiographical oeuvre extends the tradition of African American autobiography with this act of serializing, which itself can be interpreted as "a viable and subversive self-representational mode" (57). Angelou's decision to chronicle her life over a multi-volume series is thus an act of activism and resistance in which the everyday life of a black woman takes centre stage in the narrative. Stamant further explains the significance of this serialization in shaping Angelou's political voice:

Angelou's memoirs are politically aware because, as her texts illustrate, to be an African American woman in the 1930s through the 1970s and beyond is to be confronted by politics as well as, perhaps, the homespun seriality of daily life. Her use of seriality as mode of self-expression indicates that 'simply mak[ing] do' is... complicated – and potentially radical[.] (57)

Hence, as significant as the socio-political and historical content of Angelou's text is to understanding the political voice of the author, the seriality of the oeuvre also emphasizes the importance of the activism, resilience, and perseverance that takes place in the everyday, ordinary life of black Americans, which can be seen over the span of her series.

By weaving her personal experiences with the socio-political and historical events of her time, Angelou's books carry the role of consciousness-raising that was central to the Black Power movement and the feminist movement of the seventies. The concept of consciousness-raising is essential for both of these movements, as can be seen in comments made by LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, co-founder of the Black Arts movement, and Kathie Sarachild, the American feminist who adopted this idea of consciousness-raising from her days as a Civil Rights activist. In his essay, "The Need for a Cultural Base to Civil Rites and Bpower Mooments", Jones/Baraka sums up the importance of consciousness-raising: "There is no black power without blackness conscious of itself" (124). The phrase signifies the impact this movement had in increasing the racial pride and confidence of black people during the seventies. In the feminist movement, campaign slogans such as "the personal is political" emphasized the significance of sharing women's personal experiences in order to raise awareness. Considering this impact on the movement, in "Consciousness-Raising: a Radical Weapon", Sarachild conveys the necessity of consciousness-raising for the women in the seventies:

Our idea in the beginning was that consciousness-raising – through both C-R groups and public actions – would waken more and more women to an understanding of what their problems were and that they would begin to take action, both individual and collective. (149)

Sarachild is referring not only to the ability to raise awareness, but also to the empowerment that comes along with this knowledge in bringing change to the private and public lives of women, which is also a goal of intellectual activists such as Angelou. Although both of the above movements had a different agenda, they had a mutual goal for their respective supporters as Lisa Gail Collins explains in "The Art of Transformation: Parallels in the Black Arts and Feminist Art Movements":

Underlying their calls for self-examination, reflection, and scrutiny was the belief that increased knowledge of the self and the collective in society, past and present, would lead to a strong communal consciousness which, in turn, would lead to an empowered and unified activist community ready to transform the dominant social order. (279)

As part of her intellectual activism, Angelou's autobiographies embody this particular notion of raising awareness among her readers: by using her personal/individual experiences, she represents the collective issues of the Black community.

Finally, this interest in narrating a communal experience is even more evident in the way Angelou decides to bring the series to conclusion after covering forty years of her life. *A Song Flung up to Heaven* completes Angelou's autobiographical narrative in a circle with the first lines of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The cyclical structure of the narrative is a symbolic tribute to the success of Angelou's first book, but it also conveys the message that Angelou took this life-writing project as a means to spread her intellectual activism. This conscious decision not to continue the series after the start of her writing career makes her political intention in writing the autobiographies clear. As with any serial type of work, there is always an interest and demand for the next instalment, but she rejected this inquiry, stating in an interview with Valerie Webster in 1987, "After that it would just be writing about writing which is something I don't want to do" ("Journey through Life" 181). This answer makes a distinction between the two periods of her life: before and after her writing career. While writing about the first one, her personal narrative is intertwined with the collective and public narrative of African Americans, in the next stage, it will focus on the act of writing, which is a more private and solitary experience. This distinction between the two types of narrators, one as an activist and the other as a writer explains this emphasis on separating these two periods of her life. For Angelou, writing as activism has been the main purpose behind writing

her autobiographical oeuvre. Angelou's perspective on the purpose of art fits within the context of the Black Arts movement, as Lisa Gail Collins explains:

Activists... were aligned in their desire to expand the purpose and meaning of art. They worked to replace the imposed modernist ideal of 'art for art's sake' with a chosen activist ideal of 'art for people's sake.' In essence, they sought to counter the dominant ideal, which they viewed as decadent and immoral, with a more responsible and life-enhancing one. (286)

Considering the political and social context of the late sixties and the subsequent rise of the Black Power movement, the mainstream modernist view of "art for art's sake" was not in accordance with the Black Arts movement's aim of consciousness-raising. Unlike the dominant Eurocentric view of an artist isolated from society, black artists such as Angelou envisioned art as a medium to revitalize black culture and regain racial pride, and thus black art needed to be relevant to the needs of its people. Since the interview with Webster was held after the publication of the fifth volume, it depicts Angelou's certainty about how the oeuvre needed to be concluded in order to preserve the coherence of the project and its socio-political message, as we shall see in Chapter Five.

Reading the Autobiographies as a Series

Because of the continuing popularity of Angelou's initial volume, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, the reading and interpretation of the whole series are overshadowed by the success of this first volume. Although over four decades have passed since Angelou started writing her first autobiography, only the first volume has been critically analyzed. The following collections have gathered the essays related to the first volume: Harold Bloom's *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (2009), Mildred R. Mickle's *Critical Insights: I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings by Maya Angelou* (2010), and Joanne M. Braxton's *Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings: A Casebook* (1999). Even though there are several essays

reprinted in all three, the collections stand as valuable sources that provide different readings of the first volume. These collections demonstrate the attention given to the first autobiography and its impact in establishing Angelou's career as a prominent African American writer, but it further emphasizes the gap of critical studies that exist on the remaining five volumes, which this thesis aims to address. Besides Braxton, the Bloom and Mildred collection was published after the series was completed in 2002. This insistence of these critics in still defining Angelou's career with only her first autobiography is limiting the extent of her contribution to modern African American autobiography, which continued with the extension of the series. Their readings in the collections do not give a complete picture of the series, as the whole work is not looked at coherently. This thesis questions this type of one-volume-centred readings of Angelou's autobiographical writing, and argues for the necessity of reading the autobiographies as a series in order to interpret her political voice.

While critics such as Dolly A. McPherson, Lyman B. Hagen, Mary J. Lupton, and Linda Wagner-Martin have tried to critique the whole series as a unit, their readings are not without shortcomings either, as we shall see. The first five volumes appeared over a seventeen-year period and many critics did not know if Angelou would ever get around to publishing the next volume, as her celebrity status was on the rise in the nineties, especially with the reading of her poem "On the Pulse of Morning" at the inauguration of President Bill Clinton in 1993.⁴ Therefore, McPherson's *Order out of Chaos: The Autobiographical Works of Maya Angelou* and Hagen's *Heart of a Woman, Mind of a Writer, and Soul of a Poet: A Critical Analysis of the Writings of Maya Angelou*, only cover the first five volumes. McPherson's book is the first of its kind to analyze Angelou's works as a series, and pays attention to Angelou's place within the

⁴ The significance of this poem to Angelou's career will be discussed in the concluding chapter.

tradition of black American autobiography. Hagen's work extends his analysis to all of Angelou's work in prose and poetry at the time of the publication. His assessment is based on tracing the connection of Angelou's works to African culture and heritage. As a result of the addition of the sixth volume, *A Song Flung up to Heaven*, in 2002, their analysis is left incomplete. Lupton also originally wrote her book *Maya Angelou: A Critical Companion* on the first five volumes, but she recently revised her first edition after Angelou's death and published a second edition, *Maya Angelou: The Iconic self*, which covers all six volumes.⁵ Her analysis of the autobiographies is based on tracing thematic patterns in each separate volume without looking at the series as a whole. Finally, Wagner-Martin's *Maya Angelou: Adventurous Spirit* is the latest book on Angelou's work but its approach is biographical. Although these studies are a good introduction to Angelou and her works, they do not contribute any critical reading of her works. Instead of the autobiographies, the subject of their analysis is the autobiographer herself.

With this gap in the critical studies of Angelou, the aim of this thesis is to bring attention to the contribution Angelou has made to modern African American autobiography. Angelou has been considered as a literary autobiographer, but this research argues that she is part of the African American political autobiography tradition too. With the expansion of her autobiographical oeuvre to six volumes, this research will trace how Angelou expanded the tradition of slave narratives in her modern autobiographies. This research looks at Angelou's role as an intellectual activist and explores this form of activism in her autobiographical series. Angelou started her writing career with the Black Arts movement, and this thesis will trace the influence of this movement during the height of its popularity and even in the post-Black Arts era.

⁵ This research will be referring to the second edition of Lupton's work on Angelou.

As discussed earlier, one of the movement's main principles was "art for people's sake", and this thesis looks at how Angelou views her role as a black artist within the debate of art versus propaganda. While she is known as a pioneer in black feminism, this research argues that her work not only addresses the intersection of race and gender, but also class.

In order to analyze the works, the narrating "I", and the narrated "I" of the autobiographies play an important role. In the process of autobiographical writing, there are usually two "I"s: the narrating "I", the present narrator, and the narrated "I", the past protagonist. Smith and Watson discuss the relation between these two different "I"s in reading autobiography:

Often critics analyzing autobiographical acts distinguish between the 'I'-now and the 'I'-then, the narrating 'I' who speaks and the narrated 'I' who is spoken about. This differentiation assumes that the 'I'-now inhabits a stable present in reading the 'I'-then. It also assumes a normative notion of life narrative as a retrospective narrative about a separable and isolatable past that is fully past. (71)

This way of reading the autobiography is applicable to interpreting the political voice of Angelou's series, especially in her role as an intellectual activist. In each volume, the narrating "I" is reflecting on the past experiences of the narrated "I", in order to comment on the relevant socio-political debates concerning the black community at the time, as part of Angelou's overall aim of didacticism. As this thesis is concerned with the reading of Angelou's political voice, Smith and Watson's explanation assists in defining this concept: "Voice as an attribute of the narrating 'I'... is a metaphor for the reader's felt experience of the narrator's personhood, and a marker of the relationship between a narrating 'I' and his or her experiential history" (79). Based on this definition, the political voice of Angelou's autobiographies emerges through this contextual reading of the narrating "I" in relation to the narrated "I". While this research recognizes that the narrating "I" of Angelou's autobiographical series is "polyvocal", which Smith and

Watson explain as "an ensemble of voices" (80), this thesis is concerned with the significance of its political one, a dimension of her work that has not so far been recognised.

Finally, while the main source of this thesis has been Angelou's works, especially her autobiographical oeuvre, Angelou's papers and manuscripts also provided an invaluable source for analyzing Angelou's role as an intellectual activist. Since 2010, her papers are archived at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, a research unit of The New York Public Library located in Harlem. Besides having access to Angelou's manuscripts, researchers can trace her connections through her correspondences with influential political and literary figures of her time such as Malcolm X and Julian Mayfield, which is important for observing Angelou's development as an intellectual activist. In choosing the Schomburg Center, Angelou is paying tribute to the location of Harlem as being influential in the careers of many black artists and authors such as herself, as this thesis will demonstrate in Chapter Three. But more importantly, as part of her role as an intellectual activist, she is highlighting the significant role the research centre plays in preserving the black culture and art for the future generation.

Outline of the Chapters

As this thesis explores the autobiographer's representation of the development of her intellectual activist identity through an American studies approach, the chapters on the autobiographies are organized chronologically in order to demonstrate this progress in relation to the social, political, and historical context of the time. In *American Studies: A User's Guide*, Philip J. Deloria and Alexander I. Olson describe this approach as "an interdisciplinary practice that aims to understand the multiplicity of the social and

cultural lives of people in – and in relation to – the United States, both past and present" (6). Based on this definition, the significance of this contextual approach is that it chiefly investigates the relation between writing and society, which is integral for interpreting the political voice in Angelou's serial autobiography, as we shall see in the following chapters.

The first chapter, "Theorizing Maya Angelou's Political Voice", explains Angelou's political voice by expanding on the concept of intellectual activism based on Patricia Hill Collins's definition. The chapter then explores the significance of black life writing as activism in shaping Angelou's role as an activist/writer in addition to being influenced by the Black Arts movement and black feminism, and how the political voice of the autobiographies become readable through an intersectional approach. Whilst the reading of her autobiographies is intersectional, this thesis does not focus on gender specifically because as mentioned earlier critics such as Braxton, Hagen, Lupton and McPherson have already paid attention to her role as a mother and a wife in their works. From the six volumes, this thesis selects those areas that illustrate the political voice that are inclusive of race and class, not just the feminist voice as others have done.

The second chapter, "The Voices of Protest in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *Gather Together in My Name*", examines the socio-political context of the 1960s and 1970s, through the demise of the Civil Rights movement and the rise of the Black Power movement and the debate over the different methods of protest. As her autobiographies are based on slave narratives, the tradition of resistance is explored in depth in relation to Angelou's work. The remaining part of the chapter focuses on examining the three different stages of resistance in the first two volumes.

The third chapter, "The Transition from Artist to Activist in *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* and *The Heart of a Woman*", examines the development of Angelou's political identity and its clashes with her artistic identity. The chapter first examines the significance of the post-Black Arts era and discusses the significance of the debate over art versus propaganda during the late seventies and early eighties. It then depicts the four different stages in Angelou's transition from artist to activist as part of her development as an intellectual activist in the third and fourth volumes.

In the fourth chapter, "'What is Africa to me? What is America to me?' in *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes*", the focus is on Angelou's separation from the United States and her residence in Ghana during the early sixties. This chapter explores the significance of this stay in Africa for the development of Angelou's artist/activist identity and her return to activism in the States. As this volume was written in the late 1980s, Angelou uses her writing to discuss popular topics at the time such as Afrocentrism and black nationalism.

The fifth chapter reads the final volume, "'Burn, Baby, Burn' in *A Song Flung up to Heaven*", and it explores its significance in concluding the series. In this volume, Angelou deals with her return to the United States and the extent to which her activism was influenced by the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., and even more so by the Watts uprising of 1965. Angelou uses her writing about this period to promote the merging of her activism with her writing, which resulted in the creation of her autobiographical series. Written in the twenty-first century, Angelou explores the threat of the myth of a "colourblind" and "post-racial" society. Finally, in the concluding chapter, this thesis reflects on the contribution Angelou's intellectual activism has made

through her autobiographical series, and how this activism is also evident in her other forms of writing, such as poetry and cookbooks.

Chapter One

Theorizing Maya Angelou's Political Voice

Speak the truth to the people
 Talk sense to the people
 Free them with honesty
 Free them with reason
 Free the people with Love and
 Courage for their Being
 Spare them the fantasy
 Fantasy enslaves
 - Mari Evans, "Speak the
 Truth to the People"¹

The above lines are part of the first stanza of Mari Evans's poem, which is closely connected to the main concept of this research, the political voice of Maya Angelou, which I theorise as a type of activism, building on Patricia Hill Collins's concept of "intellectual activism". As Patricia Hill Collins explains in the introduction to her latest book, *On Intellectual Activism*, this term means: "the myriad ways that people place the power of their ideas in service to social injustice" (ix). To expand this introductory definition, she elaborates further on how this type of activism is achieved by different artists and intellectuals:

Through visual arts, music, poetry, fiction, essays, journal articles, nonfiction, books, and videography... many artists and intellectuals, activists and everyday people, have recognized the necessity of multiple expressions of intellectual activism for social change. (*On Intellectual* x)

For this group of activists/artists, their art is not merely appreciated for its aesthetic quality, but more importantly for its contribution to advocating social justice. Patricia Hill Collins's definition guides the way this research engages with the fusion of the two realms of activism and writing, specifically of the autobiographical kind.

¹ This poem was published as part of Mari Evans's poetry collection *I Am a Black Woman* in 1970.

Based on the above definition, Evans's poem is an exemplary text for intellectual activism, not only because of its use of the medium of poetry but also because of its message, advocating change during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The particular significance of this poem is that it was published at a critical time in African American history: the transition from the Civil Rights movement to the Black Power movement and the creation of the Black Arts movement. The poem represents the changing attitudes of the time in regards to raising awareness of inequality and discrimination, and advocates the type of activism many black writers of the time, like Evans, envisaged. The autobiographical series at the centre of this research also commenced during this significant transitional period in the history of the black liberation struggle.

The line "speaking truth to the people" is the main advice Evans has for her fellow writers/artists at the time, which resonates with the "art for people's sake" goal of the Black Arts movement, as discussed in the Introduction. This strategy defines the responsibility of the writer/artist, which according to Patricia Hill Collins is critically important, because of its focus on the masses and their needs: "ordinary, everyday people need truthful ideas that will assist them in their everyday lives" (*On Intellectual* xiii). Similar to grassroots activism, this didactic approach towards art stems from the necessity of improving the overall life of ordinary black Americans. The significance of this truth-telling type of activism is realized by fellow Black Arts movement writer John O. Killens in his article "The Image of Black Folk in American Literature". He credits Evans and her poem for reminding the black artist/activist of the "revolutionary" role they have in raising awareness. He warns his fellow writers of the necessity to challenge the negative clichéd images of black people such as "'niggers' and whores, pimps and hustlers" represented in the mass media and promote racial pride in the black culture (51). Patricia Hill Collins notes that Evans and Killens were not alone in promoting this

type of activism; it can also be traced in many other works of the black writers of the sixties and seventies:

This same era produced a broad array of artists and intellectuals from diverse racial, ethnic, class, gender, and sexual backgrounds who, through their scholarship, art, and political activism, questioned the prevailing power arrangements. Their creative work contributed to social movements against racism, sexism, militarism, homophobia, age discrimination, and class exploitation. (*On Intellectual ix*)

As this passage suggests, for this group of artists and intellectuals, their creative work was a continuation of their activism. Killens also reinforces the empowerment that is intertwined with the combination of activism and writing: "If we are committed to use our culture and literature as weapons of liberation, then clearly words are the writer's ammunition" (46). He advocates writing as a powerful medium for activism and in a sense as complementary to vanguard activism. In addition, his lexical selection, for example "weapons", "liberation", and "ammunition", is significant. Because not only is it a sign of the mood of the social and political period of the Black Power and the Black Arts movements, it also pays tribute to the tradition of the debate over art versus propaganda, which has deep roots in African American literature.² The type of activism described in this statement is of central importance to this research as it depicts the potential influence that intellectual activism can have in fighting for social justice. This research demonstrates that Angelou was also one of these writers, as she began her writing career in the late sixties and chose writing to be her tool of activism. This thesis reads Angelou's political voice in her autobiographical series as a mode of her intellectual activism. In this chapter, the development of Angelou's intellectual activist identity is explored through the examination of the importance of black life writing as activism. It then examines how the social and political and cultural context of the 1960s and 1970s, especially the Black Arts movement and black feminism influenced Angelou

² Based on W. E. Du Bois and Alain Locke's perspective on the argument, the debate over art or propaganda is discussed in the third chapter of this thesis.

as an intellectual activist and how her autobiographies are readable through an intersectional approach.

Black Life Writing as Activism

The dichotomy between literary and political autobiography is central to this research, and to understanding the reasons for categorizing *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* as a literary project and evaluating the remaining volumes in light of the success of this initial volume. In an oeuvre of such magnitude, the six volumes contribute to the overall unity of the series and its main goal of intellectual activism. This research questions the limitation of categorizing works of art under either literary or political, because the boundaries of "literary" or "political" can overlap, such as in the case of Angelou's autobiographies. While Angelou's series began as a literary project, the expansion of her series shows that she was more concerned with its didactic message.³ As key terms in the context of this research, literary autobiography and political autobiography first need to be defined.

In regards to literary autobiography, Bonnie J. Gunzenhauser's article "Literary Autobiography" is important. She opens by attempting to define the term:

Literary autobiography often refers to an autobiography written by a self-defined or publicly recognized writer. However, many autobiographies that might be considered of a literary value have not been produced by professional writers – indeed, the very accessibility of the genre has made it a place for amateur or private literary experiment by those who have written nothing else but their own life story. (562)

³ While the series took thirty-three years to be finished, the six volumes were published as one completed work for the first time in 2004 as *The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou*. Stamant argues that such a collection "visually erases the production" of each volume by presenting them as "chapters in an autobiography" (59). Even though each autobiography loses its independence (i.e. its separate cover and relevant publication details), the aim of compiling such a collection represents the unity of the project and the need to read it in continuity in order to interpret the narrative arc of the series or, in the context of this research, its intellectual activism.

This definition argues that the literary value of this type of autobiography is not just dependent on the professionalism of the author at the centre of the question, but more importantly, it rests on the style of writing in such a form, whether it is by a professional or an amateur. Angelou's career as a literary autobiographer is an archetype for the latter: beginning her career with *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* as a novice black woman writer, this autobiography fits the above description.

Gunzenhauser concludes that an autobiography can be considered literary only depending on its style of writing:

Thus the criteria for literary autobiography may be more safely defined through formal attributes of linguistic sophistication, such as the manipulation of chronological narrative, or the development of themes relating how personal memory and identity shape artistic creation. (562)

Based on this explanation, this overlap of the characteristics of fiction in the form of autobiography is the reason for it to be labelled literary. This thesis relies on Gunzenhauser's definition of literary autobiography, as it fits Angelou's series, especially *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, in which she deploys novelistic techniques such as characterization, dialogue, and poetic language, and creates a thematic coherence in the narration by manipulating the chronological order of her story.

Significantly, while it is common for autobiography and the novel to share common features, the implication of this borrowing of style in storytelling goes beyond simply creating an aesthetically pleasurable reading experience, and is more importantly a way of reflecting on the past for the autobiographer. Smith and Watson confirm that autobiographers use features of fictional writing as a tactic to deal with the recreation of their past self and its impact on their present and even future:

Many life writers take liberties with the novelistic mode in order to negotiate their own struggles with the past and with the complexities of identities forged in the present. (12)

It is a constant challenge for the autobiographer to create a balance between the past and their present identity through the separate voices of the narrated and narrating "I". This distinction is crucial, as Smith and Watson point out, especially in texts that deal with the oppression of minorities and their struggles for preserving their identity and culture under pressure from the ruling majority, such as in postcolonial autobiographies (12). As this research will show, the imaginative tools of fiction writing are vital for autobiographers like Angelou, allowing them to question the absurdity of extreme acts of racism and prejudice that subordinate subjects endure, and to transform their narratives into acts of resistance.

However, Gunzenhauser continues to differentiate literary from non-literary autobiography based on "its author's intent" in writing their life narrative (563). For the former type of autobiography, she bases her categorization on its aesthetic quality, taking precedence over its didactic purpose: "While literary autobiographers do not eschew exemplarity, they tend to privilege aesthetics; their primary concern, finally, is how mind and memory make art" (563). This research questions the limitation of creating such binary oppositions, as the boundaries between the aesthetic and political intention of writing an autobiography are never this clear-cut. The aesthetic priority of a text does not negate the existence of its political concerns, and vice versa. Although Gunzenhauser does not rule out the chance of a crossover in her observation, she implies that the boundaries of aestheticism and didacticism are distinguishable and separate. As discussed above, the merger of both aspects in autobiographies like Angelou's is proof that this type of one-dimensional classification is not consistent. As a

result, the drawback for such multifaceted works is that, as for example in Angelou's case, the same attention has not been paid to her contribution as an intellectual activist.

In Braxton's essay "Autobiography and African American Women's Literature", this type of aesthetically-based classification is echoed in regards to Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (142). Similar to Gunzenhauser, Braxton is concerned with authors' intentions in writing literary autobiographies:

Though almost all of... [the] writers are involved in activist struggles, the emphasis here is primarily on the developmental aspect of coming to consciousness of self as black women and artists. ("Autobiography" 143)

While Braxton agrees that authors such as Audre Lorde, Lucille Clifton, and Maya Angelou were engaged in activism, she insists on separating the worlds of politics and aesthetics in this category of autobiography.⁴ Even though this thesis agrees that Angelou's coming-of-age story has the criteria to be literary, it also views her intellectual activism as an equally important part of her development as a writer. In addition, since Angelou did not write only a one-volume autobiography, the series should be analyzed as a unit in order to reveal the author's overall intention in creating the series, which documents the development of Angelou's political thought.⁵

The problem with the above distinction between literary and non-literary autobiography lies in the way these terms are defined as two separate entities. In order to understand the basis for such a distinction, the term "political autobiography" also needs to be defined. Mary F. Brewer's article "Politics and Life Writing" describes the importance of the combination of politics and autobiography in giving voice to the

⁴ The two other literary autobiographies referred to here are Lucille Clifton's *Generations* (1976) and Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982).

⁵ Braxton's essay was published in 2009 as part of Angelyn Mitchell and Danielle K. Taylor's edited collection, *The Cambridge Companion to African American Women's Literature*. The final volume of Angelou's series was published in 2002, which means that Braxton could have had a broader outlook of Angelou's contribution as both a literary and political autobiographer, besides just the first volume.

subaltern part of a society.⁶ By a political autobiography, this thesis does not just refer to an autobiography written by a famous political figure. The term in the context of this thesis, following Brewer, refers to an autobiography that intends to raise awareness through combining the life story of the author with the social and political conditions of the time. Brewer explains the broader meaning that of the term "political" as follows:

[T]here are many instances of life writing that function as a form of political discourse in contemporary Western culture, but which cannot be easily classified as such by the tracing of a life in public politics. (722)

Importantly, Brewer here questions the limitation of associating political life writing only with authors with a presence in public politics and activism. Braxton, by contrast, in her classification of political autobiography connects it solely to the direct activism of authors, such as Angela Davis, Elaine Brown, and Assata Shakur: "These black women activists publicly theorize their lives in an attempt to reach others and to win them to liberation causes; autobiography becomes a political tool in their hands" ("Autobiography" 142).⁷ In Braxton's perspective, these authors are primarily activists, whose preference for autobiography is because of its correlation to their grassroots activism and its aim of social justice. This observation gives an insight into why certain texts such as Angelou's autobiographies are not considered political due to the absence of the author from the public political stage, which in Angelou's case was after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and her transition into writing. However, my aim in this thesis is to underline the importance of the engagement an author and intellectual activist, such as Angelou, has with the relevant social/political discourse via the writing of her life narrative.

⁶ While the article aims to introduce the variety of forms that political life writing can take, its focus is on political autobiography.

⁷ The political autobiographies referred to here are Angela Davis's *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (1974), Assata Shakur's *Assata* (1987), and Elaine Brown's *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story* (1992).

In broadening the definition of autobiographies written with a political intent, Brewer gives a better understanding of the concept of political autobiography. She describes the main purpose of writing such an autobiography as follows:

Life writing produced by members of subordinate or subcultural groups generally functions to give voice to the 'real' experiences of the working class, ethnic minorities, women, migrants and lesbians and gays – all those who have been rendered silent as a result of racism, colonialism, hetero/sexism, or other forms of prejudice and exploitation. This kind of auto/biographical writing provides the 'other' side to histories either previously untold, or already told but misrepresented and distorted. (722)

This definition is critical in comprehending Angelou's work as political autobiography, as it defines this category as a medium of protest and resistance for voiceless minorities against the bias of mainstream norms. Autobiography provides a platform not only to represent the subordinate group's discontent, but also to reconstruct the mainstream narrative of collective history by inserting their own perspective of events, which has not been previously recorded. This counter-hegemonic writing is essential to the survival of subordinate protest movements as it provides an archive of their resistance culture, which is absent from mainstream history.

The main aim of this type of resistance writing for black American autobiographers, such as Angelou, is to revive black pride and consciousness in their race and cultural identity. In the introduction to his book *Bearing Witness: Selections from African-American Autobiography in the Twentieth Century*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. also confirms the importance of the medium of autobiography and its political purposes for black Americans:

The ultimate form of protest, certainly, was to register in print the existence of a 'black self' that had transcended the limitations and restrictions that racism had placed on the personal development of the black individual. (3)

The point being made here is that the act of writing is part of the resistance, or is an act of protest in itself. This tradition of writing as activism can be traced back to slave narratives, as we shall see in Chapter Two. Ex-slaves wrote accounts of their own ordeals in order to reveal the atrocities of the institution of slavery, while this act of literacy simultaneously celebrated their contribution to black intellectual activism.⁸ Gates further elaborates on the significance of the political intention of narrating these individual stories:

If the individual black self could not exist before the law, it could and would, be forged in language, as a testimony at once to the supposed integrity of the black self and against the social and political evils that delimited individual and group equality for all African-Americans. (*Bearing* 4)

The act of protest through autobiographical writing thus is significant as it reaffirms the important role played by writing in creating a collective history of black Americans' culture and struggles. Individual stories are transformed into exemplary narratives of the community and act as a "testimony" of their resistance: to fill in the gaps that exist in the collective history and memory of the dominant culture. Gates further demonstrates that this act of remembering and collecting of personal narratives is in the service of representing the collective stories of black Americans: "These stories endure as chronicles not merely of personal achievement, but of the impulse *to bear witness*" (*Bearing* 9). This role of the writer as a "witness" is carried to modern black autobiography with writers such as Angelou, aiming not only to raise awareness about the status of racial discrimination and injustice in today's America, but also to document black culture in its richness and its traditions.

⁸ Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: Written by Himself* is an example of this act of protest, in which the phrase "Written by Himself" is the autobiographer's emphasis on his own role as an intellectual activist and his commitment to shaping his own narrative.

As a modern black autobiographer, Angela Davis attempts to demonstrate the importance of writing a political autobiography as an intellectual activist in the preface to *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*. Davis, who published the autobiography after her acquittal from her famous trial in the 1970s, prioritizes this didactic aspect of the writing that persuaded her to share her personal narrative:

When I decided to write a book after all, it was because I had come to envision it as a *political autobiography* that emphasized the people, the events and the forces in my life that propelled me to my present commitment. (*Angela* xii)

As Brewer and Gates describe, the collective cause of the community convinced Davis to provide a testimony of her individual experience. The importance of such a declaration is that it identifies the author's primary aim in writing to be didactic, as Gunzenhauser explained in her distinction between literary and non-literary autobiography. For Davis's writing to be an expansion of her previous years of activism, she gives the following two characteristics:

There was the possibility that, having read it, more people would understand why so many of us have no alternative but to offer our lives... to the cause of our oppressed people. ... [T]here was the possibility that more people... might be inspired to join our growing community of struggle. (*Angela* xii)

The main purpose of her writing is not only to raise the consciousness of her readers about the plight of the black community and the necessity for the continuation of the black liberation movement to improve the quality of the lives of black Americans, but also to influence readers to become engaged in their cause. As political autobiography is part of the field of the literature of resistance, in which reading is not viewed as only for leisure, authors such as Davis write to encourage their audiences to commit to their struggle and to become engaged with it within their communities.

In the concluding chapter of her edited collection *The Uses of Autobiography*, Julia Swindells also emphasizes the importance of both acts of writing and reading such

texts in contributing to the "political strategy" of consciousness-raising, "whereby the *perception* of what constitutes a common condition begins to form a precondition for social and political change" (206). This interaction between writer and reader is key to the potential intellectual activism has for inspiring social and political direct action activism through influencing its target audience. This is the primary aim for autobiographers such as Davis and Angelou in documenting their individual testimonies as representative of their collective cause in their fight against inequality and injustice.

While Angelou's autobiography has been praised for its literary characteristics, it needs emphasizing that it is political intention that enticed Angelou to use her personal narrative as a witness for the ordeals of black Americans. In *A Song Flung up to Heaven's* concluding chapter, the author reveals the reason that she accepted the challenge to write her first autobiography, which was not just for its literariness:

I thought about black women and wondered how we got to be the way we were. In our country, white men were always in superior positions; after them came white women, then black men, then black women, who were historically on the bottom stratum.

How did it happen that we could nurse a nation of strangers, to be maids to multitudes of people who scorned us, and still walk with some majesty and stand with a degree of pride? (211)

While admitting in the previous chapter of this book that she began the series as a literary autobiography, by concluding on such a point Angelou is indicating that she is consciously aligning the project with her political intentions of writing it. It is also noteworthy that thirty-three years after the project began the author is embracing both categories, literary and political, without either of them negating each other. In addition, while her central endeavour is to raise awareness of the plight of black women who, as she states, are at the lowest level of the social order in the United States, Angelou simultaneously highlights the resilience of black women as a strategy of resistance. By concluding the series with the above question, Angelou is directing her readers to reflect

on the way her overall personal narrative is reconstructed as a witness of generations of black women's contributions to the resistance movement, through celebrating their resilience and stamina.

Black Women and the Black Arts Movement

The historical and socio-political context of the late 1960s and early 1970s, in which Angelou began her writing career, plays an important role in the direction that her future activism would take. The assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. was a significant loss for the Civil Rights movement and marked an end to its nonviolent approach, leading to the rise of the Black Power movement. This change in the tactics of the black liberation movement brought a new cultural movement with it, the Black Arts movement. Considering that the development of Angelou's writing career happened alongside the formation of this cultural movement, this thesis investigates the impact the movement had on the combination of her activism and writing. Before becoming an author, Angelou's direct action activism included her work for Martin Luther King Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference, her involvement with African American expatriates in Ghana, and her intention to collaborate with Malcolm X before his assassination. The significance of each of the above examples of activism in regards to the development of Angelou's political thought and ideologies is discussed in the relevant chapters on *The Heart of a Woman*, *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes*, and *A Song Flung up to Heaven*. Disappointed with the way the nonviolent direct action of the sixties turned out, especially after King's assassination, the Black Arts movement provided Angelou with an artistic avenue to explore her intellectual activism. Angelou was part of a literary circle that aimed to reflect on the changes in the social and political atmosphere of the decade for black Americans through their art.

This vision of merging art and activism that black artists of the movement advocated was hugely impacted upon by the socio-political situation of the sixties, as Hans Bertens and Theo D'haen explain in their book *American Literature: A History*:

Against a background of political assassinations (Medgar Evers and John F. Kennedy in 1963, Malcolm X in 1965, Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy in 1968), large-scale urban rioting (Watts, L.A. in 1965; Detroit and Newark in 1967), and seemingly ineradicable racial division, a group of writers that included [Amiri] Baraka, the playwrights Ed Bullins, Alice Childress, Larry Neal, and Charles Fuller, and the poets Nikki Giovanni, Carolyn Rodgers, and Gwendolyn Brooks began to think publicly about a politically engaged art that would meet the expectations of an African American, working class audience. (544)

Bertens and D'haen here identify the three main factors, which had a significant role in the change that had occurred in the direction of the black liberation movement by the late sixties: the loss of leadership, the rise in public unrest, and continuing racial discrimination. While the recurring theme of racism and prejudice is explored throughout the series, Angelou specifically deals with her perspective on the other two factors and their significance to the movement by centring the main plotline of *A Song Flung up to Heaven* on the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. and the Watts riots of 1965. Although the legal gains of the Civil Rights movement were huge achievements, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, African Americans were struggling with the ramifications of *de facto* segregation for decades to come. Considering this context, the group of artists mentioned above aimed to create a black aesthetics that raised consciousness about the daily plight of black Americans. Each of the artists made their own contribution in their related fields; this thesis will demonstrate that Angelou's series follows this mutual goal of the movement in the field of autobiography.

Before the Black Arts movement, the other significant literary movement that celebrated African American literature was the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and

1930s. Yet, while the Black Arts writers/artists were indebted to their predecessors, they tried to avoid repeating the mistakes of the Harlem Renaissance. As Bracey, Sanchez, and Smethurst explain:

They [the Black Arts movement artists] judged the artists of the Renaissance to be insufficiently political, not actively enough engaged with the concerns of working-class African Americans, too dependent on the support of jaded white patrons, and (with the exception of a relative few such as Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, and Zora Neale Hurston) distant from the culture of the Black masses. ("Introduction" 3)

The members of the Black Arts movement thus found the Harlem Renaissance to be more suitable for black elites, less of a grassroots affair, and too reliant on white patronage. Even though their criticism is apposite, the Black Arts artists did not take into consideration the difference in the socio-political climate of each decade, nor the fact that the Harlem Renaissance built the foundations for future literary movements such as their own. Instead, through criticizing the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Arts artists were clarifying the central ideologies of their own movement, which Amiri Baraka sums up in his essay "The Black Arts Movement":

The dicta we arrived at 1. To create a true African American Art. 2. To create a mass art. 3. To create a revolutionary art, were simply three of the most important and positive aspects of the methodology, our ideological practice, such as we understand it. (17)

These three main principles collectively describe the goals of the movement, which aimed to be more politically conscious, to be more relevant to the black masses, and to focus on what they considered to be "authentic" black culture, in comparison to the Harlem Renaissance.

In addition to Baraka, Larry Neal, another co-founder and a key theorist of the movement, in his groundbreaking article "The Black Arts Movement", gives more insight into the foundation of the movement:

The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from the movement. Black Art is the aesthetic

and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America. (55)

Neal sets the guidelines of the movement both aesthetically and politically. By aligning this literary movement with its political counterpart, Black Power, Neal draws attention to the mutual concerns of both movements: promoting black culture, heritage, and racial pride. As discussed in the Introduction, to achieve this goal, the artist has a significant role in awakening this relevant black consciousness through creating works that advocate "art for people's sake". In James T. Stewart's essay "The Development of the Black Revolutionary Artist", the importance of this role of the artist in shaping the movement is explained:

Art can not apologize out of existence the philosophical ethical position of the artist. After all, the artist is a man in society, and his social attitudes are just as relevant to his art as his aesthetic position. However, the white Western aesthetics is predicated on the idea of separating one from the other – a man's art from his actions. (9)

Stewart's vision of the black artist rejects and criticizes the white mainstream model of an artist, in addition to questioning the artist's dilemma of choosing between their politics or art. Expanding on Neal's principles, he advises that black artists need to create their own models based on the collective needs of their people rather than following the white-dominated model of the secluded artist. In the introduction to their edited collection *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford evaluate the impact of this new type of black arts: "The black aesthetic of this period was a bold re-envisioning of life itself as a work of art dedicated to the advancement of black people" (11). As a type of intellectual activism, the Black Arts movement, as demonstrated by Neal and Stewart, was a cultural movement that accompanied the Black Power movement in order to advocate social justice for black Americans through its social/political awareness campaigns. The extent of the influence of this movement in challenging black artists to create a new strategy for expressing

their activism is not limited to contemporary authors such as Mari Evans and John O. Killens. The legacy of the Black Arts aesthetics continues to evolve in the works of many current black authors. Bracey, Sanchez, and Smethurst credit this movement with moulding a generation of new black artists even in the post-Black Arts era, such as the novelist Toni Morrison, the playwright August Wilson, the poet/playwright Ntozake Shange, the filmmaker Spike Lee, and the actor Danny Glover, to name just a few ("Introduction" 9).

In *The Wiley Blackwell Anthology of African American Literature*, Gene Andrew Jarret explains the two main reasons for the decline of the Black Arts movement by the mid-1970s: the ideological differences between the members of the group and the disintegration of the Black Power movement due to government measures (780). These internal and external factors had a huge impact in weakening the unity of the movement, both ideologically and politically, and brought about its downfall. Although the Black Arts movement had ended by 1975 due to internal and external factors, critics such as James Edward Smethurst, Lisa Gail Collins, and Margo Natalie Crawford have discussed the significance of this relatively short-lived movement for the literary production of the black arts. However, Eleanor W. Traylor's essay "Women Writers of the Black Arts Movement" highlights that more attention needs to be paid to the influential black women of the movement. This is an important point to make especially in reference to the earlier comment by Neal where he describes the Black Arts movement as "the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept". In the introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to African American Women's Literature*, the editors, Angelyn Mitchell and Danielle K. Taylor, call Neal's comment metaphorically ironic as "many of the men of the Black Arts movement seemed to ignore women's issues and concerns while addressing issues of race and racism, so

much so that blackness seemed synonymous with masculinity" (8). Although the movement was mainly dominated by a patriarchal perspective, the contribution that black women artists made to its success cannot be ignored. Some of the most influential women artists of the movement include Niki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, Sarah Webster Fabio, Barbara Ann Teer, and Mari Evans (Mitchell and Taylor, "Introduction" 8). In order to highlight their significance to the movement, Traylor pays tribute to these black women writers:

The founding mothers, with other vanguard women writers, strengthen the revolutionary ferment of the movement to resonate its themes: a renegotiation of power relations between black and white America, a disturbance of ideological imperatives of identity, and a re-direction of the sources of literary production. (50)

The role these black women played in advancing the aims of the movement is as significant as that of their male counterparts. Using a variety of forms, such as poetry, drama, novels, and autobiography, they raised their concerns about the prevailing status of racism and prejudice in the United States. Traylor examines the implication of these black women writers' engagement with each form in her essay and includes Angelou for *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (66). Angelou did write poetry during this period and her first poetry collection, *Just Give me a Cool Drink Water 'fore I Die*, was published in 1971 and was a bestseller and nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.⁹ However, the significance of Angelou's literary success in 1969 was that it revived the medium of autobiography as a tool of activism. As autobiography is not the primary form of the movement, Angelou usually gets only a brief mention as a member of this movement, such as in Smethurst's *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and*

⁹ The collection was divided into two parts. The first section, "Where Love is a Scream of Anguish", centres on love, while the second section, "Just Before the World Ends", focuses on the experiences of being a black person in white-dominated America. It is in this second section that Angelou explores the themes of protest and resistance, which are central to the Black Arts movement. For instance, one of the poems in this section, "Riot: 60's", is about the urban riots of the 1960s, which was one of the main concerns of Black Arts intellectuals. She reuses this poem in her final autobiography, *A Song Flung up to Heaven*, when she narrates her perspective on the events of the 1965 Watts riots thirty-seven years later to represent her previous thoughts on the uprisings.

1970s. The current research demonstrates that Angelou's dedication to the form of autobiography makes her an integral part of the movement, especially as she was alone in choosing this medium as her main form of expression. Being a part of this movement affected the development of Angelou as an author/activist, even in the post-Black Arts era. Besides the relevant social and political content of the series, her autobiographies explore the process of becoming an intellectual activist. Angelou's writing thus proves that the impact of this movement goes beyond a specific decade in history, as Traylor concludes: "Like any literary, cultural, and social movement, the Black Arts movement cannot be comprehended as a time-bound event" (67). Over the thirty-three years that it took to write the series, Angelou devoted her writing to bringing awareness of the importance of this literary and cultural movement, as we shall see later in this thesis in the discussion on her autobiographies.

Black Feminism and Intersectionality

At the same time as the Black Arts movement significantly changed the future of black intellectual art/literary production, it also opened discussion about gender discrimination, not only within but also outside the movement. This arose from the prevalent sexist attitude, which is a by-product of the male-dominated American society of the 1960s and 1970s. Smethurst positions the movement against the larger context of the national attitude towards the question of gender:

[A] paternalistic, often homophobic, masculinism was a powerful strain within the Black Arts and Black Power movements as it was in many of the ideologies and social lives of post-World War II bohemia and countercultures. (89)

He underlines that American society was going through a transition in the conventional gender hierarchy. The Black Arts movement's inner debate over gender issues is an example of this transitional phase, which led to more black women writers such as

Angelou raising their voices against the double discrimination of race and gender. In "Contemporary African American Women Writers", Dana A. Williams describes this period of modern black feminist writing:

[W]hile this exploration of the self was not then so much a new phenomenon in the tradition of African American women's writing, by 1970, black women writers, as they extended the beauty and breadth of the Black Arts movement, blossomed in their aggressive pursuit of their inquiries in to black womanhood. (71)

While she is paying tribute to the legacy of African American women's writing, Williams is also crediting these black women intellectuals for leading the way in defining the modern black woman. This group of writers included already established Black women writers such as Gwendolyn Brooks, Adrienne Kennedy, and Sonia Sanchez, but it also welcomed new talents such as Maya Angelou, Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker (Williams 71-72).

In his essay "African American Feminist Theories and Literary Criticism", Robert J. Patterson summarises the mutual aims of these writers and their black feminist intellectual activism:

In terms of its political goals, black feminist theory aims to obtain gender equality for black women, as well as to inscribe black women and their cultural contributions into the historical narrative. In so doing, it aims to expose sexism alongside racism within and outside the black community, and to eliminate all forms of oppression *for everyone*. (90)

The main aim of this movement during the seventies was to highlight the contribution black women artists/activists were making in the attempt to obtain social justice, not only for black women but for all people experiencing oppression. Toni Cade Bambara's seminal collection *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (1970) was one of the first major works that paved the way for the intellectual activism that these black women writers advocated. Bambara explains the movement's aims in the preface of her book:

What characterizes the current movement of the 60's is a turning away from the larger society and a turning toward each other. Our art, protest,

dialogue, no longer spring from the impulse to entertain, or to indulge or enlighten the consciousness of the enemy... Our energies now seem to be invested in and are in turn derived from a determination to touch and unify. (7)

The aim of these black women activists was to unite black women through their consciousness-raising campaign in order to fight for their equality and social justice. Bambara suggests that in order to change this system of oppression, there needs also to be a new outlook on the way black women fight the oppressors, or as in her essay "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference", Audre Lorde expresses it: "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (123). Both Bambara and Lorde advocate that black women writers should analyze their concerns and issues from the perspective of the black woman, rather than accommodating to the white male-dominated point of view.

Besides Lorde, critics such as bell hooks and Angela Davis have dedicated their careers as black intellectual activists to raising concerns about the necessity of a new approach in the fight against the oppression of black women, based on the three axes of race, gender, and class. In groundbreaking works such as Angela Davis's *Women, Race and Class* (1981), bell hooks's *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981), and Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (1984), these critics laid the foundation for a new black feminist thought, an intersectional one. Intersectionality as a theoretical framework became popular in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, after it was coined by the black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw. She introduced the idea in her 1989 article "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Policies". To understand the term and its significance, Crenshaw uses the analogy of a crossroads to emphasize the interconnectedness of race and gender:

Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars travelling from any numbers of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in an intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination. ("Demarginalizing" 149)

This analogy helps demonstrate the significance of the concept of "intersectionality" in regards to the oppression of black women, in which their discrimination is not because of one cause or another, but due to the interlocking of systems of oppression. It is worth noting that, even though the term came into existence only recently, the concept of intersectionality has deep roots in black feminist thought, and can be traced back to the works of influential pioneers of black feminism such as Anna Julia Cooper and Sojourner Truth.¹⁰ This thesis demonstrates that, like her predecessors, Angelou used her writing as a medium to bring awareness of the injustices black women confronted as a result of the intersection of the axes of race, gender, and class, even before the term came to exist in the modern sense. She has been one of the pioneer modern black feminist writers, whose autobiographies not only consider the double discrimination of race and gender, but also its intersection with class. Through her writing, Angelou aims to deconstruct the prevailing sexist and marginalized representation of black women by depicting personal experiences in her autobiographies that portray black women's acts of resistance and resilience.¹¹

¹⁰ Both Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I Woman" speech in the 1840s and Anna Julia Cooper's book *A Voice from the South: By a Black Woman of the South* in 1892 were iconic texts of their time, and influenced many future generation of black feminist activists.

¹¹ In her article "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color", Crenshaw refers to this concept as "representational intersectionality" which means "the cultural construction of women of color" (1245). She criticizes how mainstream culture can assist the oppression of black women with its negative stereotypical representations. Black women authors such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Maya Angelou have attempted to rewrite these representations from the perspective of the oppressed, and empowering black women in the process.

The field of reference of intersectionality has expanded over the years; in this research, I use the definition that Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge provide for the term in their collaborative work *Intersectionality*:

Intersectionality is a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences. The events and conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor. They are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and influencing ways. When it comes to social inequality, people's lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but many axes that work together and influence each other. Intersectionality as an analytical tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves.
(2)

Through the lens of intersectionality, the works of authors such as Angelou aim to provide a perspective on how daily social discriminations and injustices are a combination of the various dimensions of identity, and on how the dynamics between race, gender, and class are significant in understanding today's society.

In addition, this research will engage with Patricia Hill Collins's concept of the "matrix of domination" in applying intersectionality to Angelou's autobiographical oeuvre. This concept was introduced in her first book, *Black Feminist Thought*, originally published in 1990. Like the term intersectionality, Anna Carastathis in *Intersectionality: Origins, Contestations, Horizons* connects the concept of the "matrix of domination" with its predecessors in black feminist thought such as "double jeopardy" and "multiple jeopardy" (17). The term "double jeopardy" was introduced by Frances Beale in the essay of the same title in 1970, in which she argued against the conventional discrimination against black women based on race and gender. Developing Beale's idea, Deborah King in her essay "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness" (1988), explains that the concept of oppression expands to "several, simultaneous" forms such as race, class, gender, and sexuality and their multiplicative relationships

(47). Although Carastathis argues that these terms are not equivalent to each other, they share a common goal, which is: "the use of multiple categories of oppression and identity to describe, politicize, and struggle against the conditions facing Black women in the United States" (26-27). These previous concepts are important as they set up the foundation for Patricia Hill Collins's "matrix of domination" and facilitate the resistance against the various forms of subjugation black women suffer.

Patricia Hill Collins has expanded this concept throughout her academic career, culminating in her collaborative anthology with Margaret L. Andersen, *Race, Class and Gender*, which is now in its ninth edition. In the introduction to the anthology, Andersen and Collins emphasize its necessity:

Race, class, and gender still matter because they continue to structure society in ways that value some lives more than others. Currently some groups have more opportunities and resources, while other groups struggle. Race, class, and gender matter because they remain the foundations for systems of power and inequality that, despite our nation's diversity, continue to be among the significant social facts of people's lives. Despite having removed the formal barriers to opportunity, the United States is still highly unequal along the lines of race, class, and gender. (2)

This introduction to the collection is significant in showing that the intersection of issues of race, class, and gender dominate the United States to this day, and my thesis will contribute to this discussion by bringing to the fore Angelou's role in discussing these interlocking issues.

Andersen and Collins use the "matrix of domination" as the framework for their study and define it as follows:

A matrix of domination sees social structure as having multiple, interlocking levels of domination that stem from the societal configuration of race, class, and gender relations. This structural pattern affects individual consciousness, group interaction, and group access to institutional power and privileges. (4)

The important point in this definition is that in this structural framework, the emphasis is on the intersection of these categories simultaneously. In order to emphasize the unique characteristics of their framework, they compare it to both a "difference framework" and an "additive approach". Andersen and Collins criticize both of these approaches for not taking into consideration the "interrelationships among race, class, and gender" (6). While a "difference framework" is described as "thinking comparatively" by focusing on unique group experiences, the speciality of a "matrix of domination" is its relational approach (Andersen and Collins 6). The "additive approach", which can be seen in terms such as "double and triple jeopardy", is insufficient according to Andersen and Collins because "[a]dding together 'differences'... produces a hierarchy of difference that ironically reinstalls those who are additively privileged at the top while relegating those who are additively oppressed to the bottom" (8). Thus, both approaches miss the connections and relations that exist in analyzing race, class, and gender through a "matrix of oppression", and even facilitate new types of oppression. In comparison to these two approaches, Andersen and Collins conclude that the "matrix of domination" is the most suitable analytical approach *"because of its focus on structural systems of power and inequality"* (9). Their emphasis on this aspect of their approach is explained further on:

This means that race, class, and gender involve more than either comparing and adding up oppressions or privileges or appreciating cultural diversity. The matrix of domination model requires analysis and criticism of existing systems of power and privilege; otherwise, understanding diversity becomes just one more privilege for those with the greatest access to education – something that has always been a mark of that elite class. ... Instead, studying race, class, and gender means recognizing and analyzing the hierarchies and system of domination that permeate society and limit our ability to achieve democracy and social justice. (9-10)

As part of the theory of intersectionality, this thesis takes the inclusive approach of the matrix of domination by applying it to Angelou's writing, in order to demonstrate how

the intersection of the multiple dimensions of race, class, and gender are interwoven in her autobiographies, and used to highlight the inequalities and the fight for social justice. Her activism through words is an act of resistance against racial prejudice, social injustice, and gender discrimination, and a symbolic breaking of the silence on these significant issues, as we shall see in reading the autobiographies in the following chapters.

Chapter Two

The Voices of Protest in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

and *Gather Together in My Name*

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
 When his wings is bruised and his bosom sore, –
 When he beats his bar and would be free;
 It is not a carol of joy or glee,
 But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,
 But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings –
 I know why the caged bird sings!
 - Paul Laurence Dunbar, "Sympathy"

Angelou's reference to protest begins with the choice of title for her autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. This choice is a reference to the poem "Sympathy" by Paul Laurence Dunbar, published in 1899. Through her title, Angelou is paying tribute to the tradition of protest in African American literature with reference to Dunbar's work during the post-bellum and post-Reconstruction period, and setting the theme of her work: protest. While considering his time Dunbar's protest is not direct and only possible through a veiled poetic way, it builds an important foundation for the future generations of black American authors such as Angelou to be able to continue the fight for social justice more openly in their works.

The symbolic "caged bird" imagery of this poem becomes significant to Angelou's autobiographical writing and is a dominant trope throughout the series. Braxton believes that Angelou and Dunbar convey similar messages through their work: "The sentiment of this poem... presages the tone of Angelou's autobiography, and some of the feeling of her struggle to transcend the restrictions of her environment" (185). As

Braxton implies, Angelou's readers get a foretaste of the message of her autobiography through the imagery of the last stanza of the poem. The recurrent imagery of a caged bird, bruised, bloody, and scarred but continuously attempting to sing for its freedom, parallels the protest struggle of oppressed African Americans in racist white America. Lupton also emphasizes the choice of the verb "sing" in this poem and in regards to Angelou's autobiography. She explains the importance of this verb as it "suggests the survival of African Americans through the spiritual" (74). Lupton is referring to the tradition of protest in African American literature from its early forms such as gospels and spirituals. The act of singing is very crucial here because Angelou is also, metaphorically, singing her protest through her writing, rather than violently screaming it, which is related to the different methods of protest, and will be explored further in this chapter.

The Demise of the Civil Rights Movement and the Start of the Black Power Movement

As discussed in the Introduction and Chapter One, Angelou's last attempt at direct action activism was to be with Martin Luther King Jr.'s Poor People's Campaign in 1968. However, she never got this chance, as King was assassinated on the 4th of April 1968. His assassination not only changed the direction of the Civil Rights movement, it also signifies the transformation of Angelou's style of activism towards intellectual activism. Angelou used the publication of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* in 1969 and *Gather Together in My Name* in 1974 to reflect on the black liberation movement, especially in its transition from the Civil Rights movement to the Black Power movement. These two autobiographies were written during the period in which the Black Power movement and the Black Arts movement were at the height of their

popularity. The socio-political climate of the time is significant to Angelou's perspective on protest and resistance as it is represented in these two volumes.

Although the Civil Rights movement had achieved legislative progress with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, for ordinary African Americans the situation had not changed drastically. In their co-authored chapter "We Changed the World: 1945-1970" as part of the edited collection *To Make Our World Anew: A History of African Americans*, historians Vincent Harding, Robin D. G. Kelley, and Earl Lewis describe the extent of chaos and violence that black Americans still endured by 1968:

Inner-city neighborhoods, such as Washington, D. C., Chicago, and Memphis, visited by race riots, continued to burn; incidents of police brutality rose steadily; dozens of black activists committed to protecting their communities from police violence were embroiled in several shoot-outs with law enforcements officials; and political assassinations continued. (529-530)

Many black people were frustrated with the slow progress of the Civil Rights movement and its doctrine of nonviolent resistance, while their concerns about their poor living conditions, prevalent racial prejudice, and the suspicious deaths of their activists/leaders were met with violence, as noted in the above passage. In such an atmosphere, the assassination of King was a significant loss for the Civil Rights movement. In *Spectacular Blackness: The Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for a Black Aesthetic*, Amy Abugo Ongiri marks the year 1968 as a crucial one in the history of African Americans' struggle for freedom. She reflects on King's death and its implications on the direction of the movement as "a definitive, symbolic end to the popularity of nonviolence as a cultural phenomenon in African American social protest" (99). Although King was not the first or last influential figure to be assassinated

during the sixties, his death indicated the end of an era for the Civil Rights movement.¹ The reason Ongiri connects King's death with the end of the movement is because it symbolizes a shift in the attitude from a nonviolent strategy of resistance towards the self-defence and self-determination of Black Power ideology. For black Americans, the loss of their leader indicated that his ideology of nonviolent direct action was insufficient, not only in terms of protecting their lives, but also in regards to ending their struggle with racism and prejudice. When nonviolent tactics such as sit-ins, boycotts, and mass demonstrations seemed ineffective, black people chose the militant approach of Black Power to empower their community in striving for their civil rights.

The rise in the popularity of Black Power did not happen suddenly. The slogan "Black Power" was first shouted at the 1966 "March against Fear" by Stokely Carmichael, chairman of the Student Nonviolence Coordinating Committee (SNCC). James Meredith, the first black student admitted to the University of Mississippi, organized a symbolic one-man march through the state of Mississippi in an attempt to persuade black Americans to register to vote. However, he was unable to complete the march as he was shot on the second day (Harding, Kelley, and Lewis 518). Ongiri describes the reason that this symbolic march became known as a turning point in the Civil Rights movement: "Like the King assassination that was to come later, the attack on James Meredith seemed to many African Americans to point to the ultimate futility of nonviolent resistance as a direct-action tactic against racism and fear" (1). By comparing it to King's assassination, Ongiri emphasizes the importance of this march for the future of the black liberation movement. This violent reaction to a peaceful protest represented for African Americans that nonviolent strategies were not the answer to their problems.

¹ The decade had a number of devastating losses, such as John F. Kennedy in 1963, Malcolm X in 1965, and Robert F. Kennedy, who was also assassinated on the 5th of June, 1968, shortly after King.

In response to the attack on Meredith, the march was completed by representatives of the main Civil Rights organizations such as King and Carmichael. However, it was during this march that disagreements over the strategies of resistance broke out between the leaders of the movement. Because of the shift in the attitude of African Americans regarding the ineffectiveness of nonviolent strategies, Carmichael's call for "Black Power" at the end of the march, which represented his views on a more militant style of resistance, were welcomed (Harding, Kelley, and Lewis 518). Ongiri explains that the replacement of the usual chant of "Freedom Now" with "Black Power" represented the disappointments of African Americans with the progress of the Civil Rights movement: "The notion of Black Power galvanized those within the Civil Rights Movement who perceived it to be stagnating behind the radical legislative change the movement had provoked" (2). Although, as Ongiri notes, the legislative achievements were huge steps forward for the movement, the pace of change was too slow during the late sixties for frustrated African Americans, who saw the militant style of Black Power as their last option in dealing with the ramifications of systematic racism. While the content of Angelou's first two autobiographies deals with this change in the tactics of protest during the 1960s and 1970s, the form of autobiography also plays an important role, because of its connection to slave narratives and their tradition of protest, as we shall see in the next section.

Slave Narratives: The Tradition of Resistance

In an interview with Carol E. Neubauer in 1987, Maya Angelou revealed that half way through writing the first volume of her autobiography, she had become fascinated with the autobiographical form. As her autobiography expanded to the second volume, *Gather Together in My Name*, Angelou returned to the earliest forms of black American

autobiography, slave narratives. As she reported in the Neubauer interview, while she was rereading Frederick Douglass's narratives, she noticed a pattern that existed in many other examples of African American literature too. The pattern that impressed Angelou was the ability to use the first person singular but indirectly refer to the first person plural ("An Interview" 286), which prioritizes the collective voice over the personal in representing the experiences of African Americans. Trudier Harris, in her essay "African American Autobiography", also credits early slave narratives for being the archetype for future black American autobiographies: "Writing in the nineteenth century, Frederick Douglass established a pattern that dominated the first several decades of African American autobiographical composition – to write in the service of a people" (180). This political and didactic goal of slave narratives is significant to modern black American autobiographers such as Angelou, who continue this tradition of bearing witness and representing the voice of their community in modern times, as we saw in Chapter One. In her essay, "African American Women and the United States Slave Narrative", Joycelyn Moody mentions *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* as an example of an autobiography written in the late twentieth century, which is indebted to the rich tradition of early slave narratives (125). Because of this influence, in this section the common thematic features of slave narratives will be explored, in order to discover the extent that they shaped the work of an autobiographer like Angelou.

Slave narratives were used as an influential medium to change the opinion of readers in favour of the abolition movement. In *Where I'm Bound: Patterns of Slavery and Freedom in Black American Autobiography*, Sidonie Smith explains that for slaves, the "political usefulness" of their narratives had priority over its literary value (7). From the early days, the aim of bringing their stories to print was to gather support against the institution of slavery. These writers relied on their own experiences to give a truthful

depiction of the horrors of the institution of slavery. In his article, "Black Autobiography: Life as the Death Weapon", critic Roger Rosenblatt confirms this notion: "No black American author has ever felt the need to invent a nightmare to make his point" (171). In a section of a letter to his editor, Frederick Douglass justified his aim and reason for writing his narrative:

It is not to illustrate any heroic achievements of a man, but to vindicate a just and beneficent principle, in its application to the whole human family, by letting in the light of truth upon a system, esteemed by some as a blessing, and by others as a curse and a crime. (*My Bondage* vii)

Douglass uses autobiography as a medium to transfer a more powerful message that involved enlightening and informing white people of the horrors of slavery. Smith concludes that the idea of using ex-slaves' life writing as a "powerful political weapon" has been carried into modern African American autobiography (7), using examples such as Richard Wright's *Black Boy* and Anne Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, and I here include Maya Angelou in this tradition.

However, in order to enlighten their audience and gather support for the abolition movement, many of the illiterate ex-slaves were forced to dictate their tales to their white patrons. Therefore, literacy was considered a tool of rebellion for many slaves, and the subtitle of Frederick Douglass's work, *Written by Himself*, becomes significant, as it protested the racial discrimination slaves had to face on many levels. Douglass's intention in choosing this subtitle is clarified in another section of the above-quoted letter to his editor:

I see, too, that there are special reasons why I should write my own biography, in preference to employing another to do it. Not only is slavery on trial, but unfortunately, the enslaved people are also on trial. It is alleged, that they are, naturally, inferior; that they are *so low* in the scale of humanity, so utterly stupid, that they are unconscious of their wrongs, and do not apprehend their rights. (*My Bondage* vii)

The mode of autobiography, therefore, suited this protest literature, as it reminded readers of the writer's subjectivity and demanded that society recognize them as intellectual human beings. In his article "Writing 'Race' and the Difference it Makes", Gates reaffirms the contribution these early forms of autobiography made to challenging the notion of the inferiority of their race:

The recording of an authentic black voice – a voice of deliverance from the deafening discursive silence which an enlightened Europe cited to prove the absence of the African's humanity – was the millennial instrument of transformation through which the African would become the European, the slave become the ex-slave, brute animal become the human being. (11-12)

For these authors, the act of beginning to document their own experiences was an act of resistance in itself, the aim of which was to prove that black Americans have culture and traditions of their own and, in the process, to provide evidence of their intellectuality and humanity. In addition, according to Smith, autobiography gave the slaves the chance to reveal the horrific nature of the institution of slavery through the personalization of their own experience, which made it "immediate and concrete rather than abstract and general" (8). In this context, what I defined in Chapter One as the "intellectual activism" of these narratives did not only demonstrate the capability of mastering the language, but was also intended to help the abolition movement gain more momentum through revealing the extent of the atrocities slaves had to endure.

Another common trait in the tradition of African American autobiography is the theme of geographical displacement. This can be dated back to the early narratives told by fugitive slaves, who recounted stories about the slave's journey to freedom and making a better future for themselves. According to Smith's description, these usually consisted of a "physical" escape journey and "geographical" relocation to the North, but also a "spiritual" journey of being welcomed as an equal into American society (13). This consistent theme in the tradition of African American autobiography has gone

through some modifications with the passage of time. The search for stability was a priority for slaves who had been kidnapped and forced to depart from their homeland, Africa, and then had escaped to the North and later on, in some cases, left racist America for foreign lands as expatriates. However, these journeys did not always fulfil the desired expectations of fugitive slaves. As Smith describes it, "the freed slave is not free in the North. Freedom is merely a chimera" (25). In his book, *Black Autobiography in America*, Stephen Butterfield elaborates on this disillusionment by clarifying that ex-slaves had to face a different type of oppression in the North from the one they had escaped. He explains that they would have a difficult time finding employment, would be discriminated against when using public facilities, and would not receive legal protection against any harm they might suffer (12). Even in regards to the abolition movement, the expectations of these ex-slaves were not always met, as Butterfield explains; they were overshadowed by white activists and were only given secondary roles, which did not allow them to express their ideas and independence (12).

Therefore, some ex-slaves who were disappointed with the continuing racial discrimination in the northern states of America realized expatriation to foreign lands was their last resort. This was true of slave narrators such as William Wells Brown and William and Ellen Craft (Smith 26). This pattern of black autobiographers' disillusionment with racist American society can also be seen in modern African American autobiographies, such as those by Richard Wright and Anne Moody. Moreover, ex-slaves were not the only group who chose expatriation as their last hope for finding the freedom and equality they deserved. Prominent African American autobiographers such as W. E. B. Du Bois and James Baldwin also chose to become expatriates when their struggles for equality and freedom in America failed. The themes of journey and expatriation are evident in Angelou's six-volume autobiography too, as

she tries to find her place in society. After her disappointment with the outcome of direct action activism during the late fifties, her journey took her to Africa in search of her roots. However, her experience of living with an expatriate community in Ghana led her to realize that she needed to return to America to continue her activism, as will be discussed in Chapter Four on *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes*.

These slave narratives were pioneers in showing how African Americans dealt with the daily racial discriminations and prejudices they faced. For many slaves, the only way to tolerate or survive the cruelty of the institution of slavery was to adopt a masked identity in order to resist the total control the master had over them. Smith emphasizes that any type of "self-assertion" against the slave owner could lead to trouble and even to their death (14). Butterfield explains that the slaves had to learn to delicately balance their "split identity" if they wanted any chance of escape (20). In the case of William and Ellen Craft, their masked identity helped them to successfully flee from the South, with Ellen disguising herself as a white man and her husband acting as her slave.² These types of situation exemplify the significance of the masked identity as a symbol of passive resistance, which was used to hide any rebellious ideas of escape and independence from the master.

However, Butterfield confirms that the narratives usually had a defining moment where passive resistance was turned to active resistance and the slave risked everything to gain their self-respect (20). Sometimes the result of this type of rebellion was fatal, but the slaves had reached the maximum level of their silent endurance and had to fight for their self-worth. This transition is emphasized in Douglass's narrative, in which he describes how he successfully resisted being punished again after being beaten many

² In 1860, William and Ellen Craft published the story of their escape in *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom: or, the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery*.

times by his overseer, Covey (*Narrative* 72-74). This is a significant moment in Douglass's narrative as it makes him conscious of his will for freedom: "It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence and inspired me again with a determination to be free" (*Narrative* 74). As a common trope in most slave narratives, this dramatic turning point helps in portraying the slaves as being more than victims, and in a broader sense as activists. The narratives are structured in such a way to emphasize the element of resistance and activism that is imperative for the account to be influential on the abolitionist circuit. These early narratives became the basis for how future African American autobiographers, like Angelou, dealt with the theme of resistance, in accordance with their own time. Angelou's first two autobiographies are concerned with the socio-political situation of the sixties and seventies, and her reflections on the debate over nonviolent versus violent direct action activism, in which she uses the trope of passive versus active resistance from slave narratives to raise awareness about the history of resistance in black American culture.

Narratives of Resistance in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

and *Gather Together in My Name*

In her first two autobiographies, the political nature of Angelou's autobiography is an integral part of the main storyline of the narrator's development from childhood to early adulthood. As her autobiography is a record of the collective experiences of her people, Angelou depicts the everyday life and struggles of African Americans in the segregated South during the 1930s and 1940s. Together these two volumes have a *Bildungsroman*

narrative structure, where the plot is centred on the protagonist's social development.³

Through reflecting on the early decades of her life, Angelou presents her thoughts on the social and political debates relevant to the time of the writing. In her interview with Tate, Angelou referred to writing about this collective experience in her autobiography:

When I wrote *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, I wasn't thinking so much about my own life or identity. I was thinking about a particular time in which I lived and the influences of that time on a number of people. I kept thinking, what about that time? What were the people around young Maya doing? I used the central figure – myself – as a focus to show how one person can make it through these times. ("Maya Angelou" 151)

The significance of this interview is that it reveals two points about the author's autobiographical writing. First, starting from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou used her autobiographies as a representative of the collective experience of black Americans. Unlike a quest narrative structure, it is not about the staple heroic deeds of the protagonist or the glorification of an individual. Following in the tradition of black American autobiography since slave narratives, the personal narrative is used in the service of the black American community. Second, most importantly, it shows the author creating the autobiographical voice of Angelou by balancing the perspective between the narrating and narrated "I". In reading the narrative, it is critical to distinguish the voice of the narrator in the sixties and seventies from the narrated voice or the young Maya in this context. In regards to the first two autobiographies, we thus see how the narrator uses her experiences of growing up in the black community in relation to the debate of nonviolent versus violent direct action that was central to the black liberation movement during the sixties and seventies.

³ In reading each autobiography, this thesis demonstrates that each volume of the series has its own mode for storytelling, such as the *Bildungsroman*, the *Künstlerroman* and the travel narrative, which as Smith and Watson explain is another example of the link between autobiography and the novel (91).

The above passage also shows that, in writing her autobiography, Angelou was not limiting her narrative to following a chronological time span, which means her main concern in selecting the experiences was to express her didactic message to the readers. In her interview with Tate, Angelou gave more insight into how the selection process of memories works in regards to including them in the autobiography:

Some events stood out in my mind more than others. Some, though, were never recorded because they were so bad or so painful, that there was no way to write about them honestly and artistically without making them melodramatic. They would have taken the book off its course. ("Maya Angelou" 152)

As discussed in Chapter One, autobiographers borrow novelistic approaches in writing their personal narratives and one of these is creating a thematic structure around their plot, which does not exist in such an organized manner in real life. Smith and Watson highlight the flexibility that autobiographers have with the organization of their narrative timeline:

Autobiographical narratives can be plotted strictly by chronology, with the narrator looking back on the life course and organizing the segments of telling according to the movement of historical time. It may seem that chronology is an obvious way to organize time, but it is only one way. Time can be scrambled; it can be rendered cyclical or discontinuous, as in postmodern texts. Thus a strict linear organization of narrative can be and often is displaced by achronological modes of emplotment. (92-93)

This is applicable to Angelou's mode of narration as the linear timeline is replaced by non-linear arrangement in her work, because for Angelou it was more important to show that events convey a coherent message together, which, as this thesis argues, is her political voice.

This selective use of Angelou's memories in the form of autobiography is further elaborated in an interview with Jackie Kay:

When I set out to write, I choose some sort of 'every-human-being' emotions, themes... then I will set myself back in that time and try to see what incidents contained that particular theme... In that way the work is

episodic... but if I'm lucky and work hard it should flow so that it looks like just a story being told. ("Maya Character" 195-196)

This preference for the "episodic" narrative mode is important because it shows Angelou's concern with the way her story is interpreted. In regards to her political voice, the significance of this arrangement can be seen in the way she consciously presents the theme of resistance over the two volumes. Disappointed by the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., Angelou started writing *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and continued in *Gather Together in My Name*, with the intention of using her coming-of-age story to give hope to a generation disillusioned by the loss of their leader and the outcome of the Civil Rights movement. In *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction and Beyond in Black America, 1945-2006*, historian Manning Marable depicts this crucial point at the end of the sixties:

Thus, after the assassinations of Malcolm and Martin, the modern black movement for biracial democracy had been crippled, to be sure, but it was by no means destroyed. Yet the absence of a widely shared theory and strategy for black liberation was still missing; the political goal of black equality was still murky and ill-defined; the opportunism and accommodation of many black militants and political leaders still raised unresolved questions for future struggles; and the programmatic relationship between democracy, racial justice, socialism and peace that Du Bois and King had strived to attain was becoming ever more distant. (111)

Although the black liberation movement was not defined in one person, such as Malcolm X or Martin Luther King Jr., their absence left a void in the leadership of the movement. The reason Marable depicts a bleak picture of this transitional period is due to the fractures created by the different factions representing the movement. Because of this lack of unity and uncertainty over the direction of the movement, between the opposing Civil Rights and Black Power movements, the black liberation struggle suffered from not having a united front in their fight against social justice and equality. In such a setting, intellectual activists such as Angelou had an important role to play in

raising awareness, through personal narratives, about the heritage of resistance that lies in the history of African Americans.

Angelou deals with this debate over the different modes of activism by dividing resistance into three stages, depicting the debate over the gradual progress of the different tactics of protest: 1) passive/nonviolent resistance, 2) transitional resistance, and 3) active/violent resistance. She depicts all three stages in *I Know Why the Caged Birds Sings*, which reflects her thoughts on the gradual and stage-by-stage transition of the development of resistance and protest. By demonstrating the relevance of the varieties of resistance in the different aspects of the lives of ordinary African Americans, she offers a reminder that this debate over methods of protest is not only relevant to the sixties and seventies, but also has deep roots in black American history and culture. She revisits the last stage of protest in *Gather Together in My Name* to expand her thoughts on how her views on violent direct action have developed since writing about it in her first volume.

First Stage: Passive/Nonviolent Resistance

From the beginning of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou selects events that focus on the racist surroundings she lived in as a child, such as describing the unfair and harsh working conditions of black cotton pickers and the constant daily racism in the small segregated town in which she grew up. It is in this racist environment that Angelou is introduced to the initial stage of protest through her interaction with the older generation, such as Grandmother Henderson. Angelou presents the views of this generation on their relationship with white people through her grandmother's ideology, which she believed her grandchildren/younger generation should follow:

Momma intended to teach Bailey and me to use the paths in life that she and her generation and all the Negroes gone before had found, and found to be safe ones. She didn't cotton to the idea that whitefolks could be talked to at all without risking one's life. And certainly they couldn't be spoken to insolently. In fact, even in their absence they could not be spoken of too harshly unless we used the sobriquet 'They.' If she had been asked and had chosen to answer the question of whether she was cowardly or not, she would have said that she was a realist. Didn't she stand up to 'them' year after year? (*I Know* 51-52)

This passage sets the tone on the topic of subtle resistance. Although she explains it through the perspective of her paternal grandmother, Angelou builds the basis of subtle resistance on being non-confrontational but still to a certain extent effective. While she addresses the criticism of nonviolent protest for not being aggressive and bold in confronting racist white people, Angelou credits the resistant strategy of this older generation in being the foundation for future models of protest, as will be demonstrated in the next stages. In addition, the lexical choices made to describe her grandmother's ideology about white people is rooted in the master and slave hierarchy of the antebellum era, which implies that Angelou is paying tribute to her ancestors for their culture of resistance. The final rhetorical question emphasizes the importance of this tradition of resilience and resistance as an integral part of black American culture since the days of slavery, as discussed in the slave narrative tradition section.

Angelou demonstrates this strategy of subtle resistance when her grandmother is humiliated and insulted by a group of "powhitetrash" children, who live on her grandmother's land (*I Know* 30-31). As they are considered to be white in the racial hierarchy, they have to be treated in the same way: "Since Momma told us that the less you say to whitefolks (or even poorwhitetrash) the better, Bailey and I would stand, solemn, quiet, in the displaced air" (*I Know* 30). As explained earlier, in subtle resistance, white people cannot be confronted and racial hierarchy has to be followed, even if on the class spectrum her grandmother is higher as she is the owner of a store

and its land. However, the complexity of the matrix of domination – in this context the axes of age and class are intertwined with race – explains the humiliation and belittling her grandmother experiences at the hands of a group of young girls.

In the telling of this experience, the girls start to mock the grandmother by imitating her. However, when the imitating and mocking does not get any reaction from her grandmother, one of the girls, before leaving, takes the insult further by doing a hand stand while having no drawers under her dress (*I Know* 33-34). Young Maya, who is observing her grandmother being insulted from a distance, is infuriated by the impudent behaviour, to the extent that she thinks of defending her grandmother using the family rifle if she had had access to it (*I Know* 33). However, throughout the whole ordeal her grandmother continuously "moan[s] a hymn" and never reacts violently towards the rude girls (*I Know* 32). Observed from a young child's perspective, this narrative of resistance is significant in the way Angelou narrates it. Telling this experience from the perspective of the narrated "I", the mature narrator is commenting on the option of nonviolent versus violent resistance, and how at this stage the nonviolent protesting of her grandmother is sufficient: "Whatever the contest had been out front, I knew Momma had won" (*I Know* 35). Although she opts for a different strategy in confronting the girls, self-defence, she reveals at the end that her grandmother's strategy of resilience overcomes the girls' taunts. Her grandmother's tactic of enduring the insults not only resembles the tactics of nonviolent direct action such as sit-ins, but also the singing of the hymn is a reminder of Civil Rights protest songs. Angelou is consciously connecting the African American tradition of protest to its oral traditions of gospels and spirituals, which can be dated back to slavery. Pierre Walker, in his article "Racial Protest, Identity, Words, and Form in Maya Angelou's *I*

Know Why the Caged Bird Sings", emphasizes the influence of this stage on future protest:

Later episodes demonstrate the limitations of subtle resistance, but one should not underestimate its powers: without risking harm to life, liberty, or property, Momma is able to preserve her human dignity in the face of the white girls' attempt to belittle her. It may be all that she can do in the segregated South at the time, but it is something. (173-174)

Pierre Walker's point is valid in the sense that in the narration of this event Angelou demonstrates both the strength and weaknesses of this type of resistance, especially the limitations, which will become more obvious as she moves towards the next stages. However, in the context of the 1930s segregated South and its institutionalized racism, her grandmother's tactics are valuable as a step forward for the development of the black liberation movement.

More importantly, as part of the narrative tradition of enslaved women, Angelou is also reconstructing a stereotypical image of black women like her grandmother in order to emphasize the significant role these ordinary black women played in the struggle for liberation. Moody states that the slave women's narratives aimed to "arrest whites' production of racist stereotypes of black women as primitive barbarians, beasts of burden, slave breeders, indulgent mammies, sex-hungry Jezebels, tragic mulattas and so on" (113). Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is a great example of this tradition, which challenges the negative images of black women slaves as victims. Continuing this tradition in modern black autobiography, Angelou's first role model for any type of resistance is her grandmother, who unlike the above negative cliché images of black women, is an independent store owner.

Lastly, subtle resistance, which has been an integral part of the black community, is central to the debate over nonviolent resistance in the Civil Rights movement. In *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity*, Jeffery O.

G. Ogbar emphasizes that the success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott promoted King's nonviolent direct action as the way to challenge white supremacy during the late fifties. Ogbar explains how the nonviolent tactics of the Civil Rights movement used the violent behaviour of the racists to the former's own advantage:

King developed a belief in nonviolence that understood the power of violence and hoped to manipulate it for social and political justice. Inherent in King's activism was a resilient faith that moral fortitude and nonviolence could and would fundamentally and drastically reconstruct the collective psychology of white people. ... For King, nonviolence was empowering; it helped bolster the cause of the activists who made strong displays of morality in the face of stubborn racist brutality. Ultimately, the racists would be forced to recognize the humanity of black people and permit liberation, which King insisted, was inextricably linked to racial integration. (42)

As Ogbar clarifies, this philosophy of nonviolence, which is based on Gandhian values of civil resistance, aims to reveal the extent to which violence is used to keep minorities subjugated. Through its aspect of consciousness-raising, their peaceful protests aimed to end racial segregation and destroy the racial hierarchy institutionalized in American society. Angelou attempts to demonstrate that King's philosophy of nonviolent resistance can be traced in the culture of black American resistance, such as in her grandmother's generation. However, the narrating "I" or narrator indicates that this is not the only strategy available to African Americans, and explores other options in the next stages of resistance.

Second Stage: Transitional Resistance

In the first stages of protest, Angelou acts as a witness and an observer to pivotal racist encounters of her childhood, but in the next stage she becomes the central target for racist encounters. The transition from nonviolent to violent protest is central to the two following episodes: her graduation ceremony and a visit to a white dentist. On both

occasions the narrator uses the perspective of the narrated "I" to challenge the limitations of subtle resistance against racial discrimination and prejudice.

Angelou narrates a different aspect of protest style in relating her graduation event, a communal protest, rather than an individual one. While it is an occasion to celebrate the achievement of the students, it is the speech of the white guest speaker, Edward Donleavy, which emphasizes the ramifications of systematic racism in distinguishing the facilities of the white versus black school. His speech is a reminder of the discrimination that existed in the educational system of the community, as Angelou reports:

The Central School (naturally, the white school was Central) had already been granted improvements that would be in use in fall. A well-known artist was coming from Little Rock to teach art to them. They were going to have the newest microscopes and chemistry equipment for their laboratory. (*I Know* 192)

This discrimination against the educational rights of the black students, based on the intersection of race and class, is emphasized by the comparison Angelou makes with her own school earlier:

Unlike the white high school, Lafayette County Training School distinguished itself by having neither lawn, nor hedges, nor tennis courts, nor climbing ivy. Its two buildings (main classrooms, the grade school and home economics) were set on a dirt hill with no fence to limit either its boundaries or those of bordering farms. There was a large expanse to the left of the school which was used alternately as a baseball diamond or a basketball court. (*I Know* 183)

The narrating "I" in this context is making two significant points. First, the narrator is criticizing the 1896 *Plessy vs. Ferguson* decision, which legalized the doctrine of "separate but equal". African Americans suffered from this unfair law, which was rarely to their benefit, and educational segregation was one of the obvious disadvantages for black communities. The mature narrator visualizes the significance of this discrimination through the speech by Donleavy. Secondly, the importance of this point

in the context of the sixties is its relation to the legal achievement of the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision, which overturned the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* decision in regards to providing integrated educational facilities. As Sean Dennis Cashman points out in *African-Americans and the Quest for Civil Rights, 1900-1990*, this milestone for the Civil Rights movement "was not sudden, nor was it achieved without a context. It was the inevitable culmination of a process that had begun over twenty years earlier" (113). Cashman reminds us that this victory did not happen suddenly and was a result of years of grassroots movement. In *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Equality, 1890-2000*, Adam Fairclough reviews the impact of this decision on the black liberation movement:

[T]he *Brown* decision... turned out to be a turning point in the struggle for black equality. It destroyed the legal basis for racial segregation. It inspired blacks with the knowledge that the Supreme Court was on their side. (225)

Importantly, as Fairclough points out, the *Brown* decision paved the way for more legal achievements during the Civil Rights movement, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. However, Fairclough explains that the *Brown* decision was not as successful in reality as first expected:

Without support from the president and the Congress, the decision meant little; moreover, it placed the entire burden of securing implementation upon the shoulders of vulnerable black plaintiffs. ... Small wonder it took at least ten years before even token integration occurred in the South, and at least fifteen until Mississippi and other states in the Deep South took the decision seriously. (225)

Facing white intransigence, the progress of integration was slow even after the court victory. The criticism depicted here is significant as it also applies to the later legislative wins of the Civil Rights movement. The Black Power movement similarly argued that the legislative achievements of the Civil Rights movement in 1964 and 1965 had stopped *de jure* segregation; however, these laws had not influenced *de facto* segregation. This highlights the significance of the mature Angelou narrating this graduation ceremony in the socio-political context of the late sixties.

The graduation degradation should not be considered an isolated event, however, since from Angelou's perspective it is considered as the pinnacle of years of constant struggle with racism. She reveals her frustration at the grim situation of her people: "It was awful to be Negro and have no control over my life. It was brutal to be young and already trained to sit quietly and listen to charges brought against my color with no chance of defense. We should all be dead" (*I Know* 194). The frustration of Angelou at her helplessness against yet another racist degradation is shown by the exaggerated tone she uses to represent the humiliation she felt as a child. She implies anger and rage through expressing her sense of resentment against the submissiveness of her race in enduring the insulting speech of Donleavy. However, this exasperated tone and language can also apply to the late sixties and the mood and atmosphere that led to the birth of the Black Power ideology. In these sentences, Angelou is signalling the change in attitude towards resisting racism and prejudice, suggesting that the older generation's subtle resistance is no longer suitable.

As this experience at the graduation is a collective humiliation, the school and the audience's impromptu rendition of "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing" by James Weldon Johnson, which is referred to as the Negro national anthem, takes the significance of a protest poem.⁴ Besides the significance of its content to the resistance movement, James E. Perone, in *Smash Hits: The 100 Songs that Defined America*, highlights that the song's popularity in its own time was a sign that music would play an important role as a "means of rallying African Americans in the pursuit of true political, social, and economic freedom" during the Civil Rights era (49). This is the case in Angelou's

⁴ James Weldon Johnson's poem "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing" was first written to celebrate President Lincoln's birthday in 1900. Because the song version of the poem became the theme song for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1919, it became known as the "Black American National anthem" (Perone 48). As the song protested the racism that existed during the Reconstruction era, it is another example of early black intellectual activism.

reference to the poem, as the use of poetry in this scene is not only to express dissent but also to show the unity of the community in a common cause, similar to the protest marches of the Civil Rights movement. After the reference to "Sympathy" of Paul Laurence Dunbar, this is another allusion to the rich tradition of African American resistance literature. The wording of James Weldon Johnson's poem is significant as it is a reminder of the culture of resistance and survival since the days of slavery. Young Maya, who has been singing this song her whole life, realizes the meaning behind the words on this occasion:

Never heard the words, despite the thousands of times I had sung them.
Never thought they had anything to do with me. ... And now I heard,
really for the first time:

'We have come over a way that with tears
has been watered,
We have come, treading our path through
the blood of the slaughtered.' (*I Know* 197)

The use of the poem in this situation is significant as it reminds the community of its history and tradition of resilience. It revives the community's racial pride and worth, which had been disregarded in Donleavy's speech. In addition, the narrator credits the contribution intellectual activists such as poets like James Weldon Johnson have made in raising awareness of the black struggle. Perone also praises Angelou for her reference to this influential poem in her first autobiography, citing its effect on contemporary readers:

The continuing high regard with which Angelou's work is held, not to mention the fact that her work – particularly *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* – is included on numerous reading lists in high schools, colleges, and universities, means that the importance of 'Lift Every Voice and Sing' continues to be brought to the attention of students through the medium of Angelou's life story, students who otherwise might never have been familiar with the title of the song let alone its lyrics. (51)

This is a central aim of Angelou's intellectual activism in terms of her contemporary audience, as she intends to remind them of the contribution early black intellectual activists such as James Weldon Johnson made through their pioneering works. As pointed out by Perone, Angelou's success as a contemporary author helped in influencing her readers with her consciousness-raising campaign. The discovery that the young Maya makes about the power and message behind the words of the poem, as a collective representation of the struggles of African Americans, is the autobiographer's method of revealing her own didactic message in writing her personal narrative.

This collective rendition of the poem is also a reminder of the earlier stage of resistance, when Grandmother Henderson sang hymns as an expression of subtle resistance against the humiliation caused by the "powhitetrash" girls. The transition from moaning a hymn to singing a poem as a group is another method of the tactics of resistance, raising your voice to protest. Angelou, who consistently connects the tradition of folklore and literature with protest, emphasizes the influence of literary figures on expressing their struggles in this passage: "Oh, Black known and unknown poets, how often have your auctioned pains sustained us? Who will compute the lonely nights made less lonely by your songs, or the empty pots made less tragic by your tales?" (*I Know* 198). These sentences are the voice of Angelou, the autobiographer/intellectual activist, paying tribute to the activism by the many authors/poets who prior to her have witnessed the struggle of their people and represented their voice through their acts of writing. For Angelou, literature is an important tool of activism throughout her autobiographical series, as will be shown throughout this thesis.

However, in this first volume it becomes even more significant, as the narrating "I" describes how literature helped young Maya deal with the trauma of being raped at a

young age. In "Maya Angelou's Caged Bird as Trauma Narrative", Suzette A. Henke discusses the impact of this traumatic experience on Angelou, who became mute for about seven years. Henke emphasizes the importance of the act of reading poetry aloud with the guidance of Bertha Flowers, a mentor, who helped young Maya regain her ability to speak (113-114). While literature assists young Angelou in her posttraumatic recovery from silence to speech, the writer Angelou also uses the power of writing to break silence about topics such as rape and to raise her voice in protest.⁵ During the renaissance of black feminist writing of the seventies, Angelou's first autobiography paved the way for other contemporary black women writers to follow in her footsteps, such as Toni Morrison in *The Bluest Eyes* (1971) and Gayl Jones in *Corregidora* (1975). Lorde's seminal essay, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action", emphasizes the important role writers have in speaking the truth:

In the transformation of silence into language and action, it is vitally necessary for each one of us to establish or examine her function in that transformation and to recognize her role as vital within that transformation.

For those of us who write, it is necessary to scrutinize not only the truth of what we speak, but the truth of that language by which we speak it.
(43)

Lorde reminds authors of the important contribution they are making in breaking the silence on topics that are essential to the survival of the community of black women. The intellectual activism that authors such as Angelou conduct is not only limited to their controversial content, but also to how they use their tool of activism, language and writing, for advancing black women's rights.

The next episode, the case of the white dentist who refuses to treat young Maya's toothache due to her race, is also important in Angelou's representation of the

⁵ As discussed in Chapter One, critics such as Braxton, Lupton, Hagen, and McPherson, have praised Angelou for raising awareness about the traumatic experience of childhood sexual abuse and rape in the first volume.

transitional stage of protest. After the graduation event, this is a similar scene, criticizing the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* case, as it proves the constant inequality in the services provided in a segregated society. The dentist's refusal even to check her teeth, because of his bias – "Annie [Maya's grandmother], you know I don't treat nigra, colored people" (*I Know* 202) – demonstrates the daily discrimination black Americans faced in the South based on the intersection of race and class. This episode differs from other previous cases of discrimination as it challenges the older generation's tactics of protest through the element of imagination, which is transferred to the reader in italics. While young Maya is waiting outside for her grandmother, this is how she imagines the interaction between her grandmother and the dentist:

Momma walked in that room as if she owned it. She shoved that silly nurse aside with one hand and strode into the dentist's office... Her eyes were blazing like live coals and her arms had doubled themselves in length. He looked up at her just before she caught him by the collar of his white jacket. (I Know 204)

This is the only time in the entire autobiographical series that Angelou uses italics to differentiate her fantasy version of the event from the reality. As discussed by Smith and Watson in the Introduction, the novelistic mode is used to help the author deal with the traumatic past; for the mature Angelou it is the racial discrimination of living in the South. Timothy Dow Adams's book *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography* explores the border between truth and lies in autobiography. He argues that "Lying in autobiography is not just something that happens inevitably; rather, it is a highly strategic decision, especially on the part of literary autobiographers" (x). Like Smith and Watson, Adams agrees that this conscious decision by autobiographers to use fictionalized elements is necessary to deal with a tension created between the narrating and narrated "I"s. One of the autobiographers that he examines is Mary McCarthy, who uses italicized sections in her autobiography *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (1957).

Adams explains the structure of this autobiography: "Every chapter except the last is followed by an italicized chapter that appears at first to be correcting the fictional record" (92). While for McCarthy the italics are a frequent element of her autobiography and are used to distinguish the fictionalized section from the truth, Angelou uses them just once to highlight her childhood fantasy. The reason Angelou uses this technique only in the first autobiography is related to the young age of the narrated "I", who still has the childhood ability of the power of imagination. This use of the element of fantasy works well within the genre of childhood autobiography. The heroic element added to Grandmother Henderson's character is an attempt to resist the humiliation and disrespect the racist dentist made them experience, through the perspective of the young Maya. The lexical choices in the above passage imply a change in the hierarchy between grandmother and dentist. The end of the passage reminds readers of the new "super power" of Maya's grandmother. It also represents, in the context of the Black Power movement of the late sixties, dissatisfaction with the Civil Rights era's progress and the preference for self-defence resistance.

The use of imagination to confront the racist dentist by imagining her grandmother as heroic, and the change to italics, are signs of Angelou's protest narrative being ready for the next phase. The narrated "I", young Maya, is disappointed that the reality does not live up to her imagination. She realizes later that her grandmother was only able to force the racist dentist to pay back the interest of money that she lent to him, for their fare to the closest black dentist, and concludes that there is no heroic element to her grandmother's account. The last sentence of the chapter shows that Angelou is ready to move to the last stage: "I preferred, much preferred, my version" (*I Know* 207). This shows her dissatisfaction with the passive resistance of the older generation and her preference for actively protesting racial discrimination. In addition,

as Angelou has referred to the significance of literature to intellectual activism throughout the autobiography, Pierre Walker finds the use of the element of imagination important in this context: "The fact that the fantasy passage is an act of imagination is also significant, since it hints that imagination and storytelling can be forms of resisting racism" (184). As Lorde discussed earlier in her essay "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action", she agrees that it is not only the content that needs to fight racial prejudice, but that form and language also have an important role in shaping and developing the reader's awareness about confronting racism and fighting for social justice, which is integral to Angelou's autobiographies.

Final Stage: Active/Violent Resistance

By the end of the first volume, Angelou's representation of the gradual development of protest has reached its last stage: active protest. With the foundation of the previous stages, the transition from non-active to active is completed in this step. Upon being refused the right to apply for the job of a streetcar conductor by a receptionist, the young adult Angelou initially accepts defeat by treating the case impersonally and following the older generation's model of protest:

The miserable little encounter [between the receptionist and her] had nothing to do with me, the me of me, anymore than it had to do with that silly clerk. The incident was a recurring dream, concocted years before by stupid whites and it eternally came back to us all. (*I Know* 286)

The important change in Angelou's perspective towards integration is seen in the last sentence. The readers understand that this is not one person's story but the experience of a whole community, just as earlier she made a similar connection with James Weldon Johnson's poem. Following on the tradition of slave narratives, Angelou is relating her individual experience to the collective experience of her people. The transformation from submissive to active resistance is finalized with Angelou's representation of her

racist encounter with a conductor. As discussed by Butterfield earlier in the chapter, this is similar to the turning point or defining moment in slave narratives when subtle resistance transitions to violent direct action. The narrating "I" realizes that this is not a rejection based on merit but a racial one: "The whole charade we had played out in that crummy waiting room had directly to do with me, Black, and her, white" (*I Know* 287). The phrase, "directly to do with me" is reversing Angelou's words "it had nothing to do with me" a page earlier. She makes this defining moment for the narrated "I" clear through this declaration: "I WOULD HAVE THE JOB. I WOULD BECOME A CONDUCTORETTE AND SLING A FULL MONEY CHANGER FROM MY BELT. I WOULD" (*I Know* 287). Similar to the italics, the use of capital letters is another literary technique used by the autobiographer to announce a change/transition in the morale of the narrated "I". By forcing the reader to read this louder than other places, she is implying that the protagonist is not accepting nonviolence/subtle resistance as the only option for protest.

Confronted with racial discrimination in the workforce, Angelou takes on the challenge and succeeds in gaining an equal work opportunity by becoming the first black streetcar conductor in San Francisco. Angelou's victory in the final stage of the progress of protest in the narrative from non-active to active resistance can be compared to the achievements of the Civil Rights Movement era. Through this depiction of the gradual evolution towards active protest, Angelou not only confronts the limitations of the previous generation's methods but also gives credit to them as the basis for any future protest movements. Through such an ending, Angelou is portraying to her readers in the late 1960s and early 1970s that the black protest movement has reached a turning point with the Civil Rights era reaching its end and its transition to the Black Power era. Even the act of writing her first volume is symbolic of the idea that it is time to change

the style of protest, to take an active approach by raising your voice through intellectual activism.

However, Angelou does not close the discussion here, and in *Gather Together in My Name* she revisits the debate of nonviolence and violent resistance. Written in 1974, this volume depicts the autobiographer's perspective on the topic of resistance since writing *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The first volume was written during the rise of Black Power and the socio-political atmosphere of the late sixties, and it carries Angelou's hopes in this transitional period. Although she does not reflect on the armed resistance of Black Power, she does approach the debate from the angle of self-defence in comparison to submissive or subtle resistance. She ended the volume by showing that it was time to change the style of protest, by becoming the first black streetcar conductor in San Francisco. However, *Gather Together in My Name* was written at the time of the fall of Black Power ideology and this reflects on how Angelou approaches the topic of resistance in this volume.

In *Gather Together in My Name*, Angelou returns to Stamps, Arkansas, as a young adult, to visit her grandmother. It is during this trip that she sees the segregated South from an adult perspective, which differs from her childhood experience: "Until I moved to California at thirteen I had known the town, and there had been no need to examine it" (*Gather* 74). From a child's point of view, this was how young Maya viewed Stamps: "Along with other black children in small Southern villages, I had accepted the total polarization of the races as a psychological comfort" (*Gather* 74). The autobiographer's voice is criticizing the systematic racism that existed in the South to the extent that segregation was accepted as a norm. However, the narrator signals that her previous view of Stamps does not hold anymore: "I had no idea that I had outgrown childhood's protection until I arrived back in Stamps" (*Gather* 75). The narrating "I"

indicates that her experience of Stamps in the forties is different from her childhood one.

Angelou tries to break the boundaries of segregation by placing an order in the General Merchandise Store in the white part of the town. Imagining that times have changed, Angelou is shocked when she is faced with the racist behaviour of the clerk: "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?" (*Gather* 90). The reason for her shock is that her class status is not relevant in this context; she is being discriminated against because of her race. The narrator is criticizing the unconscious bias that is embedded in Jim Crow racism. Upon mocking her name, Angelou defends her identity: "And where I'm from is no concern of yours, but rather where you're going. I'll slap you into middle of next week if you even dare to open your mouths again" (*Gather* 91). Her reply is significant in the context of the Black Power ideology of the seventies, which through self-defence aimed to revive Black consciousness and pride. Fairclough confirms this as one of the benefits the Black Power period: "It fuelled an upsurge of black consciousness that had profound and constructive psychological benefits" (319), as demonstrated here by the narrating "I".

However, in the segregated Stamps of the 1940s, this bold, confrontational behaviour is not typical behaviour for black people. The racial pride the narrated "I" feels in confronting the racist behaviour of the clerk is brief, as she is slapped repeatedly by her furious grandmother and forced to leave Stamps immediately. This is an important clash between the two types of ideology, subtle/passive resistance versus active/violent resistance. While in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* Angelou paid tribute to the older generation's mode of resistance and describes how Grandmother

Henderson was her first role model of resistance, in this volume, the clash represents a stage of tension and disagreement over their styles of protest. However, her grandmother makes an important point about the significance of geographical location in relation to the appropriate style of resistance:

'You think 'cause you've been to California these crazy people won't kill you? You think them lunatic cracker boys won't try to catch you in the road and violate you? You think because of your all-fired principle some of the men won't feel like putting their white sheets on and riding over here to stir up trouble? You do, you're wrong.' (*Gather* 93)

This is a powerful statement, which the narrator makes through her grandmother. First, her grandmother reminds her through a series of rhetorical questions that the segregated South has not changed drastically in comparison to the North. Jim Crow is still as relevant as before and lynching, rape, murder, and Ku Klux Klan attacks are still dominant threats for African Americans in the South. The only way to survive this racist atmosphere is subtle resistance and resilience, and her slaps are a symbolic rejection of the active and confrontational resistance of her granddaughter.

However, the above passage is also relevant to the context of the seventies. While Angelou was more supportive of violent direct action during her first volume, in *Gather Together in My Name*, the narrating "I" revises her position on the effectiveness of Black Power ideology. She is criticizing the Black Power ideology for not being attuned to the needs of the black people in the southern states, as is demonstrated in the questions that her grandmother asks. Through her confrontation with her grandmother, she is allowed to visualize both aspects of the debate, but finally sides with the opponents of the Black Power in regards to its limitations and weaknesses in adjusting to the reality of the racist South even in the seventies. The Black Power movement was not as popular by 1975 and Fairclough explains the reason for this decline in its inability to form a realistic programme:

In the South, blacks gladly invoked Black Power, but grassroots activism remained firmly within the tradition of the Civil Rights Movement: boycotts, demonstrations, voter registration drives, political campaigns, cooperative business ventures, and government-funded 'community' programs. Most blacks recognized that the South was changing for the better; they knew that talk of revolution was absurd. (316)

The persistent racist atmosphere of the seventies was not prepared for the revolutionary attitude of the Black Power movement, especially in the South, where progress was much slower than in the North. In the end, although the Civil Rights era had ended with the rise of Black Power, the nonviolent direct activism of the era proved to be more effective in bringing social change.

Conclusion

The first two volumes are important in establishing the political voice of Angelou as an intellectual activist. In her interview with Tate, Angelou summed up the importance of the theme of protest in her works: "Protest is an inherent part of my work. You can't just not write about protest themes or not sing about them. It's a part of life. If I don't agree with a part of life, then my work has to address it" ("Maya Angelou" 153). Angelou uses the medium of autobiography to reveal her thoughts on the notion of resistance and protest during the sixties and seventies. Her experiences as a child and young adult growing up in the segregated South are told through the narrated "I", but the narrating "I" explores their relevance to the debate of nonviolent versus violent direct action, which was at its height at the end of the Civil Rights era and the rise of the Black Power movement. In the first volume, she pays attention to the tradition of resistance in African American culture and tradition and looks at the progress from subtle resistance to violent direct action. As the second volume was written during the fall of the Black Power era, she provides her vision of why the Black Power movement did not succeed. Even though the Black Power movement is criticized for its failure, Fairclough

emphasizes the impact it had on the black liberation struggle. Besides raising black consciousness, he credits the movement for changing African American identity and culture:

Black Power also educated blacks politically, fostering grassroots activism as well as national political caucuses. Its greatest impact, perhaps, was in the realm of culture: Black Power embodied a new aesthetic that stimulated an outburst of creativity in music, art, literature, and fashion. (319)

The impacts of this legacy of Black Power, political and cultural, would be observed in the coming decades. One of its immediate artistic influences was the creation of the Black Arts movement, as the cultural side of the political movement, which will be explored more in the next chapter.

Chapter Three

The Transition from Artist to Activist in *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* and *The Heart of a Woman*

The heart of woman goes forth with the dawn,
 As a lone bird, soft swinging, so restlessly on,
 Afar o'ver life's turrets and vales does it roam
 In the wake of those echoes the heart calls home.

The heart of a woman falls back with the night,
 And enters some alien cage in its plight,
 And tries to forget it has dreamed of the stars
 While it breaks, breaks, breaks on the sheltering bars.

- Georgia Douglass Johnson, "The Heart of a Woman"

Angelou begins her fourth volume by paying tribute to the tradition of African American women's literature. Her title is an allusion to the poem of the same title by Georgia Douglass Johnson. While in the first volume she credits the influence of black male writers such as Paul Laurence Dunbar, here she is specifically alluding to the influence of early black women writers. Hagen makes the connection between the two poems chosen for the titles of Angelou's autobiographies to be the "caged bird" imagery (96). However, the "caged bird" in Georgia Douglass Johnson's poem is not only restricted by the bars of racism but also by her gender.

The choice of Georgia Douglass Johnson's poem fits perfectly with this volume of Angelou's autobiography as it demonstrates Angelou's own dilemma of balancing her role as a mother and wife and pursuing both her career and political activism. Lupton agrees that the caged bird metaphor is shared in both poems, but with some difference:

Dunbar's caged bird is generally associated with the conditions of black people in America who are imprisoned by whites when they desire to be free. ... Johnson's use of the symbol of the bird, however, is quite different from Dunbar's, for her bird is a caged woman whose isolation seems to suggest sexual as well as racial confinement. (133)

It is important to consider the representation of this "confinement" at this stage of Angelou's life as transitional, as she is presenting the uncertainty and ambivalence she feels in this period, in both her roles, as a mother and as an activist. While the quotation from Lupton emphasizes the double jeopardy of race and gender as the focus of this volume, it is the aim of this research to show that Angelou is concerned with how the prejudice and discrimination of black Americans is affected by the intersection of race, gender, and class in the overall series.

End of an Era: After the Black Arts Movement

Angelou published *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* in 1976 and *The Heart of A Woman* in 1981, which is the period when both the Black Power movement and the Black Arts movement ended their dominance. While in the first two volumes, as we have seen, she paid attention to the debates around the Civil Rights and the Black Power movements, in the next two volumes she is concerned with the development of herself as an artist/activist in the post-Black Arts era. By reflecting on her role as an artist/activist, Angelou engages with the merging of the artist and activist identity, a process which was central to the Black Arts movement, as we saw in Chapter One.

Ongiri discusses the significant influence the Black Arts movement had on black American literature, despite its brief time span:

Though the movement was relatively short-lived, its challenges to the status quo helped institutionalize African American literature and culture

as legitimate objects of intellectual scrutiny. It continues to exert a powerful influence on artists' ideas about themselves and their art. (22)

As Ongiri describes, the aim of the movement was to create a black aesthetic centred on African American culture and tradition which, as discussed in Chapter One, was advocated as the main tenet of the movement by its founders Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal. Ongiri continues by evaluating the impact of this literary movement on contemporary black American literature:

By presenting the culture of everyday African American struggle as one worthy of serious scholarly recognition and analysis, the movement contributed to the current formation of African American studies and to a general understanding of what is valuable about African American culture. (22)

As Ongiri highlights, during the seventies and eighties there was a dramatic increase in black artistic/literary production, and also many black studies courses were offered for the first time in universities. One of the authors who continued this consciousness-raising campaign in black arts in the years after the movement was Angelou. In the post-Black Arts era, she reflected on what it means to be a black artist and to create work, which represents the issues and struggles of her people, especially in the third and fourth volumes of her autobiography. In the introduction to *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, William J. Harris emphasizes the significance of this movement for the shaping of the black artist's literary production and identity:

The Black Arts Era, both in terms of creative and theoretical writing, is the most important one in Black literature since the Harlem Renaissance. No post-Black Arts artists thinks of himself or herself as simply a human being who happens to be black; blackness is central to his or her experience and art. (xxvi)

Alongside the Harlem Renaissance, Harris pays tribute to this influential movement for creating a space for artists to deal with the tensions between their artistic and political worlds. The aesthetic agenda of this movement, combined with its political struggle for social change, would influence the way the next generation of artists examined their role

as intellectual activists within the context of the socio-political climate of the coming decades. Smethurst credits the movement for cultivating a diverse group of intellectuals/artists that were mainly artistically productive at the time, such as Lorenzo Thomas, Amiri Baraka, Askia Touré, and Sonia Sanchez (371). Smethurst also attributes the successful careers of many post-Black Arts artists to their being influenced by the movement, for example Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, Alice Walker, and August Wilson, and I here will add Maya Angelou to this list (371). Like Smethurst, as mentioned in Chapter One, Traylor argues that the Black Arts movement's impact was not limited to a certain decade. Although the movement ended in 1975, the post-Black Arts era was actually a new beginning. Margo Natalie Crawford contributes to this discussion in her groundbreaking work *Black Post-Blackness: The Black Arts Movement and Twenty-First-Century Aesthetics*. She examines the influence of the second wave of the Black Arts movement in the seventies on contemporary black American culture, and explores the concept of black aesthetics in the twenty-first century through defining this period as the "black post-blackness" era (1-2). Studies like Crawford's are essential to expanding the horizons of the Black Arts movement beyond just a historical literary movement, and discovering the ways in which it has influenced contemporary ideas about black art and the concept of blackness.

Art or Propaganda: That is the Question

As a post-Black Arts artist, for Angelou the central discussion of the third and fourth volumes of her autobiographies is the debate between art and activism. This debate was central to the Black Arts movement, as discussed by the co-founder of the movement, Larry Neal, in his influential essay "The Black Arts Movement". In addition, in his groundbreaking collection co-edited with Amiri Baraka, *Black Fire: An Anthology of*

Afro-American Writing (1968), Neal gathers works from a variety of media such as essays, poetry, short stories, and drama, and strives to define the movement and its goals via some of its famous members, such as A. B. Spellman, Sonia Sanchez, and Ed Bullins. Even the choice to start the collection with James Stewart's essay "The Development of the Revolutionary Black Artist" demonstrates that Neal and Baraka were setting the tone of their anthology to be an attempt at moulding future black intellectual activists. Neal sums up the collection's manifesto in his afterword, "And Shine Swam On", in which he states that "The artist and the political activist are one" (656). In her writing, Angelou is in quest of combining these two identities, the artist and the intellectual activist, especially in *The Heart of a Woman*.

Besides the Black Arts movement, the debate over art versus propaganda has a long tradition in African American literature, dating back to slave narratives. Two intellectual activists who debated this issue during the New Negro Movement were W. E. B. Du Bois, and Alain Locke. They capture the essence of this debate in Du Bois's essay "Criteria of Negro Art", initially written in 1926 as a speech for a NAACP conference, and Locke's response in "Art or Propaganda?" in 1928. In "Criteria of Negro Art", Du Bois reminds his audience that:

[A]ll art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care for any art that is not used for propaganda. (259)

In Du Bois's view, only art for didactic aims exists. In contrast to "pure art", art should fight for the social justice of its people. He concludes his speech by reminding his audience to prioritize political over aesthetic quality, until racial discrimination ends in both the artistic and real world:

I do not doubt that the ultimate art coming from black folk is going to be just as beautiful, and beautiful largely in the same way, as the art that comes from white folk, or yellow, or red; but the point today is that until the art of the black folk compels recognition they will not be rated as human. ("Criteria" 260)

Although he appreciates the aesthetic side of art, he argues that the art of minorities will not be appreciated for its true talent until racism ceases to exist. Thus, he prioritizes art, which advocates the concerns of its people over pure aesthetics. However, Locke's response demonstrates a different perspective to Du Bois's. In "Art or Propaganda?"

Locke argues:

My chief objection to propaganda, apart from its besetting sin of monotony and disproportion, is that it perpetuates the position of group inferiority even in crying out against it. For it lives and speaks under the shadow of a dominant majority whom it harangues, cajoles, threatens, or supplicates. It is too extroverted for balance or poise or inner dignity and self-respect. (260)

Locke's argument is that the didactic art of a minority group would not be effective, because it is advocating that there is a difference between the races, which positions black art below the art of the others. It lowers the level of respect, dignity, and humanity of black people by degrading their art, through its being too blunt. He continues to discuss the quality of a good work of art:

Art in a best sense is rooted in self-expression and whether naïve or sophisticated is self-contained. In our spiritual growth genius and talent must more and more choose the role of free individualistic expression, – in a word must choose art and put aside propaganda. (260)

In this passage, he reminds black artists that the message of pure art should be indirect, and advises artists to choose individualistic goals over collective themes and messages. Contrary to Du Bois, he sums up his argument by advocating that a pure art should not be tied down to the political aims of a movement.

As the debate between Du Bois and Locke shows, this dichotomy of art or propaganda has been a constant question for black artists. The work of contemporary

Black Arts movement scholars, such as Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford, demonstrates that this debate continues even in the works of black artists in the twenty-first century. In the context of this thesis, Angelou is an example of a black artist trying to find a balance between the artistic and political aims of her autobiographical project and to show that being considered a literary autobiographer does not negate her contributions as a political writer.

**Art for People's Sake in *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* and
*The Heart of a Woman***

The third and fourth volumes of Angelou's series have a *Künstlerroman* plot narrative, in which the main storyline is centred on Angelou's development and growth as an artist/activist during the 1950s. While the black liberation movement was moving towards being a collective resistance movement during the Civil Rights era, Angelou shows her anxieties about her activist role as part of this growing movement and as a developing artist. Through depicting this transitional stage, she examines the dichotomy of direct action activism versus intellectual activism and the possibility of a merger of her artist and activist identity.

Within the context of the post-Black Arts era, Angelou's reflection on the process of her development as an artist/activist is significant in reminding of the contribution that works done by intellectual activists make in attempting to fight for social justice and to improve the lives of black people. While her third volume was written in 1976, and the fourth one in 1981, the narrating "I" uses the experiences of the narrated "I" to express Angelou's views on the role of the black artist in the post-Civil Rights era. In an interview with Judith Paterson, Angelou raises her concerns about how the question of race still existed in the late seventies and early eighties:

We are not doing well at all. Not well at all. Whites are too ready to abide by the teachings of their ancestors rather than take the rash step of evaluating things for themselves. ... Blacks, I think, are disappointed and frustrated by the residue of the 'dream deferred' and that's a hell of a condition to live in. ("Interview: Maya" 123)

Here she is reflecting on the condition of the black liberation movement after the Civil Rights and Black Power eras. Although she terms her thoughts in an abstract way without directly referring to or blaming any groups or names, she indicates that the resistance movement has lost momentum and unity.

The significance of her answer here is that even through an interview she is promoting intellectual activism by referring to Langston Hughes's famous poem, "Harlem/Dream Deferred", written in 1951. Although she uses the poem to depict the disappointment and frustration of the post-Civil Rights era, it also emphasizes the role of black authors/activists, bearing witness to the collective struggle of her people. Angelou has paid tribute to this literary tradition of resistance in her works, as seen previously in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, with Paul Laurence Dunbar and James Weldon Johnson, and in *The Heart of a Woman*, with Georgia Douglas Johnson. In this context, she alludes to the poem's famous line to describe the bleak situation of black people in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The poem's wording and the images Hughes creates of frustration and disappointment are important in understanding Angelou's aim in comparing it to the atmosphere of the time:

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

Like a raisin in the sun

Or fester like a sore –

And then run?

Does it stink like a rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over –

Like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
Like a heavy load.

Or does it explode? ("Harlem/Dream Deferred" 426)

The rhetorical questions and metaphors Hughes employs in this poem are about the disastrous result of being denied the lawful rights of citizenship for black Americans in the United States, which will eventually have violent repercussions. Angelou is making a similar prediction through her allusion to the poem in the aftermath of the fall of both the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. While throughout the poem each question implies a negative outcome, the last line, in italics, is significant in its direct visualization of a violent result. In *Origins of the Dream: Hughes's Poetry and King's Rhetoric*, W. Jason Miller emphasizes the last line's importance:

Larger possibilities for different types of explosions result from the ambiguities of the word '*explode*' as it stands on its own. The word '*explode*' was italicized to stand apart from the other similes in the poem, as it became the only direct metaphor. (86)

Compared to the previous lines, the significance of this last line, as Miller says, is that Hughes has left the imagination open with regards to how to relate to the potential of a violent consequence. In the post-Civil Rights/Black Power era, Angelou's reference to this poem in the interview is foreshadowing the possibility of the frustration turning to similar violent urban protests as in the 1960s, such as the Watts uprising of 1965. Miller also pays tribute to Hughes's "Dream Deferred" influencing Martin Luther King's speeches, in which the dream analogy becomes significant to King as he refers to it numerous times, especially in his famous speech of the March on Washington, "I Have a Dream", in 1963 (87). As a result, Angelou's use of the phrase is meaningful in this interview in the socio-political context of the time, as the "dream" King promised in his

famous speech is far from being realized, according to the way she reflects on racial status during the seventies and eighties.

The violent eruption that Angelou is predicting as a result of the frustration and disappointment of the post-Civil Rights era is also seen in the way historian Marable depicts the situation of African Americans during the 1980s. Marable begins his account of the decade by listing all the achievements the black community had made politically, academically, and culturally since the passage of the Civil Rights Act in the 1960s (182-183). However, Marable believes that these advancements do not hide the depressing reality of race relations in the 1980s:

Hundreds of racially motivated acts of harassment and violence occurred throughout the country. Thousands of black students were victimized by intimidation, threats and even physical violence by whites who were too young to remember racial segregation. ... Civil rights organizations point to a disturbing pattern of legal indictments and political harassments of black elected officials and to the growth of violent incidents aimed at black-owned property and individuals in urban areas. (183)

The above description paints a very dark and violent picture of the state of racial relations in America during the eighties, which made the progress made since the Civil Rights era inconsequential in comparison to these setbacks.

In this chapter, the representation of the formation of an artistic/political identity in Angelou's *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* and *The Heart of Woman* is explored in more detail. This portrayal of the transition of Angelou's intellectual activist identity is traced through four stages: the creation of her artistic name, her interaction with the Harlem Writers Guild, the organization of *Cabaret for Freedom*, and finally her acting in Jean Genet's *The Blacks*. While the creation of her artistic name/identity happens in the third volume of her autobiography, the rest of the transition takes place in the fourth volume. Through her representation of her growth as a black artist, Angelou is presenting her views on the importance of the role of a black

artist in the post-Black Arts era. The chapter will look at the contribution of each stage to the internal conflict of choosing art or activism.

First Stage: The Creation of the Artistic Name

Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas is important to the *Künstlerroman* narrative as it is in this volume that Angelou sets up her career as an artist. This significant moment happens when she gets a job as a calypso singer at the Purple Onion, a nightclub in San Francisco. The owners of the club convince her that as part of her act she needs an exotic and interesting name. Thus, her birth name, "Marguerite Johnson", transforms into her artistic name, "Maya Angelou", which is a combination of her brother's nickname for her, "Maya", and her former married name, "Angelos" (*Singin'* 95-96). The autobiographer's reflection on this moment of rebirth for the protagonist is crucial. As Mhairi Pooler explains in regards to the *Künstlerroman* in her book *Life Writing: Early Twentieth-Century Autobiographies of the Artist-Hero*, this is an important transition in "the portrait-of-the-artist" narrative, which leads to the eventual formation of an artistic identity (2-3). While the "Marguerite" identity represents a period in which she is not yet aware of her potential, the metamorphosis into this new identity foreshadows a phase in which she consciously rediscovers herself, as an artist and later as an activist, and which is developed stage-by-stage by the autobiographer in the subsequent volumes of the series.

In addition, the relevance of the autobiographer's name to the authenticity of the text has a long tradition in the field of autobiography, according to Phillipe Lejeune's declaration on this issue in his seminal essay "The Autobiographical Pact". Lejeune argues that there is a contract between the reader and autobiographer that differentiates the text from a work of fiction: "What defines autobiography for the one who is reading

is above all a contract of identity that is sealed by the proper name. And that is true also for the one who is writing the text" (42). He emphasizes the role that the identical name of the author and the protagonist plays in the relationship of both writer and reader to the autobiographical text. Lejeune's theory about the role of the author's name in autobiography is significant in the discussion it created around distinguishing autobiography from other forms of writing. However, his argument about the insistence of the usage of the author's literal name has its limitations, especially in relation to autobiographies written by minorities such as African Americans, who have their own tradition in regards to the trope of naming.

In "What's in a Name? Heteroglossic Naming as Multicultural Practice in American Autobiography", Julia Watson describes the importance of this act of renaming in autobiographies by minorities:

Self-renaming is a central signifier in constituting identity for formerly anonymous subjects whose autobiographies dramatize the quest for identity as a process of challenging and rewriting the limits imposed by specific social constructions such as race, ethnicity, and gender. (99)

While for Lejeune the proper name is proof for the claim of authenticity, these autobiographers, such as black Americans, use the trope of renaming as method of resistance against the discrimination and inequalities they face because of the intersection of race and gender. Watson refers to Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s signifying theory to explain this act of resistance, in which "[s]ignifying turns on being called out of one's name by playing with established signs to make free narratives" (100).¹ The act of choosing your name becomes a marker of your new identity, and at the same time it signifies the rejection of the institution of slavery. This tradition of renaming in African American literature can be traced back to slave narratives, with Frederick Douglass and

¹ Henry Louis Gates Jr. published his seminal book *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro- American Literary Criticism* in 1988.

Harriet Jacobs as its archetypes. While by choosing the surname "Douglass", he is signalling his reclamation of his freedom and individuality from his identity as a slave, in Jacobs's case, the choice of the pen name "Linda Brent" is marked as an act of resistance and survival against the sexual abuse and threats of her master. Through the act of renaming, this tradition of resistance continues in the field of modern black American autobiography with some of its prominent authors, such as Malcolm X (previously Malcolm Little), Amiri Baraka (or Le Roi Jones), and bell hooks (or Gloria Watkins). While all of these authors contribute to the resistant movement through their own acts of renaming, bell hooks's choice in particular highlights the importance of the black feminist tradition. In "To Gloria, Who is She: On Using a Pseudonym", she reflects on the personal and collective reasons behind the transformation of her name from "Gloria Watkins" to "bell hooks" and the significance of this tradition by paying tribute to the early black feminist/intellectual activists who led the way, such as Sojourner Truth (or Isabelle Bumfree). She honours her great-grandmother's spirit by choosing her ancestor's name as her pseudonym in her the conclusion of the essay:

Talking with an elderly black man about names, he reminded me that in our southern black folk tradition we have the belief that a person never dies as long as the name is remembered, called. When the name bell hooks is called, the spirit of my great-grandmother rises. (279)

Not only is hooks paying tribute to trope of naming through her pseudonym, but also the actual choice of this specific name is an act of treasuring her black female ancestors, especially ordinary black women and their rich tradition and heritage.²

² In her essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens", Alice Walker also reminds her readers how important it is to cherish the legacies of these female ancestors such as her own mother: "And so our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see" (240). Both hooks and Walker emphasize reviving the memory of their female ancestors, who through ordinary daily acts are the first role models of intellectual activism for the next generation. Similarly, the creation of the character of Grandmother Henderson by Angelou in her autobiographies, especially in the first volume, also follows on this tradition of keeping the memories of these black female ancestors alive.

Lastly, besides renaming herself, Angelou also signifies resistance against the act of calling out of her name in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. In the first volume, while working as a maid for Mrs Cullinan, her name is changed to "Mary" because "Marguerite" is too hard to pronounce. She recalls how this is not a personal insult but a collective pain:

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 being called niggers, jigs, blackbirds, crows, boots and spooks. (*I Know* 118)

The narrating "I" broadens the context of this offense by connecting it to the history of abuse and erasure of identity that black Americans have suffered. In order to regain her stolen identity, young Angelou breaks the valuable china of Mrs Cullinan to remind her of the value of her identity and actual name: "Her name is Margaret, goddam it, her name's Margaret" (*I Know* 120). Her inclusion of this symbolic resistance is significant as it allows her to reclaim her name and in the process to signify her race's self-worth and identity as part of the volume's narrative of resilience and protest. In this context, her own decision to change her name rather than having it taken away, as in the Cullinan episode, highlights the importance of this act of self-resistance. Watson examines the meaning behind her new name: "This remaking of her name suggest her self-possession ('my') and her transition from an invisible, effectively orphan child to an accomplished mother and writer" (101).³ In shaping her new artistic/activist identity, Angelou's choice of pseudonym becomes significant as part of her overall resistance narrative in her autobiographical project to raise awareness and empower her own race.

³ Her brother's nickname for her was originally "My sister", then "My", and finally "Maya" (*Swingin'* 95).

Second Stage: The Harlem Writers Guild

After setting the foundation of her artistic identity in the previous volume, Angelou returns from a successful European tour of the opera *Porgy and Bess*. In *The Heart of a Woman*, she writes about her attempts to expand her artistic identity by turning her attention to writing. However, before her writing career begins, she has a personal encounter with the famous African American singer Billie Holiday through a mutual friend. One of the first signs that the narrating "I" gives of a shift towards merging art and activism is through Holiday's rendition of her powerful song, "Strange Fruit", for Angelou's son, Guy.⁴ Perone discusses the importance of this song:

The text of the song uses the metaphor of 'strange fruit' in depicting lynched African Americans 'hanging in the Southern trees.' The lyrical imagery became iconic, largely as a result of Holiday's well-known 1939 recording. (99)

The poem's powerful and haunting imagery and its anti-lynching theme are significant for Angelou to mention in the introduction of *The Heart of a Woman*, as it is a horrific reminder of the recent past of lynching in the South and its role in spreading racism, hatred, bigotry, and prejudice. This is not the only song that Holiday sang for Guy during her visit with the author, but it is the one Angelou pays the most attention to. It also sets up the tradition of art and propaganda working together, as Du Bois had pointed out in his essay; "Strange Fruit" is a great example of this. Following on the tradition of honouring black intellectual activists, her inclusion of Billie Holiday in the introduction to this volume is Angelou's way of honouring the contribution of black women to this tradition, as she did earlier in this volume with Georgia Douglass Johnson.

⁴ The poem "Strange Fruit" was written by Abel Meeropol under his pen name Lewis Allen, a Jewish communist, in 1937, and it was recorded as a song by Billie Holiday in 1939. The song is an example of the collaboration of the Jewish and African American intellectual activists as part of their mutual struggle for civil rights (Perone 100).

In order to show the shocking impact that Holiday had on her audience when she sang the protest song, in his article "Performance as a Powerful Change: The Case of Billie Holiday and 'Strange Fruit'", David Margolick quotes Max Roach's review of the significance of this song in its own time:

'When she recorded it, it was more than revolutionary,' the drummer Max Roach said of Holiday. 'She made a statement that we all felt as black folks. No one was speaking out. She became one of the fighters, this beautiful lady who could sing and make you feel things. She became a voice of the black people and they loved this woman.' (92)

Roach's description of the impact this song had on the black liberation movement shows how it transformed the artist to an activist who became a voice for voiceless black Americans. The consciousness-raising element of the work is important in the context of the 1940s but, more importantly, it lays the foundation for future African American intellectual activists to follow suit. Angelou uses the song as representative of what black art must be like in the post-Black Arts era: bold and revolutionary.

This is Angelou's interpretation of Holiday's rendition of this famous protest song:

I saw the black bodies hanging from Southern trees. I saw the lynch victim's blood glide from the leaves down the trunks and onto the roots. ... She painted a picture of a lovely land, pastoral and bucolic, then added eyes bulged and mouths twisted, onto the Southern landscape. (*The Heart* 14)

Angelou's reaction to the horrifying imagery of the song only intensifies the shocking impression the song leaves on its audience. Angelou uses a question from her son, Guy's, and Holiday's responses to explore the song further. When the twelve-year-old Guy, confused by the violent imagery of the poem, asks about the "pastoral scene" in the song, Holiday responds harshly: "'It means when the crackers are killing the niggers. It means when they take a little nigger like you and snatch off his nuts and shove them down his goddam throat. That's what it means'" (*The Heart* 14). Holiday's harsh, frank,

and direct reply is not only directed at the innocent Guy but via the text at the readers of the autobiography, confronting the readers with the atrocious reality of lynching and its violent history. The element of shock in the language that Holiday uses via Angelou's narration, to show hatred and revulsion towards lynching is not only important in the socio-political context of when it was written, but also to contemporary readers of Angelou's autobiography. Besides the 1930s, Perone explains the poem's relevance up to even recent years:

[T]h song remained relevant well into the 1950s and early 1960s, when vigilante justice charges still persecuted African Americans with this type of death. With the 21st century charges of institutional racism that resulted in police shootings of young African Americans in Cleveland, Ohio; Ferguson, Missouri; Chicago Illinois; and elsewhere, the song can be understood as a still-relevant indictment of the U.S. justice system. (101)

While all types of activism are important in the contribution they make to social justice, this shows that compared to direct action activism the impact of intellectual activism is timeless and can influence audiences beyond the social and political context of its own time. As is the case with many of the works of intellectual activists such as Angelou, Holiday's song has the power to be relevant to the gruesome and unjust murder of black Americans, whether through lynching or in a contemporary context, in regards to police shootings of unarmed black men and women. After James Weldon Johnson's poem, which demonstrated communal protest, this is the second time that Angelou honours the legacy of black American protest poems/songs for their role in raising political and social awareness.

The "Strange Fruit" episode can be seen as introduction to the transition of Angelou's view about the combination of art and activism. In *The Heart of a Woman* Angelou reaches a point where her profession as a performer does not satisfy her, because of the changing socio-political context of the late 1950s. On the advice of John

Killens, who was the first published black author she had met besides James Baldwin, Angelou decides to move to New York to develop her writing career under the guidance of the Harlem Writers Guild.⁵ This decision is crucial in the development of Angelou's political identity as it allows her to interact with an important group of intellectual activists of her time, such as the aforementioned Max Roach, as well as Abbey Lincoln, Rosa Guy, Paule Marshall, and Godfrey Cambridge.

The attempt to become part of the Harlem Writers Guild group was the next stage of Angelou's transition from performer to writer.⁶ The Harlem Writers Guild is a significant organization, which was started in the 1950 with the help of Rosa Guy, John Oliver Killens, Dr John Henrik Clarke, Willard Moore, and Walter Christmas. It in essence represented the aims of what would be later known as the Black Arts movement. While the group was created in Harlem, it met regularly in the home of John Killens in Brooklyn. However, Smethurst describes how its name represented "a reminder of the continuing cultural charge of Harlem as a symbolic landscape rather than as a simple marker of the group's physical location" (118). This emphasizes how Harlem was more than just a location, and how the group's title pays tribute to the history and legacy of Harlem as a symbolic space that cultivated many famous black American intellectual activists, especially during the Harlem Renaissance. Smethurst highlights the importance of this location to the black artists of the 1950s and 1960s:

[T]he writings of [Langston] Hughes, along with those of the émigré Harlem-native James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and the detective novels of Chester Himes... still promoted Harlem not only as the literary landscape but also as a symbolic merging of the earlier

⁵ Angelou first met James Baldwin, who became a close friend, in Paris, while she was on the *Porgy and Bess* tour in the early 1950s.

⁶ The Harlem Writers Guild was an important organization in helping promote the writing careers of many black writers as mentioned here, and as described on their website they are "the oldest organization of African American writers" and are active to the present day. It started as the group felt "excluded from the main literary culture of New York" and their motto is to "develop and aid in the publication of works by writers of the African diaspora" (*The Harlem Writers Guild*).

'Negro capital of the world' of the Harlem Renaissance with the prototypical everyghetto 'home' of the 1930s and 1940s. (111)

Due to this rich intellectual and literary legacy of Harlem, the relocation of Angelou to Harlem during the late 1950s becomes particularly significant. Not only is she being mentored by a group of contemporary artists and activists, but also the cultural and literary influences of Harlem were teaching her more about the tradition of intellectual activism in African American art and culture. This move had a huge impact on her growth and development as an artist/activist.

Even though the group did not get the attention it deserved, Smethurst points out that it had a lot of influence on black literary production in the 1960s, as the following list of works produced by group members during this period shows: Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Lonnie Elder III's *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men*, Rosa Guy's *Bird at My Window*, Louise Merriwether's *Daddy Was a Numbers Runner*, Douglas Turner Ward's *Day of Absence*, and Sarah Wright's *This Child's Gonna Live* (118). Angelou's inclusion of the group in her autobiography is a way of giving credit to how the organization not only helped to build her writing career, but was also the foundation of the black literary movement in the 1960s, especially in relation to the later Black Arts movement.

Through her interaction with the Harlem Writers Guild Angelou gave her readers a sign of her transition from a performer to a writer. In this volume, she gradually prepares her readers for this new role. The following comment on how the artists around her at the time were using art as activism makes her stand on the topic clear:

I sang in the club for two miserable months. People I admired were doing important things. Abbey and Max Roach were performing jazz concerts on liberation themes. Lorraine Hansberry had a play on Broadway which told some old truths about the black American Negro family to a new white audience. James Baldwin had the country in his balled fist with *The Fire Next Time*. Killens' *And Then We Hear the Thunder* told the

uncomfortable facts about black soldiers in a white army. Belafonte included the South African singer Miriam Makeba in his concert, enlarging his art and increasing his protest against racial abuse. And I was still singing clever little songs only moderately well. I made the decision to quit the show business. ... I would never again work to make people smile inanely and would take on the responsibility of making them think. Now was the time to demonstrate my own seriousness. (*The Heart* 44-45)

Angelou starts the passage by admiring her fellow artists in their politically themed works. She is impressed by how their works were making an impact in the political and social arena of their time, which shows her preference for propaganda art. Angelou's declaration at the end of the passage indicates her separation from her performing career and her stepping in to the realm of activist writing. By listing the accomplishments of her comrades during that period, she is declaring that she also wants to belong to this category of activists/artists. In addition, she is bringing to the attention of her readers in the 1980s of how vibrant African American culture and literature was in the late 1950s. Her desire to include her political activism with her literary vision did not make her an exception but included her in a network of talented writers and artists of the time who were aiming to raise political awareness through the medium of art.

Third Stage: *Cabaret for Freedom*

It is in *The Heart of a Woman* that Angelou writes about her first encounter with Martin Luther King Jr. in the Harlem church. Angelou explains the two reasons behind King's presence in New York: to raise funds for his new organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and to raise awareness in the Northern states about the extent of the struggle against racism in the South (*The Heart* 53). The co-authors of the chapter "We Changed the World: 1945-1970", historians Vincent Harding, Robin Kelley, and Earl Lewis report that the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was founded as a consequence of the success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott (470). In

Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare, James H. Cone describes the goals of this organization: "Nonviolent direct action was chosen as the method, because the ultimate goal was integration, that is the creation of a 'beloved community' where Negroes and whites could live together as brothers and sisters" (66). Angelou's introduction to direct action activism was through King's organization that, after the success of the bus boycott, was at the height of its popularity. Although Angelou's first volume depicts her thoughts on the nonviolent and violent direct action debate and its history in the black liberation movement, it is in this volume that she shows how the social and political atmosphere of the time shaped her activist identity.

The narrating "I"'s special introduction for the distinguished speaker, Martin Luther King Jr., indicates his popularity and respectability as a leader at the time:

He was here, our own man, black, intelligent and fearless. He was going to be born to us in a moment. He would stand up behind the pulpit, full grown, and justify the years of sacrifice and the days of humiliation. He was the best we had, the brightest and most beautiful. Maybe today would be the day we would find ourselves free. (*The Heart* 55)

The above description makes King out to be a Christ-like figure, and the exaggeration is suggestive of how much of the hope and dreams of her race depended on the success of this man. Angelou is not the only author to portray King via a Messiah analogy. In "Choice: A Tribute to Martin Luther King, Jr.", Alice Walker describes a similar first impression of King when she saw him on television: "He was The One, The Hero, The One Fearless Person for whom we waited" (144). From the use of the exaggerated tone and religious language, King is represented as a saviour sent from God, and this use of hyperbole emphasizes King's value for African Americans in leading the movement. The importance of Angelou's portrayal of King and his influence is understood through historian Fairclough's depiction of the crisis point that African Americans felt in the

seventies, due to the lack of leadership of both the Civil Rights and the Black Power movements:

Following King's Death, a sense of pessimism engulfed African Americans. The collapse of the Civil Rights Movement as a national force, followed by the failure of Black Power as a political strategy, dashed hopes that either racial integration or black self-determination would become realities. (323)

As both Angelou and Alice Walker's tone and language demonstrate, the reliance on one person meant that person's absence was a huge blow to the black liberation movement, which suffered from the lack of leadership in the years after King's assassination.

One of the reasons King was so influential and charismatic was his eloquence. Miller pays attention to the influence of poetry, especially Langston Hughes's works, on King's public speaking. He analyses the significance of King's rhetoric as follows:

[Poetry] allowed King to validate his prophetic persona. Poetry is a co-requisite to prophecy. We realize that we have forgotten this when we recognize the Old Testament prophets presented their visions in poetic form. In these inherited models, prophecy trespasses into poetry. Without the gift of lyrical expression, King's declaration of the future would lack the rhetorical authority of scripture. (6)

Miller's explanation is important to my argument, as it ties the impact of King's speeches to his reliance on black American poetry and literature, which in turn emphasizes the power of literature as tool of activism. He also connects the popularity of King's speeches to its sermon and gospel foundation, which pays tribute to the oral tradition of African American literature, a key part of their protest literature. Miller concludes that King's ability to use poetic language reinforced his prophetic voice as a leader of the movement.

Angelou demonstrates King's poetic skills when she uses his words to describe his views on nonviolent activism:

We, the black people, the most displaced, the poorest, the maligned and scourged, we had the glorious task of reclaiming the soul and saving the

honor of the country. We, the most hated, must take hate in our hands and by the miracle of love, turn loathing into love. We, the most feared and apprehensive, must take fear and by love, change it into hope. We, who die daily in large small ways, must take the demon of death and turn it into Life. (*The Heart* 56)

As Miller's research and my reading show, Angelou's representation of King's language transforms him into a prophet-like figure. Since King is known for his oral skills, Angelou presents the speech to read like a sermon, and it is full of alliteration. Significantly, the above passage depicts King's nonviolence doctrine. The relevance of this topic to Angelou's views on protest is central. She uses King's speech to represent his own philosophy. The terminology of "by the miracle of love", "turn loathing into love", and "take fear and by love change it to hope" all emphasize his Christian, nonviolent doctrine, which aligns him with the likes of Gandhi.⁷ Cone also explains the importance of nonviolence to King's ideology of integration:

King urged Negroes to follow his example and to accept nonviolence as a way of life. But even if they could not accept nonviolence as an affirmation of faith, he urged them to accept it as the only practical way of achieving justice in America. Violence will not achieve freedom for Negroes, King argued. It will merely get a whole lot of them killed and also serve as an excuse for the whites not to do anything about oppression. (76)

King's strong belief on the effectiveness of his nonviolent tactics is clear in the above explanation, and his condemnation of Malcolm X's ideology is rooted in their disagreement on the different tactics of self-defence. Even though the mature autobiographer has developed her own philosophy of protest, as seen in the previous chapter, King's philosophy was the first step in shaping Angelou's activist phase, and thus the narrating "I" uses King's speech at the church to show the narrated "I"'s inclination to become more involved with the movement.

⁷ King's nonviolent protest was closely tied to Gandhi's ideology and his visit to India in 1959 was one of the most significant trips in developing his nonviolent ideology.

The significance of this meeting is that it marks Angelou's involvement with her artistic-activist side. The speech influenced Angelou and her friend, the comedian-actor Godfrey Cambridge, to such an extent that it convinced them to become involved in fundraising for King's organization. This was the first stage of Angelou's intellectual activism and this was how the ideas for writing and directing a play for SCLC become a reality:

'So what's next? What are we going to do about it?' Godfrey beat me to the question and I had no answer. 'We got to do something. Reverend King needs money. You know damn well we're not going down to Hang 'em High and let some cracker sheriff sap up on our heads. And we're not going to no Southern jail, so what are we going to do?'

... I answered, 'We could get some actors and singers and dancers together.' (*The Heart* 57)

Godfrey's comments bring the notion of activism into the picture as well as the different ways of being considered an activist. Angelou's response is significant as it brings the act of performing, producing, writing, and art as a whole into the same scale as direct action activism. It is through this dialogue that Angelou brings the debate of activism and art into her autobiography, and her answer represents her opinion that art can be propagandist.

The result of this collaboration would be known as *Cabaret for Freedom*. The choice of the medium of cabaret is important in the transition of Angelou to artist/activist. The cabaret format made use of her previous profession as a performer, as she had not yet developed into a full-time writer. Angelou's views on the new format of the show reveal her vision and belief in the power of art as activism:

We were the talented unknowns, who with only our good hearts, and those of our friends, would create a show which professional producers would envy. Our success would change the hearts of the narrow-minded and make us famous. We would liberate the race from bondage or maybe we would just go on and save the entire world. (*The Heart* 66)

The choice of diction and style of this passage resembles King's speech earlier and the influence of nonviolent activism is evident in the passage. The mature narrator sarcastically reminds the readers of the naivety of her younger self in her belief in the power of change, especially through a mere cabaret performance. While the autobiographer believes in the power of intellectual activism, in this passage she also confronts its limitations in comparison with direct action, which besides raising consciousness can be effective in bringing actual social change.

Cabaret for Freedom was not the only example of collaboration between art and activism during the Civil Rights era. In *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call out to Africa and Jazz*, Ingrid Monson explains that variety-show formats were common during this period as a way to finance the Civil Rights organizations, a sign of the integration of the artistic and activist world. In this context, she evaluates the success of *Cabaret for Freedom*:

In the fall of 1960 the [Village] Gate began having a 'Cabaret for Freedom' on Sunday nights, organized by Maya Angelou and Godfrey Cambridge to benefit SCLC. Actors, musicians, and comedians, including Sarah Vaughan, Max Roach, and Abbey Lincoln, would drop by to express their views about segregation, integration, and freedom. As a writer for the *Amsterdam News* reported, the shows included everything 'from Langston Hughes' poetry to Nigeria's Liberation song' and was 'as topical as today's headlines.' (165)

Monson's analysis emphasizes the show's achievement in combining the autobiographer's aesthetics and political aims for the first time. It is an example of a collaborative work of intellectual activism, which included some of the prominent artists/activists of the time in discussing current events, and also celebrated the rich tradition of protest literature in the African diaspora.

After the success of *Cabaret for Freedom*, Angelou became even more involved in the organizational side of the show for SCLC. When the organization was short on

staff to help promote the show, Angelou took on the responsibility, and this was her reasoning for becoming more involved:

Three white men were willing to lay themselves out for our cause and all I was ready to do was sing and dance, or at best, encourage others to sing and dance.⁸ The situation was too historic for my taste. My people had used music to soothe slavery's torment or to propitiate God, or to describe the sweetness of love and the distress of lovelessness, but I knew no race could sing and dance its way to freedom. (*The Heart* 69)

From one perspective, Angelou is connecting the tradition of art and protest to her African American ancestry, but on the other hand, she is also concluding how art is not the only answer to help the cause and that she has to do more than what her art delivers. This is similar to her earlier anxieties about art and activism and their actual effectiveness, and is part of her development as an artist/activist.

Fourth Stage: Jean Genet's *The Blacks*

During the last stage of her development as an artist/activist, Angelou writes about becoming involved with the Off-Broadway production of Jean Genet's *The Blacks*. This play was very important to Angelou, and it signals her final shift towards choosing art for people's sake. She was introduced to the play's production team by Max Roach, who was supposed to compose the music for the play.⁹ The play symbolizes the combination of Angelou's artistic and political identity. Until *The Heart of a Woman*, Angelou's tribute to other artists/activists had been mainly in the tradition of African American art and culture. While she had engaged previously with other artists and their works, the inclusion of Genet's work is significant because it expanded the network of intellectual activism to include an international writer.

⁸ Angelou is referring to the three men who helped her with organizing *Cabaret for Freedom*: Stanley Levison, Jack Murray (both volunteered for the SCLC), and Art D'Lugoff, who was the owner of the Village Gate theatre.

⁹ Due to disagreements with the producers on the contract, Roach would not be the composer for the play, and Angelou took over that role at the last minute.

In Genet's works, aesthetics and politics are intertwined, which is the reason Angelou focuses on him at this stage, as through Genet she can deal with the debate over art and propaganda. However, Genet's theatre does not follow the norms of traditional political theatre. In their introduction to their edited collection *Jean Genet: Performance and Politics*, Clare Finburgh, Carl Lavery, and Maria Shevtsova explain that for Genet "conventional political theatre too often indulges the spectator by depicting a revolution as having already happened. Instead of encouraging the audience to change the world, it acts as a safety valve, and thus works to support the status quo" (9). According to them, Genet aimed to shock his audience into a reaction and he promoted "a radical version of a committed theatre" (9), where the audience is as much involved in the process of the political performance as the actors are. This element of audience participation is explained by the French dramatist in the explanatory note at the beginning of *The Blacks*:

This play, written, I repeat, by a white man, is intended for a white audience, but if – which is unlikely – it is ever performed before a black audience, then a white person, male or female, should be invited every evening. The organizers of the show should welcome him formally, dress him in ceremonial costume and lead him to his seat, preferably in the front row of the stalls. The actors will play for him. A spotlight should be focused upon this symbolic white throughout the performance.

But what if no white person accepted? Then let white masks be distributed to the black spectators as they enter the theater. And if the blacks refuse, then let a dummy be used. (4)

This long introductory note not only emphasizes the necessity of audience participation to complete the performance, but also highlights the significance of the theme of racial consciousness and a reversing of the stereotypical hierarchy of racism. As reviewer, Ben W. Mkapa comments on the note: "*The Blacks*, then, if we trust the playwright's words, is a play about Blacks, by Blacks for Whites" (39), which further underlines the dichotomy of black and white that is at the centre of the play.

Besides the content, the structure of *The Blacks* is also interesting for Angelou. Her inclusion of "the-play-within-the-autobiography" in this volume is an allusion to the structure of *The Blacks*, which includes what is known as a "play-within-a-play". This structure aims to raise awareness, which suited Angelou's pursuit of intellectual activism. In their essay "The Play within the Play: Scholarly Perspectives", Gerhard Fischer and Bernhard Greiner discuss this theatrical device:

Dramaturgically speaking it describes a strategy for constructing play texts that contain, within the perimeter of their fictional reality, a second or internal theatrical performance, in which actors appear as actors who play additional roles. (xi)

Because of its complex-layered dual structure, this form also raises social/political awareness, as is the case in *The Blacks*. It causes a self-reflection within the original play over a past action and it involves the audience in the process of interpretation. The importance of such a double structure is significant for a playwright like Genet, who aimed to reinforce audience participation and reaction by implementing another play within in the original story. Fischer and Greiner pay attention to the long tradition of playwrights using this technique, and describe how because of its popularity it has been used by other forms of art, such as narrative fiction (xii). Angelou's use of this double layered plot in her autobiography, i.e. her life narrative and the plot of the play, allows her to use its potential for self-reflectivity on racial consciousness in the post-Black Arts era.

Not only is *The Blacks* relevant to its own socio-political context, the revolutionary period of the fifties and sixties, it also addresses the issue of race beyond the Civil Rights era. Debby Thompson in her article "'What Exactly is a Black?': Interrogating the Reality of Race in Jean Genet's *The Blacks*" reveals the significance of Genet's play for future generations:

While *The Blacks* was written during the time of the American civil rights movement's struggle for equality between blacks and whites in the 1950s, the struggles that *The Blacks* reflects on is one of a real crisis over the authenticity of 'black identity' – a struggle more characteristic of later decades. (397)

Angelou's conscious decision to write about the play twenty years later signifies its importance to her didactic aim of raising awareness about threats such as "reverse racism", which was central to the post-Civil Rights era. It signifies her role as an intellectual activist, by writing about the play in her narrative as a tool of activism and reintroducing Genet, as a political activist, to an audience who were not present at the time of its production in the sixties.

Angelou's focus on the topic of "reverse racism" is critical in this volume in relation to the time of the volume's publication. Race theorists Michael Omi and Howard Winant raise concerns about the significance of this issue during the seventies in their book *Racial Formation in the United States*. As a result of the progress made during the Civil Rights era, white reaction towards race had entered a new stage: reverse racism. They explain the concept behind this new claim of racism:

[T]he implementation of civil rights policy was recast as an attack on whites. It was reframed as a distribution of resources away from whites... towards people of color. ... 'Reverse racism' had obviously not been foremost in anyone's mind... while racial discrimination was the law of the land. But now that a significant if partial attempt was underway to ameliorate it, whites' sensibilities and sensitivities were activated big time. (219)

Omi and Winant attempt to define "reverse racism" and the reason for its rise within the post-Civil Rights context. However, they argue that the allegations of "reverse racism" against black people were not applicable to the concept of race relations in the late twentieth-century United States. They warn against the drawbacks of such a shift in the way race and racism is perceived:

'Reverse Racism' was conceptualized as an issue of 'fairness,' thus rearticulating the central tenets of civil rights demands – equality and

justice. This was an ideological appeal that seemed consistent with the anti-discrimination demands of the movement, yet simultaneously attacked the movement for 'going too far' and indeed violating its own principles. (219)

They criticize the extremists among white people, who used "race neutrality" to their own advantage, but who in reality were complaining about the loss of their power in the social hierarchy due to the reforms of the Civil Rights era. According to Omi and Winant, this group's accusations of "reverse racism" simply express their desire to return to the previous racial hierarchy of white dominance. Similar to Omi and Winant, Joe R. Feagin in his book *Racist America: Roots, Current Realities, and Future Reparations* finds the roots of the ideology of reverse discrimination to be in the absence of white privilege in the post-Civil Rights era: "Whites have profited not only economically but also educationally, politically, legally, and aesthetically from centuries of systematic racism" (213). Thus, the accusation that government programs such as affirmative action were disadvantaging white people was not about being fair and more about the return of "institutionalized *favoritism* for whites" (Feagin 214). Ideologies such as "reverse racism" lead to the rise of race neutral concepts such as the concept of being colour-blind, which became popular in the twenty-first century, and which argues for the destruction of race consciousness in society, as we shall see in Chapter Five.

In the context of the 1970s and 1980s, the work of intellectual activists such as Angelou became important to raise awareness against the dangers of ideas such as "reverse racism" and colour-blindness. Through a staged representation of numerous readings of the play, Angelou tackles the issue of reverse racism and its importance to the contemporary context. While at first she considered the play's language to be too complex and absurd, it was on her third reading that she understood the message of the play. This transition technique is used by Angelou to raise her audience's awareness gradually and reinforce the significance of the issue of reverse racism through the naïve

perspective of the narrated "I". By tactfully taking the critical view, she discusses the message of the play. This is the conclusion the narrated "I" presents, according to her own understanding:

During the third reading, I began to see through the tortuous and mystical language, and the play's meaning became clear. Genet suggested that colonialism would crumble from the weight of its ignorance, its arrogance and greed, and that the oppressed would take over the positions of their former masters. They would be no better, no more courageous and no more merciful. (*The Heart* 172)

This was a critical message during the sixties and is even more important in the post-Civil-Rights era, that eradicating white racism will replace it with another type of discrimination, reverse racism. By disagreeing with the existence of reverse racism, Angelou gives voice to the critics of this debate:

The Blacks was a white foreigner's idea of a people he did not understand. Genet had superimposed the meanness and cruelty of his own people onto a race he had never known, a race already nearly doubled over carrying the white man's burden of greed and guilt, and which at the same time toted its own insufficiency. (*The Heart* 173)

While Angelou uses the narrated "I" voice to express this criticism, she allows her South African partner, Vusumzi Make, to give voice to the other side. The discussion between them is used didactically to give voice to both supporters and opponents. Make's ability to convince the narrated "I" is the autobiographer's method of showing her agreement with the potential threat of reverse racism that needs to be addressed. While Angelou does not believe that her people will follow the fate of the characters of the play, her partner convinces her that the play is important for raising awareness:

'Maya, [reverse racism] is a very real possibility and one we must vigilantly guard against. You see... most black revolutionaries, most black radicals, most black activists, do not really want change. They want exchange. This play points to that likelihood. And our people need to face that temptation. You must act in *The Blacks*.' (*The Heart* 175)

The significance of the above discussion is that it shows the necessity of talking about such an important issue: Genet's play provided space to do so. As part of the theatre of

the absurd, Genet's interpretation of the outcome of the play is only a satirical representation of reality. Even though Angelou disagreed that reverse racism existed in the United States in the seventies, her acceptance of being part of the play was to continue her role as an intellectual activist, which continued even after the play was done, by documenting it in her autobiography.

Michael Y. Bennett, in *Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd: Camus, Beckett, Ionesco, Genet and Pinter*, explores the importance of the absurdity of the story in its understanding of race:

[T]he ultimate failure is the failure of whites to investigate themselves. It takes blacks in the play to physically remove the white masks. The uncomfortable and metaphorically violent act of removing the white masks forces the whites to confront their own contradictions that they created. (72)

The symbolic use of masks in this play is a tool of resistance and rebellion against the absurdity of racism and white people's lack of self-reflection. Through the parody that the play creates, it questions the role the oppressor and the oppressed play in keeping the chains of oppression intact. The literal and figurative act of taking the masks off is an act of revelation in showing the true nature of white racists and a foreshadowing of the inevitable violent ending. In this context, Bennett's comment on the full title of the play becomes important. As the play is titled *The Blacks: A Clown Show*, he concludes that Genet's satire is on white people, and as discussed earlier in this section the dramatist's note at the beginning of the play reinforces this idea that the play is targeted at a white audience. Bennett explains the message of this satirical play: "Genet ultimately argues that it is the whites who are metaphorically the clowns who have to hide their foolishness and self-disgust behind masks. The task of this play is to both literally and figuratively remove the whites' 'mask'" (73). This message is important both in colonial and postcolonial discourse, and also in relation to the state of race in the United States.

In order to understand this literal and figurative interpretation of the play, Angelou's explanation of the plot and her role as the White Queen is useful:

Raymond, Lex, Flash, Charles and I played the 'whites.' We wore exaggerated masks and performed from a platform nine feet above the stage. Below us the 'Negroes' (the rest of the company) enacted for our benefit a rape-murder by a black man (played by Jones) of a white woman (a masked Godfrey Cambridge). In retaliation we, the colonial power – royalty (the White Queen), the church (Lex Monson), the law (Raymond St. Jaques) the military (Flash Riley) and the equivocating liberal (Charles Gordone) – descended into Africa to make the blacks pay for the crime. After a duel between the two queens, the blacks triumphed and killed the whites one by one. Then in sarcastic imitation of the vanquished 'whites,' the black victors ascended the ramp and occupied the platform of the former masters. (*The Heart* 179)

While Genet wrote the play as a comment on the role of colonialism and the rebellion of minorities, the significance of the plot of the play is that it matches the revolutionary mood of the sixties, and even the black characters' violent rebellion at the end represents the debate over nonviolent versus armed resistance of the sixties. In his article "The Blacks and Its Impact on African American Theatre in The United States", John Warrick comments on the reason the play suited the atmosphere of the time in the United States: "Unsurprisingly, given its criticism of white racism and celebration of black revolt, the play was of immediate concern to black artists, who were at the time attempting to manufacture an empowering and culturally relevant theatre movement" (131). The early sixties was a time of change both socially and politically for the black liberation movement, and the play's militant attitude matched this transitional period in black art and culture.

Because the play is "a cruel parody of white society", Angelou did not expect it to be successful (*The Heart* 180). However, she was proven wrong. The success of the show had a huge influence on African American theatre, according to Warrick: "it put black theatre firmly on the public map and provided a physical (if not aesthetic or mental) space where Blacks and Whites could meet" (138). The opportunity that the

popularity of *The Blacks* created is significant, not only allowing audiences to enjoy the artistic side of the play, but also to provide the medium for intellectual discussion on such a controversial issue. Warrick describes how the show ran for three profitable years after its original run in 1961 and became known "as the longest standing serious drama in the history of New York theatre" (139). The play was so influential that it affected the works of some famous black American playwrights such as Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, Douglas Turner Ward's *Day of Absence*, Amiri Baraka's *Great Goodness of Life*, and Lorraine Hansberry's posthumous play *Les Blancs* (Warrick 139). The attention Angelou devotes to her role in the play in this volume of her autobiography is not only a depiction of her development towards art for people's sake, but also a tribute to a French intellectual dramatist who changed the black American art and culture scene.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown the transition of Angelou into an artist/activist through an exploration of four stages: first, the creation of her artistic name/identity, second, her involvement with the Harlem Writers Guild, third, her organization of *Cabaret for Freedom*, and finally her role as the White Queen in Jean Genet's *The Blacks*. Each stage was important in shaping her ideas on the debate over art versus propaganda. Through *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* and *The Heart of a Woman*, Angelou aimed to portray the development of her intellectual activism via a *Künstlerroman* narrative. Although the seeds of this narrative arc of artistic/activist identity are developed in these two volumes, she completes the journey of the development in the final volume, when she begins her professional writing career. However, the foundation she builds here is influential in how she views her future

project as aligned with the goals of the future Black Arts movement, art for people's sake. As Maria K. Mootry Ikerionwu describes in her review of *The Heart of a Woman*, the main themes of this period of the autobiographer's life are "creativity" and "engagement" (86). Following the traditions of the Black Arts movement, this is the message Angelou had for black artists in the post-Black Arts era, especially with the demise of both the Civil Rights and the Black Power movements. Mootry Ikerionwu explains the importance of Angelou's role as a role model: "We learn by her example the value of both an artistic and an activist lifestyle" (86). While in each phase she reminds the contemporary black artist of the important role they have in raising consciousness through their medium of art as a tool of activism, this is especially evident in the last stage, with her discussion of reverse racism and the importance of art in creating a space for having these intellectual debates.

Chapter Four

"What is Africa to me? What is America to me?" in

All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes

I got shoes, you got shoes
 All o' God's chillun got shoes
 When I get to heab'n I'm goin' to put on my shoes
 I'm goin' to walk all ovah God's Heab'n
 Heab'n, Heab'n
 Ev'rybody talkin' 'bout heab'n ain't goin' dere
 Heab'n, Heab'n
 I'm goin' to walk all ovah God's Heab'n.
 - "All God's Chillun Got Wings", African
 American spiritual

The title of the fifth volume of Angelou's autobiography refers to the fourth and final stanza of the spiritual "All God's Chillun Got Wings", which is the author's style of paying tribute to the rich African American oral tradition of spirituals. In all Angelou's autobiographies, one of the main projects behind her writing is to raise awareness of the rich tradition of intellectual activism in African American art and culture. Following on this tradition, here she is honouring the contribution the oral folk tradition, such as gospels and spirituals, has made to the black liberation struggle. Spirituals and gospels are considered the earliest forms of resistance in African American literature. In her article, "Slave Resistance and Rhetorical Self-Definition: Spirituals as a Strategy", Kerran L. Sanger explores the significance of spirituals as an act of resistance: "The singing of spirituals did not replace other forms of resistance, but it provided slaves with hope and an alternative to the definitions advanced by whites. ... The slaves made their spirituals an act of rhetorical resistance" (190). Angelou is acknowledging the

contribution these spirituals made as the first example of what we might call propaganda art in African American culture, and also as the basis for their art of storytelling, which has influenced generations of black authors.

Although the title of the fifth volume does not refer to the "caged bird" imagery, it is connected to the previous volumes because of the concept of a journey, which is a trope of Angelou's series.¹ Even from the choice of title, Angelou is indicating that this volume is different from the other ones, as the narrated "I" is not residing in the United States throughout this volume. By using the phrase "travelling shoes", Angelou is alluding to the theme of travelling and journey, which was a popular theme in slave narratives: the journey to freedom. Lupton also pays attention to this choice for the title and its reference to the spiritual as Angelou's way of setting the mood for this autobiography and its specific motif of travelling (138). In addition, Hagen notices that this allusion to the spiritual is a "reference to the ongoing search for a place... [an] ultimate home" (107), which, as this chapter demonstrates, was the central question for Angelou during her time in Ghana, especially with regards to the debates on black nationalism and Afrocentrism during the 1980s.

The Rise of Black Nationalism

All God's Children Needs Travelling Shoes was written in 1986 and the narrative is centred around Angelou's experience of living in Ghana during the early sixties. However, the situation of African Americans in the eighties had not improved as expected after the Civil Rights era. The analysis historian Marable makes of the critical situation of the young generation in the 1980s proves the importance of Angelou's

¹ As mentioned in the previous chapter, besides travelling in the United States, in the third volume, *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry like Christmas*, Angelou narrates her experience of travelling on a European tour with the *Porgy and Bess* production.

attempt to write for a generation of black Americans, who were born after the Civil Rights decade:

African Americans coming to maturity in the 1980s and 1990s have never personally experienced Jim Crow segregation. They could not express how it feels to be denied the right to vote, because their electoral rights are guaranteed by law. They have never personally participated in street demonstrations, boycotts, picket lines, and seizures of governmental and academic buildings. Few have tasted the pungent fumes of tear gas, or felt the fiery hatred of racist mobs... the absence of a personal background of struggle casts a troubled shadow over the current generation of black Americans who are poorly equipped to grapple with the present complexities of racial and class domination. (188)

Marable is depicting a generation that is separated from the struggles of black liberation during the sixties. This lack of connection to the history and tradition of their protest struggle is a warning sign for future generations. In her role as an intellectual activist, Angelou's expansion of her autobiographical series in the social of climate of the late 1980s contributes to educating this younger generation about their rich culture of protest and resistance.

The fifth volume is not only the narrative of Angelou's experiences in an African American expatriate community in Ghana during the 1960s; it also aims to parallel the situation of black Americans during the post-Civil Rights period. By the end of the 1960s, many African Americans were hopeful of the change that would come as the result of the passage of Civil Rights bills; however, the promises of the Civil Rights movement were not fulfilled, as discussed in the previous two chapters. It was in such a social and political context that there was a revival of African American interest in Africa as a sign of the rejection of the prevalent systematic racism in the United States. In *Middle Passages: African American Journeys to Africa, 1787-2005*, James T. Campbell's research on the history and tradition of African American journeys to Africa explains this phase in the post-Civil Rights period:

The last decades of the twentieth century witnessed a resurgence of African American interest in the continent [Africa], a renewed sense of identification expressed in everything from fashion to the names that families gave to their children. (370)

This was an act of resistance against a racist system, which denied African Americans the right to full citizenship. However, twenty years after the height of the Civil Rights movement, they were not striving for such acceptance anymore. Identifying with Africa through fashion, identity, culture, and tradition, black Americans were attempting to build a new identity for themselves and to re-write their connection with the shaming history of slavery. Campbell describes how this resurgence of interest in African culture in the 1980s did not lead to a sudden increase in migration to the continent, in comparison to the previous decades, but it helped to revitalize the African tourist industry, with many travelling in an attempt to find their African roots (371-372).

This search for the roots of their identity, as Campbell explains, was inspired by the publication of a popular work by Alex Haley, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, in 1976. This interest in tracing family origins arose from Haley's retelling of tracing his ancestral line to "an African captive from the Gambia, Kunta Kinte" (Campbell 370). Although, as Campbell mentions, further research put doubt on the accuracy of Haley's narration, the significance of his story for African Americans cannot be denied, as they realized through "the figure of Kunta Kinte the previously unthinkable possibility of discovering their true names" (370). This search for identity during the seventies and eighties can be traced back to the previously discussed tradition of renaming and its importance as an act of resistance.

The popularity of Haley's *Roots* and its impact resulted in an award-winning mini-series television adaptation of the book in 1977. As part of expanding her intellectual activism to the viewers of the mini-series, Angelou played the role of Nyo

Boto, Kunta Kinte's grandmother, for which she received an Emmy award nomination (Carr 14). Angelou's involvement with *Roots* was not only with her acting as she also wrote an article, "Haley Shows us the Truth of our Conjoined Histories", to raise awareness about the significance of Haley's story at the time for all Americans, black and white. In her article, she signifies the importance of Haley's work in understanding the history of African Americans in relation to both Africa and America:

Using this formidable work as lens, for the first time we were able to see Africans at home (on the continent) and abroad... as simply human beings caught in the clutches of circumstances over which they had little or often no control. Whites, who had been caricatured into two-dimensional bigots, also came into clear focus. Haley, pursuing his own genealogy during 12 years of research, unearthed facts about himself and his family, which in turn showed us the truth of our conjoined histories. ("Haley Shows" 81)

For Angelou, the significance of this work lies in the notion that Haley's depiction of his world distances itself from the stereotypical characterization of black people and white people, which allows the author to probe into the real questions behind humanity and race. She also confirms that Haley's work was the reason for many black and white Americans "to reexamine their families and their origins" ("Haley Shows" 81). This reconnection of black Americans with their heritage and roots is also affected by the consciousness-raising campaigns of both the Black Power and the Black Arts movements during the late sixties and early seventies.

This political and cultural revolution of the mentioned decades led to a resurgence of black nationalism. While black nationalism has a long tradition in African American politics and thought, the social and cultural reawakening of the Civil Rights and the Black Power era redirected African American attention towards this debate. Black nationalism is divided into two periods: classical and modern. In *Radical Aesthetics and Black Modern Nationalism*, GerShun Avilez describes how the classical

period had two aims: building an autonomous black state and raising racial pride (4). After the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, black nationalism lost its momentum, as a separate state seemed less necessary after Emancipation (Avilez 4-5). It was during the height of the mass resistance movement of the 1960s that black nationalism was once again at the height of its popularity. Modern black nationalism provided a platform for black Americans to express their dissatisfaction with the slow progress of social reform and embrace their black culture and identity. In *Black Nationalism in American Politics and Thought*, Dean E. Robinson explains that modern black nationalism builds on the ideas of the classical period but instead of the separate black state, it focuses more on supporting "the more modest goal of black administration of vital private and public institutions" (2). This means that the modern nationalist tries to gain independence from within the American community rather than separating from the United States. This modern version of black nationalism had a huge influence on the artists of the Black Arts era. Bracey, Sanchez, and Smethurst discuss the influence of black nationalism on the Black Arts artists:

[B]lack nationalism has a long history in the United States reaching back to the eighteenth century. However, with the mass circulation of the ideas of Malcolm X, first within and then outside the Nation of Islam, and the explosion of the uprisings of the 1960s, especially after the Watts Rebellion of 1965, [black] nationalism exerted a new influence on Black artists and on the African American community in general to an extent unseen since the heyday of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in the 1920s. ("Introduction" 4)

In this context, the work of Angelou becomes an important part of the cultural movement, as it created a space to explore how people related to these social and political ideologies and how it influenced their concept of racial consciousness via sharing their own individual voice and experience.

In *Proudly We Can Be Africans: Black Americans and Africa, 1935-1961*, critic James H. Meriwether explains that the reason for the rise of Pan-Africanism during the

1960s and later decades was similar to modern black nationalism. He relates this interest in Africa to the continuing racism and discrimination black Americans faced in the United States, especially with the popularity of the post-colonial African liberation struggles during the fifties and sixties (242-243). However, as Africa's new-found independence was being tested, in countries such as Congo, Ghana, and Guinea, Meriwether argues that African Americans had to renegotiate their vision of the ideal image of Africa: "The historic imagining of Africa as a more or less unified whole could not be sustained in a world of radical nationalists, authoritarian strongmen, military coups, and democratic hopefuls" (243). As mentioned, one of the African countries experiencing such a radical change was the newly independent Ghana. The former Gold Coast became an independent country in 1957, with Kwame Nkrumah as its first president. However, this independence was brief, as Nkrumah's government was overthrown by the army in 1966. Angelou, who was in Ghana during its independence, 1962-1965, in *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes* gives an account of her time and her perspective on this continuously changing relationship between black Americans and Africans at the time.

Written in the mid-eighties, in this volume Angelou also confronts the popular notion of Afrocentricity, advocated, among many others, by African American professor Molefi Kete Asante. In the chapter "Into the Fire: 1970 to the Present", historian Robin D. G. Kelley describes the idea of Afrocentrism as

a way of thinking and a type of scholarship that looks at the world from an African/African-American perspective... and a distinctive way of doing things, a set of cultural values and practices that are unique to their African heritage. (598)

Kelley explains that this African angle is explored in depth by Asante, who "locate[s] the origin of this distinctive African culture in the ancient African civilization of Egypt, and offer[s] prescriptions for maintaining this Afrocentric way of life" (598). As a

manifestation of black nationalism in the 1980s, Afrocentrism rejected the Eurocentric culture of America and advocated a return to an African-centred perspective. In his book, *The Afrocentric Idea*, Asante explains the choice of the term Afrocentricity, which means "placing African ideals at the center of any analysis that involves African culture and behaviour" (2). Based on this definition, Asante criticizes the Eurocentric ideology for being inadequate in regards to understanding African Americans:

African American culture and history represent developments in African culture and history, inseparable from time and place. An analysis of African American culture that is not based on Afrocentric premises is bound to lead to incorrect conclusions. (11)

Asante emphasizes the importance of centralizing the African identity that has been displaced by the Western culture for many centuries since the Middle Passage. However, critics such as Robinson challenge Asante's African-centred perspective and his oversimplification that African Americans should be identified as Africans:

By doing so, Asante demonstrates a tendency in nationalistic theory to simplify a more complex historical and sociological story. He fails to consider syncretism between 'black culture' and 'white culture' in the United States. His Afrocentricity sits atop the assumptions of the ethnic paradigm, and so argues that blacks in the United States are cultural outsiders and that improper understanding of that unique identity thwarts group progress. ... Indeed, despite Asante's contention, black American culture is hardly analogous to any sub-Saharan black African *ethnos*. (131)

Robinson criticizes Asante for overemphasizing the importance of the African roots while underestimating how American the African Americans have also become. In the eighties, Angelou, as an integrationist, questions the appropriateness of Afrocentric ideologies and her experiences in Ghana, as represented in *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes*, bear out Robinson's critique, as we shall see. Therefore, this chapter analyses Angelou's portrayal of being a black American in Africa and her challenges, especially in regards to the notion of idealism about Africa that surrounds movements such as black nationalism and Afrocentrism. The chapter is divided into three sections

and it explores the notion of Africa as a dream or a nightmare, the significance of the March in Washington in Accra, and finally, the impact of Malcolm X's visit to Ghana. As an intellectual activist in the post-Civil Rights era, Angelou warns about the dangers of separation and exclusion of the extreme black nationalism and Afrocentrism of the eighties, and her writing about her time in Ghana and her return to the United States to pursue her political activism is a sign of her rejection of these ideologies.

In Search of Home in *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes*

In comparison to the previous volumes, as with the title choice, the significance of this latest addition to the series is its different setting: Accra, Ghana. Besides the third volume, *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas*, and the fourth volume, *The Heart of a Woman*, which are partly situated in Europe and Africa, the remaining autobiographies are mostly set in the United States.² This volume is mainly about her experiences in Ghana from 1962 to 1965. The narrative arc of this autobiography fits the genre of travel narrative. The book starts with Angelou's arrival in Ghana and finishes with her departure for the United States. This experience outside of America gives her the space to be reflective on the notion of race from the viewpoint of an outsider. Gary Totten, in *African American Travel Narratives from Abroad: Mobility and Cultural Work in the Age of Jim Crow*, describes the two main characteristics of the travel narrative genre to be: "a focus on the self" and a "'focus on the external details of nature and society in a specific location'" (9). The fifth volume constantly demonstrates the inner anxiety and doubt that Angelou feels as a black American in Ghana, and also

² Besides the European tour of the *Porgy and Bess* production, in the final part of the fourth volume, *The Heart of a Woman*, she briefly moves to Egypt because of her relationship with Vusumzi Make. After that relationship ends, she begins the narration of her fifth volume with writing about her plans to move to Liberia to start a new job while her son begins his studies at the University of Ghana. However, due to her son's serious motorcycle accident at the beginning of the volume, her plans change and she decides to stay in Ghana to be near her son while he is recovering.

shows her constant comparison between her new location, Ghana, and her home country, America.

Although travel writing in African American literature has a rich tradition, it has a traumatic past too, and this may explain Angelou's ambivalence. Totten traces back the traumatic history of travel writing to slavery and the Great Migration:

The forced travel of the slave trade and the displacement of African Americans within the United States during northern migration following Reconstruction forge close connections between mobility and African American identity. (6)

In this social and political background, travelling itself becomes an act of resistance, with the slave narratives and the tale of their escape to the North as the earliest form. This is also true for Angelou's narrative, as her stay in Ghana represents a figurative and literal rejection of the continuing white supremacy in the United States during the sixties.

In addition, the nearly twenty-year gap in writing about the actual events allows Angelou to use her reflections on her time in Ghana as a commentary on the status of African Americans in the post-Civil Rights era. The narrating "I" uses the commentary on the narrated "I"'s time as an African American abroad to examine African Americans in relation to Africa, black nationalism, and Afrocentrism during the 1960s and beyond. As discussed previously, the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were considered the pinnacle of the Civil Rights era and brought significant changes to the lives of African Americans. However, in the 1980s African Americans were a long way from reaching the promises of racial equality and integration of the Civil Rights movement. Campbell depicts the bleak situation of African Americans in the decades after the Civil Rights era:

A generation after the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, African Americans continued to face significant discrimination in hiring, access

to housing, medical care, criminal sentencing, even the interest rates they were charged for mortgages and car loans. In contrast to the injustices of the Jim Crow era, however, such discrimination was typically not inscribed in law but rooted in the operation of ostensibly race-neutral institutions, making it harder to document or combat. (368)

As described in the above passage, during the 1970s and 1980s, African Americans still faced different types of daily discriminations, which constantly reminded them of being denied their full rights as an American citizen. Although, as Campbell noted, the discrimination differed from the Reconstruction period, its effect on society was as devastating, if not more so. While *de jure* racial segregation had become illegal, the above passage demonstrates that *de facto* segregation was further embedded in society than before.

Similar to her previous volumes, Angelou's life narrative of her experiences in Ghana around the mid-sixties can be seen as a means of addressing questions and dilemmas that existed for black Americans during the eighties. This concern of Angelou's can be traced in an interview with Russell Harris, conducted when the fifth volume was first released. In the interview, Harris comments that after reading *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes*, he detects a similar sense of displacement between the situation of African Americans in the 1960s and 1980s:

You [Angelou] and the other Black Americans about whom you write left this country and journeyed to Africa because of the sense of displacement you experienced living in a staunchly racist society. And now, some twenty years later after integration, after the initiation of civil rights, I find there is still a strong feeling of displacement among the new generation of Black Americans. ("Zelo" 166)

The surprise in Harris's tone and observation that such a similarity should still exist in the post-Civil Rights era emphasizes the importance of Angelou's writing at this time. Angelou's response is significant in understanding the reasons behind such a closely

related sense of displacement and not belonging in the younger generation of black Americans of the 1980s:

Young people today, young Black people today, have a sense of dislocation for a number of reasons, one historic. Their fathers did; their grandmothers did. We have always had this sense of dislocation and it is inevitable that the young people have inherited it. They have simultaneously inherited something called the American dream. And with the urgency of the '50's, '60's and '70's – with the promise nearly kept during those years or a promise that it would be kept, there is an inevitable contradiction. ("Zelo" 167)

Her answer indicates that the source of the frustration is not limited to one generation, and reminds the interviewer that African Americans have been haunted by the shackles of slavery and its consequences for generations. While the burden of this ancestral inheritance exists, the new generation's expectations were raised with promises such as Martin Luther King's "I have a Dream" speech during the Civil Rights period. As Angelou concludes, the juxtaposition of these two mindsets caused the conflict to arise in the young generation of the 1980s.

However, in the same interview Angelou continues to warn the post-Civil Rights generation of this sense of conflict between raised expectations and the feeling of exclusion:

Now enough young Black people are visited at once by this sense of dislocation which they have inherited and simultaneously with the belief that they can be privileged. There is no such possibility, and if it ever happens that we are all considered a people, a nation indivisible and undivided, then it will be hundreds of years from now. It will be when racism itself has disappeared, has melted, thrown off into ether. It is not likely because as a species we are still all so crushingly ignorant... blithely ignorant. ("Zelo" 167)

The significance of this interview is that it indicates Angelou's disappointment with the lack of actual progress on the integration front and the continuing struggle against racism in the post-Civil Rights era. Her bitter tone comes through her choice of phrases such as "no such possibility", "hundreds of years from now", and "blithely

ignorant". With such an outlook towards the racist American society of the time, the latest instalment of her autobiographical oeuvre can be considered Angelou's interpretation of how the young generation could deal with such a dilemma, which will be explored further in this chapter.

Africa: A Dream or a Nightmare

Now she is rising
 Remember her pain
 Remember the losses
 Her screams loud and vain
 Remember her riches
 Her story slain
 Now she is striding
 Although she has lain.
 - Angelou, "Africa"

This is the third and final stanza from Angelou's poem "Africa", published in her collection of poetry *Oh Pray My Wings Are Gone Fit Me Well* in 1975. Written before *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes*, as Stefanie K. Dunning describes it, this collection, especially the poem "Africa", is Angelou's attempt not only to "confront issues of race and racism", but also to "reflect [on] her experiences abroad and in Africa" (61). This third stanza can be considered a prologue to Angelou's attempts in the fifth volume of her autobiography to pay tribute to her African ancestry while remembering the consequences of the painful history of slavery for Africans and black Americans.

The significance of Africa to Angelou's writing is evident from the attention she has given to this topic throughout her writing career. Before dedicating one volume of her autobiographical series to this subject, Angelou had written an article for *The New*

York Times, "For Years, We Hated Ourselves", as well as the aforementioned poem, "Africa", in the 1970s. Also, in the 1990s, in her book of collected essays, *Even the Stars Look Lonesome*, there are two essays dedicated to this topic, "Africa" and "Art in Africa". The main theme in all these writings is an attempt to build racial pride from the African ancestry of black Americans, which she believes has been distorted due to slavery's history of shame and guilt ("For Years" D15). These ideas are expanded in *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes*, as the medium of autobiography gives her the longest format for exploring her thoughts on Africa.

This volume gives her the opportunity to narrate to her readers in the 1980s her experiences of living in a newly independent African country. Disappointed with the slow progress of the Civil Rights movement, Angelou starts the narrative with being excited at the notion of being in Africa. Based on the promises of the new president of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, the country had become a popular destination for many African Americans during the early sixties, who chose being in Africa over enduring more racism in America. Ghana was not like any other country in the African continent and the significance of its political situation is essential to an understanding of this stage of Angelou's life. In his book *African Americans in Ghana: Black Expatriates and the Civil Rights Era*, Kevin K. Gaines explains the reasons for the migration of many African Americans to Ghana during the late fifties/early sixties:

Ghana afforded them what was impossible in America: the freedom not just to speak but to advocate democratic socialism and economic justice; not just a sanctuary from exile but an external vantage point that enabled critical insight into the U.S. overseas propaganda and the nation's relationship to the world. (141)

As can also be seen in Angelou's narration, the geographical separation Gaines describes gives the opportunity for Angelou to openly criticize not only the national but international affairs of the United States at the time.

Angelou is not the only African American author to have written about her time in Africa. Africa has been a destination point for many black Americans who chose to visit the continent because of the inequality and racism they faced in the States. As has been illustrated in Campbell's research, the interest in Africa also attracted the attention of many of the black political and intellectual leaders of the time, such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Richard Wright, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and Alice Walker, besides Angelou. These journeys emphasize the importance of Africa for the "black political, intellectual, and imaginative life" of these intellectual activists (Campbell xxi).

The significance of this relationship has been considered in Countee Cullen's 1925 poem "Heritage", in which the question "What is Africa to me?" is asked. As Campbell argues, this question is not only asking about the significance of Africa for the speaker but it is consequently asking another embedded question, "What is America to me?" (xxii), which is also important to Angelou in her narration of her time in Ghana. In her essay "Africa", in her book of essays *Even the Stars Look Lonesome*, Angelou begins by referring to Cullen's poem. She explores the question of the poet, "What is Africa to me?" in this way: "Many black as well as white Americans were equally ignorant of both African history and African culture" (*Even the Stars* 13). Therefore, Angelou's writing of her time in Africa in the sixties can be interpreted as her contribution to filling these gaps and presenting a better and more realistic depiction of Africa.

As Campbell explains, the journeys, which were made ostensibly to discover the meaning of Africa, were in essence helping the travellers realize their relationship with America: "As paradoxical as it may sound, Africa has served historically as one of the chief terrains on which African Americans have negotiated their relationship to

American society" (xxii). The word "paradoxical" is significant here as it emphasizes the ironical situation for these African Americans who leave their homeland, America, as they have never been fully accepted there as citizens; however, it is their travel to Africa that helps to renegotiate and re-examine their relationship with America. This is a significant characteristic of African American travel writing, where the author explores not only their relationship to this new place, but also how it makes them feel about being a migrant and an expatriate. The geographical space is important in the self-realization that their identity has been formed in a country, which rejects them. Writers such as W. E. B. Du Bois, James Baldwin, and Richard Wright have explored the issue of displacement away from the United States in their writing about travelling or living abroad.

Angelou's interaction with a group of black American expatriates in Ghana is important to the way she explores her identity in Ghana. The group included prominent black American intellectual activists of the sixties and later decades, such as writer Julian Mayfield, sociologist Sylvia Boone, union organizer Vicki Garvin, and another sociologist, Alice Windom (*All God's* 18-19). Angelou's interaction with this group, whom she titles "Revolutionist Returnees" (*All God's* 19), is important to the way she shapes her experience in Ghana. She is developing her identity as an intellectual activist, which she started in *The Heart of a Woman*, through her interaction with this network of activists. The title Angelou chooses to refer to her group of friends is critical in understanding the group's status in Ghana. The "Revolutionist" part refers to their political activities back in the United States and aligns with the revolutionary ideologies of the Black Power movement and their support for a more militant resistance. Although they had left the United States during the Civil Rights period, Angelou does not reflect on their journey to Africa as an escape but as an act of resistance, which is a tradition of

black American travel writing since slave narratives. Angelou's conscious choice of the title represents the idea that their intellectual activism is not bound to the borders of America and is explored internationally as well, which is demonstrated later in this chapter via analysis of their interaction with Malcolm X. However, the more significant part is the "Returnees". This group of African Americans had chosen Africa as their new home since the progress of the Civil Rights movement did not meet their expectations. The "return" is referring to a symbolic coming back to their ancestral motherland, Africa, as the expatriates were born in America and this is their first journey to Africa. It also represents that this group believes that they belong to this land and do not think of themselves as migrants. However, writing in the 1980s, Angelou is also criticizing black nationalism and Afrocentrism, with its advocacy of returning to Africa as the solution to the problem of racism and prejudice that African Americans face in the United States.

In this context, Angelou's description of the reasons behind this group's immigration to Africa gives a better understanding of their residency in Africa:

Its members were impassioned and volatile, dedicated to Africa, and Africans at home and abroad. We, for I counted myself in that company, felt that we would be the first accepted and once taken in and truly adopted, we would hold the doors open until all black Americans could step over our feet, enter through the hallowed portals and come home at last. (*All God's* 24)

This group, Angelou included, felt superior to other African American immigrants for they believed that they would be "the first accepted" and would easily adjust to the African culture and lifestyle, and would pave the way for subsequent black American émigrés. Their journey back to Africa is elevated to a religious rite of passage. However, the narrating "I" is presenting the naivety of the narrated "I"'s views of Africa and its relations to black Americans. The irony and satire of this passage is directed at the Afrotopia imagery that is central to black nationalism and Afrocentric ideas. Initially,

Angelou presents this idealized image of the concept that African Americans have of their journey to Africa. However, as the narration develops this notion of Africa is challenged. Angelou's text represents the realities and realization that the "Returnees" are treated as outsiders also in Africa, and concludes that America is their real home after all.

The signs of doubt about belonging can be traced even in the first few chapters. The "Returnees" still insist on their right to come to Africa, even though their expectations have not been fulfilled: "We had come home, and if home was not what we had expected, never mind, our need for belonging allowed us to ignore the obvious and to create real places or even illusory places, befitting our imagination" (*All God's* 19). This quote exemplifies the author's intention of juxtaposing the reality with the illusion. The phrase "we had come home" can be seen as the motto for these "Returnees", but Angelou continues the rest of the sentence with the reality of what being home meant. Angelou explores the disappointments and the sense of displacement that the African American émigrés felt, especially since their exile is self-imposed. The narrating "I" is directly criticizing the ideology of Afrocentrism, which promotes an unrealistic vision of the African continent.

Angelou is challenging the preconceptions about travelling to Africa held by African Americans not only in the 1960s but also at the time of writing in the 1980s. She confronts these presumptions to help black Americans in the 1980s construct a realistic vision of Africa. In the following passage, she is demonstrating that the basis for these delusional notions is in the exaggerated image of their ancestral land:

Our people had always longed for home. For centuries we had sung about a place not built with hands, where the streets were paved with gold, were washed with honey and milk. There the saints would march around wearing white robes and jeweled crowns. ... The old black beacons, ushers, mothers of the church and junior choirs only partially meant

heaven as that desired destination. In the yearning, heaven and Africa were inextricably combined. (*All God's* 20)

Disappointed by the worsening civil rights conditions in the United States, African Americans relied heavily on an exaggerated vision of Africa as their dreamland destination. The hyperbole that Angelou uses in the above passage transfers this notion of Africa to the readers. The repetitive, overstated imagery, such as "paved with gold", overemphasizes the equivalence of Africa to heaven and its significance for its descendants. This exaggerated vision of Africa allows the narrator to mock her younger self's naïve vision about Africa and give warning against the stereotypical illusion of Africa. Wilson Jeremiah Moses, in *Afrotopia: The Roots of African American Popular History*, explores this notion of utopia about Africa:

The Afrocentric tradition is related to utopian ideas of progress because it promises a glorious destiny for African people in the future. Ironically, however, it looks backward to a utopia in the past when Africans were the most advanced people on earth. (42)

Moses shows that the Afrotopia does not exist, as it is ironically based on the old notion of Africa, which is not adjusted to the modern Africa and its economic, social, and political problems in the seventies and eighties. The autobiographer's writing then becomes vital, in this context, to deconstructing this utopian vision and presenting a real account of being in Africa. This didacticism of the narrator continues in the following passage:

Some travelers had arrived at Ghana's Accra Airport, expecting customs agents to embrace them, porters to shout – 'welcome,' and the taxi drivers to ferry them, horns blaring, to the city square where smiling officials would cover them in ribbons and clasp them to their breasts with tearful sincerity. Our arrival had little impact on anyone but us. (*All God's* 21-22)

This delusion of a welcome that Angelou is presenting to the readers through the sarcastic imagery and ironical tone of the narrating "I" is represented as a challenge to the existence of the concept of an idealized Africa. The reality of the situation is

emphasized in the last sentence, which is a contrast to the unrealistic vision of Africa as the Promised Land.

The climax of this sense of displacement in Africa is reached when Angelou, in search of a job as a journalist, encounters a prejudiced receptionist in the Ghanaian Broadcasting Office. When the receptionist does not direct Angelou to the right person, the situation escalates to a verbal confrontation. However, it becomes even worse, when unexpectedly the discriminatory view of the receptionist is revealed to a shocked Angelou:

She knew herself to be a cat and I was a wounded bird. I decided to remove myself from her grasp. I leaned forward and imitating her accent. I said, 'You silly ass, you can take a flying leap and go straight to hell.'

Her smile never changed. 'American Negroes are always crude.' (*All God's* 37)

By comparing the receptionist to a cat and herself to a wounded bird, Angelou is reminding the readers that the participants are not from the same power hierarchy. In the matrix of domination a new axis is added, nationality, which explains the discrimination Angelou faces in this context. To escape from the superior/inferior trap, Angelou reverts to verbal attack and defence. However, the use of the derogatory language towards the Ghanaian receptionist also indicates Angelou's own sense of superiority due to her being an overseas black American, which ironically reverses the hierarchy of racism. In addition, the term "wounded bird" is significant to readers of Angelou's writing as it invokes reference to her initial autobiography and to the overall unity of the series through the image of the "caged bird". The narration of this experience is like a *déjà vu* for the readers who are familiar with Angelou's autobiographical series. As previously discussed, in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, a similar account is narrated, in which Angelou challenges the racist attitude of a white receptionist until she succeeds in becoming the first black streetcar conductor in San Francisco. This similarity of these

two separate events emphasizes the overall theme of the series in confronting discrimination not only in the United States, but also abroad.

However, the irony of the present situation is that Angelou's shock is due to the location of this racist encounter, as she is in Africa, where she least expects to be treated like this. She elaborates on her surprise in the following passage:

I stood nailed to the floor. Her knowledge of my people could only have been garnered from hearsay, and the few old American movies which tacked on black characters as awkwardly as the blinded attach paper tails to donkey caricatures. (*All God's* 37)

The above realization makes her aware that Ghanaians/Africans do not have any true knowledge about the African diaspora and are treating African Americans like strangers. Furthermore, the extent of the influence of the racist American media is shown and how Africa is affected by this propaganda. It also confronts the romanticized image of Pan-Africanism as there seems to be no alliance between Africans and African Americans based on mutual African diaspora roots.

Contrary to the outcome of the episode about becoming the first black streetcar conductor in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou's narration of this experience does not have a heroic result. Unable to respond due to shock, Angelou further analyzes her reaction to the receptionist:

The woman's cruelty activated a response which I had developed under the exacting tutelage of masters. Her brown skin, curly hair, full lips, wide flanged nostrils notwithstanding, I had responded to her as if she was a rude white salesclerk in an American department store. (*All God's* 38)

This is a significant declaration for Angelou as she is familiar with this type of prejudice back in the United States. She instinctively wants to attack the biased Ghanaian receptionist like "a rude white salesclerk in an American department store", however the racial features of the receptionist are a reminder of her location, Africa. The language

Angelou uses to express her frustration conveys the burden of slavery and its ramifications, especially in the usage of the word "masters". In order to explain the traumatic experience, Angelou is using the collective trauma of slavery to give context to the historical and geographical irony of this discrimination. The narrator is addressing that the legacy of slavery is not only present in America but also in Africa, where the trauma began with the transatlantic slave trade.

In *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*, Ron Eyerman explores the importance of the history and memory of slavery in the way black intellectual activists related to the notion of Africa during the mass resistance movement of the sixties. While the role of Africa was central to the modern black nationalism and to the Black Power movement in rebuilding black consciousness, the trauma and legacy of slavery was also probed in relation to the new system of black exploitation in the urban ghettos of the 1960s. Eyerman argues that this interest in how the collective identity of African Americans relates to slavery and its trauma is also important to the post-Black Arts artists, especially with the popularity of Afrocentricity:

The meaning and memory of slavery are still unresolved, however, as is the cultural trauma. Perhaps it will never be resolved, there may be no resolution as the collective identity of black Americans, as opposed to individual memory, is filtered through cultural trauma, which means that slavery, the primal scene of the collective, will be recalled every time the collective is questioned. (221)

Angelou's questioning of the collective memory of slavery and its legacy in modern times becomes significant in relation to how she is constructing the image of Africa in the 1980s. As a writer in the post-Civil Rights era, she is exploring the issue of black American identity in relation to the traumatic consequences of the legacy of slavery. As Eyerman points out, in the contemporary period there is no definite answer, so Angelou is contributing to this continuing debate about the formation of the collective identity in relation to its traumatic past.

In this context, her examination of the history of slavery and its connection with Africa becomes meaningful as part of the understanding of this cultural trauma:

Could the cutting treatment we often experienced have been stimulated by something other than our features, our hair and color? Was the odor of old slavery so obvious that people were offended and lashed out at us automatically? Had what we judged as racial prejudice less to do with race and more to do with our particular ancestors' bad luck at having been caught, sold and driven like beasts? (*All God's* 38)

Angelou's self-analysis investigates the deep roots of slavery and its burden on African Americans since the slavery era. The structuring of this self-examination is through asking rhetorical questions without any breaks. These self-reflective questions are important as they provide space to deal with the burden of the collective trauma of slavery. However, the last rhetorical question dwells even deeper on the role of Africans in assisting the origin of the slave trade. In his book *Slavery and African Life*, Patrick Manning documents the contribution of Africans to the act of the "capture, commerce, exploitation of slaves" (86). He further explores the reason behind such a huge involvement in the following four reasons:

(1) Africans were unaware of the damage the slave trade was doing to the continent; (2) they were unable to escape the social pressures to participate in the slave trade; (3) they were unable to escape the economic pressures to participate in the slave trade; and (4) they did not think about the consequence of their actions. (86)

While Angelou is rhetorically questioning this role, Manning's research gives evidence of the social, economic, and political factors and benefits that involved the African tribes in expanding the slave trade. Angelou's aim of including the history of the African role in the transatlantic trade is to deconstruct the naïve romanticized notion of Africa that is popular in Afrocentrism.

These revelations lead Angelou to ask more questions about the contribution of Africans in promoting the slave trade:

The receptionist and I could have been sisters, or in fact, might be cousins far removed. Yet her scorn was no different from the supercilious rejections of whites in the United States. In Harlem and in Tulsa, in San Francisco and in Atlanta, in all the hamlets and cities of America, black people maimed, brutalized, abused and murdered each other daily and particularly on bloody Saturday nights. Were we only and vainly trying to kill that portion of history which we could neither accept or deny? (*All God's* 38)

In this passage, Angelou confronts the genealogical bonds to African ancestors who are oblivious to any lineage connections and are now mistreating them like the white people back home. She even elaborates further by trying to explain the urban black-on-black violence by relating it to the burden of slavery. When she questions whether her people are "trying to kill that portion of history" she is referring to the guilt and shame of slavery of both Africans and African Americans, which the Ghanaians are ignoring. She is challenging Africa's involvement in the slave trade and blaming Africa for its role in expanding the trade. This reflection on her thoughts and inner conflict about this collective trauma is part of the autobiographical tradition of bearing witness, as I explained in Chapter One. Her disillusionment with Ghana allows her to redirect her self-reflections about her black American identity to getting involved with the American political scene of the mid-1960s.

The March on Washington in Accra

Angelou's reflections on Africa and her identity as a black American lead her to confront her role as a political activist and to re-evaluate her contribution to the Civil Rights movement happening in the United States at the time. Angelou relates two significant historical events in the politics of Africa and America that initiated her transition towards becoming actively involved in the resistance movement: the attempted assassination of Kwame Nkrumah in 1962 and the March on Washington of 1963.

The attempted assassination of the President of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, is a crucial point in the autobiography as it reveals the harsh realities of living in Ghana for African Americans. The narration of this political event in the eighties aims to help deconstruct the Afrotopia vision and give a better understanding of the struggle of democracy in the independent countries of Africa, such as Ghana. Before the unsuccessful assassination, Angelou presents the sense of racial pride that African Americans felt from being present in Ghana at this point in its history:

For the first time in our lives, or the lives of our remembered families, we were welcomed by a president. We lived under laws constructed by blacks, if we violated those laws we were held responsible by blacks. For the first time, we could not lay any social unhappiness or personal failure at the door of color prejudice. (*All God's* 86-87)

While Angelou is praising Ghana for giving African Americans the chance to experience this racial pride in a newly independent African country, she is simultaneously criticizing America for not eradicating the existing racism in its society. In the context of the sixties, Meriwether explains the reasons Ghana's independence was so important for black Americans:

For many African Americans, Ghana's independence came filled with portent. Long-held dreams might be fulfilled: Africa would return to its former greatness; a powerful African nation would rise to make the Western world accountable for its deeds; respect would grow for people of African descent everywhere. (151)

Due to the slow progress of the Civil Rights movement, according to Meriwether, Ghana's independence was a case of racial pride for the African diaspora. In the context of the rise of the Black Power movement and modern black nationalism, Ghana's independence became an ideal model for America's own resistance movement.

However, after the failed assassination of the Ghanaian president, the political situation and mood of Ghana changed. Gaines describes the extreme measures Nkrumah took to remove any dissent from internal or external sources:

Two weeks later, three of his [Nkrumah's] aides... were arrested in connection with the attack, even though the case against them was circumstantial. The arrest failed to dissipate the climate of intrigue and distrust that had descended on the government. A shaken Nkrumah closed all borders and detained more than five hundred people, many of whom remained jailed until the 1966 coup overthrowing Nkrumah. (164-165)

Because of the attack on Nkrumah's life, as Gaines reports, there was political tension in Ghana that contradicted the goals of freedom and democracy that independence stood for. This atmosphere of mistrust and political tension was not only felt by Ghanaians but also by African American expatriates, especially since the suspicions of treason turned on them. Gaines explained that Nkrumah was convinced that these attempts to overthrow his government were organized by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) (164). These accusations were the start of a change in the way black Americans viewed Ghana and its independence.

The most important implication of this failed assassination is that it was not only a sign of the rejection of Nkrumah's autocratic and corrupt government, but also of the gradual loss of Ghana's appeal as a haven for African Americans. Angelou gives voice to the concerns of African Americans during this political upheaval: "We saw ourselves as frail rafts on an ocean of political turbulence. If we were not welcome in Ghana, the most progressive black nation in Africa, where would we find harbor?" (*All God's* 89). By comparing their situation to "frail rafts", Angelou is evoking the imagery of rootlessness and instability for African Americans in Ghana, which intensified during this tense political period. The conditional structure of the question contributes to the irony of the situation, as the narrating "I" has undermined the delusional sense of welcome and inclusion in Ghana, and in a broader sense Africa. The concluding rhetorical question is significant as it implies that for African Americans, Ghana has failed to fulfil its promises to the expatriate community, as it has proven not to be the harbour they have been searching for all along. In the context of the eighties, for

Angelou the failed democracy of Ghana represents a symbolic rejection of the notion of a separate autonomous state for black Americans proposed by extreme black nationalists.

The above rhetorical question also signifies a transition in the political mindset of the African American expatriates in the 1960s. Disappointed with the progress of the Civil Rights movement back in the United States, the expatriate community in Ghana separated itself not only geographically but also psychologically from any involvement in the movement's activities. The seemingly indifferent attitude of these ex-political activists towards the movement could be read as a sign of protest and a criticism of the direction of the Civil Rights movement during the 1960s. According to Gaines, Ghana provided these émigrés "with a forum for their criticisms of American racism and empire and with a home for their quest for a radical alternative to the U.S. civil rights movement and its officially managed goal of integration" (141). Not only were the expatriates critical of the prevalent racist situation in America, they were also criticizing the lack of progress of the nonviolent approach of the movement and its overall integrationist attitude. However, the attempted assassination of the Ghanaian president and its political repercussions redirected the attention of the expatriate community towards the political situation in the United States. The first significant historical event to accelerate this shift in the political attitude of the expatriates was the March in Washington in 1963.

Marable describes the significant progress made by the Civil Rights activists in the first three years of the sixties:

In three difficult years, the southern struggle had grown from a modest group of black students demonstrating peacefully at one lunch counter to the largest mass movement for racial reform and civil rights in the twentieth century. (67)

However, for the movement to reach this point, Marable explains the exact number of people incarcerated:

Between autumn 1961 and the spring of 1963, 20000 men, women and children had been arrested. In 1963 alone another 15000 were imprisoned; 1000 desegregation protests occurred across the region, in more than 100 cities. (67)

The culmination of these local protests could be seen on the actual day of the march in August of 1963, in a protest which gathered people from many different backgrounds.

The March on Washington happened at an important point in the Civil Rights period. In 1963, the government of John F. Kennedy began to pay attention to the nonviolent protests of the Civil Rights movement, which were gathering more support for their cause. Fairclough depicts the reason the Kennedy administration began to think of a Civil Rights bill:

The nonviolent revolt had riveted the attention of the nation to the South, revealing an underlying ugliness of the Jim Crow system. The federal government realized that segregation was destabilizing the South and embarrassing the United States in the eyes of the world. The government also worried that racial conflict and violence might engulf the entire nation. (279)

As Fairclough describes, the proposal for the Civil Rights Bill was the result of the pressure of the nonviolent protest and the embarrassment it brought in the international context. However, he also foreshadows the rise of Black Power, as there were signs of unrest with the progress of the Civil Rights even before the march.

In order to gather support for passing the Civil Rights Bill, the Civil Rights leaders planned the March to use the opportunity to influence the government in their decision. On the day, August 28, 1963, about 250,000 people gathered to show their unity with the Civil Rights movement. Fairclough discussed the impact of the day on the resistance movement:

Although the March on Washington did little to spur the passage of the Civil Rights Bill, it did give the Civil Rights Movement a national platform, an opportunity to present itself as strong, united, determined, and responsible. Moreover, the presence of many white people, including prominent religious leaders, made it a visible expression of racial integration. The high moral tone of King's speech, 'I Have a Dream,' memorably expressed the optimism, idealism, and determination of the Civil Rights Movement. (280-281)

The March was a success in presenting a united front in the struggle against inequality, racism, and prejudice. It promoted nonviolent protest and its goal of integration, with King's speech becoming representative of the struggle. The peaceful protest was a pivotal point for the movement. However, Marable points to the discontent of the militants, especially the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, with King's speech and the overall concept of the March, because the militants believed King "had chosen not to include extensive critical remarks on the recent violence in the South, and the failure of most white liberals to respond concretely or adequately to the Negro's economic plight" (Marable 72-73). The criticism forewarns of the violent eruptions in the urban black ghettos such as Watts, Los Angeles, and also the eventual rise of the Black Power movement during the late 1960s.

Angelou's narration of this historical event gives voice to the similar discontent apparent in the expatriate community of African Americans in Ghana. Since Angelou's arrival in Ghana, this is the first direct mention of any events related to the Civil Rights movement happening concurrently in the States in her autobiography. This pivotal moment in America's history and in the Civil Rights movement coincides with a crucial stage in the narration of Angelou's life story in Ghana; her interest in becoming involved with the Civil Rights movement once again.

Angelou first tries to depict the attitude of the expatriate community in Ghana towards the idea of Civil Rights activists in the United States organizing such a massive gathering in Washington. Initially, the idea of a March on Washington led by Martin

Luther King Jr. is not welcomed by the expatriates due to the earlier mentioned feelings of dissatisfaction the group has toward the movement. Their cynicism and disappointment can be traced in the following set of comments:

'King leading a march. Who is he going to pray to this time, the statue of Abe Lincoln?'

'Give us our freedom again, please suh.'

'King has been in jail so much he's got a liking for those iron bars and jailhouse food.' (*All God's* 134)

Through these sarcastic remarks, Angelou is demonstrating the attitude of the expatriate community towards the Civil Rights movement and their belief that King's nonviolent tactics will not end racism in America. With each comment, Angelou is representing an aspect of the criticism directed toward the movement. They are criticizing the nonviolent tactics of the movement and its limitations for not being effective in bringing real social reform. They are mocking King's abilities as a leader and the sarcastic tone of the questions depict King as a submissive servant like an Uncle Tom, rather than a revolutionary leader. They also show a shift towards the violent tactics of the Black Power movement and Malcolm X.

As the autobiography was written in the late eighties, and keeping in mind the parallel narrative structure, the narrating "I" is here criticizing her younger naïve self and her companions' cynical attitude towards King and nonviolent protest in the 1960s, especially in regards to their reception of the March on Washington. Angelou attempts to explain to her readers the reasons for the group's sceptical attitude:

The ridicule fitted our consciousness. We were brave revolutionaries, not pussyfooting nonviolent cowards. We scorned the idea of being spat upon, kicked, and then turning our cheeks for more abuse. Of course, none of us, save Julian [Mayfield], had even been close to bloody violence, and not one of us had spent an hour in jail for our political beliefs. (*All God's* 134)

The mature author, through terms such as "pussyfooting nonviolent cowards", is directly criticizing how the naïve younger Angelou and the expatriates viewed King's methods of protest and nonviolence, and, in their opinion, its non-effectiveness. Ironically, the present narrator/author is mocking the expatriates by referring to them as "brave revolutionaries" while they have not been actively close to the political scene since their own imposed exile. The above passage contains a double critical structure. While the narrated "I" is presenting the expatriate community's view on the futility of the nonviolent protest method, the mature author is criticizing the naïve perception of this group about the achievements of the Civil Rights movement through nonviolent tactics. In an interview with Sal Manna in 1986, Angelou reflected on her views on protest in the eighties:

It is much more useful to be constructive than destructive. Don't get me wrong. I still feel you should rock the boat. And if you're not in it, you should turn it over. But not unthinkingly. Protest without serious consideration is dangerous. You have to back up what you say. But once you find the truth, you ought to be prepared to stand on the street corner and use all your gifts to right the wrong. ("The West" 159)

She is guiding the younger generation with her preference for the more "constructive" approach for protesting and showing dissatisfaction with the status quo. Although she does not deny the effectiveness of the militant approach, or as she phrases it, "rock[ing] the boat", she advises the future generation to follow their activism through an organized approach rather being "destructive". The inclusion of the March on Washington in the fifth volume is Angelou's way of paying tribute to the resistance movement of the sixties in organizing mass protest. This type of leadership and united collective protest was missing from the political activist scene of the post-Civil Rights era.

Although in the fourth volume, *The Heart of a Woman*, Angelou expresses a close connection to King's political ideology through her earlier work for his

organization, here she explains the reason for her political alignments with the expatriates in the 1960s:

After all, when I worked for him, I had been deluded into agreeing with Reverend King that love would cure America of its pathological illnesses, that indeed our struggle for equal rights would redeem the country's baleful history. But all the prayers, sit-ins, sacrifices, jail sentences, humiliation, insults and jibes had not borne out Reverend King's vision. When maddened white citizens and elected political leaders vowed to die before they would see segregation come to an end, I became more resolute in rejecting non-violence and more adamant in denying Martin Luther King. (*All God's* 134-135)

In the above passage, on the one hand the young Angelou is depicting a transition in her political activist ideology. It demonstrates her loss of faith in nonviolent protest and the belief that it "would cure America of its pathological illnesses". It represents the disappointment of the expatriates with the progress of the Civil Rights movement under the leadership of Martin Luther King and the lack of faith that it will bring an end to racism. On the other hand, however, the tone of the overall quotation represents the mature author's criticism of the naïve narrated "I"'s rejection of King and his nonviolent protest tactics, as discussed previously. By giving voice to the criticism of King's method of protest, the autobiographer is trying to point out the fallacy of thinking along the same lines as the young Angelou.

Cone describes the ideology behind King's philosophy and defends its viability against its opponents: "For Martin, nonviolence did not mean passivity or doing nothing, as so many critics have suggested. His philosophy was nonviolent *direct action*" (77). He expands his argument in support of nonviolence in the following passage:

Nonviolence, therefore, was not a sign of weakness or of a lack of courage. Quite the contrary. King believed that only the strong and courageous person could be nonviolent. He advised persons not to get involved in the civil rights struggle unless they had the strength and the courage to stand before people full of hate and to break the cycle of violence by refusing to retaliate. (77-78)

Cone highlights that in order for nonviolent protest to be effective, its members need to show resilience, which is not equal to submissiveness. Angelou used her autobiographical writing to present her views on this debate especially in the first and second volumes, and she argued that both aspects, peaceful and militant resistance, are part of the natural progress of the tradition of the resistance movement.

The first signs of a transition in Angelou's interest in becoming active in the Civil Rights campaign appear when the expatriates decide to put their differences aside and support the cause of the March on Washington even from Ghana. Despite all their earlier bitter criticism of the March, the expatriate group decides to organize a solidarity march in front of the US embassy in Ghana and present a protest declaration to the American ambassador as a sign of support for the struggle of black Americans in the United States. Gaines explains the importance of organizing such an event for the expatriates that goes beyond just a solidarity march: "The expatriates joined their support for the movement in the United States with the cause of Ghana, the African revolution, and global anti-imperialism, with denunciations of U.S. foreign policy thrown in for good measure" (168). By participating in this protest overseas, the expatriates are connecting their dissent over America's racism against African Americans with the international context, which will bring embarrassment to the United States over the state of democracy of its own citizens.

Even though the protest was small in comparison to the one in the United States, it was an example of the collective protest of the expatriate community outside of the United States. In Maya Angelou's archive, kept at the Schomburg Centre for Research in Black Culture, one letter documents the organization of the protest. In the file for the correspondence with Alice Windom, there is a copy of a letter dated the 11th of September 1963 from Alice to an anonymous recipient describing the events of the

demonstration staged at the American embassy, which aimed to show solidarity with the March on Washington ("Maya Angelou Papers" Sc MG 830/Box M).³ This detailed account of the events on the day of the demonstration is from the perspective of Windom, and Angelou probably collected this letter at the time of writing her autobiography, as a source for fact checking and documenting her own version of it in the fifth volume. As part of the archive, the letter gives an insight into the process of writing an autobiography and the variety of sources that an autobiographer uses to reconstruct an event that is part of a collective memory rather than an individual one.

Being able to read Windom's interpretation of the event gives autobiography scholars the opportunity to see an event beyond the autobiographer's lens. Windom's conclusion explains the reason for writing such a detailed account of the demonstration to her anonymous reader. She writes about the importance of organizing the March at the time: "The demonstration I describe in detail because, to our knowledge, this is the first demonstration staged in Africa by Afro-Americans and Africans against American racism" ("Maya Angelou Papers" Sc MG 830/Box M 7). The significance of documenting this protest, in both Windom's letter and later on in Angelou's autobiography, is that it is the first time such a public protest was carried out by an African American expatriate community to raise awareness about racism in America.

Ironically, the climax of this march happened when two American soldiers were raising the American flag in front of the embassy. This symbolic act was closely examined as one of the soldiers, a black American, tried to save the flag from being disgraced by falling to the ground. As Angelou relates it, his reaction was criticized by the protesters:

³ Alice Windom is a photographer and social worker, and was a close friend of Angelou during the time in Ghana.

'Why you, brother? What has that flag done for you?'

'Brother, why don't you come over here and join us?'

'That flag won't cover you in Alabama.' (*All God's* 139)

With each sarcastic question, the group is being critical of America for not accepting black people as equal citizens in their own country. These statements/questions allow Angelou to probe into how these expatriates define themselves in regards to their relationship with Africa and America. The first and third questions are critical of America for not protecting black people against the violent repercussions of racism and prejudice, especially in the Southern states. However, the second question depicts the dilemma of the group with its dual identity, African and American. The African American expatriates are condemning the black soldier's action, because the patriotism that the black American soldier is showing is never returned to his race by his own country.

However, it also represents their dual conflict, as they are not questioning the soldier's patriotism but are reflecting on their own ties to the United States. As Angelou has shown in the previous section that their journey to Africa makes them realize they are more American than African. The conflict that she describes here is her reference to W. E. B. Du Bois's "Double Consciousness". Du Bois describes the struggle between his American and African identity in *The Souls of Black Folk*:

He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face. (34)

Du Bois explains the constant struggle for African Americans to live with this dual identity and their aim to reconcile these two identities into one without rejecting one for

the other. While Angelou has previously dealt with the issue of the conflict of her dual identity through the racism and prejudice she encountered in America, in this volume she differentiates her experience with this dual conflict between her American and her African side, as it is happening in Ghana. While at first she tries to embrace her African identity, the experience at the embassy culminates in this message that her American identity is also an important part of her that she cannot reject.

Angelou continues to try to uncover the reasons behind the criticisms directed at the black American soldier:

We were scorning the symbol of hypocrisy and hope. Many of us had only begun to realize in Africa that the Stars and Stripes was our flag and our only flag, and that knowledge was almost too painful to bear. We could physically return to Africa, find jobs, learn languages, even marry and remain on African soil all our lives, but we were born in the United States and it was the United States which had rejected, enslaved, exploited, then denied us. It was the United States which held the graves of our grandmothers and grandfathers. (*All God's* 140)

While on the surface the expatriates are criticizing the black American soldier for defending the flag, which is the symbol of the country they had rejected, they are internally realizing that they belong to America. As mentioned before, these reflections that Angelou shares with her readers about her thoughts and inner conflicts about the popular trend of coming to Africa in the sixties are signs of the narrating "I"'s voice replacing the narrated "I"'s voice. Through these post-event reflections, Angelou takes the opportunity not only to criticize this movement in the sixties but also to relate her criticism to the return of this movement through the version of black nationalism and Afrocentricity that gained popularity in the eighties. She expresses that black Americans can geographically separate themselves from the United States by relocating to Africa, however, the place they will always belong to, and which is their home, is America.

Malcolm X's Visit to Ghana

Malcolm X's visit to Ghana in 1964 is the next significant historical event that influenced Angelou's decision to return to her political activism in the United States. While she honoured Martin Luther King Jr. and his nonviolent ideologies in *The Heart of a Woman*, in the fifth volume she pays tribute to Malcolm X's legacy to the black liberation movement. His visit is important in shaping Angelou's opinion about the next direction for the mass resistance movement of the sixties.

Similar to the March on Washington event, there is a letter in Maya Angelou's archive reporting on Malcolm X's trip. In the file for the correspondence with Alice Windom, there is a copy of a letter dated the 21st of March 1964 from Alice to a friend, Christine, describing the events of Malcolm X's visit to Ghana. This detailed account of the events of the visit is from the perspective of Alice, and Angelou again probably collected this letter as a source for fact checking and collating this collective experience with her own version in the autobiography ("Maya Angelou Papers" Sc MG 830/Box M). While Malcolm X's visit to Ghana has been documented, Windom's perspective gives the researcher another insider's opinion on the organization of the trip and its significance to the expatriate community. In the letter, Windom mentions that she is sharing copies of this letter, like the previous one, on the March on Washington, in order to spread the news of events in Ghana. She explains the significance of sharing this visit in the following sentences: "We are in a battle and since Malcolm is one of our most significant leaders, efforts will be made to malign and discredit him, so as many activists as possible need all the information they can get" ("Maya Angelou Papers" Sc MG 830/Box M 5). This is a significant declaration: it demonstrates Malcolm's importance to the resistance movement. Windom's letter indicates the dangers that threaten both his reputation and life, as a result of his rift with the Nation of Islam. The

act of writing as activism becomes important, whether as a letter, or as autobiography in later decades. Both Windom and Angelou's aim in writing about this collective historical event is to pay tribute to Malcolm's legacy, and to help to depict his contributions in such a way as to restore his image and spread his message.

Upon her first meeting with Malcolm in Ghana, Angelou remembers that she had met him briefly before coming to Ghana:

When I met him two years earlier, he had been the bombastic spokesman for Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam. Clean shaven and dark-suited, he sizzled proudly on street corners and from television screens, as he called whites 'Blue-eyed devils' and accused America of totalitarian genocide. (*All God's* 142)

In order to write about Malcolm, the narrating "I" first gives a depiction of him when he was a part of the Nation of Islam. This way of introducing Malcolm to the readers is important because she wants to emphasize that the Malcolm she meets in Ghana is different. Malcolm X had left the Nation over ideological disagreements with its leader, Elijah Muhammad, in March of 1964. In *Black Leadership in America: From Booker Washington to Jesse Jackson*, John White comments on the reason behind this decision:

Although he publicly still endorsed Muhammad's policies of racial separation and an ultimate return to Africa, Malcolm was aware that the theology and political inactivism of the Nation did not appeal to the Black youth of the ghettos. (155)

Malcolm X's aim in his separation was not to be as exclusive as the Nation and his trip to African countries was a step towards expanding his network.

In Ghana Angelou presents her readers with a more moderate Malcolm, who expresses that his trip to Mecca has changed him:

'On this journey to Mecca, I met white men with blue eyes, who I can call brother with conviction. That means that I am forced to reconsider statements I have made in the past and I must have the courage to speak up and out about those reconsiderations.' (*All God's* 143)

Her emphasis on his redemption is important because the legacy of Malcolm, which Angelou wants to honour, is this new and reformed one. Cone refers to this change in Malcolm's philosophy as a "spiritual rebirth" (205). White also describes the Haj pilgrimage as a crucial trip in influencing and changing Malcolm's ideology:

The turning point of this tour was his pilgrimage to Mecca, where his exposure to the true Islamic faith broke his remaining ties with the bowdlerized version preached by Elijah Muhammad. Malcolm was particularly impressed by the fraternal relations between the pilgrims of all colors and nationalities at Mecca and the interest expressed in the American racial situation by Arab and African leaders. (156)

This religious trip was influential in changing Malcolm and making him rethink his previous ideologies of separatism. Malcolm's mission on his visit to Africa was to bring awareness to the plight of African Americans in the racist society of the United States and in the case of the expatriates to remind them of the continuing struggle, as he says to them:

'The situation has not lightened up. Black people are still marching, sitting in, praying in and even swimming in...

And white Americans are still saying that they don't want blacks in their restaurants, churches, swimming pools and voting booths.' (*All God's* 143)

The narrating "I" uses Malcolm's words to signal to her readers her shift about her views on being an expatriate, while there is a need for activism back in the United States. The experience of being in Ghana has taught her a lot about her identity, race, and culture, but it has made the autobiographer realize that she needs to be more involved with the social and political change happening in America.

Disappointed with the progress of the Civil Rights movement, Malcolm aimed to present the case of African Americans to the General Assembly of the United Nations with the support he had gained from his travels to African nations. Angelou presents Malcolm's argument in his own words:

'If our cause was debated by all the world's nations, it would mean that finally, we would be taken seriously. We could stop courting the 'fair-minded white people in the U.S.' as Martin Luther King called some of his constituents. America would be forced to face up to its discriminatory policies. Street protests and sit-ins would be as passé as auction blocks and as unnecessary as manumission papers. If South African blacks can petition the U.N. against their country's policy of apartheid, then America should be shown on the world's stage as a repressionist and bestial racist nation.' (*All God's* 145)

Based on the case of South Africa, Malcolm plans to use the UN as a platform to put the United States under international pressure by revealing its racism against its own people, African Americans. As Cone explains, Malcolm's insistence on expanding the black American struggle to the international arena is crucial:

By linking the black struggle in the United States with a worldwide revolution among Third World nations, Malcolm was able to challenge the typical assumption of the civil rights movement: Since blacks were a minority, they had no other option than to negotiate their freedom through nonviolence. (313)

His aim of connecting the black American struggle to the African diaspora's mutual resistance was to bring attention to their problem through a wider international campaign. At the same time, he reminded the white supremacy of America that nonviolence was not the only choice for black Americans to fight for their rights. His famous speech, "The Ballot or the Bullet", in 1964, which was given after his separation from the Nation, represents his ideology on the option of nonviolent or armed resistance in the black liberation struggle and his aim to reach a wider audience after the exclusive tactics of the Nation. Cone explains the importance of this speech:

While the 'bullet' symbolized the continuity in Malcolm's thinking, the 'ballot' signaled an important change. It represented his movement away from the narrow skin-nationalism of the Black Muslims to an affirmation of blackness which enabled him to cooperate with Martin King and others in the mainstream of the civil rights movement. (198)

As Cone insists, the change from an extreme ideology to a moderate one is significant in the trajectory of Malcolm's political development. While Malcolm did not rule out

armed resistance, he reminded his audience of the power of voting in changing the future. For Angelou this message is important. Significantly, through Malcolm's words, she is implying that her return to political activism was aligned with the reform campaign of Malcolm X. In the sixties, this moderate vision of Malcolm X represents for Angelou a middle way between the victimization that the nonviolent approach presented and the previously discussed observation about the misguided illusion of moving to Africa.

In the interview with Harris, Angelou admitted that in the eighties she realized that the two different ideologies represented by these two leaders of the movement were more similar than she first thought:

I really left Dr. King because I married a revolutionary. Then too, I was young and I had seen the all the work of Dr. King. All that heart and passion and courage; especially courage. Love and courage... they seem to come to no avail. I couldn't see beyond it. I thought well I agree with Malcolm. I had only met him once before in the United States so I hadn't had a chance to make a friend. In Ghana we became friends. I didn't realize at that time that Martin and Malcolm were a pair, like peaches and cream... But they were a pair, like coffee and cake... absolutely. One needs time and needs the activity of mental exercise to make such connections. ("Zelo" 168)

The aim of the autobiographer is to reconstruct the image of King and Malcolm X and their contributions to the struggle through her writings, which began in *The Heart of a Woman*. Her conclusion in this interview is that she sees these two leaders as complementing each other rather than as opposing forces, fighting for the liberation of black Americans on different vanguards. Cone provides a similar connection between the two leaders in the later part of their activist careers:

Martin and Malcolm's movement towards each other is a clue that neither one can be fully understood or appreciated without serious attention to the other. They *complemented* and *corrected* each other; each spoke a truth about America that cannot be fully comprehended without the insights of the other. (246)

This is an important conclusion about the way these two prominent figures of the resistant movement related to each other. Their different ideologies do not negate each other, but represent the different aspects of the development of the mass resistance movement. Writing twenty years after the Civil Rights decade, Angelou aimed through her writing to raise consciousness about the significant role each man played, not only as an individual person but also as a team, in the black liberation movement.

The extent of Malcolm's influence on Angelou's return to political activism can be seen when he advises her that her presence is needed back in America: "The country needs you. Our people need you... You have seen Africa, bring it home and teach our people about the homeland" (*All God's* 153). This is an important message in the autobiography as it foreshadows Angelou's role as an intellectual activist in the future. This is how the autobiographer reflects on the development of her role as a writer/activist. For Angelou, activism is not limited to direct action, as she promotes the contribution of intellectual activism too, which is evident in Malcolm's advice. The element of "teaching" is an important part of intellectual activism and Angelou explores this potential in her writing career. In the eighties, she acknowledged that her autobiographies aimed to raise awareness about the history and culture of black Americans, and its connection to its African heritage.

The significance of this advice was realized when Angelou decided to join forces with Malcolm X and return to the United States to be part of his new organization, the Organization of Afro-American Unity. Besides presenting the case of African Americans to the UN, the other aims of Malcolm's new organization are listed by White as follows:

Among its objectives, the OAAU asserted the 'Afro-American's right for self-defense' against all oppressors, complete independence for all black people, 'a voter registration drive to make every unregistered voter in the

Afro-American community an independent voter', 'the establishment of a cultural centre in Harlem' to offer courses and workshops in the arts and in Afro-American history, and Afro-American principals for black schools. (156-157)

The organization's aim was to merge both the nonviolent and armed resistance tactics of the resistance movement. While it supported armed self-defence, it also advocated registering black voters, strengthening independent black businesses, and developing arts and education facilities for black people. The mottos of Malcolm's new organization can be seen as a foundation for the rise of the Black Power movement and its cultural branch, the Black Arts movement. These goals help the readers to envision the extent of the role Angelou wanted to play as an artist/activist in Malcolm X's new organization, upon her return to the United States, as will be explored in the next chapter.

Conclusion

All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes is essential to an understanding of Angelou's representation of her development as an intellectual activist. In this volume, her geographical location allows her to explore and confront issues in relation to Africa and her decision to return to political activism in the political and social context of the 1960s. In the review, "Traveling Hopefully", Deborah McDowell also confirms that this different setting allows Angelou to confront her connection to her African heritage:

This is, rather, a confrontation with an African heritage, a heritage she has viewed primarily in abstract and sentimental terms... The book records the sometimes painful process of exchanging that faulty and naive understanding of Africa for one more realistic and complex. (17)

Through writing about her experience in Ghana, Angelou attempts to give a better understanding of what Africa means to a black American and the way it influences her dual identity, American and African. Her decision to return to the United States to get involved with Malcolm X's new organization comes out of the realization that, although

she pays tribute to her African heritage, her American identity is an integral part of who she is.

However, she reminded her readers in her interview with Manna in 1986 that going to Africa was not a mistake, because it allowed her to answer not only the question of "What is Africa to me?" but also "What is America to me?":

Mistake is a harsh word. One of my errors in judgment was the idea that if I learned an African language, wore the native clothing and ate the African food that I would become an African. I found that you can fool some of the people some of the time, but you can't fool yourself. ("The West" 157-158)

This volume can be read as a record of how Angelou made a "fool" out of herself by trying to assimilate with the African culture in Ghana and in her criticism of the popular 1980s Afrocentric ideologies and black nationalism and, thus her tale is a model for future black generations.

Chapter Five

"Burn, Baby, Burn" in *A Song Flung up to Heaven*

The caged bird sings
 With a fearful trill
 Of things unknown
 But longed for still
 And his tune is heard
 On the distant hill
 For the caged bird
 Sings of freedom.
 - Angelou, "Caged Bird"

This poem of Angelou's, "Caged Bird", is part of her fourth collection of poetry, *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?*, published in 1983. The concurrent comparison of the freedom of a "free bird" to the restrictions of a "caged bird" matches the recurrent imagery of the "caged bird" that unites her autobiographical series, as shown in previous chapters. Throughout the poem and the series, Angelou reminds her readers of the ability of the "caged bird" to sing about protest and for "freedom", with all the limitations it faces. The symbolic "caged bird" can be taken metaphorically to stand for Maya Angelou, the writer, who sings about freedom through the act of writing. Her autobiographical series is evidence of Angelou singing about freedom against all the racism and discrimination black Americans face daily, which has been discussed in this thesis so far.

To emphasize the seriality of her six-volume autobiography, Angelou attempts to make connections with, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Lupton also mentions that the connection between the first and six volumes is a sign of the continuity of the series, especially in the link between the titles of these two books (163). The title of the finale,

A Song Flung up to Heaven, is also from Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem "Sympathy".

The last two lines of the stanza of the poem read:

But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings –

I know why the caged bird sings!

The connection between these two lines brings the series full circle. Angelou begins the series by telling her readers that she, as an insider, has the answer to "why the caged bird sings". After six volumes written over three decades, she reminds her readers that the answer is that the bird "sings of freedom", as Dunbar sang: "It is not a carol of joy or glee | But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core | But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings". That this act of protest is not a private one but a collective and public one can be deduced from Dunbar and Angelou's choice of words. Both poets are sending their protest upwards to Heaven, which means the act of writing is to become part of the collective memory or tradition of African American literature, which has expanded due to their contribution.

Post-Racial America: A Reality or a Dream?

A Song Flung up to Heaven (2002) concludes the series sixteen years after the publication of the fifth volume. While the previous five volumes were written between the 1970s and 1980s, this volume brings Angelou's writing into the twenty-first century. By returning to her series at the beginning of this current century, Angelou uses her life narrative to discuss the importance of issues such as race and equality in the contemporary period. Her reflection on the late sixties becomes significant as a commentary on how much progress the African American community has made since the Civil Rights decade, and it confronts the myth of a "post-racial" society, which arose with the advent of the Obama presidency.

Although America has made a lot of progress in regards to race relations since the 1960s, it is far from being considered a "post-racial" society. The choice of this term to describe American society in the twenty-first century is debatable, as it describes a certain mindset towards the issue of race and racism. Andersen and Collins describe such a society as "one where the nation has shed itself of the racially exclusionary practices of the past, moving toward a more tolerant, racially just and integrated society" (56). However, this assumption, that race is not a relevant factor anymore and Martin Luther King Jr.'s "dream" of equality has been reached, is far from the reality in the twenty-first-century America.

In *Signifying without Specifying: Racial Discourse in the Age of Obama*, Stephen Li explains why:

Persistent disparities in housing, health care, education, and other opportunities among racial groups make such a claim absurd. Instead, post-racial implies a more disturbing conclusion: racism can be ended only through the destruction of race as a meaningful category of identity.
(2)

Contrary to the belief in a "post-racial" society, Li's criticism shows that minorities are still struggling for basic amenities and that the fight for social justice needs to be continued. One of the threats of believing in a "post-racial" period is that it results in the growth of the concept of "colorblindness". As discussed in Chapter Three, Michael Omi and Howard Winant, in their book *Racial Formation in the United States*, warn that after the Civil Rights decade, the concept of racism took a new format, with the terms such as "reverse racism" during the seventies and eighties, and "colorblindness" in the succeeding era. Omi and Winant explain the new racial ideology and its dangers:

Colorblindness racial ideology represented a step beyond 'reverse discrimination' because it repudiated the concept of race itself. In certain respects the concept of race 'neutrality' already does that ideological work. To dismiss the immense sociohistorical weight of race, to argue that it is somehow possible, indeed imperative, to refuse race

consciousness and simply not take account of it, is by any rational standard a fool's errand. (220)

They criticize the new trend in racial ideology for diminishing the importance of race in the formation of identity and emphasize that racial equality does not equal eradication of the diversity in our racial identity. While colourblindness aims to show that racism has finished, with its foundation of race neutrality, the drawback of this new trend is that it eliminates the legacy of race and its contribution in forming identity.

The usage of the term "post-racial" reached its height of popularity with the election of the first black American president, Barack Obama, in 2008. This was a huge step for people of colour, but it did not mean that America is now a post-racial society. In his essay, "Can race be eradicated? The Post-Racial Problematic", Brett St Louis discusses the impact of Obama's victory on the usage of the term: "If, as the contention goes, an African American could be elected to the highest office in the land and become the 'leader of the free world,' then race was no longer a barrier to progress and achievement in America" (114). While Obama's win became a symbol for the end of racism and discrimination in America, the reality was that his case was an exception rather than the norm. The illusion of a post-racial society grows under the shadow of the success of a black American president; however, as Andersen and Collins argue, the reality is different for ordinary people of colour:

Voting rights valiantly fought for in the civil rights movement, are being infringed upon. Incarceration of African American, Latino, and Native American men is shockingly high. Poverty keeps many of our urban zones and, increasingly, suburban places in serious trouble. Unemployment rates for young people of color are soaring. (56)

These observations are important to show the extent and variation of racial stratification that exists in contemporary society, even though racial discrimination became illegal in 1964 with the passage of the Civil Rights Act.

In such an atmosphere, activism becomes essential to raise awareness about the myth of a post-racial America and its colourblind racial ideology. The creation of the Black Lives Matter movement was a step in this direction. The murder of unarmed black men such as Trayvon Martin (2013), Mike Brown (2014), and Eric Garner (2014), to name just a few, galvanized the protest movement, which raised questions about the extent of police brutality and its violent ramifications for the black community. In *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, Keenaga-Yamhata Taylor discusses the role this new movement has played in bringing awareness to the plight of contemporary black Americans:

Today, the birth of a new movement against racism and policing is shattering the illusion of a colorblind, postracial United States. Cries of 'Hands up, don't shoot,' 'I can't breathe,' and 'Black lives matter' have been heard around the country as tens of thousands of ordinary people mobilize to demand an end to rampant police brutality and murder against African Americans. (10)

While police brutality against African Americans is not a new phenomenon, the occurrence of such acts of violence in the twenty-first century calls out the hypocrisy behind proclamations of racial neutrality in America. Although the Black Lives Matter movement is still in its early stages, it can be considered a new chapter in the black liberation struggle.

Intellectual activists such as Angelou also have an important role in raising awareness about the concept of race in the twenty-first century, especially with works, such as Kenneth Warren's *What was African American Literature*, published in 2011, which represent this type of post-racial thinking. Warren argues, as the title of his book suggests, that African American literature ceased to exist with the demise of Jim Crow era:

African American literature took shape in the context of this challenge to the enforcement and justification of racial subordination and exploitation represented by Jim Crow. Accordingly, it will be my argument here that

with the legal demise of Jim Crow, the coherence of African American literature has been correspondingly, if sometimes imperceptibly, eroded as well. (2)

However, his argument is problematic on two grounds. First, he is assuming the success of African American literature is only defined by its attention to racial oppression. In the introduction to their collection, *Contemporary African American Literature: The Living Canon*, editors Lovalerie King and Shirley Moody-Turner counter-argue Warren's proposal:

Indeed Warren's definition overstates the degree to which all African American writing counted in the political project he describes. There have always been 'anomalous' African America literary texts that neither protested racial oppression directly nor showcased the achievements of prominent African Americans. (2)

This variety of creativity that King and Moody-Turner refer to is a testament to the continuity of African American literature beyond the boundaries of race protest. However, this does not diminish the necessity for black intellectual activists continue to confront the impact of race in the twenty-first-century context. The second point against Warren's claim is that African American writers such as Angelou addressed the problems of the colourblind, post-racial America as the new form of racism that is threatening the lives of the majority of black people in the contemporary era. Edited collections such as Houston A. Baker and K. Merinda Simmons's *The Trouble with Post-Blackness* also aim to do this. In this context, while Angelou wrote her last autobiography early in the twenty-first century and before the election of President Barack Obama, the discussion in this chapter shows that she constructed her narrative around this contemporary debate: the threat of a post-racial America with its colourblind attitudes towards black Americans.

The Art of Protest in *A Song Flung up to Heaven*

The final volume of Angelou's autobiographical oeuvre brings her writing to the tumultuous years of 1965 to 1968 and her return to the United States after being away for the previous years in Ghana. *A Song Flung up to Heaven* is a critical work in African American political autobiography as it covers an important period in the history of the Civil Rights movement. In this volume, Angelou presents the last stage of the development of her artist/activist identity, with the merging of her activism with her writing career. While the previous volumes set up the foundation for her artistic and political voices to join each other, in the finale this merger is represented with the initiation of her writing career. Pooler describes this tradition of the *Künstlerroman* as "[t]he goal of the journey's search for meaning is the resolution of the conflicts that drive the narrative and motivate the artist-hero on his quest", where the autobiographer concludes with the discovery of their artistic identity and career (39). Following the tradition of the *Künstlerroman* narrative, Angelou finishes this autobiography, and the series as a whole, with achieving the goal of becoming a writer, and as a result, an intellectual activist.

The assassinations of the two influential leaders, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., during the Civil Rights era, are the starting and finishing points of the concluding volume. However, Angelou's narrative is not limited only to the assassinations and their impact on the black community; it also pays attention to another critical political upheaval that happened during the Civil Rights era, the Watts riots of 1965. The author's focus on these three collective memories out of the many that could have been included during that period is significant in understanding her line of thought while writing the finale of her life story. Upon her return from Africa, this stage of her life is a significant point in Angelou's political perception of the United States during

the sixties. Therefore, understanding Angelou's self-narration of these specific events during that period is essential in deciphering not only this volume's relation to the socio-political context of the twenty-first century, but also its role in concluding her series.

During the mid- to late sixties, the Civil Rights movement made some major federal legislative achievements, among which are the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965. However, the atmosphere Angelou creates in revisiting the three selected tragic moments in the collective memory of Civil Rights is not to juxtapose them against the accomplishments of the decade but to depict their relevance to the status of race relations at the time of writing the finale. Thus, the significance of the dialogue Angelou's text makes her readers engage in with the past is that it drives them to re-evaluate the progress made so far. The anniversaries of many of the mentioned milestones of the Civil Rights movement were celebrated during the last few years; however, as discussed previously, America is still evidently far away from reaching the ideal post-racial society it had promised in the 1960s.

Thus, through the narration of these three significant events, Angelou weaves an intricate tapestry of the decade and gives her interpretation of that period and the main political ideas of the time. The reader can envisage this historical period through the perspective of Maya Angelou, a Civil Rights activist. This reading, through Angelou's lens, helps the reader to grasp the devastating effect of the loss of these two important historical figures on the black community, and the explosion of the Watts protest and its significance for the status of race relations in the United States during the 1960s, even in later decades and up to the present time.

A Song Flung up to Heaven took sixteen years to complete, as Angelou had difficulty confronting the events in this stage of her life. In an article written by

Margaret Busby for the *Guardian*, Angelou reflects on the painful process of writing this last volume, which nearly took longer than the writing time of all the preceding five volumes together: "I'm working on it" and "it's working on me" (B12). The second statement reveals that Angelou felt overpowered by her upsetting memory of that decade and how she wanted to represent it in her own work of art. While in the above review Angelou just hints at the pressures of confronting this period of her life in her writing, she gives more insight into the exact obstacles she confronted during the writing process in an article by Sherryl Connelly. Angelou explains the reason behind the gap between the writing of the fifth and sixth volumes in Connelly's article for the *New York Daily News*: "I didn't know how to write it. ... I didn't know how the assassination of Malcolm X, the Watts riot, the breakup of a love affair, then Martin King, how I could get all of that loose with something uplifting in it" (34). The obstacles, which made writing about this specific time a challenge, are the low points in both the public and personal memory of the writer. As discussed in the Introduction, the theme of survival is prevalent across the works of Angelou, and to make "something uplifting" from the assassinations, the riot, and the relationship failure was a hard task for the author, who is more popular for her inspirational guru persona in the twenty-first century than for her political voice.

Then again, the conflict that Angelou presents here could be due to the expectations that arose as a consequence of the success of her previous works. Wagner-Martin describes the popularity of Angelou's works:

[E]very book Maya Angelou published with them [Random House] sold hundreds of thousands of copies. Nearly every book was translated into thirty or more languages. Beginning with the... appearance of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou's writing had such an extensive following that observers sometimes mentioned her 'cult' of admiring readers. (143)

This huge success and connection she made with her "cult" of readers as an inspirational writer could result in the tensions she felt when attempting to write the last volume. The delay caused in the writing of this volume just adds more to this pressure, because her fame and her readers' expectations were affecting her writing at this stage. She presents this dilemma in the Connelly article as between balancing her role as an intellectual activist, which is, as we have seen, largely a critical one, with being an inspirational role model. While these two roles do not negate each other, the reason the author is more recognized as the latter could be because of the way she constructs her persona as a spiritual mentor outside the realm of writing, which needs to be differentiated from the character of the protagonist of her autobiographies.

However, she was able to combine both aspects in this final volume, as Sue Wilson notes in her review of this autobiography for *Scotland on Sunday*:

The narrative's larger political movements are seamlessly interwoven with more personal content, relating the succour she derives from relationships with family and friends... Historical developments such as Watts, the Black Panther movement, and Martin Luther King's Carnegie Hall speech for W. E. B. Du Bois's centenary, shortly before his assassination, are conveyed with the same first-hand immediacy as preparations for parties, [or] decorating new apartments[.] (5)

Wilson praises Angelou's personal touch for bringing together both the collective and individual moments in the final instalment. Gary Younge's review for the *Guardian* agrees with Wilson's and describes the reason Angelou's final volume was able to convey her message: "It is her personal connection to these political events that makes them so evocative. Her own narrative is so closely interwoven into black America's political and cultural fabric" (n. pag.). Younge's observation illustrates the reason for the success of her writing, especially in this volume. The key for her success lies in Angelou's ability to intertwine her private and public narrative in order to raise awareness, which resonates with the feminist movement's goal of "the personal is

political", later also expanded to black feminism and intersectionality, as we saw in Chapter One. In her essay, "The Master's Tools will Never Dismantle the Master's House", Lorde emphasizes the importance of using each person's individual differences in the service of social justice: "In a world of a possibility for us all, our personal visions help lay the groundwork for political action" (112). Instead of following the white patriarchal tradition, black women intellectual activists such as Lorde and Angelou rely on their unique individual experiences to represent their collective desire for change. This chapter discusses the significance of Angelou's perception of this historical period, as she mainly focuses on the aftermath of the loss of the two historical leaders of the movement and the uprising of Watts, and how Angelou, through her writing, contributed to the understanding of the current situation of black Americans in the United States.

The Loss of the Leaders of the Civil Rights Era

A Song Flung up to Heaven continues the narration without any interruption from where it was left off in the fifth volume, *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes*. After being in Ghana for three years between 1962 to 1965, several factors such as the developing political turmoil in the newly independent African country and Malcolm X's visit to Ghana convinced Angelou to return to the political scene of the United States as an activist, as we saw in the previous chapter. Angelou's leaving Africa coincided with tumultuous times in both Ghana and the United States.

As she explains, Ghana's glorious days of independence were reaching their end:

It was a known fact that antigovernment forces were aligning themselves at the very moment to bring down the regime of Kwame Nkrumah,

Ghana's controversial, much adored but also much hated president. The atmosphere was thick with accusations, threats, fear, guilt, greed and capriciousness. (*A Song* 4)

Angelou's prediction about Ghana turned to reality on the 21st of February 1966. As historian Gaines reports the opposition took advantage of the absence of Nkrumah during an official visit to China to overthrow his government (227-228). Meriwether explains the reasons for the coup: "These [difficulties at home] centered on the nation's deteriorating economy, his [Nkrumah's] increasing authoritarianism, and his promoting a cult of personality" (241). These internal problems, economically, socially, and politically, brought the downfall of Nkrumah's government less than a decade after independence.

For black American expatriates in Ghana, who had invested in the independence of the country as a role model for the resistance movement in the United States, this instability in its politics was disheartening. This change is evident in a letter written by Julian Mayfield, a black American writer and a friend of Angelou during her time in Ghana, on the 8th of August 1966. He reflects on the reasons for Nkrumah's failure:

I have not the slightest doubt that as far as Ghana is concerned Nkrumah is finished. He left himself too exposed and has been thoroughly destroyed as an image with the Ghanaian people. No one conversant with the situation there after the coup gives him a chance of returning to power. Ghana itself is finished. Nkrumah failed because of weaknesses and mistakes, and because the cards were stacked against him. ("Maya Angelou Papers" Sc MG 830/Box M 1)

Like Angelou, Mayfield had left Ghana by the time the coup happened. Having lived in Ghana during its independent years, his reflection gives an insight into the reason Nkrumah's revolution failed, which had to do both with internal and external problems he had while governing the country. In the same letter, Mayfield referred to have finished a book, *The Lonely Warrior*, which is about Nkrumah's Ghana. He describes it as "a balanced book to tell about what I saw that was good and bad, and what went

wrong" ("Maya Angelou Papers" Sc MG 830/Box M), which emphasizes his interest in analyzing the reasons independence failed. Gaines describes the purpose of this book as to "draw out for posterity the lessons of Nkrumah's mistakes" (240). This interest in Ghana's political situation represents the expatriate's personal attachment to the vision of independence in Ghana that had inspired them to leave America as an act of resistance. As both Gaines and Meriwhether's studies show, as a result of the coup, these black Americans had to reassess their relationship with Ghana due to its failure in achieving its vision.

The political turmoil in Ghana is paralleled to the political situation that was awaiting Angelou in the United States:

I knew that the air in the United States was no less turbulent than that in Ghana. If my mail and the world newspapers were to be believed, the country was clamoring with riots and pandemonium. The cry of 'burn, baby, burn' was loud in the land, and black people had gone from the earlier mode of 'sit-in' to 'set fire' and from 'march-in' to 'break-in.' (*A Song* 5)

Angelou's observation sets the mood and atmosphere of the time and forewarns of the transition in the style of protest, which will be explored in the next section on the 1965 Watts riots. This pivotal depiction of the turbulence in America's Civil Rights politics aims to set the stage for the tragic opening event of the finale, the assassination of Malcolm X.

Even with the legislative success of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act 1965, as Marable explains the struggle for civil rights continued as Black people still faced many forms of discrimination:

In the process of social transformation, there are always bitter seeds of defeat hidden within the fruit of victory. Jim Crow was legally finished, yet black workers and sharecroppers were still the victims of bombings, lynchings and rapes. ... Black Southerners had the electoral franchise; but what of economic security, housing, childcare, and the right to live

without fear? So much had been won, but the greatest expectation of the black poor and working class had not yet been achieved. (82-83)

In this passage, Marable puts the impact of the legal achievements of the Civil Rights decade in perspective in comparison to the realities of the obstacles typical working-class black people still faced in their daily lives. As he demonstrates, the ramifications of these legislative reforms were not realized in the practical lives of African Americans. Using her autobiography, Angelou searches for the answers to these questions, not only in relation to the Civil Rights decade, but also to the period in which she was writing.

Throughout her autobiography, Angelou attempts to recreate the mood and sense of the era by showing the existing rifts in the political opinions of African American people during the 1960s. Therefore, her mother's criticism of Angelou's intention of working for Malcolm X's new organization becomes significant:

I [Vivian] read in the papers that you were coming back to work with Malcolm X in some new organization. I hope not. I really hope not. ... If you feel you have to do that – work for no money – go back to Martin Luther King. He's really trying to help our people. Malcolm X is a rabble-rouser. (*A Song* 16)

Vivian's opinion gives voice to the divisions over the diverse protest modes of these two prominent leaders. It also allows readers to see the extent of the impact of the media on the perception of the black masses of the two leaders of the movement. Cone explains the reasons behind these contrasting perceptions of the two leaders:

Malcolm's challenge of Martin's philosophy of nonviolence caused many whites, particularly northern liberals, to reevaluate their view of Martin as moving too fast on the civil right agenda. Malcolm made Martin and the other civil rights leaders acceptable to white America by presenting himself as the 'bogyman' alternative. He also made Martin more acceptable to a larger segment of the black community by pushing him to the left, thereby causing him to become more militant than he would otherwise have been. (264)

As described in the previous chapter, although the two leaders had different tactics in their fight for freedom, they actually complemented and corrected each other. While the

media represented them as two opposing forces, their differences did not separate them in their mutual struggle. However, as Cone explains, after his separation from the Nation of Islam, Malcolm's attempts to reconstruct his earlier image was not welcomed by the media, as Vivian's opinion demonstrates:

The media were not interested in the 'New Malcolm,' only the old one. They reported only those statements that could be interpreted as 'irresponsible,' that is, inciting violence, which they usually contrasted with the 'responsible' statements of the nonviolent leaders of the civil rights movement, especially Martin King. (267)

The media had a huge role in the way these leaders were represented as antagonizing each other, but even more importantly in the way their legacy is remembered. The term "rabble-rouser" to describe Malcolm X refers to the familiar negative image of him represented in the media before his assassination. As discussed in the previous chapter, one of the aims of Angelou's writing was to reconstruct this negative image of Malcolm X and help rebuild his legacy for future generations. Furthermore, she confirms that Malcolm and King were more similar politically and personally than different, as Angelou argued in the article written by Younge on the publication of the finale:

"They were men of passion, exquisite intelligence, great humor, shattering courage. I don't mean courage to stand up against the possibility of being assassinated. I mean the courage to stand in a hostile world and say, 'I was wrong.'" (n. pag.)

Her aim here is to reconstruct a vision of these two public figures that are joined in their fight to eradicate racism, but each in his own way. The last part of her answer refers to the newly reformed Malcolm, who after his separation from the Nation of Islam revised the dogmatic nationalistic ideologies of his previous organization. As discussed in regards to the previous volume, in her writing and interviews Angelou aimed to emphasize this reform in Malcolm's ideology, as an important part of his legacy, as demonstrated here also. In addition, a contemporary writer and a close friend, James Baldwin, came to the same conclusion. In an article, "Martin and Malcolm" for *Esquire*

magazine in 1972, he argued that these two great leaders had a great impact on each other's ideologies: "by the time each met his death, there was practically no difference between them" (qtd. in Cone 259), which confirms Cone's observation about the two leaders.

However, Angelou never got the chance to get involved with Malcolm's new organization. Her reason for coming back to the United States was quickly brought into question by the assassination of Malcolm X less than two days after her return. On a birthday card written on Angelou's birthday, the 4th of April 1965, Alice Windom reflects on the shock of hearing of the assassination of Malcolm X. She expresses her worry about how Angelou is dealing with this sudden loss, passing on Julian Mayfield's concerns: "Julian, especially, was worried about you wanting to work with Malcolm and the awful thing just happened days after your return" ("Maya Angelou Papers" Sc MG 830/Box M). The impact of this assassination is explored in this volume. Through expressing the personal grief the narrated "I" felt at the loss of Malcolm, the narrating "I" is observing the impact of this tragedy for the movement and the nation.

This reflection on the impact of losing a public figure can be seen in Angelou's friend Ivonne's tone when she is passing on the news of the assassination to Angelou:

'Maya, girl, why did you come home? Why did you come back to this crazy place?' ...

'I came back because I think I have something to do.'

She [Ivonne] said, 'These Negroes are crazy here. I mean, really crazy. Otherwise, why would they have just killed that man in New York?' (*A Song* 26)

Beside the initial shock over Malcolm's murder, the more striking part of the news for Angelou is that it was an insider, who assassinated Malcolm X, not a typical hate crime. White reports that Malcolm was assassinated by three members of the Nation of Islam

while giving a speech at Audubon Ballroom in Manhattan on the 21st of February 1965 (158), which points to the rift that was caused by Malcolm's separation from the Nation.

After hearing the shocking news, the circumstances of Malcolm X's death make Angelou reassess her view of her own people:

If a group of racists had waylaid Malcolm, killed him in the dark and left his body as a mockery to all black people, I might have accepted his death more easily. But he was killed by black people as he spoke to black people about a better future for black people and in the presence of his family. (*A Song* 38)

There are two points to consider from Angelou's observation here. First, the unity of the movement is based on the common enemy, racist white people. Second, beneath the surface, differences and disagreements are causing more harm to the movement than could ever be imagined, which resulted in the cold brutal killing of one of its own. The frequent use of the word "black" in the above passage emphasizes the rift between the black Americans that the narrating "I" is pointing to in her observation. Cone also refers to the irony of Malcolm's death being caused by the people who he "was seeking to liberate" (243). Thirty-seven years after the assassination, the autobiographer examines the role black people had in Malcolm's death and its impact on the black liberation movement.

The public's spirit of indifference over Malcolm X's shocking death was unexpected for the narrated "I". She anticipated a different reaction from her own people, but when her brother Bailey tries to bring down her expectations, she explodes: "What do you mean they don't care? I can't accept that. When they know that Malcolm has been killed, the people will riot. They'll explode" (*A Song* 29). Angelou returns to America with a different vision of the movement and is surprised by her people's apparent unresponsiveness towards such a violent death. She writes about her observation of the reaction to the tragedy:

In Ghana, I had read that the mood of unrest here was so great that the black community was like a powder keg that would take very little to detonate. But only hours after their champion had been killed, black men and women were flirting and drinking and reveling as if nothing had happened. (*A Song* 29)

The above passage shows that Angelou's expectations of a heroic farewell for Malcolm were not fulfilled, which suggests that her time in Ghana had separated her from black Americans. However, the reason for the apparent indifference Angelou is pointing out can be traced through Marable's account of the reactions to Malcolm's assassination: "From the moment of his death... both the Nation of Islam and most of the mainstream civil rights leaders attempted to eradicate Malcolm's political influence among young blacks" (89). As mentioned earlier, through writing about that period Angelou aimed to criticize this type of stereotypical narrative about the role of Malcolm X in the movement and ultimately to reconstruct his image and his forgotten legacy, not only in 1965, but also in the twenty-first century for a generation of readers who had never met the revolutionary reader.

Her brother's voice counters Angelou's accusations and gives the readers the realistic vision of the status of the Civil Rights movement, as he personally witnessed the struggles of his people, unlike others such as Angelou who observed it from a distance. He elaborates on his observation by predicting the movement's reaction:

'Baby, let me tell you what's going to happen. In a few years, there are going to be beautiful posters of Malcolm X, and his photographs will be everywhere. The same people who don't give a damn now will lie and say they always supported him.' (*A Song* 33-34)

This is a noteworthy criticism that Angelou expresses through Bailey's words about the different way Malcolm X is remembered then and now. Angelou is interjecting her present thoughts through the character of her brother. The significance of writing about the assassination thirty-seven years later is not the assassination itself but its

ramifications, and the need to re-evaluate how the legacy of Malcolm is kept alive for future generations. Cone also criticizes the way Malcolm's memory is remembered:

Malcolm is still forgotten by most Americans. Only a few blacks – and few whites – celebrate his birthday on May 19 or remember his assassination. When Malcolm is remembered, his significance is primarily defined as a *black* leader, as if he made little or no contribution to the nation as a whole. (289)

This criticism highlights how Malcolm's contribution to the black liberation movement has not been fully realized. His legacy needs to be included in the collective memory of the Civil Rights movement as his ideologies are significant. Malcolm was not just a public figure of a resistance movement; his vision and ideology about freedom need to be remembered not just by America but the world. This also signifies the importance of intellectual activists such as Angelou reviving Malcolm's legacy by writing about him in the present era.

To convey the devastation of the loss of Malcolm's leadership and mentorship to her readers, a disappointed Angelou writes about distancing herself from the mainstream Civil Rights movement until Martin Luther King's Poor People's March campaign in 1968. She describes the disappointment she felt during those days, to Youngs in his article: "'After Malcolm was killed, the hope and I were both bashed to the ground'" (n. pag.). Malcolm's death is portrayed as a turning point for the autobiographer in the way she views grassroots activism and its limitations. However, her return to political activism resurfaces at the concert held for the hundredth anniversary of the birth of W. E. B. Du Bois. After the ceremony, Angelou was approached by Martin Luther King to get involved with his Poor People's March:

'This poor people's march we are girding up for is not a black march or a white march. This is the poor people's march. I want us to stay in Washington, D.C., until legislation is passed that will reduce the poverty in our rich country. We may have to build tent cities, and if so, I want to be able to do that.' (A Song 176)

Angelou, through King, is here establishing that her return to political activism is not just for racial equality but equality for all humans. The last sentence of the quotation from King expresses his expectation that Angelou's return to activism will be able to provide funding from black churches to help him carry out his campaign.

Although not having the complete support of other Civil Rights leaders, in King's own words published in an article after his assassination, the significance of this last project was realized:

The time has come to return to mass non-violent protest. ... Our Washington demonstration will resemble Birmingham and Selma in duration. Just as we dealt with the social problem of segregation through massive demonstrations, and... with the political problem – the denial of the right to vote – through massive demonstrations, we are now trying to deal with economic problems – the right to live, to have a job and income – through massive protest. (qtd. in White 137)

The significance of this passage is that King lists the three main aspects of American lives, social, political, and economic, which his activism is dedicated to improving, through his nonviolent approach. His insistence on returning to "mass non-violent protest" also indicates that he was aware of the changes and divisions in the movement in regards to the tactics of protest towards the late sixties. In an interview, King reconfirms Angelou's understanding of the extent of his new campaign:

America is deeply racist and its democracy is flawed both economically and socially[.] ... [T]he black revolution is much more than a struggle for the rights of Negroes. It is forcing America to face all its interrelated flaws – racism, poverty, militarism, and imperialism. It is exposing evils that are deeply rooted in the whole structure of our society. (qtd. in White 137)

This important passage states King's ideology in regards to the way he would have liked to expand his activism beyond racial boundaries to encompass wide-ranging issues, which concerned his society. The Poor People's March campaign and his stand against the war in Vietnam are examples of this expansion.

Similar to Malcolm's new organization, Angelou never got the chance to work with King's new campaign, as the news of his assassination destroyed her hopes and dreams once again. King was killed on the evening of the 4th of April 1968 by a white man, James Earl Ray (White 138). When the news of the assassination reached Angelou on her birthday, these were the thoughts that cross her mind: "Who was dead? Who was dead now? Not Malcolm again. Not my grandmother again. Not my favorite uncle Tommy again. Not again" (*A Song* 189-190). The repetition of "again" in the above quote is referring to personal and collective losses, and how sometimes the boundaries between the two are hard to identify. Angelou's representation of her grief is symbolic as it is not only for the loss of King but also for the many more before him. The first name that she lists is Malcolm's, as a reminder of how recent it was for the African American community to lose one of their leaders, but also as a sign of how she has not yet come to terms with the grief over his loss.

A few lines later, still in shock, the thread of thought continues: "If Malcolm was dead, who was alive? Where would we go? What was next?" (*A Song* 190). These unanswered questions reflect not only the narrator's personal anguish but are also representative of the collective community's grief at the loss of another of one of their leaders and anxiety over the ambiguous future of their people and the movement. Angelou further elaborates the significance of King's sudden death to her and her people:

That great mind, which considered adversity and said, This too shall pass away, had itself passed away. The mellifluous voice, which sang out of radios and televisions and over altars and pulpits, which intoned from picket lines and marches and through prison bars, was stilled. Forever stilled. That strong heart which did beat with the insistence of a kettle drum was silent. Silenced. (*A Song* 190-191)

This statement feels like a eulogy to a great leader. Like Malcolm X's assassination, Angelou does not write about King's murder nearly four decades later just to reflect on

the death of the leader. Her writing is aimed at the young generation of the twenty-first century who have not seen these two men in person and who do not have a personal connection to them. It is to revive the significance and legacy of these great men for a generation, who might know them only from history books or films.

However, the public reaction that Angelou observes this time round is different from the one she confronted for Malcolm's death:

On the evening of April 4, 1968, a lamentation would rise and hold tremendously in the air, then slowly fall out of hearing range just as another would ascend. Strangers stopped in front of strangers and asked 'Why? Why?' 'You know? You Know.' These strangers hugged strangers and cried. (*A Song* 191-192)

Unlike Malcolm's death, this time the public mourned the loss of their leader. Angelou's description of the impact of the loss matches the mood of the time, as described by historians Harding, Kelley, and Lewis in their account of those days:

At the same time the *New York Times* editorialized, 'Dr. King's murder is a national disaster.' And it was: major riots engulfed Washington, D. C., Baltimore, and Chicago. All told, more than one hundred cities suffered from rioting after the assassination of King, leaving thirty-nine people dead and millions of dollars' worth of property destroyed. President Johnson declared April 7, 1968, a day of mourning, and in tribute to the man whose death brought condolences from leaders and citizens around the world, the country flew its flag at half mast. (528-529)

The loss of King was not only felt domestically but also internationally, which shows the extent of the impact of his activism all over the world. King's death not only represented a loss for the movement, but for the nation and the world. His death symbolized the end of nonviolent resistance, as people's frustration with the lack of progress in the movement and the death of its leader led to riots and violence. The resistance movement was transitioning towards militant resistance, as will be explored in the next section.

In comparison to Malcolm, Cone comments that King's legacy is kept alive in the collective memory of the nation as a national hero:

Since his assassination, Martin has been immortalized as a great *American* leader by blacks and whites alike. During the third Monday of each January, America celebrates his birthday with many tributes and speeches, recounting his contribution to the nation. Similar events are held during the first week of April to mark his assassination. (289)

This difference in remembering the two public figures of the movement is based on how the images of Malcolm X and King were presented differently when they were alive. As discussed before, they were demonstrated as two opposing forces because of their different ideologies, one as integrationist and the other as nationalist. While King's nonviolent ideology was embraced, Malcolm's ideology of militant resistance was presented as too radical by both white and the Civil Rights leaders. Cone criticizes this emphasis on comparing these two ideologies:

As during Martin's and Malcolm's lifetimes, it is their enthusiasts, the cult of worshippers, who exaggerate their differences and individual accomplishments and thereby succeed not only in misrepresenting their significance for the 1950s and 1960s, but more importantly, their meaning for us today. (289)

This is a reminder that the legacy of these two men is fulfilled when they are presented as complementing and correcting each other rather than as two opposing forces, which diminishes their contribution to the black liberation movement.

This was Angelou's aim in remembering and reviving the legacy of these two public figures in the contemporary era in her series, beginning in *The Heart of a Woman*. While talking to a person in a bar, she realizes the public display of emotional despair is not only because of the loss of King, but is also rooted in the loss of Malcolm and has an even deeper connection with their history:

'See, they killed him not far from here, we didn't do anything. Lot of people loved Malcolm, but we didn't show it, and now even people who didn't agree with Reverend King, they out here, just to show we do know

how to care for somebody. Half of this is for Malcolm X, a half for Martin King and a half for a whole lot of others.' (*A Song* 193)

In this passage, Angelou emphasizes the significance of her writing about the tragic assassinations many years later, in the twenty-first century. Through her reflections, she aims to contribute to the reconstruction of the legacy of both these two leaders, especially in the way the next generation remembers them. However, most importantly, it is not just a remembrance of the loss of these two significant personas; their loss is representative of the many other African Americans whose lives have been sacrificed to keep the liberation movement continuing over the years. The last sentence of the passage encapsulates this message; the significance of "a half for a whole lot of others" is investigated in Angelou's narration of the Watts riots, as explored in the next part of this chapter.

Rebellion or Revolution: The Watts Uprising

Understanding the influence of the Watts protest on Angelou's political thought is critical in interpreting the way Angelou concludes her autobiographical series. As discussed in the previous section, Angelou's return to political activism was brought to a halt on two occasions with the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. However, since her return from Ghana, the Watts protest was the first instance that allowed Angelou to be involved at the forefront of the protest and to be part of the movement.

Because of the importance of the Watts protest, this thesis questions the appropriateness of the term "riot" in describing this historical event. Dominic J. Capeci Jr., in the foreword to the *Encyclopedia of American Race Riots*, explains the meaning of the term "riot" in the context of the 1960s:

Ghetto blacks protested racism and brutality through commodity riots that became *uprisings* in the 1960s and 1980s, and arguably *rebellion* in Los Angeles in 1992. For the most part, rioters from the 1960s onward struck police and property without taking life or destroying public service buildings. They revealed a commonality of purpose: rejecting the system's legitimacy without endeavoring to overthrow its government. Spontaneous and largely unorganized, black rioters considered their actions justifiable challenge to white racial views and official policies. They spoke for themselves and stimulated federal programs, serving as momentary change agents and extensions of the civil rights struggle. (xxxiii)

The terminology in describing these acts of collective protest is important in the history of the resistance movement. Capeci differentiates these urban unrests from the earlier decades of white mob violence and, as depicted in his description, looks at them as a type of protest. It is important to pay attention to the negative and positive connotations that the words "riot", "rebellion", and "uprising" have. These acts of protest, such as in Watts, were symbols of resistance to racial discrimination, to which the word "uprising" is the closest in conveying its meaning.

Recollecting her thoughts on the protest thirty-seven years later signifies Angelou's concern with the relevance of the protest and the circumstances that caused it to the current issues in her community in 2002. The Watts uprising has a close resemblance to the 1992 protests over the Rodney King beatings and verdict, also in Los Angeles, only 10 years prior to Angelou writing this volume. As Matthew W. Hughey reports, in his article "Los Angeles (California) Riot of 1992", the Rodney King race riots happened on the 29th of April 1992, and he describes the circumstances that caused the protests, which were that a mostly white jury found four Los Angeles police officers not guilty on charges of police brutality against Rodney Glen King. The uprising that ensued was in protest against this verdict and the status of race in the 1990s, and "was considered as 'one of the worst riots of the century'" (Hughey 377). Happening at the end of the twentieth century, the Los Angeles riots of 1992 raised questions about the

status of race relations in the post-Civil Rights era. In *Racial Conditions: Politics, Theory, Comparison*, Howard Winant comments on the impact of this protest in the context of the nineties: "the riot was more than a rejection of a single verdict; it was a protest against the systematic aggressions to which poor and non-white residents of Los Angeles are routinely subjected, especially if they are black" (80). This act of collective resistance was important as it expanded the radius of frustration to include the social, political, and economic disparities that black communities were subject to in late twentieth-century America.

The extent and impact of the Los Angeles riots of 1992 resembled the Watts riots twenty-seven years earlier. The Watts uprising, which was also caused by police violence, was also one of the worst riots of the sixties, and was seen as a transition in the tactics of Civil Rights movement towards the Black Power movement. In her narration, Angelou uses Watts as an example of resistance against the recurring racial injustices that black Americans were facing in the perceived "post-racial" America. Angelou indicates in the Younge article that the young generation needs to be made aware that there is still a long way to go to reach the promised post-racial society:

I think that, as one looks at Watts, one must look at the Academy awards. As one looks at the drug epidemic, one has also got to look at the General Colin Powell and Ms Condoleezza Rice, the mayor of Washington and the mayor of Atlanta... One has got to say there are changes and the reason for that is this. If we suggest that there are no changes, then young people must say, 'Well, damn, with the lives and deaths of Martin King, Malcolm X, the Kennedys, Medgar Evers, you mean all of that and they weren't able to effect any change – then there's no point in me trying.' So we've got to say, yes, there have been changes, minimal changes, but there have been some. And you must try. (n. pag.)

The advice Angelou has for her young readers in 2002 is to acknowledge how much real progress has been made since the Civil Rights era. Her double comparison of both the positives and negatives of the progress is to remind readers that although there have

been achievements, there is still a lot more work to do to reach a just society. She believes that the young generation needs to be reminded of how the achievements have been made, such as the Academy awards giving recognition to people who come from different racial backgrounds, or black people gaining governmental and legislative positions, in order to be able to confront the remaining challenges.

Situated between the two narratives of the assassinations, a main section of the autobiography is dedicated to the reconstruction of the events that led to the Watts riots of Los Angeles in 1965. Watts was not the first or last race riot to happen during the sixties, but it is considered one of the most devastating in American history. Between 1965 and 1967, frequent uprisings happened in the urban ghettos of the North, also known as the Long Hot Summer Riots. These rebellions changed the way Americans viewed race riots, as they were different from the previous racial violence, which happened before the 1960s. In her article "Long Hot Summer Riots of 1965-1967", Gladys L. Knight explains that most riots prior to the sixties were initiated by white people. She describes the reasons for the occurrence of these violent outbursts:

The inciting event was often triggered by a perceived need to enforce economic, social or political control, or by an alleged accusation of crime or offense, no matter how minor. Once the white mobs or vigilante groups apprehended and executed the accused, they often went on long and violent rampages through the nearest black community. (365)

These acts of violence were used to reinforce white supremacy over and fear in black civilians, and the attackers took justice into their own hands. These types of violence started to decrease during the sixties with the rise of the Civil Rights movement. However, Knight describes that the situation did not improve for all black people, even with the progress made during the Civil Rights movement:

Wealthier blacks moved out of the formerly black urban neighborhoods, leaving the destitute in their wake. The residents of the ghettos faced critical problems such as high crime and unemployment, broken families, poorly maintained housing, and feelings of powerlessness. (365-366)

These socioeconomic conditions play an important role in the eventual uprising. As mentioned above, out of these frustrations, a new type of racial revolt, the black urban "riot", was created.

The explosion in Watts was a clear indication that the tactics that Civil Rights leaders were using to combat racism in the South were not effective in the urban ghettos of the North. As Marable points out, "even before the assassination of Malcolm, many social critics sensed that nonviolent direct action, a tactic of protest used effectively in the South, would have little appeal in the northern ghetto" (90). The urban social upheavals were signs of cracks in the social system of the United States that frequently rose to the surface in the sixties and were a recurrent feature in many of the big urban centres between 1964 and 1968. James Baldwin predicted in 1963 that urban uprisings would in a few years "spread to every metropolitan center in the nation which has a significant Negro population" (qtd. in Marable 90). His prediction was proven right, as the report of Harding, Kelley, and Lewis depicts, the unrest spread to more cities in the coming years, such as Watts, Los Angeles, in 1965, which turned out to be the most devastating. The flames of these violent mass protests did not stop here, but spread to more cities such as Chicago, Cambridge (Maryland), Providence, Hartford (Connecticut), San Francisco, Phoenix, and Detroit. The human fatalities and financial damage left as a result of these riots were staggering. Experts and social workers were left confused by the uprisings, which raised some of the following questions for them:

Why burn building in 'their own' communities? What did they want? Were these 'disturbances' merely a series of violent orgies led by young hoodlums out for television sets and a good time, or were they protest movements? (Harding, Kelley, and Lewis 523).

These questions undervalued these acts of self-destruction by representing them as aimless and destructive, while they were in fact symbolic acts of protest and resistance

against the dire conditions black people were living in and needed to be treated seriously as protest movements. Although the black middle class was benefiting from the advances of integration, affirmative action policies, and a strong economy, the black poor were not sharing in these benefits.

In *A Song Flung up to Heaven*, the Watts riot is narrated differently to the two assassination episodes in the autobiography. Both of the assassination narratives are retold in the same pattern, in which the author hears about the assassination from a third person and involves readers with the aftermath of the tragic events. Unlike their style of narration, the riot is chronicled differently, as Angelou was in midst of the locale before and after the riots break out. Although she did not witness the actual event that initiated the riot, her visits to Watts give her the opportunity to depict the situation pre- and post-riot. She combines this pre-narration and post-narration style to reconstruct the mood and atmosphere of the time the riots occurred.

As previously mentioned, Angelou was welcomed back to the United States with the protest slogan "burn, baby, burn" setting the mood of the decade. This famous slogan, which was originally the catchphrase of disc jockey Magnificent Montague earlier in 1965, came to represent the mood of rebellion and protest of the time. In his article on the twentieth anniversary of the riots for the *Los Angeles Times*, Bob Baker explained the background story to the popularity of the catchphrase:

Montague's phrase had been on the streets for months before the Watts blew up. He had thrown it into his patter years earlier, in Chicago and New York, but in Los Angeles he added a twist: He invited his primarily black teen-age listeners to telephone KGFJ during his morning show and participate. ... The intensity of the show formed an unusual bond between the performer and his audience, as the riot progressed and '*Burn, baby, burn!*' became an instant national symbol of urban rebellion, it became easy to presume that the disc jockey had somehow helped kindle or at least sustain the rioting. (1)

As Bob Baker points out here, Montague had no role in promoting the slogan as a protest symbol, but the phrase spoke to the protesters. The catchphrase that became the slogan of a movement took a completely new meaning, as Angelou stated earlier in her autobiography; it represented a change in the method of resistance from the Civil Rights movement's nonviolence to Black Power's self-defence: "sit-in" to "set-fire" and "march-in" to "break-in" (*A Song* 5). Ironically, it captured the mood of the time from two opposite perspectives. From one side, the slogan's significance was realized as a symbol of black people taking control of their destiny and empowerment, while on the other hand it was a reminder of decades of dissatisfaction, protest, and destruction.

The reason for Angelou being in Watts around the time of the riots is connected to the assassination of Malcolm X. Angelou attempted to separate herself from the chaotic political scene in the wake of Malcolm's death. She finally decided to stay in Los Angeles to continue her writing career. As a means of making a living, she was assigned to Watts as a market researcher to collect data from the community for Random Research. This gave Angelou the chance to get to know the Watts community from close up before the riots broke out and it also gave the opportunity for comparing the situation of Watts in 1965 to her own previous perception of the area.

The overcrowding of the neighbourhood was the first change Angelou noticed on her visits. In their book *Ghetto Revolts: The Politics of Violence in American Cities*, Joe R. Feagin and Harlan Hahn explain that the cause of this overpopulation was due to the migration of the black middle class out of the neighbourhood, leaving behind the poor black people (4). These ghettos became overcrowded with an increasing number of poor black migrants, who had left the South for the North in the hopes of providing themselves a life of equal opportunity, but were faced with limited resources in the big

cities. In his article "Los Angeles (California) Riots of 1965", John G. Hall looks at the city of Los Angeles and its long history of racial division. Like the above critics, he concludes:

Los Angeles became one of the most segregated cities in the United States, and once the boom from the war industry was over, the majority of lucrative employment went to European-Americans while non-Europeans, particularly African- and Mexican-Americans became increasingly impoverished. (371-372)

The neighbourhood of Watts was one of the worst to suffer, and Angelou attempts to present a real picture of this overcrowded poverty-stricken area in her narration of the events prior to the uprising.

Through her survey, Angelou gets a closer look at the living conditions of the black communities in Watts. Although, as Angelou points out, the families came from different backgrounds, the problems are common between most of them, such as the high unemployment rate and poor public transportation. In Angelou's words, "I had gone to Watts to fulfill the demands of my job and had gotten so much more" (*A Song* 63). She tries to describe the circumstances of the families she met before the riots broke out: "I found hardworking women and hard-thinking women. Indirectly, I met their men, whose jobs had disappeared and who found they were unable to be breadwinners in their own homes" (*A Song* 63-64). The issue of the unemployment of black men and its effect on their families is further investigated by Angelou:

Some men, embarrassed at their powerlessness, became belligerent, and their wives' bodies showed the extent of their anger. Some, feeling futile, useless, left home, left the places where they read disappointment in every face and heard shame in every voice. Some drank alcohol until they reached the stage of stupor where they could not see or hear and certainly not think. (*A Song* 64)

Angelou is here attempting to demonstrate that the consequence of the loss of jobs for these black men was more than the loss of economic security. Their unemployment is a sign of the loss of their pride and masculinity, which leads to them weakening their

family structure through domestic violence, abuse, drunkenness, and finally the abandonment of their loved ones. Angelou is not alone in her observation of the cause of the riots. Critics such as David O. Sears and John B. McConahay, Joe R. Feagin and Harlan Hahn, and Gerald Horne and Robert M. Fogelson, to name just a few, share her opinion of the common problems such as unemployment, economic instability, and broken families as the roots that lay behind the eruption of the uprising.

In *We Ain't What We Ought to Be: The Black Freedom Struggle from Emancipation to Obama*, historian Stephen Tuck explains that the rebellion started five days after President Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (324-325). As discussed in the previous chapter, legally racial discrimination was over with the passing of the Civil Rights bills; however, the black masses were still fighting inequality and prejudice in their daily life. The Watts riot was a sign of protest and rebellion towards the continuing racism black Americans faced in the United States. The incident that caused the actual protests to start was a typical traffic stop, which went beyond the control of the police on the scene. As Christopher Strain reports, in his book *Pure Fire: Self-Defense as Activism in the Civil Rights Era*, on the 11th of August 1965, Marquette Freye was stopped for speeding and reckless driving by Officer Lee Minikus. Strain describes that by the time the police tried to arrest Freye for speeding and driving under influence, the situation had got out of control, as Freye's family were on the scene and they were joined by a huge number of spectators from the Watts neighbourhood (129). The crowd became more hostile as the police treatment of Freye came under question. For Angelou's readers, the reminder of this type of police violence and brutality through her writing is very similar to scenes of the Rodney King case in the riots of 1992, which might make the events at Watts more tangible and easier to understand.

In a letter, Angelou wrote to Julian Mayfield on the 12th of August 1965, she describes the cause of the protest: "There is a riot in town today, started last night. Police brutality brought it on" ("Julian Mayfield Papers" Sc MG 339/Box 4). The timing of the letter is important as it was written a day after the Watts uprising began. This brief reference to the riot could be because it was still just the early days of the protest. However, it signifies the importance of the news, that it was reported by Angelou to Mayfield, who was not in the United States at the time. Langston Hughes also reported on the significance of the uprising just a few months later, in "Reflections on Watts", written on the 9th of October 1965 for *The Chicago Defender*:

I [Hughes] am not surprised that there was, a few weeks ago, an anti-white, anti-police riot in Watts. When I lived there, its police precinct was felt by Negroes to be the worst in Los Angeles. Its officers were the quickest to beat black heads and the personnel of its cops was most Southern in attitudes and composition, consisting mostly of whites from Texas and Louisiana. (10)

Hughes's understanding of the reasons for the insurgence shows the extent to which police brutality against African Americans was typical, especially in Los Angeles, at the time. Like Angelou's autobiography, Hughes's column aimed to raise social awareness of such discrimination through his writing.

Angelou's first reports on the Watts riots pay attention to white people's lack of knowledge about the existence of Watts. Newscasters report the situation in such a way – "There is full-blown riot in Watts. Watts is an area in Southeast Los Angeles. Its residents are predominately Negroes" (*A Song* 67) – as to emphasize their naivety about the existence of this neighbourhood in their own city. On the 50th anniversary of the Watts uprising, the *Los Angeles Times* published a special issue, which collected the front pages of their newspaper coverage of the event at the time. The headlines that they ran through the five days of unrest echo Angelou's anxiety over their biased coverage of

the event. Some of the headlines are as follows: "August 12, 1965: 1000 Riot in L.A., Police and Motorist Attacked", "August 13, 1965: New Rioting, Stores Looted, Cars Destroyed," "August 14, 1965: Eight Men Slain; Guard Moves In", "August 15, 1965: Negro Riots Rage on; Death Toll 25", "August 16, 1965: Rioting Shifts to Long Beach", and "August 17, 1965: Brown Declares: Riot is Over" (*Los Angeles Times* Staff). The headlines broadcast five days of destruction, looting, murder, and riot without giving the black perspective, which further supports Angelou's aim in writing about the event thirty-seven years later to correct the one-dimensional view the media presented of the protest. Angelou interprets this type of news broadcasting as a sign of the ignorance on the part of white people about minorities in their society:

That description was for the millions of the whites who lived in Los Angeles but had no idea that Watts existed and certainly no awareness that it was a parcel of the city and only a short ride from their own communities. (*A Song* 67)

However, the ignorance about the reality of the situation in Watts was not just restricted to the media. It was even evident in the attitude of white policymakers and the police force: "'You have nothing to fear. The police have been deployed to Watts, and in a few hours we will have everything under control'" (*A Song* 67). The estimation that police could control a "full-blown riot" in just a few hours shows the extent of their ignorance. Their unrealistic prediction sets the scene for a more violent and out-of-control situation:

The rioters had abandoned all concern for themselves, for their safety and freedom. Some threw rocks, stones, cans of beer and soda at police in cars and police on foot. Heavily burdened people staggered out the doors of supermarkets, followed by billows of smoke. Men and women carried electrical appliances in their arms, and some pushed washers and dryers down the middle of the street. (*A Song* 67-68)

This chaotic scene is a sign of a community under enormous pressure that has been pushed to the brink. It demonstrates the result of discrimination based on the intersection of race and class. The attacks on businesses are signs of the economic pressures that

these black communities were suffering from. Harding, Kelley, and Lewis describe the extent of poverty in these black neighbourhoods:

Dilapidated, rat-infested housing, poor and overcrowded schools, the lack of city services, and the disappearance of high-wage jobs in inner-city communities all contributed to the expansion of urban poverty and deprivation. (523)

Such economic hardship was a central cause of the frustrations that erupted as a result of police brutality. The protesters were demanding attention to their problems and their concerns with the lack of equality between white people and black people. Angelou captures the mood of the riots in the following passage:

Sirens screamed through the night, and television screens showed gangs of young men refusing to allow fire trucks a chance to put out fires. 'Burn, baby, burn.' The instruction came clear over the radios: 'Burn, baby, burn.' Certain political analysts observed that the people were burning their own neighborhood. Though few houses were set afire, the rioters considered the stores, including supermarkets, property of the colonialists who had come into the neighborhood to exploit them and take their hard-earned money. (*A Song* 68-69)

The observation here is significant. Angelou is referring to the self-destructive characteristic of these riots. However, unlike the political analysts in this passage, she distinguishes between burning and stealing from residential houses and commercial businesses in the neighbourhood. The rioters attacked mainly the businesses that represented the white monopoly over their neighbourhood. This act of self-destruction thus became a symbolic act of protest and resistance. Strain also summarizes this understanding of the uprising: "the Watts conflagration may have not been so much a 'riot' but a defensive reaction: a collective expression of self-defense" (136), which can be seen in Angelou's observation of the uprising. Similar to the above observations, Hughes also sees the rebellion of Watts as an act of protest against white supremacy:

The riots in Watts were on a black-white basis, too, the residents of Watts against the white shop keepers who, oddly, almost always seem to charge a few cents more for commodities than is charged in white neighborhoods; and against the cop who, regrettably, almost always seem

to beat or shoot Negroes quicker than white [*sic*] are beaten or shot.
("Reflections on Watts" 10)

Through his analysis, Hughes confirms the concept of the unrest being symbolic acts of self-defence against the white domination over the economy of the neighbourhood, as well as the police violence the Watts residents had to endure.

Angelou decided to visit Watts herself after two days of rioting. While there, she was in a near encounter with a police raid:

The loud whine of police sirens was so close it stabbed into my ears. Policemen in gas masks emerged out of the smoke, figures from a nightmare. Alarm flooded me, and in a second I was dislocated. It seemed that sirens were in my nose, and smoke packed my ears like cotton. Two policemen grabbed a person in front of me. They dragged the man away as he screamed, 'Take your hands off me, you bastard! Let me go!' (*A Song* 70)

Angelou's account of her experience in Watts as it was engulfed in riots reveals some of the police brutality black people encountered. The scenes she observes are dramatic and her sense of dislocation is due to her observation of police violence on home turf, rather than in enemy lines, which further emphasizes the discrimination of the police force towards black Americans. The media coverage of the raid gives another angle to what Angelou witnessed:

The national guard was shown arriving in Watts. They were young men who showed their daring on their faces but fear in their hearts. They were uncomfortable with new, heavy responsibilities and new, heavy guns. After three days the jail began to fill. The media covered hundreds of looters being arrested. ... [T]he rumor in the neighborhood beauty salons and barbershops was that the police was arresting anyone black and those suspected of being black. (*A Song* 71)

These observations show that the situation was not handled properly by the lawmakers, and black people were treated even worse than before. The need for the national guard is a sign of the extent of force and violence used to bring back order. Angelou questions the need to exert so much power when the protesters were young civilians who were forced to defend themselves. It is a sign of their dissatisfaction with the lack of progress

and a transition towards Black Power's self-defence tactics, which Strain also points to in coverage of the riot (141). Hughes also presents this mistrust of police officers:

Those of us [black people] who lived in Watts then, thought the police attitude was, 'All Negroes are criminals,' and that our trial might be held before we were even taken to the station. The police were seldom gentle when they arrested Negroes. ("Reflections on Watts" 10)

Hughes reveals the extent of the discrimination and violence police showed towards black people is at the root of the lack of trust racial minorities have towards the police force.

Angelou transfers her emotion about what she witnessed at Watts by writing a poem, and the last stanza captures the mood of the protests. It represents Angelou's political perspective on not only Watts, but also the many similar uprisings in Detroit, Newark, and New York during the 1960s:

Lighting: a hundred Watts
Detroit, Newark and New York
Screeching nerves, exploding minds
lives tied to
a policeman's whistle
a welfare worker's doorbell
finger. (*A Song* 74)¹

As she observes, the lives of black people in these ghettos depend on and are in the control of policy makers and lawmakers who have no real knowledge of their everyday struggles. Through such vocabulary as "lighting", "screeching nerves", and "exploding minds", Angelou attempts to depict the urban unrest on the verge of explosion, which needs immediate attention to stop further damage.

¹ This poem was first written as part of Angelou's first collection of poems, *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diiie*, published in 1971. The title of the poem is "Riot: 60's", which shows that before writing the final part of her autobiography her thoughts about the riots were reflected in this poem. In addition, by the time she was writing *A Song Flung up to Heaven*, her readers were familiar with her poems. This is the first time Angelou combines her poetry and autobiography by borrowing from her own poems.

Angelou attempts to review the development of the protests and rioting from both of her visits to Watts:

On the first day of insurgency, people of all ages allowed their rage to drive them to the streets. But on the fourth day, the anger of the older citizens was spent. I read sadness and even futility on their faces. But I saw no one attempt to dissuade the young rioters from the hurly-burly behavior. (*A Song* 76-77)

This observation shows how the protest lost its earlier momentum as it continued for more than one day. The protest had not met the expectation of all the people involved. Angelou demonstrates the division between the young and old and their outlook on the progress of the rioting. The older and more experienced are aware of the ineffectiveness of the riot continuing for longer; however, they are reluctant to guide the inexperienced younger generation. Angelou also shows the change in the direction of protest, from anger and frustration at the lack of progress in the neighbourhood, towards chaotic and disorderly behaviour on the part of the youth. The following statement sums up Angelou's opinion on the results of the multiple days of protesting: "The upheaval continued in volume and drama for five days, and although the violence waned, the frustration was as pervasive as ever" (*A Song* 77). In her opinion, the physical damage to the neighbourhood was massive; however, the last part of the observation is the most important part of her conclusion that the real cause of the "frustration" was not solved by the political leaders and continued to plague the community.

Instead, she declares that the solutions were coming from within the black community's efforts to rebuild their neighbourhood:

But talking drums of the black community carried the message loud and clear. The rebellion reached some important ears, and things were going to change. Community spokespersons said what was needed most was a medical clinic so that sick people didn't have to travel two or three hours just to see a doctor. The unemployed wanted jobs, the underemployed wanted better jobs. (*A Song* 79)

Angelou is not clear who exactly she is referring to by using an Africanist reference, "talking drums", but it can be gathered that is referring to the black leaders of the community who spread the protestors' message through their speeches. However, Angelou brings to her readers' attention that the problems would not all be solved overnight. In a series of questions, she examines how the reality after the riots is not much different from before for the people in Watts: "Who would answer all the questions, fulfill all the requests? Would anyone? Could anyone? History had taught the citizens of Watts to hope for the best and expect nothing, but be prepared for the worst" (*A Song* 79). Her reflections on the protests and their outcome are not only related to her experiences at this particular uprising but also include all the consequent riots that have happened since Watts until the present. Using the Watts riots as the prototype of race riots, these consequent rhetorical questions are Angelou's style of asking her readers to evaluate how much progress the post-racial society of the twenty-first century has made, since similar riots still happen frequently. The last sentence is her verdict on the uprising, and she makes it clear that rioting does not change the situation of black people for the better, as they should "be prepared for the worst".

However, she does not simply project a pessimistic outlook towards the future of Watts. This positive attempt to bring change is because of the awareness that the riots raised about the realities of living in Watts: "A shaft of sunlight penetrated the gloom of cynicism when Budd Schulberg, an award-winning writer, went to Watts and founded the Watts Writers Workshop" (*A Song* 80). Angelou's mention of this writing workshop is a sign of her approval of such improvements for the community of Watts, especially through the act of writing. Smethurst also portrays the importance of the Watts Writers Workshop, which began as a creative response to the devastating uprising (303-304).

Similarly to Angelou, he discusses the significance of this group at such a crucial time for the community of Watts:

[T]he high profile of the Watts Writers Workshop made available to black artists across the United States... an image (and model) of a new black cultural movement. This movement represented the conditions and moods of urban black America in a range of voices that were urgent, but also stylistically varied and formally and ideologically sophisticated. ... The power of this image was due in part to the workshop's connections in various mass cultural industries, the prominence of Watts as an emblem of black unrest after the 1965 uprising, and the public and private money made available to African American cultural initiatives in Southern California after the uprising. (316)

Smethurst shows the significance of the Watts Writers Workshop in bringing activism and art together, as has always been the aim of the Black Arts movement. He further explains that the reason the workshop was a success with the black youth of Watts was that it inspired them to write "about their own experiences in their own voices" (304), which was also the aim of Angelou through her writing. Angelou believed the writing workshop was a way to create a space for young, frustrated black Americans to explore their creativity and interest in continuing their education, and provide them with more opportunities. The writing workshop is, however, mainly significant as it resonates with Angelou's writing project and her attempts to continue her activism through her writing.

Thus, through the narration of her despair with the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King and the Watts riots of 1965, Angelou brings her readers to the point that her political activism will carry on with her writing. Disappointed with how her attempts at grassroots activism have not been effective, it is through the transition to writing and intellectual activism that her legacy will last for generations to come. She reinforces this transition to writing through James Baldwin's voice as advice not only for herself, but also more importantly for her young readers:

'We put surviving into our poems and into our songs. We put it into our folk tales. We danced surviving in Congo Square in New Orleans and put it in our pots when we cooked pinto beans. We wore surviving on our

backs when we clothed ourselves in the colors of the rainbow. We were pulled down so low we could hardly lift our eyes, so we knew, if we wanted to survive, we had better lift our own spirits. So we laughed whenever we got the chance.' (*A Song* 199)

This advice from Baldwin was given to her after King's assassination, and it emphasizes the tradition of survival that African Americans have carried with them throughout the centuries since the time of slavery. Through Baldwin, Angelou is paying tribute to African American cuisine, culture, and lifestyle for being symbols of their resistance, but most importantly their arts: "We put surviving into our poems and into our songs. We put it into our folk tales." This has been the message of Angelou's "caged bird" from the first volume to its finale, singing of freedom, survival and resistance.

Conclusion

The concluding pages of *A Song Flung up to Heaven* are a tribute to the writing of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. As mentioned earlier, in the tradition of the *Künstlerroman*, it brings the journey of her artist/activist identity full circle with the writing of her first book. As discussed earlier in the chapter, the connection between the two volumes goes beyond the similarities in the source for their titles. Not only is the title of the final volume paying tribute to the initial one, as both are chosen from the poem "Sympathy" by Paul Laurence Dunbar, but Angelou also concludes her serial autobiography with the final sentence of her sixth volume being the initial line of her first autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*: "What you looking at me for. I didn't come to stay" (*A Song* 212). This line, which comes from a poem young Maya sings at the Easter church service, is reminding her readers of her commitment as a writer/activist in bearing witness to the ordeals of the black community through her serial autobiography. With this circular ending, Angelou is acknowledging how her role as an intellectual activist began with the writing of her first autobiography.

Using the narrated "I", she reflects on the impact of three major events in the collective history of African Americans during the Civil Rights decade. While in the contemporary era, the Civil Rights decade is mostly remembered for its achievements, Angelou focuses on three tragic events that significantly affected the resistance movement. By narrating the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., and the Watts uprising, she assesses the impact of these significant events on the trajectory of the black liberation movement, but also the narrating "I" uses these historical moments to reflect on the illusion of a colourblind, post-racial society in the contemporary era. With the threat of this new form of racism, Angelou does not idealize the memory of the sixties, which was a significant period in the collective memory of African American history. She raises awareness by reminding her readers to learn from the past in order to make progress in the future. In her essay "Learning from the 60s", Lorde also reminds us of the significance of building on the experiences of past generations:

We do not have to romanticize our past in order to be aware of how it seeds our present. We do not have to suffer the waste of an amnesia that robs us of the lessons of the past rather than permit us to read them with pride as well as deep understanding. (139)

In the context of the contemporary era, the role of intellectual activists such as Angelou is integral for black Americans in order to be aware of their rich history and culture and to avoid the setbacks of their ancestors, by building on their tradition of resistance and resilience.

Conclusion

"A Brave and Startling Truth": The Legacy and New Ventures of Angelou's Intellectual Activism

The thought of only being a creature of the present and the past was troubling. I longed for a future too, with hope in it. The desire to be free, awakened my determination to act, to think, and to speak.

- Frederick Douglass (Angelou, *Letter to My Daughter*)¹

The above quotation from Frederick Douglass was used by Angelou in an essay titled "Fannie Lou Hamer" in her collection of essays *Letter to My Daughter*, published in 2008. Besides *Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey* (1993) and *Even the Stars Look Lonesome* (1997), this is the last collection of personal essays Angelou wrote. During the latter part of her career, these collections help to promote the inspirational guru persona of Angelou that her readers are familiar with, especially on her lecture tours, which she began during the 1990s. In contrast to autobiography, the essay's short format gives Angelou the chance to explore this aspect of her persona through sharing vignettes of her personal wisdom. While Angelou did not have a daughter, the title of her last collection is referencing to not only her role as a spiritual mentor but also a mother figure for her many readers, especially women: "I gave birth to one child, a son, but I have thousands of daughters" (*Letter* x-xi). Like the previous collections, Angelou as a role model is passing her wisdom to the next generation in this book.

The mentioned essay is dedicated to honouring Hamer's contribution to the Civil Rights movement, and especially her organization of the Mississippi Democratic

¹ This quotation is a shortened version of a longer quotation from Frederick Douglass's second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (273-274).

Freedom Party. More importantly, Angelou is paying tribute to the rich tradition of black activists, with reference to both Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman in this essay. Throughout her career, this has been a mission of her intellectual activism; like Alice Walker in her essay, "Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View", famously said of remembering the legacy of Hurston: "*A people do not throw their geniuses away. And if they are thrown away, it is our duty as artists and as witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children, and, if necessary bone by bone*" (93). As we have seen, this devotion to remembering the contributions of other influential African American artists/activists, who have devoted their lives to their fight for social justice such as Rosa Guy, Abbey Lincoln and Julian Mayfield, was a major feature of Angelou's career, especially in her autobiographical series.

This research has demonstrated the significance of Angelou's contributions as an intellectual activist since the beginning of her career. Although Angelou has been recognized as a successful author, publishing more than thirty books and winning numerous awards, the aim of this research has been to bring attention to her role as a writer/activist in her serial autobiography and her representation of her development as an intellectual activist. In this context, Angelou's reference to Douglass resonates with the aim of merging her writing with her activism. In his book *Frederick Douglass' Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee*, David W. Blight explains the significance of this particular quotation in regards to Douglass's decision to write his autobiography:

Throughout his life Douglass was acutely aware that one of the most important contributions he could make was to tell his own story. As the author of three autobiographies, he repeatedly re-created himself, linking the past with the present. But the autobiographies were more than attempts to preside over his biographers, to write his own personal history, and to search for his sense of self. They were a means to yoke the

aspirations of his people – their future – with the model of his own past.
(73)

As Blight explains, the form of autobiography became an important tool of activism since it has the potential to connect the past to the present and to the future. Dating back to slave narratives, this tradition of counter-hegemonic writing is not only about preserving the culture and identity of an oppressed group of people, it is more importantly about motivating the next generation of artists/activists to continue the struggle. The contribution of contemporary intellectual activists such as Angelou is a reminder of the importance of expanding this tradition of resistance in the present time, especially with the threat of a colourblind, post-racial America in the twenty-first century. Reading the autobiographies as a series and as a mode of intellectual activism, this thesis highlights the necessity of interpreting Angelou's political voice in relation to the social and political discourse of the late 1960s to the contemporary era through discussing the complexities of the intersection of race, gender, and class.

While this research has focused on Angelou's autobiographical oeuvre, there have been some passing references to her poetry and essay collections, which contribute to the argument of her political writing. In the search for Angelou's political voice, this thesis has made a distinction between the persona of the protagonist of her autobiographical writing versus the inspirational guru persona of the author in her popular ventures such as her lecture tours, the essay collections and the Hallmark merchandise project, the *Maya Angelou Life Mosaic Collection* in 2002. As discussed in the Introduction, even the posthumous publication of the collection of quotes *Rainbow in a Cloud: The Wisdom and Spirit of Maya Angelou* in 2014 by Angelou's family is directing the attention to the popularity of this spiritual icon that Angelou had become. However, besides her prominent autobiographical oeuvre, the extent of Angelou's intellectual activism can be traced throughout her illustrious career in other forms of

writing as well, such as poetry and cookbooks, which show the potential for further research, extending beyond her autobiographical series. The remainder of this concluding chapter briefly discusses how the public performances of her poetry such as the inaugural poem, "On the Pulse of the Morning", her influence on hip-hop music especially in the posthumous collaborated project of the album, *Caged Bird Songs*, that combined a selected number of her poems with hip-hop, and her cookbook, *Hallelujah! The Welcome Table: A Lifetime of Memories with Recipes*, add other dimensions to her role as an intellectual activist.

In 1993, Angelou became the second poet, the first black American and the first woman, when she performed her poem "On the Pulse of Morning" at the inauguration of President Bill Clinton.² Her public performance of this poem was highly acclaimed as she used her previous experiences in acting and public speaking in the reading of the poem. Lupton sees the poem as symbolic of the message of unity and hope that surrounded the new administration of President Clinton (20). Besides the political message of the poem, Lupton connects Angelou's performance to the African American oral tradition such as "when slaves like Frederick Douglass stood on platforms in abolitionist meeting halls to register their concerns about the slave system", and praises Angelou's performance for paying tribute to the "rhetorical grace of African American sermons", which has been used in the speeches of great African American leaders, such as Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Jesse Jackson, and Louis Farrakhan (20). Angelou's ability to use this public performance as part of her political message is a credit to her for reinforcing the significance of the African American tradition of protest and resistance through oratory skills on a national and international public stage. While her ability to perform the poem as part of her political message resonates with the Black

² Robert Frost was the first inaugural poet at the 1961 inauguration of President John F. Kennedy.

Arts movement's preference for poetry in combining their art and activism, it is noteworthy to point out that her selection for this role was underpinned by her popularity as a feminist icon and spiritual mentor during the 1990s. Besides this public performance, Angelou also performed the poem "A Brave and Startling Truth" for the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations, and the poem "A Black Woman Speaks to a Black Manhood" at the Million Man March demonstration, both in 1995. These contemporary performances and the specific political message of their poem, regarding the state of world's politics or racial discourse in America, further demonstrate the important role Angelou plays as a public poet and an intellectual activist in echoing the important message of "art for people's sake" of the Black Arts era.

In addition to these public performances, Angelou's influence on the genre of hip-hop is important as part of expanding her didacticism through combining her poetry with this style of music. As the poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Georgia Douglass Johnson inspired Angelou to title her autobiographies after their works as a way to pay tribute to these influential African American poets, Angelou's own poetry has been the inspiration for many hip-hop/rap musicians such as Tupac Shakur, Nicki Minaj, and Kanye West. She even collaborated with Common on his song, "The Dreamer" in 2011 in which Angelou recites a poem at the end of the track. Through this type of collaboration, Angelou is emphasizing a deep connection between hip-hop and the tradition of African American poetry. In his article, "A Brief History of How Maya Angelou Influenced Hip Hop", Nolan Feeney quotes Angelou on the significance of this connection: "'Take 'A Negro Love Song' by Paul Laurence Dunbar. Mr. Dunbar wrote this poem in 1892. It could have been written last week for Queen Latifah, or M.C. Hammer or L. L. Cool J or whoever they are'" (n.pag.). Angelou's reference to Dunbar's poetry is important as it explains that for this new generation of black artists, hip-hop is

more than just making music for pleasure and has deep roots in the tradition of black American culture and art. In the introduction to her book, *Pulse of the People: Political Rap Music and Black Politics*, Lakeyta M. Bonnette explains that hip-hop continues the Black Arts movement's goal in bringing politics and art together in the modern era:

Like the Black Arts Movement, Hip-Hop was ... seen as the cultural extension of politics in the Black community. Within the Hip-Hop culture of break dancing, disc jockeying, rapping, and graffiti one could observe the political sentiments, issues, and desires of the urban Black community. ... [I]t is ... effective as a cultural platform from which its artists can advocate for the involvement and resistance of those who are marginalized and alienated in the United States and abroad. (2)

Similar to how poetry was an important medium for Black Arts artists, hip-hop, as a medium of protest, is used by these musicians/activists to raise awareness about the economical, social and political struggles of black Americans in the contemporary era.

Angelou realised the power that hip-hop music and culture had in influencing a new generation of Black Americans, which can be seen in her posthumous collaboration with musicians Shawn Rivera and RoccStar in mixing her poetry and vocals with hip-hop, in a joint album, *Caged Bird Songs* (2014) – as a tribute to Angelou's famous first autobiography. This album was one of the last projects that Angelou was working on before her death and it contains thirteen of Angelou's poems, such as "Harlem Hopscotch" and her famous poem, "Still I Rise". Colin Johnson, Angelou's grandson, who took over the project after Angelou passed away, emphasizes the importance of this collaboration on the website of the album: "With [Angelou's] dedication to social activism and how she illuminated the struggles and injustices of the urban experience through prose, there's a direct correlation to hip-hop today" (*Caged Bird Songs*, n.pag.). Making her poetry available in this new format of hip-hop is Angelou's way of adapting her intellectual activism to new and popular mediums in order to convey her message to a new audience of young Black Americans growing up with hip-hop music.

As seen with hip-hop, her last ventures were not limited to conventional literary forms, as she embarked on new projects such as publishing her first cookbook: *Hallelujah: The Welcome Table: A Lifetime of Recipes with Memories* (2004).³ Similarly, this new medium also allowed Angelou to find new and innovative ways to explore her intellectual activism, while also reaching a new audience through combining it with her interest in cooking. As Stamant emphasizes, while the cookbook seems a departure from her usual form of writing, it was in fact a natural expansion of her autobiographical series:

[W]hen placed alongside Angelou's other self-referential texts, these culinary memories expand her autobiographical project's experiments in the kind of mode that makes the most sense for her; when read as a collection of episodes, they are an addition to and variation on Angelou's serial memoir. (56)

While the autobiographical series ended with *A Song Flung up to Heaven*, this new form of experimentation made it possible for Angelou to continue her didactic aims in writing, raising awareness of the traditions and culture of black Americans in contemporary readers, via the popular form of a cookbook. Smith and Watson point to the popularity of the food memoir in the present time, which has its roots in early forms of cookbooks and eating diaries (148). The importance of these early version of cookbooks is also discussed by Janet Theophano in her book *Eat My Words: Reading Women's Lives Through the Cookbooks They Wrote*: "For hundreds of years, women of diverse backgrounds have found the homely cookbook a suitable place to record their stories and thoughts as well as their recipes" (1). Besides the important act of preserving recipes for future generations, their cookbooks provided these women with a space to discuss their personal, social, and political thoughts.

³ In 2010, she published another cookbook, titled *Great Food, All Day Long: Cook Splendidly, Eat Smart*.

Hallelujah! The Welcome Table consists of twenty-eight recipes, each of which is centred on special memories. Each of the recipes acts as a medium for remembering a specific moment in Angelou's life. Most of the collected memories are new episodes that have not been shared in her autobiographies, but some will be familiar to her avid followers. These revisited segments of her life are retold with the food becoming the centralizing motif. The recipes in this memoir were mainly collected from four different sources: her grandmother, Momma; her mother, Vivian; the author, Angelou; and her friends. Through matrilineality and sharing recipes from these different generations, Angelou celebrates African American tradition and culture, challenging conventional stereotypes of African Americans and preserving the lifestyle of previous generations of Black women.

In conclusion, the impact Angelou's literary career has had on her audiences over the years can be seen in the two memorial services which were held for her after her death on the 28th of May, 2014.⁴ A wide range of literary and political figures paid tribute to Angelou and her writing career in both ceremonies, such as former President Bill Clinton and his wife Hillary Clinton, former First Lady Michelle Obama, Angelou's close friend Oprah Winfrey, actress Cicely Tyson, and distinguished authors Toni Morrison and Nikki Giovanni. However, Michelle Obama best captured the extent of the impact Angelou's writing has had on changing the lives of black Americans in the moving tribute she gave at the first memorial service at Wake Forest University in North Carolina, on the 7th of June 2014: "For me that was the power of Maya Angelou's words – words so powerful that they carried a little black girl from the South Side of Chicago all the way to the White House" (n. pag.). Since *I Know Why the Caged Bird*

⁴ The first memorial service was held on the 7th of June 2014, at Wake Forest University, North Carolina, where she taught for thirty years. The second memorial service was at New York's Riverside Church on the 12th of September 2014, and was hosted by the Schomburg Center, Random House, Medgar Evers College, and Angelou's family (Lupton 178).

Sings, it was the mission of Angelou's writing career to inspire her readers through her intellectual activism to create a better future for themselves, and this testimony is proof of that.

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