

WHAT WAS LEFT TO SAY: RESISTANCE AND IDENTITY IN
MAYA ANGELOU'S ORATORY

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Introduction

Born on April 4, 1928, Maya Angelou set out to become one of the most influential and adored Americans in the world. Attempts to describe her would limit rather than broaden the understanding of her personality, life, and work. She became “the first black woman” in many things such as publishing best-selling autobiographies, movie producing, and cable cart conducting. She also featured as a dancer in *Porgy and Bess*, performed as a Calypso singer, and was a highly-acclaimed poet. She received more than 60 awards for her work.

Maya Angelou gave numerous interviews about her life and the lessons she had learned so far, always sharing her knowledge with the public and cooperating in interviews until her lungs prevented her from speaking. In these interviews, she would reflect on her publications and elaborate on the lessons she aimed to teach. It is clear that she was aware of her unique position and the broad audience she was able to reach through the media which extended beyond her written publications. Angelou’s published work has been analyzed and criticized endlessly. However, the content of her interviews and speeches has received less attention. This thesis will analyze how Maya Angelou’s broadcasted speeches between 1975-2014 contributed to representation of black culture.

This thesis contributes to the existing debate and research that has been done about Maya Angelou, her publications and legacy.¹ Angelou’s public appearances and the message she aimed to convey in the public spotlight has never been a prominent focus in previous research. An analysis of her oral stories creates an opportunity for

¹ Lupton, Mary J. *Maya Angelou: The Iconic Self*. California: Greenwood, 2016; Wagner-Martin, Linda. *Maya Angelou: Adventurous Spirit*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2016; Dolly McPherson, *Order Out of Chaos*, London: Little, Brown Book Group, 1991.

further research about the correlation between her written and spoken words. Moreover, Angelou often told stories that explained the reasoning behind her autobiographies. Analyzing this oratory contributes to the scholarly debate about her written works and provides a more complete picture of her life and legacy.

Scholars such as Marie J. Lupton, Linda Wagner-Martin and Dolly McPherson have written works analyzing Angelou's autobiographies and life. However, none of the academic works have analyzed the content of her interviews, speeches and her use of the public spotlight. Lupton provides a thorough literary analysis of each of Angelou's autobiographies. Wagner-Martin provides a more biographical account of Angelou's life but also bases it on her autobiographies predominantly. However, she does commit the last chapter of her book to Angelou's role as a "spirit leader" towards the end of her life yet uses the written works subsequent to the autobiographies as the main sources. Dolly Mcpherson provides great insight into the life and legacy of Maya Angelou but bases it on her autobiographical works. The analysis focuses on recurring themes throughout her works and Angelou's writing techniques. The abovementioned writers are the only ones that have published scholarly books published on Maya Angelou's autobiographical works.

Scholarly articles on Maya Angelou's legacy also predominantly focus on Maya Angelou's written works.² Even though the themes analyzed in this thesis correlate with those analyzed in her written works, none of them focus on her role in

² Catherine A. Dobris, "Maya Angelou Writing the 'Black Voice' for the Multicultural Community," *Howard Journal of Communications* 7, no. 1 (1996): 1-12; Oana Cogeana, "Maya Angelou: A Trickster's Tale," *A Quarterly of Language, Literature and Culture* 62, no. 4, (2014): 309-362; Fernanda L. Feneja, "The Power of Writing: Resistance in Maya Angelou's visit to the dentist," *Explorations: A Journal of Language and Literature* 4, (2016): 72-83.

the public spotlight, oral stories, and the way she contributed to the representation of black culture in the public media.

As Angelou was one of the first influential black people to appear on television, it is noteworthy to analyze the way she voiced her perspective on black culture, its rich history and (collective) identity and her contribution to change the dominant narrative in society. It also gives a more elaborate perspective on the different views between influential black people in the public media and the way they voiced their (diverse) opinions about the themes analyzed in this thesis. Furthermore, this thesis provides insight into the way Angelou drew from the African-American tradition of storytelling. It provides a historiography of the tradition and the way it evolved over time. Analyzing Angelou's oratory will give insight into the way she drew from this tradition in service of her goal to continue her activism for equal rights.

This research will focus on (inter)nationally broadcasted public appearances only, rather than locally broadcasted ones. This ensures that the content of her speeches and interviews were addressed to broad audiences. Based on the interviewees Angelou spoke with, she aimed to reach a diverse and broad audience. For example, a prominent interview this thesis draws from is the program "Going Home" with Bill Moyers, in which Angelou visits her hometown in Stamps, Arkansas with Moyers and tells him her stories about growing up in the Jim Crow South and her experiences with racism. Bill Moyers is a highly acclaimed journalist who reached into the homes of many Americans with programs such as *NOW with Bill Moyers*, *Bill Moyers Journal* and *Moyers & Company*. By appearing on shows such as these, Angelou was able to reach many more people with her stories than through her autobiographies only. Angelou also had an international focus as she appeared on

shows such as BBC's *HARDtalk* and *Mavis on Four* as well from early on in her career. At that time, these shows were not broadcasted in America yet which shows Angelou's aim to reach people outside of the United States as well.

I will argue that Maya Angelou consistently emphasized that she spoke from the first person singular for the third person plural, in line of the African American tradition of slave narratives in which enslaved people wrote down their personal stories, ultimately aiming to illustrate the horrors of slavery. Most importantly, this thesis will demonstrate that Maya Angelou used her role in the public spotlight in order to fight for equal rights by drawing from the African-American tradition of storytelling. By aiming to affect the representation of her race through storytelling, Angelou was able use her own experience, (the first person singular) as an archetype of black culture (the third person plural). Furthermore, Angelou transcended this tradition by rooting her stories in the black experience, and relaying touching messages with which any human being could identify. In this way, she continued her struggle for equal rights in the popular media in order to boost mutual understanding, thereby encouraging equality in the process. In her interviews and speeches, Angelou continuously emphasized her aim to make all human beings realize that "we are more alike than we are unlike"³.

It is important to note that cultural representation is an abstract concept which can be perceived in different ways. This thesis emphasizes Maya Angelou's *contribution* to the representation of black culture because there are many forms through which something can be represented. This is due to the fact that at the roots of representation lie in interpretation and perspective. Maya Angelou contributed to the

³ Maya Angelou, interview by Oprah Winfrey, *OWN*, YouTube, 1989.

representation of the black community through her interpretation of and perspective on it, which was highly personal. According to Ron Eyerman in *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*, the black community has struggled for representation since slavery.⁴ Furthermore, he argues that in this struggle to “be seen as well as heard”, the definer played an important role. Even though Maya Angelou contributed to the representation of black culture from a black perspective, it should be considered that the black community consists of a diverse people who perceive their culture differently. Phyllis R. Klotman and Janet K. Cutler contend in *Struggles for Representation: African American Documentary Film and Video* that “since there is no single, unchanging black community, the ‘burden of representation’ involves varying viewpoints, differing degrees of objectivity and subjectivity, and competing facts and fictions.”⁵

Maya Angelou’s perspective cannot fully encapsulate that of the black community’s perspective and is, therefore, limited in the extent to which it could affect representation. In a culture whose voice has been predominantly white, there was a “a vital need for African Americans to present their lives, past and future, as of equal importance in the ‘American story’.”⁶ Throughout history, black people have always resisted imposed silence and dehumanization through language. Enslaved people kept the oral tradition of storytelling alive and passed the tradition on to their descendants.⁷ Harriet Jacobs and Fredrick Douglass became important voices in the

⁴ Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009), 13.

⁵ Phyllis R. Klotman & Janet K. Cutler, *Struggles for Representation: African American Documentary Film and Video*. (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999), xxv.

⁶ Neil Campbell & Alasdair Kean, *American Cultural Studies: An Introduction to American Culture*. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 78.

⁷ *Ibid*, 81.

struggle to abolish slavery through their slave narratives. Resisting imposed silence through language is “about the transformation of the self from self-definition and being one’s subject.”⁸

Eyerman argues that “movement intellectuals and leaders” are crucial to the continuation of the representation of the collective identity and a shared past.⁹ Writers such as W.E.B. Du Bois, James Baldwin, bell hooks, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, resisted imposed silence through language in the way that their “expression provides a means of ‘claiming the I’ through telling personal and cultural histories that together form a vital strand of black experience not given space in traditional white history books.”¹⁰ Maya Angelou’s mastery of language and storytelling contributes to this tradition in her writings and oral stories.

During the Civil Rights Movement, African-American traditions such as song, storytelling and preaching became essential to the movement as “expression was a vital component of the political process.”¹¹ Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. used the African-American tradition of oratory to articulate the need for equal rights and recognition. Maya Angelou listened to these speeches and was convinced to become a civil rights activist herself. Part of the Civil Rights Movement’s goal was to deconstruct the imposed identity created by dominant white culture and to “[dismantle] the economic, legal and social aspects of racism.”¹²

⁸ Ibid, 86.

⁹ Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009), 21.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid, 92.

¹² Ibid, 100.

The Civil Rights Movement achieved ground-breaking progress in terms of ending legal segregation and earning the right to vote. However, the struggle for self-definition and voice continued in the post-civil-rights era. There was a strong need to continue the struggle “so as to have a voiced identity in a strong sense of the past, and to use it in the context of the world in which there are still many changes to be made.”¹³ Maya Angelou often talked about the success of the civil rights movement, but also emphasized that it was not finished yet. She argued that “we have made tremendous gains, not nearly enough as we want to, but tremendous gains.”¹⁴ However, much of the post-civil-rights era was about the struggle to defend the success of the movement. Eyerman contends that “[f]ighting old battles was the order of the day at the end of the century...the main battle in politics was trying to defend the gains of the 1960s and 1970s.”¹⁵ For this reason, it was important that black intellectuals held roles in the public spotlight in order to contribute to the representation of the black culture, to provide encouragement and function as role models who reminded the collective about “the pattern of resistance and the need to hold on to an identity despite the slave systems brutal attempts to erase it as crucially linked to the struggle of the 1950s and 1960s [and beyond].”¹⁶

Angelou continuously contributed to the representation of black history in connection to slavery and the African ancestry of black Americans. She was among the first influential black people to use the public spotlight to convey her pride in black resilience and African ancestry.

¹³ Neil Campbell & Alasdair Kean, *American Cultural Studies: An Introduction to American Culture*. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 101.

¹⁴ Maya Angelou, interview by Johnetta B. Cole, *Smithsonian Museum*, YouTube, 2014.

¹⁵ Stephen Tuck, *It Ain't What It Ought To Be*. (Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2010), 388.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Moreover, Angelou continued to use her public appearances as a civil rights diplomat. She told stories about her upbringing in the segregated South, gave insights into the lives of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., reflected on their collaborations and continued to speak out on the Civil Rights Movement's achievements and shortcomings.

The topics of Angelou's stories were also controversial during the time. Never before had a woman written an autobiography about the trauma of rape and segregation. In the interviews and speeches she elaborated on these topics during moments when the Civil Rights movement was still fresh in people's memories and people were dealing with its aftermath and exploring how to continue. The topics these interviews and speeches covered sparked conversations that had not been held before, especially not in publicly broadcasted interviews or speeches.

This thesis will highlight three themes which were dominant in Angelou's public speaking: storytelling, resistance, and identity. Storytelling is a meta theme throughout this thesis, because most of Maya Angelou's answers to questions in interviews are imbedded in a story. In her speeches, she told stories in order to bring her message across, be it in a poem, hymn or memory. Themes of resistance and identity lie at the heart of many of her stories. First of all, Angelou believed strongly in the power of resistance and that "if you really have something to protest, you should be on the streets."¹⁷ Second, she argued that everybody has to find that "wondrous and uniqueness thing in ourselves to remind us that everyone is worthy."¹⁸

¹⁷ Reuben Cannon and Marquetta Glass, *And Still I Rise*. Directed by Bob Hercules and Rita Coburn Whack (2017; United States of America: American Masters Pictures), Netflix.

¹⁸ Maya Angelou, interview by Johnetta B. Cole, *Smithsonian Museum*, YouTube, 2014.

Ultimately, by highlighting these themes and telling these stories, Angelou continued to strive for equal rights, a better America and ultimately, a better world.

In an interview with BBC's talkshow 'HARDtalk' in 1998, Angelou explained that she would like to be "an ambassador for the good"¹⁹. The fact that she appeared on shows for the BBC, which were at that time not broadcasted in the United States yet, showed Angelou's commitment to communicate her message outside of the United States as well. This also shows that she aimed her stories and their underlying message for equality to have a global impact. In a subsequent interview with Armstrong Louis, she explained that she aspired to be a "shero"²⁰. An ambassador traditionally functions as an authorized representative of a nation or cause. As the evidence shows, Angelou was aware of her role in the public spotlight and showed her willingness to embrace the opportunity by functioning as a matriarch for the black community as well as for society in general. Angelou also emphasized in the interviews that she never meant to write "a dust-catching masterpiece"²¹. On the contrary, she wanted "[her] ideas in [people's] conversations" so that they can "use them to build better ideas." Angelou built on to this by having public conversations as well.

The first chapter of this thesis will give an introduction to Maya Angelou's life and legacy. This chapter will provide background information to contextualize the themes and their roots. Furthermore, I will demonstrate how Maya Angelou's lectures and responses in interviews are very much aligned with the tradition of storytelling in the African-American culture. When Maya Angelou told a story, she would perform it. She would laugh, dance, cry and sing her way through a story. I will argue this is

¹⁹ Maya Angelou, interview by Tim Sebastian, *BBC HARDtalk*, YouTube, 1998.

²⁰ Maya Angelou, interview by Armstrong Louis, *Howard Stirk Holdings*, YouTube, 2008.

²¹ Ibid.

the first indication of her contribution to the representation of the African-American culture in the public spotlight. In this chapter, I will argue that Angelou used the stage to contribute to the representation of the black culture in popular culture, while at the same time imbedding it in an inclusive message which was relatable to any person. Furthermore, she often sang several spirituals or hymns to support her message. Using these features, Maya Angelou spoke about many (at the time) controversial topics on stage, such as her experiences with racism and segregation, her sexual trauma, identity and feminism.

The second chapter will highlight Maya Angelou's stories on resistance against her personal trauma, the cultural trauma of slavery and racial inequality. Angelou argued that through resistance, black people have historically "done better than survived. We thrived, and we've done better than that. We thrived with some passion, some compassion, some humor and some style."²² Her stories on resistance continuously aim to support this argument.

First, I will argue that Maya Angelou used storytelling to cope with her personal trauma as well as the collective trauma of slavery. Maya Angelou's personal trauma is often highlighted in speeches and interviews and as the root of her theories on resistance. There is a transformation evident in the way Maya Angelou speaks about her personal trauma in interviews. She struggles to speak about her trauma in early interviews, whereas in later interviews, she speaks about it more openly.

Drawing from Mieke Bal's theory on trauma, I will argue that storytelling helped Maya Angelou to process her personal trauma. Mieke Bal suggests that trauma

²² Maya Angelou, interview by Johnetta B. Cole, *Smithsonian Museum*, YouTube, 2014.

should be transferred from a “traumatic memory” to a “narrative memory” by telling the story to a “sympathetic listener”.²³ Therefore, storytelling lies at the heart of working through traumatic experiences, according to this theory. This thesis will draw from Bal’s trauma theory in order to argue that storytelling contributed to Angelou’s ability to process her personal trauma and to create a platform with which the collective could process the cultural trauma of slavery in retrospect.

I will argue that Angelou used the stories about her personal trauma to demonstrate the possibility to overcome hardship and adversity. Angelou’s traumatic experience was fundamental to her theories on resistance and turning a negative experience into the opposite. This formed the basis of her stories about resisting inequality and adversity. In this way, Angelou’s stories about her personal trauma connected to her overarching aim to use her role in the public spotlight to continue her fight for equality.

Lastly, the public media was also an important component to reach a broad audience, but also to connect to others in a more personal way. Oftentimes, after interviews, there would be room for questions which allowed Angelou and the audiences to bear witness to each other and communicate more directly. Drawing from Eyerman’s theory on the cultural trauma of slavery, I will analyze the correlation between Angelou’s stories with the cultural trauma of slavery and how her position in the public spotlight exemplifies the possibility to work through it.

Second, I will highlight Maya Angelou’s stories about resistance against racial inequality. Whenever she spoke about her experiences with racism and segregation, Angelou always referred it to inequality in general, remarking that all human beings

²³ Mieke Bal. *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*. Ed. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer. (Hannover, NH: UP of New England, 1997): viii.

know suffering. This way, she highlighted the black experience and at the same time connected their suffering to human suffering in general, so that her messages were relatable to all types of people. Through the interviews and lectures, Angelou elaborated on the lessons she had learned in her life and explained how to resist in the face of adversity.

Chapter three will focus on the theme of identity on a personal and collective level in speeches and interviews with Angelou, and explore the way she talked about (re)constructing her identity and the collective (black) identity. Early on in her life, segregation and racism stopped Angelou from being able to fully construct her identity in a way society would accept. Furthermore, she argued that she struggled with being black from an early age on. As she grew up and became part of the struggle for equal rights, she started developing a pride in her race. I will argue that Angelou emphasized female black identity when she took on an influential role. Drawing from Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory on intersectionality, which explores the effect of discrimination from diverse angles instead of one identity aspect at the time, I will argue that Angelou contributed to the representation of black women who experience(d) discrimination due to their race as well as gender. Angelou countered the dominant narrative about black women in society through storytelling and provided an alternative narrative about (female) blackness.

Angelou emphasized her inclination towards constructing an identity grounded in her ancestry and emphasizing her descendance of African slaves. In an interview with Dr. Henry Louis Gates Jr. Angelou reflects on her time during her self-imposed exile in Africa in which she reflects on her ancestors: "I heard the ocean from where we were and I couldn't stop weeping. I thought: 'When I left here, I had a cuff around my throat and my hands were tied and my feet were tied. And I got into a

slave ship and I slept on the bottom in the filthy hedges and now I'm being brought back.”²⁴ In this excerpt, Angelou identified with her ancestors who were uprooted and enslaved. She often related the African ancestors to the black collective in order to emphasize their worth and the sacrifices that were made for them. Angelou argued that the African-American identity was strongly rooted in their African ancestry. Angelou showed pride in her race and her African ancestry, which used to be culturally signified as shameful. By countering those views, she became a pioneer in the expression of black pride which she demonstrated by wearing her hair natural and by wearing traditional African clothes in the public spotlight. In this way, she encouraged black people to reclaim their heritage, to reconcile with their past, and to take pride in their ancestry.

²⁴ Maya Angelou, interview by Henry L. Gates, *PBS*, WBGH, 2008.

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Chapter 1

Storytelling

In this chapter, I provide background information on Maya Angelou's life and legacy and analyze the way her stories and techniques correlate with the African-American tradition of storytelling. Angelou's worldview and perceptions are inextricably entwined with her experiences as a young girl growing up in the Jim Crow South, taking part in the Great and Return Migration, being an activist in the Civil Rights Movement and reconnecting with her ancestral roots in Africa. Angelou expressed her life experiences in her literary work and oratory which was rooted in the rich tradition of African-American storytelling.

Equally important to the African-American tradition of storytelling, was transmitting wisdom and life lessons the orator had acquired in life. For this reason, this chapter starts by highlighting Angelou's life and experiences before connecting them to the African-American tradition of storytelling. Both Angelou's life experiences and the way her stories were rooted in the African-American tradition of storytelling were fundamental to the way she used her role in the spotlight to contribute to the representation of black culture as well as to continue her struggle for equal rights.

The second part of this chapter demonstrates how Angelou's stories, rooted in the African-American tradition of storytelling connect to black culture in particular and the way Angelou transcends the tradition by aiming to narrate in a way that allows any person to relate to her stories. In this way, she demonstrated that everyone was equal by using traditions from the black culture to continue the struggle for civil rights.

Maya Angelou: Life and Legacy

Maya Angelou was born Marguerite Annie Johnson in St. Louis, Missouri. Her parents, Bailey Johnson and Vivian Baxter, separated when Angelou was merely three years old. Unable to take further care of their children, Angelou's parents sent her and her brother Bailey down to Stamps, Arkansas where they were raised by their deeply religious paternal grandmother, Annie Henderson. The Jim Crow South was heavily segregated at this time and Maya Angelou was confronted with racism from a very early age on.²⁵ However, Maya Angelou had fond memories about the town as well. She recalled that her grandmother's store was her favorite place to be until she moved to California at the age of thirteen.²⁶

Angelou spoke about her grandmother with much fondness and deep respect. In an interview with Learning Landscapes, Angelou recalled that “[k]nowing her and being in that ambience of love, calmness and serenity, had a serious impact on [her].”²⁷ When white children called her grandmother “Annie” instead of Mrs. Henderson, Angelou considered that to be worse than the racism she had to deal with, because it showed her that “this great, powerful woman who was my protection, couldn't protect herself.”²⁸ This sparked Angelou's anger towards racism from a very early age on. Mrs. Henderson ran a structured household and the only black-owned grocery store in town which sustained them and many citizens, both black and white, during the Great Depression and after.²⁹

²⁵ Comer Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career Of Jim Crow*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1955.

²⁶ Maya Angelou, interview by Bill Moyers, *Moyers and Company*, YouTube, 1988.

²⁷ Maya Angelou, “Poetry Is the Human Heart Speaking in Its own Melody.” *Learning Landscapes* 4, no.1 (2010):15.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Robert S. McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941*. New York: Random House, 1984.

When Angelou was seven years old, her father took his children to visit their mother in St. Louis. Maya Angelou and Bailey stayed with their mother, Vivian Baxter, and her mother's boyfriend, Mr. Freeman. Tragically, Mr. Freeman raped Maya Angelou not long after their arrival. When she told Bailey the name of her rapist, he was put on trial, convicted and imprisoned for a day and a night. However, soon after his release, the police informed Maya Angelou's family that Mr. Freeman had died and "it seemed as though he had been kicked to death."³⁰ Allegedly, he had been killed by Vivian Baxter's brothers. Severely traumatized and terrified that her spoken words had the power to kill, Maya Angelou went into a voluntary mutism. She would only occasionally speak to her brother, Bailey. Unable to cope with Maya Angelou's trauma, Vivian Baxter sent her children back to Mrs. Henderson in Stamps, Arkansas. Maya Angelou remained a voluntary mute for approximately five years.

It was her love for poetry which eventually led Maya Angelou back to speaking. She was mentored by a woman named Mrs. Flowers who invited Angelou to her house and provide her with literature. Angelou fell in love with reading and started writing at the age of nine. However, Mrs. Flowers told her that it was dishonorable to read poetry in silence because it was meant to be recited. Out of loyalty to Mrs. Flowers as well as her love for literature, Angelou sought safety by hiding under her house and it was there that she recited her first poem. Angelou's love for literature and stories began during her mutism. She recounted literature is what kept her alive during this heart-wrenching time and reflected on it as followed:

"[w]ords meant the earth to me, and still do. I love them – they helped me to define myself to myself and helped me to define my world."³¹ Furthermore, she argued that

³⁰ Maya Angelou, interview by Bill Moyers, *Moyers & Company*, YouTube, 1988.

³¹ Maya Angelou, "Poetry Is the Human Heart Speaking in Its own Melody." *Learning Landscapes* 4, no.1 (2010):15.

every young child, every young person, should be weaned on poetry... each person needs to know there was someone there before you, someone was lonely before you, someone was confused before you, someone was maybe brutalized before you, and miraculously someone has survived. So then [it's] possible for you to survive.³²

Angelou immersed herself in writers such as Shakespeare, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, James Weldon Johnson, Edgar Allen Poe, Langston Hughes, gospel songs and spirituals during her voluntary mutism.

When Angelou graduated grade eight, she became part of the Great Migration in which approximately six million black people left the South in search for better socio-economic opportunities in the North, by leaving Stamps, Arkansas to settle in California with her mother, Vivian Baxter, to continue school there.³³ The strong sense of independence and pride was already evident in Angelou's teenage years. Determined to earn some money in a job she envied, Angelou defied the odds by becoming the first African-American streetcar conductor, at sixteen. Shortly after, Angelou became pregnant.

Even though she wished to go to college, she could not provide for her baby and study simultaneously. Angelou decided to move out and become independent by finding a job to provide for herself and her baby, Clyde Johnson, who later changed his name to Guy Johnson. She took any job she could get to make enough money and

³² Ibid.

³³ Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: the Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. New York: Vintage Books, 2010.

found jobs as a cook, dancer, a dishwasher, barmaid and, for a short time, as a prostitute.³⁴ She was determined to provide for her son and herself independently and consistently refused to accept financial or material aid from anybody.

In 1952, when Angelou was 24, she was offered a scholarship under Pearl Primus.³⁵ This allowed her to start a career in singing and dancing, in which she featured as a dancer in the highly acclaimed *Porgy and Bess*. During this time, Angelou heard Martin Luther King Jr. speak and decided to commit herself to the struggle for Civil Rights.³⁶ In order to help Martin Luther King Jr. to raise money, she organized a fundraiser called “Cabaret for Freedom” together with a colleague from the cast in *Porgy and Bess*.

Her commitment to bring awareness to racial inequality was also visible when she played the White Queen in a play called *The Blacks* in 1961 which was, “a dark satire about the reversal of racial power.”³⁷ During these years, she became politically involved and was appointed the northern coordinator of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, succeeding Bayard Rustin.

Angelou did not hold the position as northern coordinator for long because she met Vusumzi Make, an African Freedom Fighter whom she married and joined to live with in Egypt. Angelou did not conform to the societal norms in Egypt either. She refused being bound to her home as a housewife and sought a job as a journalist which she became, for the *Arab Observer* between 1961-1962. The marriage did not last and Maya Angelou and Vusumzi Make separated in 1962. Angelou and Guy were

³⁴ Mary J. Lupton, *Maya Angelou: The Iconic Self*. (California: Greenwood, 2016): 7.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid, 8.

planning on staying in Ghana briefly before moving to Liberia. However, during their time in Ghana, Guy got into a life-threatening car accident which forced them to stay.

It was in Accra that Angelou met with W.E.B. Du Bois, Malcolm X and Julian Mayfield who influenced her political ideas greatly. In support of Martin Luther King Jr.'s March on Washington, Angelou organized a solidarity demonstration in Ghana.³⁸ She also worked as a journalist for the *Ghanaian Times* and mediated between the Ghanaian government and its African-American residents. Angelou returned to the United States in 1965 with the intention to continue the struggle for Civil Rights from New York by opening an office in order to start fund-raising for Malcolm X.³⁹ However, short after her arrival in February 1965, Malcolm X was assassinated. "After Malcolm was killed, the hope and I were both dashed to the ground," she told Gary Young in an interview for the *Guardian*.⁴⁰ However, Angelou got back up because she felt her "pen owe[d] its every movement to the struggle."⁴¹

After Malcolm X died, Angelou committed her time in favor of Martin Luther King Jr. He asked her to travel around the country with her to promote the Poor People's March. They planned to leave after Angelou's birthday on April 4, 1968 as she wanted to throw a party first. Tragically, it was on this day that Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. Maya Angelou fell into a deep depression, shutting herself out from all human contact for about five days. James Baldwin pulled Angelou out of her house and forced her to join him to a party. When Baldwin encouraged her to tell a few stories about her life to the guests, Judy Feiffer was in awe of her and contacted

³⁸ Ibid, 9.

³⁹ Linda Wagner-Martin, *Maya Angelou: Adventurous Spirit*. (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016): 122.

⁴⁰ Maya Angelou, interviewed by Gary Young, *The Guardian*, 29 May 2014.

⁴¹ Linda Wagner-Martin, *Maya Angelou: Adventurous Spirit*. (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016): 128.

Robert Loomis about Angelou's capabilities of storytelling. Loomis was intrigued and decided to offer her the possibility to write an autobiography. However, Angelou rejected the offer politely several times until Loomis said that she was right to reject the offer because "writing autobiography as literature is almost impossible."⁴² This was all Angelou needed because her response was: "Well, in that case, I'll try."⁴³

In 1970, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* was published and became an international bestseller, translated in over 30 languages. Maya Angelou's career as a writer had begun and she signed an agreement to publish five more autobiographies with Random House. According to Linda Wagner-Martin, Angelou's first four autobiographies highlight the course of her life from:

her childhood to adolescence, her several geographic locations, her sexual abuse and the resulting voluntary mutism, her religious belief, her academic excellences, her early yearn for adventure, the birth of her son, her talents as dancer and singer, her struggle as single mother to earn a living, and – not least – her heterosexual relationships with Tosh Angelos, Vus Make, Paul Du Feu, and others (one man named only "the African").⁴⁴

Her last two autobiographies mainly focus on her commitment to the Civil Rights Movement and her devastation surrounding the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.⁴⁵

⁴² Reuben Cannon and Marquetta Glass, *And Still I Rise*. Directed by Bob Hercules and Rita Coburn Whack (2017, United States of America: American Masters Pictures), Netflix.

⁴³ Linda Wagner-Martin, *Maya Angelou: Adventurous Spirit*. (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016): 122.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

During the years Angelou published her autobiographies, she also started publishing poetry, which was highly praised as well. However, her writing was as much celebrated as it was criticized. The topics she wrote about were perceived as highly controversial because of its graphic description of her rape, sexuality and racism. This causes her first autobiography to be banned in several states up to this day. Furthermore, Maya Angelou did not conform to the traditional norms surrounding writing an autobiography. Linda Wagner-Martin describes some of the problems critics encountered when reading Angelou's work:

Angelou is a woman writer, and readers have been troubled for centuries by the work of "lady poets." Another difficulty is that Angelou is African American so readers unfamiliar with black American speech might be somewhat put off by the poet's use of idiomatic language (as well as in writing about experiences that might be seen as race specific). From the history and traditions of African literature may come important qualities that an observant poet such as Angelou would practice. A third difficulty that readers might deduce in Angelou's poetry is her political bent, her tendency to draw from African American life and law (and the abuses of that law) in the twentieth and the twenty-first century.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Ibid, 150.

After publishing her last autobiography, Angelou continued to publish essays and poetry. She was often asked to write introductions to books, essays or poems by editors because of her reputation “that combines name recognition with unqualified respect in a fusion so superior to that of different writers as to be of a different ilk.”⁴⁷

A major boost which sparked Angelou’s (international) acclaim is President Clinton’s request to write and recite a poem at his inauguration. She wrote the poem “On the Pulse of the Morning” in which she emphasized diversity as a strength which binds the United States together, a topic Angelou often highlighted when she spoke publicly. Angelou was the second person in American history to recite a poem during a president’s inauguration and the first female American to do so. Short after, she received a Grammy Award for the Spoken Word.⁴⁸ After this event, the invitations to speak at public gatherings became uncountable. Eugene Edmond, a professor of English literature argues in the documentary “And Still I Rise” that “if [Angelou] lived another lifetime, she wouldn’t be able to fulfil all the requests to speak at universities and colleges.”⁴⁹

Besides the lectures, interviews and writing, Angelou produced, directed and acted in movies and shows such as *Roots*, *Down in the Delta* and *How To Make An American Quilt*. All of them surrounded the representation of the black American community and experience. Furthermore, Angelou became the first black woman to join the Directors Guild of America. Angelou went on to receive more than sixty awards in her lifetime. She received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from Barack Obama in 2011.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 193.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 191.

⁴⁹ Reuben Cannon and Marquetta Glass, *And Still I rise*. Directed by Bob Hercules and Rita Coburn Whack (2017; United States of America: American Masters Pictures), Netflix.

Maya Angelou used the public spotlight to lead, teach and speak out on topics that were of importance to her. Linda Wagner-Martin argues that “[s]he was a spirit guide in many senses of the word; she was spiritual but she also cared about helping others find paths that would allow them their own kinds of spiritual comfort.”⁵⁰ In the interviews, she was often asked to speak about equality, ecological issues, religion, education, the importance of language or anything else that was on her heart.

Even though she had lived all over the world, Angelou finally settled in Winston-Salem, North Carolina after being offered a lifetime position at the Wake Forest University as a professor in the American Studies department. This made Angelou part of the Return Migration as well, in which a “reverse flow” of black migrants returned to and settled in the South from the North.⁵¹

As Angelou grew older, she started to suffer from physical menaces. For example, when she spoke at Evergreen in Washington in 2007, she explained that she had to sit down from time to time because her right knee has caused her trouble for several years. However, she explained, “about a few months ago, my left knee started to feel sympathetic for the right knee.”⁵² On top of that, Maya Angelou was diagnosed with COPD. This caused her to end up in a wheelchair during the final years of her life. Despite these health problems, Maya Angelou did not stop showing up for interviews or speeches. When Gary Young interviewed Maya Angelou in 2002 for *The Guardian*, he inquired about her health and she replied by reciting the last verse of her poem “On Aging”: I'm the same person I was back then / A little less hair, a

⁵⁰ Linda Wagner-Martin, *Maya Angelou: Adventurous Spirit*. (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016): 191.

⁵¹ Stewart E. Tolnay, “The African American ‘Great Migration’ and Beyond,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 29, no.1 (2003): 223.

⁵² Maya Angelou, “Dr. Maya Angelou at Evergreen, “Rainbow in the Clouds,” YouTube, 2007.

little less chin, / A lot less lungs and much less wind. / But ain't I lucky I can still breathe in.⁵³

Angelou always showed that her physical problems would not keep her from striving to show up and keep on working until the end. When she decided to speak about her health, which was rare, she would never fail to put a positive twist to it and use her pain in order to empower, inspire and to set an example. In the same interview with Gary Young, Angelou explained that she was “dealing with [her] 81-itis.”⁵⁴ She went on to say:

I expect that next year it will be 82-itis. I don't have as far to go as I had to come. But I'm not making any arrangements, and I plan to keep working as long as I can ... I'm fine as wine in the summertime.

Up to a month before she passed away, Angelou continued to speak to big audiences. Cicely Tyson recalls in the documentary “And Still I Rise” which features Maya Angelou’s life, that “[Angelou] had this incredible love for people. And she did everything she could to keep herself alive and to keep people being fed that energy. It’s a recognition of similarity. And that is the bond that brings you together.”⁵⁵ Maya Angelou believed that the role of an artist was to serve society and she committed herself to this fiercely.⁵⁶ In the documentary “And Still I Rise” she said, “I used to think I was a writer who could teach, now I know I am a teacher who can write.”⁵⁷

⁵³ Maya Angelou, *Maya Angelou: The Complete Poetry*. (New York: Random House, 2015): 166.

⁵⁴ Maya Angelou, interviewed by Gary Young, *The Guardian*, 29 May 2014.

⁵⁵ Reuben Cannon and Marquetta Glass, *And Still I rise*. Directed by Bob Hercules and Rita Coburn Whack (2017; United States of America: American Masters Pictures), Netflix.

⁵⁶ Maya Angelou, interviewed by Kabir Sudan, *Humanities Underground*, 19 February 2013.

⁵⁷ Reuben Cannon and Marquetta Glass, *And Still I rise*. Directed by Bob Hercules and Rita Coburn Whack (2017; United States of America: American Masters Pictures), Netflix.

Angelou continued to speak to large audiences as long as her breath allowed her to do so. There are interviews and recordings of her lectures up to and including a month before she passed away, which shows her commitment to get the stories across that were left to say.

Storytelling and Black History

Storytelling is “intricately interwoven with the study of black history” and deeply rooted in African culture.⁵⁸ Before Africa was burdened with colonization and slavery, many African communities considered *Nommo*, which means “the generative power of the spoken word”⁵⁹, to be of prior importance to their culture. “Nommo was believed necessary to actualize life and give man mastery over things.”⁶⁰ The trust in the power of words, naming, and the meaning of words went far beyond the hypothetical future and quality of life they envisioned for an individual. The power of words sustained whole cultures. “Culture was transmitted through...oral tradition.”⁶¹ This transmission was provided by storytellers, also known as griots. These people, often elderly males, were responsible for keeping the connection between their cultural history and present alive. They taught their tribes about their norms, values, religion, history, and important life lessons.

Many Africans carried the tradition of *Nommo* along when they were enslaved and forced to cross the ocean. Deliberately separated from those that spoke similar languages, the people that were enslaved were dehumanized beyond expression,

⁵⁸ Arthur Smith, “Socio-historical Perspectives of Black Oratory,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 56, no. 3 (1970): 264.

⁵⁹ Janice D. Hamlet, “Word! The African American Oral Tradition and its Rhetorical Impact on American Popular Culture,” *Black History Bulletin* 74, no. 1 (2011): 27.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

trapped in the slave ships as well as in their language. However, the tradition of *Nommo* was a commonality among the cultures which could go beyond the language barriers.

Arthur Smith argues in his article “Socio-historical Perspectives of Black Oratory” that “the word could not be considered static; it was then and is now dynamic and generative. Actually this concept embodies the idea of incantation as transformation; vocal expression reigns supreme.” This is evident in the way that the tradition of *Nommo* has continued to be an important aspect of black culture. African slaves in America adapted the culture of storytelling slightly, yet it is evident in the “work songs, Black English, sermons, and the Spirituals with their dual meanings, one for the body and one for the soul.”⁶² The powerful use of words is also evident in the evolution of black music. Spirituals, gospel, the blues, jazz and hip-hop are all steeped within the African-American tradition of storytelling and often surround the themes of facing adversity, survival and reclamation of memory and identity.

Maya Angelou was a living example that the tradition of *Nommo* lived on in black culture. In a way, she functioned as a griot for the people in the world. Maya Angelou’s career, life and the way she transmitted her messages evolved around storytelling. Furthermore, her beliefs about the power of words correlate with those found in (earlier) African societies as she argues that:

Words are things, I’m convinced. You must be careful about the words you use or the words you allow to be used in your house...I think they are things,

⁶² Arthur Smith, “Socio-historical Perspectives of Black Oratory,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 56, no. 3 (1970): 265.

they get on your walls, they get in your wallpaper, they get in your rugs, in your upholstery, in your clothes and finally into you.⁶³

Similar to the griots in the early African societies, Maya Angelou believed that words have power and can have tangible qualities. She also argued that the power of words showed her how to survive after being severely traumatized. During the years of her voluntary mutism, it were books and poems that taught her how to survive, because they showed her that people had known hardship before and survived it.⁶⁴

It was at Jules Feiffer's party, when all the guests were sitting around and James Baldwin and his friends engaged in telling each other stories, that Angelou was encouraged to tell those of her own and captured all the guests with her enchanting stories. Angelou recalled that James Baldwin asked her to talk about Stamps, Arkansas. She began her story by saying, "In Arkansas, racism was so prevalent that black people couldn't even eat vanilla ice cream."⁶⁵ This line set the tone for an evening full of storytelling. Angelou continued to say that this line "...made everybody laugh. And they asked [her] to tell another story, and another."⁶⁶ Eventually, this story led to her autobiographies. Storytelling turned out to be as natural for Angelou as it was for her heart to beat. Her whole life revolved around storytelling.

When Angelou told a story she often sang a spiritual or drew from her poetry to bring a message across. Answers to questions in interviews became imbedded in a

⁶³ Maya Angelou, interview by Oprah Winfrey, YouTube, OWN, 2013.

⁶⁴ Reuben Cannon and Marquetta Glass, *And Still I Rise*. Directed by Bob Hercules and Rita Coburn Whack (2017; United States of America: American Masters Pictures), Netflix.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

story in which she drew from her memories, poetry or songs. Wagner-Martin describes her oratory as follows:

Her “talks” were filled with cajoling, pleading, reaching out to members to urge them to live morally, push themselves to achieve, as well as to find inner satisfactions and [perhaps] peace, creating narratives that served to illustrate significant principles for upright living.⁶⁷

Maya Angelou did not merely narrate a story; she sang it in a song, recited it with poetry, performed it by acting out the different voices and emotions, and gripped the audience’s attention in an enchanting manner. According to Janice D. Hamlet, this performative way of storytelling was already evident in the way griots conveyed a story. In her article “Word! The African American Oral Tradition and its Rhetorical Impact on American Popular Culture” she contends that

[griots] infused their storytelling with dramatic power that appealed to the emotions: it satisfied inner cravings, cloaked unrest, evoked laughter, provided solace, and fostered a temporary release from the misery of chaotic experiences.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Linda Wagner-Martin, *Maya Angelou: Adventurous Spirit*. (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016): 152.

⁶⁸ Janice D. Hamlet, “Word! The African American Oral Tradition and its Rhetorical Impact on American Popular Culture,” *Black History Bulletin* 74, no. 1 (2011): 27.

Maya Angelou internalized the aspect of performance in the way she told a story. Mary-Jane Lupton writes in her book *Maya Angelou: the Iconic Self* (2016) that Angelou's oratory represents "a return to African American oral tradition"⁶⁹ which was also evident in Frederick Douglass' and Martin Luther King Jr.'s speeches.⁷⁰ Angelou was aware of this return to the tradition of storytelling. In the documentary "And Still I Rise" she explains:

Once I got really into it, I realized that I was following a tradition established by Frederick Douglass, which is the slave narrative, speaking in the first person singular, talking about the third person plural. Always saying 'I' meaning 'we'.⁷¹

Angelou's aim to speak in the first person singular talking about the third person plural transcended the abovementioned meaning as she went beyond speaking for the black community; she aimed to speak for all races, and therefore humankind, from her own perspective. Angelou explained this to Mavis Nicholson during an interview on *Mavis on Four* in which they discussed her first autobiography, "I write through the black experience, that's what I know, I'm talking always about the human condition, what it is like to be a human being."⁷² In another interview with Armstrong Louis, she elaborates on this too. She contends that "[t]he same issues that face and beleaguer every human being in the world have...beleaguered me and still do." Therefore, Angelou spoke from the black experience but always aimed to speak

⁶⁹ Mary J. Lupton, *Maya Angelou, the Iconic Self*. (California: Greenwood, 2016): 18.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Reuben Cannon and Marquetta Glass, *And Still I Rise*. Directed by Bob Hercules and Rita Coburn Whack (2017; United States of America: American Masters Pictures), Netflix..

⁷² Maya Angelou, interview by Mavis Nicholson, *Mavis on Four*, ThamesTV, 1984.

about the challenges that she faced in a way that was relatable to every human being. In an interview with Walter Blum, Angelou explained that she always aimed to convey the truth:

I hope to look through my life at life. I want to use what happened to me – what is happening to me – to see what human beings are like, to tell anecdotes so true, to look behind the fact of the anecdote and see what motivated this person in action, and that person, so that people who have never known blacks, or Americans, for that matter – can read a work of mine and say, you know, that’s the truth.⁷³

Angelou was also inclusive towards every race to connect to others and bring about healing through her stories. Storytelling in the African-American tradition is an important tool for healing and connecting to each other.⁷⁴ When stories are told that establish a connection to one another, they are called touchstones. Joanne Banks-Wallace explains in her article “Talk that Talk Storytelling and Analysis Rooted in African American Oral Tradition” that “touchstones are things that remind people of a shared heritage and/or past.”⁷⁵ When touchstones are established, healing through storytelling can take place. Angelou was continuously trying to establish touchstones with people but went beyond that as well.

Angelou sought to find, what I would like to call ‘soulstones’, which transcends touchstones. It does not connect people with a shared heritage or past only,

⁷³ Maya Angelou, interview with Walter Blum, California Living, YouTube, 1975.

⁷⁴ Joanne Banks-Wallace, “Talk that Talk Storytelling and Analysis Rooted in African American Oral Tradition,” *Qualitative Health Research* 12, no. 3 (2002): 412.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 411.

but it connects people on the basis of an experience or similarity in their souls, which is what Angelou aimed to do through storytelling. Angelou's aim in establishing soulstones was to make people understand that they were equally human. This way, she continued her struggle for equal rights through storytelling by drawing from the black culture.

Not only did enslaved Africans sustain storytelling in their culture through the power of words, it was also a primary tool of communication and the need for their oratory to be effective was even greater because they were forbidden by law to learn to read and write. Furthermore, the smallest miscommunication could cost a slave's life or have him transported to a different plantation away from his family. The spoken word was the sole and primary way to provide consolation to one another, to negotiate in "myriad subtleties"⁷⁶ with their owners for better conditions and to resist dehumanization by holding on to the truth. Storytelling helped slaves to empower each other and to resist dehumanization. Furthermore, it taught them to develop strong oratory skills which could potentially be life-saving. Angelou's stories correlate with the tradition to empower one another using oratory. Her stories were often aimed to encourage people to continue to strive to improve their lives and to keep hope that life will be better. She always tried to show people that something good could come out of adversities, and she encouraged others to pass on the good they receive.

Traditionally, the stories told during slavery generally revolved around the themes survival, resistance and facing adversity. For example, "The People Could Fly" is a famous black American folktale about slaves who resist American slavery by

⁷⁶ Paul Lawrence Dunbar, *The Complete Poems of Paul Lawrence Dunbar*. (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1922): 28.

flying away, enabled by the African magic that had continued to exist within them. Furthermore, black American slaves would pass on the stories of Brer Rabbit in which different ways to resist and outsmart oppression were revealed.⁷⁷

Angelou's stories featured similar themes. For example, she often emphasized black survival of slavery through resistance in her stories. Alfred Woodard was directed by Maya Angelou in the making of the movie *Down in the Delta*. This movie portrays a family that settled in Chicago during the Great Migration but has to return to the South to fly ghettoization and to reconnect to their roots in order to construct an identity. The movie is filmed at important historical sites in American history and Angelou often sat the cast down to tell them stories about the historical significance to emphasize some of the casts' (ancestors') relation to the sites as well as to be able to relate more to the story they were telling in the movie. Alfred Woodard explains Angelou's method as a director and storyteller:

The whole crew would sit and [Maya Angelou] would talk about the historical significance of a particular scene and what would be happening in that space a hundred years ago. It was like we were on an archaeological dig on sacred ground.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Sergio Lussana, "Reassessing Brer Rabbit: friendship, altruism, and community in the folklore of enslaved African-Americans," *Slavery and Abolition* 39, no. 1 (2018): 124.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

This way, Angelou's methods correlate with the African-American tradition of storytelling in which she connected the past to the present. Furthermore, Angelou allowed her black listeners to potentially (re)connect to their shared pasts and roots.

In the African-American tradition of storytelling, metaphors and allegories can be used to create a safe place which protects the listener psychologically from the "emotionally threatening content."⁷⁹ Furthermore, the emotional distance that is created through the metaphor makes it more likely that the content of the story will be received.⁸⁰ This is another indication that Angelou's techniques in storytelling can be traced back to its African roots because her messages would often be imbedded in allegory or metaphor in order to create a distance between the listener and the frequently laden content she spoke about. She was aware of this method as well and the fact that it was a West-African tradition.

In a 1984 interview with *Mavis on Four* she explained that she used a West-African technique called 'Blow, Bite and Blow', to teach her son about being black in a white society. She only realized it was a cultural carry-over after she arrived in Ghana and recognized the similar technique.⁸¹ This technique involves hiding an emotionally laden concept in a way that the listener is protected from its content but still internalizes it. She also used this technique for her listeners. Especially towards the end of her life, Angelou started to speak out about the "vulgar"⁸² use of language among young people. She opposed to black people using the N-word to reclaim it and explained this with the following allegory: "...if a thing is poison, and it's got a skull

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Maya Angelou, interview by Mavis Nicholson, *Mavis on Four*, ThamesTV, 1987.

⁸² Reuben Cannon and Marquetta Glass, *And Still I rise*. Directed by Bob Hercules and Rita Coburn Whack (2017; United States of America: American Masters Pictures), Netflix.

and bones on it, you can take that content and pour it into Bavarian crystal, it's still poison."⁸³

Angelou often told a story which indicated the power of the spoken word. One of the cast members in *Porgy and Bess* taught her an African song of which he did not know the meaning but said that his family had passed this song on from generation to generation. When Angelou lived in Ghana, she sang it to a friend of hers to see if she understood the language. After Angelou looked up she noticed that her friend's face was covered in tears. Angelou recalled that she said,

Sister, it's old Yoruba. It's a slave song and it says, 'Father, father, they have taken me from you over water so wide and they treat me worse than a dog in your compound. Father, can your magic find me and bring me home?'⁸⁴

Angelou demonstrates how the cycle was completed as she carried the song back to West Africa and emphasized that "[c]enturies of voices have rumbled down the years. Voices stacked upon voices. Close as accordion's pleats. Voices telling and relating and retelling, informing the horrors of the stories of their lives."⁸⁵ She concluded that the voices would be represented and never be forgotten. This way she not only contributed to the representation of the black community in the public spotlight, but also contributed to the representation of her enslaved ancestors. She concluded her story with a promise to the ancestors who cried out to their homeland begging to be saved.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Maya Angelou, "Dr. Maya Angelou Gives Commemorative Poem – 2010 National Urban League Conference", *National Urban League*, YouTube, 2010.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

We have stretched our hands across ten scores of years to pull your name from the forgotten roster. We will wipe your tears with the palms of our hands. We listen and we will continue to listen. We shall continue to speak for you. You will not be abandoned. You will not be forgotten.⁸⁶

Angelou sang the African song for the audience throughout the story, letting the melody of the song carry the story along. She highlighted the significance of herself as a descendant of slaves, taking the song and its message from the slaves back to Africa, where she sung it to the descendants of those that stayed behind in Africa, fulfilling the cycle as the song finally reached its destination. Furthermore, she answered the slaves' plea in retrospect on behalf of their descendants.

Angelou often referred to black artists, often writers, when she was on stage. For example, one of her poems "The Masks" is an adaption of the poem "We Wear The Masks" by Paul Lawrence Dunbar. She often referred to Dunbar before reciting this poem and introduced it with the story that inspired her to write the adaption. This way, she contributed to the representation of black American writers in society. Among those she often referred to were James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson and Paul Lawrence Dunbar. This way, Angelou contributed to the representation of black American artists through storytelling as well, which resulted in their names to be heard all over the world.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

This chapter demonstrated that storytelling is an important aspect of black culture and aimed to provide background information about Maya Angelou's life. By drawing from the oral tradition of storytelling in the popular media, Angelou already contributed to the representation of black culture in general. The following chapter will focus on the themes resistance and survival in Angelou's oratory. As Maya Angelou continued to speak out on resisting and dealing with inequality through storytelling in interviews and during speeches, she aimed to join the struggle for equal rights during the Civil Rights Movement and long after. Inequality was (and is) a prominent struggle in the daily lives of many black Americans, which made it a highly relevant theme to highlight in her stories.

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Chapter 2

Overcoming

This chapter focuses on Maya Angelou's oratory on resistance and survival. These themes were relevant to represent in the popular media because they correlated with the issues that were prominent in the lives of many black people, due to segregation, the Civil Rights Movement and racism altogether. Angelou often talked about surviving, whereas I would like to argue that overcoming is a better word to describe what she achieved. Not only did she survive, she used her trauma to actively improve her life and lives of those around her. For this reason, I have titled this chapter "Overcoming".

The first part of this chapter will analyze the way that Maya Angelou portrayed the theme of African-American trauma – both individual and collective – through her public oratory and storytelling. I will focus on the way storytelling helped Angelou control her personal trauma by drawing from Mieke Bal's trauma theory. Angelou's personal trauma and the way she coped with it is fundamental to her later approach to create a platform to cope with the cultural trauma of slavery in retrospect and inequality in general. Furthermore, she used her experience with resisting trauma and inequality through storytelling to empower and encourage (black) people to protect themselves and resist inequality.

The second part of this chapter will analyze the way Angelou used storytelling to communicate her lessons on resisting and overcoming adversity focusing on (her experiences with) inequality. I will contend that Maya Angelou's experience with overcoming childhood trauma, her experiences growing up in the segregated South,

and resisting inequality as an activist in the Civil Rights Movement gave her unique insights in the way an individual can resist and overcome adversity.

Personal Trauma

Before Maya Angelou published *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* (1969), no autobiography had ever been published, especially in such grave detail, about the horrifying trauma of rape in America. Moreover, after publishing her first autobiography, Angelou had the courage to face the media, and talk about it openly. Angelou's autobiography was published around the second wave of the feminist movement in the 1960s. Among other things, feminists of the second wave pressured lawmakers for improvements in legislation surrounding rape, and fought to "combat the public stigma and suspicion associated with bringing a rape complaint."⁸⁷

Historically, sexual assault had been a problematic societal issue which was often perceived with distrust. Victims of sexual assault who spoke out were often met with resistance within their "larger family and community, and [faced] legal struggles over the social significance of sexuality and the proper prevention, control, and punishment of deviant sexual behavior."⁸⁸ As a result of the efforts of second wave feminists, psychological diagnosis such as post-traumatic stress disorder became legal evidence in trials. Previously, victims of sexual trauma were expected to testify against the perpetrator in trial. This caused Angelou to have to face her rapist at the age of seven in court to testify against him. New legislation allowed counsellors or psychotherapists to testify on behalf of the victims.

⁸⁷ Laura Hengehold, "Remapping the Event: Institutional discourses and the Trauma of Rape," *Signs* 26, no.1 (2000): 191.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 189.

As mentioned in the introduction, Mieke Bal contends that traumatic memory can be transferred to narrative memory through storytelling. Bal argues that trauma theory centers around “the need for traumatic memories to be legitimized and narratively integrated in order to lose their hold over the subject who suffered the traumatizing event in the past.”⁸⁹ Bal contends that narrating a traumatic memory will allow for “the past [to make] sense in the present,” but also that a traumatic memory has to be narrated “to others who can understand it, sympathize with it, or respond with astonishment, surprise, even horror.”⁹⁰ It is important for a listener “to act as a confirming witness to a painfully elusive past [and will confirm] a notion of memory that is not confined to the individual psyche, but is constituted in the culture in which the traumatized subject lives.”⁹¹ Angelou’s autobiography *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* functioned as a “narrative articulation” of her trauma and it became “a public, potentially communal testimony that [set] the stage for psychic reintegration.”⁹²

Suzette A. Henke describes in *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life* (2000) that “it is the very process of rehearsing and emotionally re-enacting a tale of survival and triumph that gives meaning to an otherwise meaningless experience of victimization and effects both psychological catharsis and reintegration into a sympathetic discourse community.”⁹³ Mieke Bal’s theory on trauma correlates with this because she argues it is necessary for a traumatic experience to be fully integrated in the narrative memory but adds the need for someone to bear witness and respond sympathetically to the survivor’s narrative.

⁸⁹ Mieke Bal. *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*. Ed. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer. (Hannover, NH: UP of New England, 1997): viii.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, x.

⁹¹ *Ibid*.

⁹² Suzette A. Henke, “Maya Angelou’s Caged Bird as Trauma Narrative,” *The Langston Hughes Review* 19 (2005): 28.

⁹³ *Ibid*, xix.

Whereas *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* (1970) allowed Angelou to create a narrative around her trauma, the *subsequent* interviews and speeches were what allowed her to re-enact her survival many times over, in the presence of witnesses.

In Angelou's early interviews, she clearly struggled to talk about being raped. A 1976 interview in which she discussed her second book, *Gather Together in My Name* (1976), on the *Buck Matthews Show*, she told Buck Matthews that "something awful had happened to me when she I seven-and-a-half,"⁹⁴ referring to the rape but avoiding further discussion. In 1982, she spoke about being a victim of rape with Bill Moyers in more detail, presenting the rape as a "difficulty I had had when I was in St. Louis." When Moyers asked her to elaborate, the words that seemed to come so easily before slowed down. Angelou stared down, stumbled over her words, swallowed slowly and tried again, "I had been raped and the person who had raped me, was killed. I called his name and he was killed. And I thought of the time that it was my voice that caused the man to be dead, so I just refused to put my voice out and put anyone else in danger."⁹⁵

Angelou explained in the 1982 interview "Going Home" with Bill Moyers that she became a voluntary mute after she was raped. Leigh Gilmore's theory on trauma explains language to be at the heart of trauma which makes Angelou's voluntary mutism a logical response, especially because she was only seven years old. On the one hand, Gilmore argues that language does not suffice to work through trauma to the fullest, but on the other hand, "language is asserted as that which can and must

⁹⁴ Maya Angelou, interview by Buck Matthews, *Buck Matthews Show*, YouTube, 1976.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

heal the survivor and the community.”⁹⁶ According to Gilmore this leads to a “constitutive ambivalence” which results in “an impossible injunction to tell what cannot, in this view, be spoken.”⁹⁷

Psychoanalyst Dori Laub’s trauma theory correlates with Mieke Bal’s theory on the importance of bearing witness. He asserts that when an individual suffers from a traumatic event, “Thou” which is a symbol for an individual’s self-dialogue “ceases to exist.”⁹⁸ This causes the survivor of trauma to be unable to control the traumatic memory because “[it] is as though memory in its wider form becomes non-existent.”⁹⁹ Laub especially emphasizes the communicative aspect between the survivor and the listener and argues that the survivor can use the listener as a bearer of their “Thou”.¹⁰⁰ This allows the listener to become an active participant in the process of working through a survivor’s trauma. He claims that

[The listener] has to assist [the survivor of trauma] actively by providing a holding frame of time, space and sequence, and she must actively intervene when the survivor is overwhelmed by her feelings, at a loss for words and faltering because she cannot sustain the effort or wants to flee the terror, grief and pain.¹⁰¹

⁹⁶ Leigh Gilmore, “Limit-Cases: Trauma, Self-Representation, and the Jurisdictions of Identity,” *Biography* 24, no. 1 (2001): 132.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁹⁸ Dori Laub, “Reestablishing the Internal “Thou” in Testimony of Trauma,” *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* 18, no. 2 (2013): 187.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 189.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

Interestingly, Laub argues these points on the basis of video-interviews with Holocaust survivors. In these videos, severely traumatized Holocaust survivors recall a traumatic memory during an interview. He demonstrates how the active participation of an interviewer can help a survivor to converge “the disjointed traumatic fragments into a hitherto unknown, cohesive narrative.”¹⁰²

There are two noticeable aspects in the “Going Home” interview with Bill Moyers that correlate with Mieke Bal’s trauma theory. First of all, Angelou seemed not to have transferred the narrative about her traumatic experience to her narrative memory to the fullest, as she struggled to speak about it. As a consequence of the rape, Angelou stopped speaking for approximately five years. In both cases, language plays a large role in the manifestation of trauma. Leigh Gilmore describes the function of language in connection to trauma in her article “Limit-Cases: Trauma, Self-Representation, and the Jurisdictions of Identity” as follows:

Crucial to the experience of trauma are the difficulties that arise in trying to articulate it...the relation between trauma and representation, and especially language, is at the center of claims about trauma as a category.¹⁰³

In both of the interviews with Buck Matthews and Bill Moyers, Angelou seemed to struggle to either say what had happened to her, or to say it right. Gilmore argues that trauma is “beyond language” and that it “not only fails in the face of trauma, but is mocked by it and confronted with its own insufficiency.” Angelou tried to find fitting

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Leigh Gilmore, “Limit-Cases: Trauma, Self-Representation, and the Jurisdictions of Identity,” *Biography* 24, no. 1 (2001): 132.

words for a trauma that felt indescribable in the interview, which may have caused her to struggle. Moreover, when the “traumatic narrative” is not fully integrated into a “narrative memory”, the trauma can trigger involuntary flashbacks, reenactments and, according Cathy Caruth, become “possessive”. The fact that Angelou avoided and struggled to speak about her trauma suggests that she had not yet fully integrated her “traumatic memory” to her “narrative memory” and indicates that her traumatic memory still controlled her to a certain extent.

Even though Angelou’s storytelling through her first autobiography is likely to have contributed to the transformation of a previously uncontrollable, hollow memory, the interviews contributed to Angelou’s ability to create a more complete version of the narrative. For example, in an interview with *Mavis on Four* in 1984, Mavis Nicholson noticed that Angelou left her mother’s reaction to the rape out of the autobiography. By inquiring about her mother’s response, Nicholson held Angelou accountable for her narrative and created a platform for her to make it more complete. It turned out that Angelou did not include it because she “did not understand her reaction.” However, this question forced her to consider what made it so complicated for her. Unable to cope with the demands of a traumatized child, Angelou’s mother sent her and her brother away to live with their paternal grandmother. This rejection, and the loneliness that followed retraumatized Angelou. Furthermore, Angelou felt conflicted because she was not certain about her mother’s role in the death of the man. She answered:

I didn’t know how much she was involved in the death of the man...My mom didn’t know what to do with me. She did everything she could. She tried to entertain me, she sang to me, she danced to me, she’s really wonderfully

charming. She did everything and I remained this sort of sphynx-like figure at eight years old. She just didn't know what to do with me so she packed me up and sent me back to my paternal grandmother.¹⁰⁴

In another interview with Bill Moyers, Angelou demonstrated how she had created a narrative that reflected the “tale of survival and triumph.” In the interview “Facing Evil” with Bill Moyers she explained how she was saved:

Now, to show you how out of evil there can come good, in those five years, I read every book in the black school library. I read all the books I could get from the white school library... In my case, I was saved in that muteness...and I was able to draw from human thought, human disappointment and triumphs, in order to triumph myself.¹⁰⁵

Angelou contended that literature saved her life because it taught her how to survive. Furthermore, she argued, “I was silent, but I wasn't in silence. All sounds became heightened.”¹⁰⁶ She reflected on this time as a voluntary mute as a time in which she soaked up a lot of information and became extremely aware of her surroundings.

Maya Angelou also highlighted the way black culture influenced her as a victim of rape and voluntary mute. For example, she explained that “the challenge for a black child not to speak was no small matter, because “black people believe [you should] speak when you're spoken to.”¹⁰⁷ She emphasized Southern black culture and

¹⁰⁴ Maya Angelou, interview by Mavis Nicholson, *Mavis on Four*, ThamesTV, 1984.

¹⁰⁵ Maya Angelou, interview by Bill Moyers, *Moyers & Company*, Youtube, 1988.

¹⁰⁶ Maya Angelou, interview by Mavis Nicholson, *Mavis on Four*, ThamesTV, 1984.

¹⁰⁷ Maya Angelou, interview by Armstrong Louis, *Howard Stirk Holdings*, YouTube, 2008.

its values to be respectful to one another. Another aspect of black culture Angelou highlighted was the influence the black church. In particular the sermons and the way “black ministers speak in that imagery, in that melodic, melliferous cadence and rhythm.”¹⁰⁸

Angelou also contributed to the representation of black culture when she told the story about the way Mrs. Flowers got Maya Angelou to speak again. Mrs. Flowers followed Maya Angelou home and in an attempt to compel her to speak, said that Angelou did not like poetry because she would not recite it in order to woe her to speak. Angelou explained how Mrs. Flowers followed her into her house and pointed her finger to Maya Angelou, in front of her grandmother, accusing her not to like poetry. Angelou remarked that, “She would point at me in front of Momma. Black people say, ‘Don’t put your finger in my face.’”¹⁰⁹ Furthermore, Maya Angelou often referred to the story about her grandmother “who was a traditional Southern black lady” that never doubted Angelou’s abilities. When Angelou talked about her grandmother, she would imitate her grandmother’s deep southern accent and say:

Sister, Momma don’t care what these people are saying about ‘You must be a moron,’ or ‘You must be an idiot’. Sister, Momma don’t care. Momma know when you and the good Lord are ready, you are gonna be a teacher...¹¹⁰

In line with the tradition of African-American storytelling, Angelou often knew how to complement her stories with an entertaining twist, no matter how serious its content. She would often conclude the story about her grandmother’s belief in her

¹⁰⁸ Maya Angelou, interview by The National Visionary Leadership Project, *NVLP*, YouTube, 2001.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Maya Angelou, interview by Armstrong Louis, *Howard Stirk Holdings*, YouTube, 2008.

with a line that guaranteed a laugh from the audience: “I used to sit there and think, ‘This poor ignorant woman, doesn’t she know I will never speak.’”¹¹¹ However, when Angelou decided to start speaking again, she said, “I had a lot to say.”¹¹²

Angelou told stories about the way she worked through her traumatic experience to inspire others. She aimed to be “healed [from trauma]” and “[to be] a healer” as well.¹¹³ She was aware of the dangers of trauma on people and often referred to its repercussions by saying that “rape on the body of a young person, more often than not, introduces cynicism, and there is nothing quite so tragic as a young cynic, because it means that a person has gone from knowing nothing, to believing nothing.”¹¹⁴ However, by “showing that out of evil there could come good”, she used the stories in which she overcame trauma to inspire and influence others.

Collective Trauma

It is crucial to analyze the way the trauma of slavery was remembered, represented, and worked through in retrospect before the reconstruction of a (collective) identity can be analyzed. The trauma of slavery was not only the direct experience of slavery but also its hope-crushing aftermath during reconstruction in which it became clear that former slaves would not become accepted equals in society.¹¹⁵ To make matters worse, minstrel shows and the representation of slaves in dominant white culture

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Maya Angelou, interview by Bill Moyers, *Moyers & Company*, YouTube, 1988.

¹¹³ Maya Angelou, interview by Charlie Rose, *Charlie Rose*, YouTube, 1993.

¹¹⁴ Maya Angelou, interview by Bill Moyers, *Moyers & Company*, YouTube, 1988.

¹¹⁵ Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009), 39.

created a representation of slavery that denied and ignored its atrocious and dehumanizing realities. Any public representations of slavery from the perspective of African-Americans “depended entirely upon whites.”¹¹⁶

Eyerman distinguishes between two narrative frames that followed slavery in order to work through the cultural trauma: the representation of slavery and the process of forming a collective identity. The latter will be discussed in chapter three. Even though these developed separately before, the New Negro Movement and Civil Rights Movement contributed to the two narratives to become intertwined. To this day, the cultural trauma of slavery is not fully resolved and the formation of a collective identity ongoing.¹¹⁷ Furthermore, cultural trauma is worked through and remembered differently in different groups and generations of African Americans. When a traumatic event occurs, it is usually followed by a “suppression of understanding” before it can be reflected upon.¹¹⁸ Eyerman explains that most former slaves generally suppressed their past and wanted to focus on their future.¹¹⁹ For this reason, the trauma of slavery could not be worked through until later.

The rise of the New Negro Movement showed “the energy of a new generation” that “emerged out of the cultural trauma spurred by the end of Reconstruction and culminated in the urban Renaissance of the 1920s.”¹²⁰ This is a period in which black intellectuals in the public arena struggled to reclaim their cultural identity and history, opposing white culture’s construction of a romanticized image of slavery and a minstrel representation of black Americans. Furthermore, the

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 46.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 221.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 33.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 58.

Great Migration began with this generation. Eyerman considers the Great Migration to be the first time in which black Americans claim agency over their future.¹²¹ The Great Migration also brought about the New Negro Movement of which the Harlem Renaissance was a product. During the Harlem Renaissance black artists reclaimed and represented the “roots of the black experience – Africa, the rural South’s folk traditions, and the life of the urban ghetto.”¹²² It was a time in which many black artists created a platform to work through the trauma of slavery in retrospect using art. Mieke Bal argues that

Art—and other cultural artefacts such as photographs or published texts of all kinds—can mediate between the parties to the traumatizing scene and between these and the reader or viewer. The recipients of the account perform an act of memory that is potentially healing, as it calls for political and cultural solidarity in recognizing the traumatized person’s predicament.¹²³

For example, W.E.B. Du Bois’ book *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) wrote about the “sorrow songs” which carried the voices of the “soul of the black slave [who] spoke to men.”¹²⁴ These songs allowed black Americans to (re)connect to their roots, created a collective cultural memory and allowed their cultural heritage to be passed on to different generations. W.E.B. Du Bois was not the only one to find solace in Negro Spirituals. Fredrick Douglass, who was a former slave, witnessed and

¹²¹ Ibid, 158.

¹²² Eric Foner, *Give Me Liberty*, (New York: Norton & Company, 2017), 809.

¹²³ Mieke Bal. *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*. Ed. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer. (Hannover, NH: UP of New England, 1997): x.

¹²⁴ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. (New York: Bantham Books, 1903), 177.

participated in these songs on slave plantations and remarked that he felt deeply moved by them.

Maya Angelou rarely let an interview or speech pass without singing a spiritual. She, too, felt the power and importance of these songs. She cited these songs all over the world to contribute as a symbol of black culture. In the Netflix documentary “And Still I Rise”, Angelou tells a story in which the conductor of *Porgy and Bess* asked her to sing a spiritual for an audience in Morocco. The documentary shows an exclusive excerpt of a speech from Angelou to a predominantly black school in Arkansas, in 1982, in which Angelou tells this story about the significance of spirituals. Interestingly, she tells them, “I see myself in you as a young person in Stamps [Arkansas]. I hope you see yourselves in me.”¹²⁵ This suggests that she understood her influential role and that she could be a role-model for the students. Furthermore, she had the opportunity to explain the power of spirituals to them:

Songs written not by a free and easy people, not by a leisure class, songs written from the heart, written with their blood, written with the whips and the lash on their back. When I sung these songs, the [audience] couldn't stop screaming. Then I began to think, ‘Oh, I see. Now, I see. When the people were passing out the big packets of land and money, my people had none of that to give. But what they gave me. Look at what they gave me. My Lord!

¹²⁵ Reuben Cannon and Marquetta Glass. *And Still I rise*. Directed by Bob Hercules and Rita Coburn Whack (2017; United States of America: American Masters Pictures), Netflix.

Look at what they gave me. It opens doors for me all over the world. It's a great blessing.'¹²⁶

Angelou drew from spirituals in her stories to demonstrate how to find hope in the face of adversity and to use that experience to be of help to others when they are struggling. In many interviews she would sing a line from a spiritual called "Rainbow in the Cloud". In a 2014 interview with George Stroumboulopoulos, she sang the line for him, "When it looked like the sun wasn't going to shine anymore, God put a rainbow in the cloud." She continued to explain that

So many times, I've had rainbows in my clouds: people who've been kind to me...I realized that that was given to me and all I have as a response is to prepare myself so I can give that to somebody else who is yet to come.¹²⁷

Drawing from her cultural heritage, Angelou used the spirituals in order to bring hope and encouragement to her listeners, in line with the African-American tradition of storytelling. This way, she demonstrated how black history is not one of oppression and shame but of resistance, resilience and hope.

Part of the Civil Rights movement was to reclaim, negotiate and reconstruct the cultural narrative of black history. As an activist in the Civil Rights Movement and storyteller, Maya Angelou contributed to the movement with a new perspective

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Maya Angelou, interview by George Stroumboulopoulos, *George Stroumboulopoulos Tonight*, CBC, 2014.

on the cultural memory of slavery and heritage among black Americans. Eyerman contends that this time marked the “return to the ancestral culture”¹²⁸ as central in black nationalism of the 1960s in which “slavery was the shared heritage that remembered an uprooted... and fragmented community.” This was also an important aspect in what is now considered to be the post-civil-rights era and increasingly more black people gained powerful positions and contributed to their representation in the mass media. Furthermore, the rise of television and radio made it easier for black press to access a wider public and to “[articulate] the meaning and bounds of the collective.”¹²⁹

Maya Angelou contributed to the representation of the cultural trauma of slavery by performing in Alex Haley’s “Roots” (1977), a 1976 television series which follows the family line of an African man named Kunta Kinte, his enslavement, deracination and forced migration to American soil up to his descendants’ liberation from American slavery. Maya Angelou features as Kunta Kinte’s grandmother.

Angelou deployed the tradition of African-American storytelling to work through the cultural trauma of slavery with oratory. One important interview stands out in which Maya Angelou reflected the cultural trauma of slavery in the *PBS* program “African American Lives” presented by Dr. Henry Louis Gates Jr. in which important African American figures find out about their genealogy and ancestry. DNA results confirmed what Angelou expected: she turned out to be a descendent of the Mende people of Sierra Leone. Angelou responded by reflecting on the time she visited the Slave Port in Ghana:

¹²⁸ Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009), 194.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, 141.

I could hear the water, the ocean, from where we were and I couldn't stop weeping. I thought: 'When I left here, I had a cuff around my throat and my hands were tied and my feet were tied. And I got into a slave ship and I slept on the bottom in the filthy hedges and now I'm being brought back.'¹³⁰

It is remarkable that Angelou switches from the third to the first person in this reflection and demonstrates that she identifies with her ancestors' traumatic experience as if it were her own. By reconstructing the historical narrative of black history and making Africa the starting point for black American history, Angelou could tell a more complete version of black history in which she created a platform to work through this cultural trauma to a certain extent.

In *Can These Bones Live?: Translation Survival and Cultural Memory* (2007)

Bella Brodzki demonstrates the intercultural and generational transmission of cultural trauma and memory. She researches the way in which different cultural traumas such as the Holocaust or slavery is remembered and worked through by the generations after which they took place. She demonstrates that the descendants of those that have been traumatized by the Holocaust or slavery, can show similar symptoms as of those that were directly affected by it.¹³¹ However, whereas those directly affected by the traumatic event could not speak about it, the later generations would often put their ancestors' trauma into words, bearing witness and eternalizing the events that would otherwise be forgotten. She argues that,

¹³⁰ Maya Angelou. "Maya Angelou Reflects on her Mende Heritage." *PBS*, 2008.

¹³¹ Bella Brodzki. *Can These Bones Live?: Translation Survival and Cultural Memory*. (California: Stanford UP, 2007), 114.

more pointedly, they speak on behalf of the dead, the missing, and sometimes even in their name – for the dead, by definition, can no longer speak for themselves and are often consigned to anonymity and oblivion, as well as to silence.¹³²

Brodzki calls the narration of another generation’s direct traumatic experience “intralingual translation”.¹³³ Whereas Brodzki mostly focuses this theory on the written word, I contend that it can also be applied to spoken word if it is memorialized through audio or film.

Furthermore, Maya Angelou created a platform for the black community to work through the trauma of slavery in retrospect by reconstructing and retelling black history from a position of pride and overcoming. Additionally, she spoke on behalf of their ancestors, honored them and their sacrifices, and gave meaning to the otherwise meaningless experience by telling their stories and giving them the credit for the survival and thriving of the black Americans.¹³⁴ Angelou contended that black people inherited the “survival apparatus” from their ancestors.¹³⁵ To demonstrate what this looked like she referred to a woman, Mrs. Rosie, who sat on a bus and laughed at everything even though there was nothing to laugh about. Angelou explained, “Now, if you don’t know black features, you may think she’s laughing. But she wasn’t laughing. She was simply extending her lips and making a sound.” It is noticeable that Angelou explains the meaning of the black features because it was a more diverse audience. Angelou refers to the fact that “black Americans, for centuries, were

¹³² Ibid, 185-186.

¹³³ Ibid, 123.

¹³⁴ Maya Angelou, interview with Johnetta B. Cole, *Smithsonian Museum*, YouTube, 2014.

¹³⁵ Reuben Cannon and Marquetta Glass. *And Still I Rise*. Directed by Bob Hercules and Rita Coburn Whack (2017; United States of America: American Masters Pictures), Netflix.

obliged to laugh when they weren't tickled and to scratch when they didn't itch.” Angelou explained this would soon be known as “Uncle Tomming” and continuous to say that she wrote a poem to honor Mrs. Rosie because she “helps us to survive. By your survival, Mrs Rosie, by your destruction we stand up!” She goes on to perform her poem, dancing, singing and eventually with tears streaming down her face as she forces her breaking voice to laugh like Mrs. Rosie had to do:

They laugh to conceal their crying,
They shuffle through their dreams
They stepped 'n fetched a country
And wrote the blues in screams.
I understand their meaning,
It could and did derive
From living on the edge of death
They kept my race alive
By wearing the mask! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!¹³⁶

This poem is one of many examples of how Angelou used written and spoken word to give voice to cultural traumas experiences by black Americans. Furthermore, she explains the importance of honoring their ancestors' sacrifices and the need to realize that nobody would have been here if it were not for their ancestors and if “those people had not been successful in the humiliating employment of those humiliating ploys.”¹³⁷

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Maya Angelou “Maya Angelou Live and Unplugged,” *Black Heritage Channel*, YouTube, 1987.

Angelou always emphasized how far society had progressed, yet also acknowledged that it has not nearly progressed as far as it should have, as exemplified by how she was still arguing the same points from 1970 in 2014.¹³⁸

We have made changes, [but] they are not nearly enough to root out ignorance and the ignorance of slavery. It takes a long time and we have to be up and doing with a heart for any fate...Black people and white people, the children need to know the truth, not the facts. You can tell so many facts you obscure the truth.¹³⁹

By continuing to speak out, Angelou contributed to the process of working through the cultural trauma of slavery and imbedding it in the collective memory through storytelling.

Part Two: Overcoming Adversity

Maya Angelou faced many hardships growing up. As abovementioned, she was heavily traumatized as a survivor of rape but not only that, she grew up in a severely segregated part of the nation: Stamps, Arkansas.¹⁴⁰ Furthermore, Angelou grew up in the South during the Great Depression.¹⁴¹ In an interview with *Blackside, Inc.*, for the “Henry Hampton Collection”, which collected first hand stories from people who lived through the Great Depression, Angelou recalled that

¹³⁸ Maya Angelou, interview by Bill Moyers, *Moyers & Company*, YouTube, 1973.

¹³⁹ Maya Angelou, “Dr. Maya Angelou,” *PBS*, UNCTV, 2014.

¹⁴⁰ Jennifer Ritterhouse, *Growing Up Jim Crow: How Black and White Southern Children Learned Race*, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006.

¹⁴¹ Robert S. McElvaine, *The Great Depression*, New York: Times Books, 1984.

[t]here is a bitter and yet rue statement which was made by blacks about the Depression. They said in the South, that the depression had been going on for ten years before black people even knew about it.... And that was true particularly in the South...because the people lived at a subsistence level for the most part...¹⁴²

However, Angelou was in a unique position as her grandmother owned the only black-owned store in the area and was able to sustain her family and many people, black and white, in the town.

When she was very young, Angelou did not interact with white people often and distinguished between those she encountered in her town and those she read about in her books. She highlighted this in the following excerpt by even pronouncing their names differently, distinguishing between ‘whitefolks’ and white people, indicating the difference she felt between the two types of white people.

When I was growing up, whites were called ‘whitefolks.’...We, it seemed to me, we blacks, we Negroes, we colored folks, were humans. And ‘whitefolks’ were those others, they were ‘other than’...Any action from ‘whitefolks’ was an interaction of disrespect, cruelty, scorn, so they couldn’t be just...I read about white people in other places and I believed them...but I didn’t connect those people with ‘whitefolks.’¹⁴³

¹⁴² Maya Angelou, interview with Blackside Inc., Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection for The Great Depression, 1992.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

However, soon Angelou was confronted with racism. She tells stories about being refused emergency treatment at the only dentist in town who treated white people only, or how little girls disrespected her grandmother by calling her by her first name. She told stories about having to sit cramped up in a little space at the movies and the Ku Klux Klan riding through town while grandmother Henderson, Maya Angelou and her brother hastily tried to hide their Uncle Willie, “Cause a white girl could say, ‘Well, he made an attempt to touch me.’”¹⁴⁴ These stories were of utmost importance as they contributed to the representation of the black experience in the popular media. Most black people could relate to stories like these and for the first time, they were being broadcasted and represented in the popular media.

Maya Angelou also highlighted what the Ku Klux Klan did to their community:

When a black man had been accused of something, which terribly offended the white community, the news went around the black community like a string of Chinese firecrackers being set off, [she mimics the sound]. I don’t know how it got around so fast. And then a cloud of gloom and fear would settle over the community like a heavy blanket being put over a light, a little candle. You could sense it, but you could also see it in the sag of the people’s shoulders when they would come into the store and just shake their heads.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

Even in a story such as her experience with the Ku Klux Klan, Angelou was able to establish soulstones so that every person could identify with this situation. In this way, she made sure that people understood that black peoples' fear of the Ku Klux Klan " [was] exactly the same universal sense of loss and fear and dread and terror that obtained in Russia when the pogroms...knew, 'Oh, here they come...'" Angelou relates her experience with the Ku Klux Klan to a "universal sense" of being in danger, which many people have had to go through. In this way, Angelou made it possible for individuals to relate their own experiences to hers, which she hoped would ultimately lead to the acceptance of racial equality. Ultimately, Angelou used this technique to continue her struggle for civil rights in the post-civil-rights era.

Angelou also talked about her anger towards inequality, and by doing so shed light on important emotions that were felt within the black community during that time. By telling stories about her emotions towards inequality, she acknowledged the validity of these emotions in an oppressive system. She talked about the first time she remembers being angry as a result of racism in the *Blackside Inc.* interview. Her eyes filled with tears when she said:

[T]hat's when I think my first anger, real anger at a depressive and an oppressive system began...When I saw that the white kids had these fresh books, it was so unfair, because I loved books and I deserved them and just because I was black I couldn't have them.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

After this she shook her head softly, looked away, reached for her cup to drink some water allowing the silence to speak for itself. In an interview with BBC's *HARDTalk*, Angelou spoke about the anger she felt:

What I have is a readiness to rage. I see injustice anywhere, I'm angry. I speak up, I do something about it. But I don't harbor and nurture a little kernel of bitterness, oh no. I know it will eat me up and I'm here to stay. To be present right up to the very end...If the awful thing befalls you, it is a wise thing to try and take that and open it up and make it of use...You can't sit by and watch evil on the throne and good dashed to earth and not say something.¹⁴⁷

Angelou's achievements in life are evidence that she lived according to these standards. When she was sixteen years old, Angelou defied the odds and became the first black cable-cart conductor in Los Angeles. She demanded a job by showing up every morning for two weeks before anyone else and leaving when the last person left the building, ignoring the fact that they "laughed at me, they pushed out their lips, and used some negative racial things but I sat there...[because] I loved the uniforms. So I said, that's the job I want."¹⁴⁸ And she got it. Her mother was very supportive following her daughter throughout her shifts in her car with a gun on the seat beside her, to make sure she could protect her daughter if need be. Angelou finished the story by highlighting what her mother had taught her: "She said, 'You learned that you are very strong, that with determination, dedication, you can go anywhere in the world.'"¹⁴⁹ By telling these stories, Angelou not only represented black culture

¹⁴⁷ Maya Angelou, interview by Tim Sebastian, *BBC HARDtalk*, YouTube, 1998.

¹⁴⁸ Maya Angelou, interview by Oprah Winfrey, *OWN*, YouTube, 2013.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

through popular media, but also empowered and inspired (black) people to believe in themselves and their capabilities.

Angelou told countless stories in which she stood up for herself or others. She would not allow any racist or discriminating words to be spoken around her. In one interview, she tells a story in which she was having a meeting in her office at *Twentieth Century Fox* as the first black producer and director. Her colleagues were making racist jokes about someone, who was not present at that moment. Angelou told the men to stop but they refused to be told off. As a result, Angelou got mad and stormed out of the office. She said:

Finally I got up, walked out of the office, passed these men and right through my secretaries office and out of the receptionist office and down the stairs and realized I'd left my purse. I couldn't go back, I would die first ... so I would encourage you, don't take that attitude if you don't have the keys to your car.¹⁵⁰

Again, Angelou had a humorous end to an emotionally laden story such as the one above, which correlates with the African-American tradition of storytelling. These stories were of utmost importance because Maya Angelou used them to show (black) people that it was okay to be angry, but that is was also vital to use the anger constructively. She demonstrated that her anger fueled her drive to make a difference but also warned against the destructive outcome anger could also have.

¹⁵⁰ Maya Angelou, interview by Johnetta B. Cole, *Smithsonian Museum*, YouTube, 2013.

Angelou often emphasized that there is a difference between anger and bitterness, using the following allegory: “Bitterness is cancer. It eats upon the host. Anger is healthy. I think anger is fire...I think it’s wise to show it. To be opposed to injustice at all times, for anybody.”¹⁵¹ Whereas Angelou contended that the danger of trauma is to produce a cynical person, she also argued that anger could transform into bitterness. Both outcomes can stop a person from overcoming adversity. Through these stories, Angelou contributed to the representation and acknowledgement of black culture in popular culture by highlighting the experiences and emotions many black people were dealing with.

Furthermore, Angelou dared to be vulnerable in her autobiographies as well as on stage. She often wrote about topics that were controversial and sometimes brought criticism. However, Angelou turned the negative responses to her autobiographies into stories which she could tell to encourage and teach others. When Angelou wrote about her time as a prostitute in her second autobiography, critics were less enthusiastic. “Before, people adored me,” she said in a book interview with *Mavis on Four* as she acted out what that looked like. “I came on this time and people went, ‘zang!’,” she pointed towards Nicholson Mavis sharply, as to sting her. Angelou continued to explain how she dealt with the criticism:

Sometimes my eyes were filled with tears and I just straightened my back and said, ‘That is what happened. Now, watch and see me... You think you can do me down? Darling, an entire society has tried to do me down and look at me. And look upon me and be free.’¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Maya Angelou, interview by Nicholson Mavis, *Mavis on Four*, ThamesTV, 1984.

Even when Angelou spoke about her personal experience with prostitution, she drew from black experience and history to explain her ability to resist their criticism. Again, Angelou drew from the black experience and resilience of her people to demonstrate their power and ability to deal with an oppressive system. In this way, she contributed to the representation of black culture in the popular media at the same time aiming to be accessible for any person, by establishing soulstones. Her stories needed to be accessible to everyone because in order to ensure equal rights in a society, all people have to be on board.

In nearly every interview and speech, Angelou contended that “courage is the most important of all the virtues because without courage, you can’t practice any virtue consistently. You can’t be consistently kind, consistently fair, merciful, just, loving, you cannot.”¹⁵³ In order to bring this message across, she often referred to a story about Malcolm X not many people were aware of. Angelou had an interesting perspective on Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. as she had collaborated with both of them. She was often asked about these Civil Rights leaders and she aimed to tell stories that were unknown by popular culture. She also warned against setting the civil rights leaders on a pedestal as heroes:

[People] should know [Malcolm X] had an incredible sense of humor. They should know that about Martin too. Martin King had an incredible sense of humor. One of the things some historians do, some of the mistakes made, in the historian and social historian, in particular, oftentimes recreate the man or

¹⁵³ Maya Angelou, interview by Maya Angelou The National Visionary Leadership Project, *NVLP*, YouTube, 2001.

workman as larger than life which puts the person beyond the reach of a young person, so if Malcolm and Martin and Abraham Lincoln and Kennedy, if Dr. Du Bois and Mary McLeod Bethune are beyond their reach, then they say, ‘there’s nothing I can do. Those people were bigger than life and I’m just myself.’¹⁵⁴

Angelou called for the need to humanize the people that go down into history as heroes, to “[s]how their wiles and their wits” so that individuals can identify with them and, therefore, walk in their footsteps. Furthermore, she drew from the first person to bring a message across for the third person. By speaking about black history and representing civil rights activists, Angelou imbedded a transcending message about making sure that leaders do not become inaccessible to their followers. To demonstrate Malcolm X’s humanity and courage, Angelou often told the story about the time he was traveling around Africa and visited her in Ghana.

Malcolm, having said that all whites were blue-eyed devils... went to Mecca, ...came to West-Africa and he said, “I have met white skinned, blue-eyed men, who I’ve openly called brother. I was wrong.” Now, it takes a great deal of courage to say that. Even when the person feels that they were wrong...they are afraid to say, “Listen everybody, do you remember what I said last week? I don’t believe that anymore.”¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

In this way, Angelou brought her message about courage across, drawing from the black experience, yet establishing soulstones in order to make her message about courage accessible for everyone.

Angelou also aimed to establish soulstones when she spoke about oppression. Up until the end of her life, she continuously argued that there is no true equality yet. She was very upfront about it. In a 2013 interview, Anderson Cooper asked Maya Angelou if she believed that there was no true equality yet. She responded by saying, “Oh, I know there isn’t and you know there isn’t and everybody who hears you knows there isn’t...”¹⁵⁶ When she spoke about the oppression of black people, she often referred to the way white people would benefit from equality as well:

People think that when you get free, you’re just freeing the black people. The truth is, you free everybody. White folks get free. They become free of their idiocy and their ignorance. And so they’re differently liberated, so they don’t have to be imprisoned by their stupidity.¹⁵⁷

In another interview she said, “How can I be free and keep you down? If I keep you down, I have to be down there with you. Keep my hand on your neck, keep my hand over your mouth.”¹⁵⁸ This way, Angelou continued to speak out for equality by drawing from the black experience, contributing to the representation of black culture in the media up until the end of her life.

Another remarkable story that showed Angelou’s roots in the tradition of African-American storytelling is the story that she told about her uncle Willie, who

¹⁵⁶ Maya Angelou, interview with Anderson Cooper, *CNN*, YouTube, 2013.

¹⁵⁷ Maya Angelou, interview with Johnetta B. Cole, *Smithsonian Museum*, YouTube, 2013.

¹⁵⁸ Maya Angelou, interview with Johnetta B. Cole, *Smithsonian Museum*, YouTube, 2014.

despite his handicap, influenced many people around him. Among these was a young boy who turned out to become the first black mayor of the state of Arkansas. Angelou remarked Uncle Willie astounded her:

I look back at uncle Willie: crippled, black, poor, unexposed to the worlds of great ideas, who left for our generation and generations to come, a legacy so rich, so I wrote a song... It says,

Willie was a man without fame
Hardly anybody knew his name
Crippled and limp and always walking lame
He said,
But I keep on moving
and moving just the same

Solitude was the climate in his head
Emptiness was the partner in his bed
Pain echoed in the steps of his tread
He said,
But I keep on following
Where the others lead.

People called him uncle, boy and hey
Said you can't live through this another day
And then they waited to hear what he would say

He said but I'm living in the games that children play.¹⁵⁹

Drawing from the black experience, Angelou showed how anybody, despite their circumstances and being discriminated against, could make a difference in the world. Even though she drew from her personal and the collective black experience to get her message across, it always led to a universal conclusion in which she contended that every person:

has gone to sleep one night or another...with fear, or pain, or loss, or terror, unhappiness, grief, insecurity, and yet each of us has awakened and risen...the nobleness of the human spirit is that we rise.¹⁶⁰

Maya Angelou's stories about working through her personal (and the cultural) trauma (of slavery) as well as her stories about overcoming and resisting adversity represented black culture in the popular media through her ability to speak about her personal and the collective experience. Whereas her personal experiences were often aimed to empower black people initially, Angelou always made sure to establish soulstones for any human being to identify with, in order to be empowered and inspired simultaneously. This notion is also evident in chapter three, which highlights Angelou's story about her personal and the collective black identity. Even though she speaks from her own perspective and the black experience of reclaiming and negotiating a collective identity, Angelou never ceased to narrate it from the first person singular for the third person plural,

¹⁵⁹ Maya Angelou, interview with Bill Moyers, *Moyers & Company*, YouTube, 1988.

¹⁶⁰ Maya Angelou, "Maya Angelou Live and Unplugged," *Black Heritage Channel*, YouTube, 1987.

which caused the messages of her stories to transcend beyond race, culture or religion and allowed them to be accessible for any person despite their background.

As discussed in chapter one, resistance and identity are fundamental themes in the tradition of storytelling in black culture. This chapter demonstrated the way that Maya Angelou offered an alternate narrative about black history that was rooted in strength, endurance and overcoming. In doing so, Angelou created a platform to work through the cultural trauma of slavery in retrospect in which her own traumatic life experiences functioned as the basis of her stories and her approach to resist trauma, inequality and adversity in general. Another important aspect that is inextricably connected to the representation of culture and the tradition of African-American storytelling is the theme of identity. For this reason, chapter three will focus on Angelou's stories in which this theme is featured prominently.

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Chapter 3

“Becoming”

When Michelle Obama published her autobiography *Becoming* (2018), she explained that she chose this title because of her belief that identities are continuously evolving. Voiced slightly differently, Maya Angelou narrated a similar message. This chapter focuses on Maya Angelou’s stories about identity on a personal and a collective level. Similar to the previous chapter, this chapter will first focus on Maya Angelou’s personal process of constructing an identity before it highlights her stories on the black collective identity. As Maya Angelou was among the first people to appear in the popular media to speak about her personal and the collective black identity, which was highly affected by an oppressive system, it is fascinating to analyze how she contributed to constructing and negotiating an identity and used her role in the spotlight to counter the dominant, minstrel and stereotypical narrative in society about black identity.

Angelou’s stories on her personal identity are significant because she used them to empower black women in which she predominantly imbedded lessons from her mother and grandmother, who both (used to) live in the Jim Crow South. The lessons that these women passed on to Maya Angelou provides insight into the tools they thought she needed to navigate through life in an oppressive system. Maya Angelou passed these lessons on to a broader public for the same reason. Drawing from Kimberlé Crenshaw’s theory on intersectionality, I will analyze the way Maya Angelou translated her (grand)mother’s lessons into stories in order to empower and inspire black women and to counter the dominant narrative about them in society, with a special focus on her stories of self-love, self-determination and ultimately self-

betterment. Whereas the chapter on overcoming and resistance is mostly based on (working through traumas from) the past, this chapter focuses more on the future. Working through the traumas of the past provided the tools to construct a better future by renegotiating and reconstructing a (collective) identity.

Furthermore, Angelou's stories about the collective black identity are equally important because they give insight into the way that the collective black identity was (re)constructed through the popular media. Drawing from Eyerman's theory on identity and the cultural trauma of slavery, I will analyze how Angelou contributed to the representation of black culture by providing a new narrative about the collective black identity through storytelling. I will analyze the way Maya Angelou countered the dominant voice in society by offering an alternative narrative about the collective black identity in society, in which she focuses on how it has been affected by (the cultural trauma of) slavery, and voiced her pride in the African ancestral roots of the black American.

Even though Angelou's stories around identity may seem to be aimed at the black collective only, this chapter will also focus on the way Maya Angelou would aim to make sure that there would be soulstones in her stories for every listener, despite their backgrounds in order to ensure that people could empathize and recognize the main messages in her stories. This way, she continued her struggle for equal rights by aiming to make people realize their likeness.

Personally Becoming

One of the first issues Maya Angelou speaks about is growing up black in the segregated South. In an interview with Bill Moyers, she tells a story about one of her childhood fantasies in which she would magically turn white. This was because it

would prevent her from having to walk through the white part of town and to “be looked at with such loathing.”¹⁶¹ The effect of racism on a small girl, who was systematically ostracized and taught to dislike herself made her question: “what scars does that leave on somebody? ... I don’t even dare examine it myself.” However, she continued to say that in order to write, she had to “scrape [her pen] across those scars to sharpen that point.”

Maya Angelou’s identity was affected by the collective history of slavery, racism and its aftermath at a very early age. Eyerman contends that “[i]ndividual identity is said to be negotiated within this collectively shared past.”¹⁶² Inextricably connected to Maya Angelou’s identity is that she was both black and female. In a society in which being both black and female meant to be treated as inferior, Angelou was “doubly threatened”¹⁶³ and this confronted her at an early age. By writing her autobiographies and contributing to the representation of black women in interviews and speeches through storytelling, Angelou resisted the denigration of her identity by actively constructing it according to her own standards, and not to the standards of the dominant voice in society. By emphasizing this in public interviews and speeches, she contributed to the representation of black women and encouraged them to stand up for themselves and own their worth.

In 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality”, arguing that previous research had not taken into account that an individual can experience discrimination from multiple directions. Up to this point, she argued, research had

¹⁶¹ Maya Angelou, interview by Bill Moyers, *Moyers & Company*, YouTube, 1982.

¹⁶² Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009), 6.

¹⁶³ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987), 35.

treated “race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis.”¹⁶⁴ Brittney Coopers explains in the Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory that

[i]ntersectionality represents an analytic framework that attempts to identify how interlocking systems of power impact those who are most marginalized in society. Intersectionality considers that various forms of social stratification, such as class, race, sexual orientation, age, religion, creed, disability and gender, do not exist separately from each other but are woven together.¹⁶⁵

Even though Cooper mentions the different aspects that can intersect to affect an individual from multiple directions, this chapter will focus on the intersection of race and gender because of the discrimination Maya Angelou encountered and spoke about as a black woman and emphasized that black women were the “last on the totem pole.”¹⁶⁶ Angelou contributed to the representation of black culture by highlighting the oppression of black women and changing the narrative the dominant culture had constructed about them. For example, she provided a different narrative about beauty standards and self-determination. When Angelou remarked that black women were last on the totem pole, she added that “everybody has a chance to take a change on us. Well, not now.”¹⁶⁷ This indicated that she wanted to counter the oppression and one way through which she did that was by reconstructing the narrative about black

¹⁶⁴ Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex,” *Feminist Legal Theory* 8, no. 1, 1989: 139.

¹⁶⁵ Brittney Cooper. “Intersectionality.” *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, Oxford University Press, 2015.

¹⁶⁶ Reuben Cannon and Marquetta Glass. *And Still I rise*. Directed by Bob Hercules and Rita Coburn Whack (2017; United States of America: American Masters Pictures), Netflix.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

women and changing her physical appearance to one that suited her standards instead of the European beauty standards.

The story about black women's identity has historically been shaped by the dominant culture. Crenshaw argues that black women have been "portrayed as more sexual, more earthy, more gratification-oriented" ever since the Europeans interacted with Africans for the first time.¹⁶⁸ Furthermore, she argues, that these "sexualized images of race intersect with norms of women's sexuality, norms that are used to distinguish good women from bad, the Madonna's from the whores."¹⁶⁹

Whereas dominant stereotypes construct an identity for African-American women, focusing on who they are, the limitations of the European beauty standard prevalent in dominant white society focus on who they are not. Anita Thomas, Jason Hacker and Denada Hoxha demonstrate the way the interrelated identity aspects of race and gender can affect black women's identity in their article "Gendered Racial Identity of Black Young Women." Due to the limits of European beauty standards dominant in Western society, black young women in this study state to have "issues of colorism, skin tone, and hair."¹⁷⁰ Since black women are often compared to the European beauty standards some may "straighten and lighten their hair to be closer to European standards of beauty."¹⁷¹ According to this research, these acts "may impede the development of healthy self-esteem for girls and young women."¹⁷²

¹⁶⁸ Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color" *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1271.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Anita Thomas, Jason Hacker and Denada Hoxha, "Gendered Racial Identity of Black Young Women." *Sex Roles* 64, no. 7 (2011): 537.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid.

One way to counter these limiting European beauty standards is to construct a different narrative which features a broader beauty standard that encompasses more physical features. However, dominant white society rejects non-European beauty standards and even “serve[s] to undermine [black women’s] sense of pride and positive self-image.”¹⁷³ For this reason, it is of utmost importance to have influential people in society that have the possibility to contribute to the representation of black women and are in a position to offer an alternative narrative. Maya Angelou, was one of those people. First of all, Angelou did not conform to European beauty standards. She often wore her hair natural and was typically dressed in traditional West-African garments. Furthermore, she changed the narrative about beauty standards, often voicing the beauty she found in the black race. Angelou’s son, Guy Johnson reflected on Maya Angelou’s appearance in the documentary “And Still I Rise”:

What I remember most, when I think of a childhood memory, is the fact that she would come to school wearing her African clothes and her hair natural...I would come home and I would ask my mother, ‘Don’t you have a sweater/skirt outfit? One of those Penney’s things? And she would say to me, ‘This is your history. You come from kings and queens.’¹⁷⁴

This example demonstrates the way Angelou used her position to carry out her pride in her race and its roots. She changed the narrative by approaching her ancestral roots

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Reuben Cannon and Marquetta Glass. *And Still I rise*. Directed by Bob Hercules and Rita Coburn Whack (2017; United States of America: American Masters Pictures), Netflix.

from a position of pride and dignity, noting that they (might) descent from kings and queens.

Furthermore, Maya Angelou regularly emphasized black female features in her poetry, which she often recited on stage accompanied by her remarks of her pride in the black race. In her speech *Live & Unplugged* she contended that “self-love is very important. You got to look at yourself and like it.” Even though Angelou argued to have written the poem for all women, she highlighted and celebrated black features throughout the poem. She argued that “[black] women] have not even begun to test [their] potential, but it’s there.”¹⁷⁵ Furthermore, Angelou commented on gender inequality in this speech arguing that “men are as phenomenal as women, because nature abhors imbalance.” However, she concluded, addressing the men in the audience, “you will have to write your own poem.” Angelou applies an intersectional approach to this poem, not only celebrating black femininity but also emphasizing her opposition towards the gender gap. Michelle Obama recollects the empowerment she felt when she learned about this poem. She contends that Angelou, “celebrated black women’s beauty like no one had ever dared to before...Maya Angelou spoke to the essence of black women, but she also graced us with an anthem for all women.”¹⁷⁶ Obama also recognizes Angelou’s ability speak to the “essence of black women” at the same time establishing soulstones for all women.

Maya Angelou often expressed her pride in being black. In her *Live & Unplugged* speech, she celebrated her “luck to be black on a Saturday night!” After having received the Essence Award in 1992, she thanked “her people” and said: “The

¹⁷⁵ Maya Angelou, “Maya Angelou Live and Unplugged,” *Black Heritage Channel*, YouTube, 1987.

¹⁷⁶ Maya Angelou, *Maya Angelou: The Complete Poetry*, (New York: Random House, 2015), 126.

beauty of my people gives me all the material I will ever need. I could never, ever, say how beautiful you are and how grateful I am to be black and a woman.”¹⁷⁷

By reciting her poetry celebrating black women’s physical features and her public statements of her pride and awe for black women’s appearances in combination with her voiced opposition against gender inequality, Angelou told a different narrative and contributed to the representation of African-American women in society. It is clear that Angelou’s narrative was rooted in pride and dignity, in the way in which she celebrated her inherited physical features from her African ancestors. This provided society with a different perspective on beauty standards and stereotypes surrounding black women.

Maya Angelou could provide a different perspective on beauty standards by tying her intersectional approach together with storytelling. This connects to Patricia Collins Hill *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (2000), in which the intersection of race and gender is a prominent theme. Collins argues that in order for black women to survive, they need an “articulated, self-defined, collective standpoint” that intersects within “oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation.”¹⁷⁸ Furthermore, Collins emphasizes the way African-American tradition of storytelling including books, music and oratory oppose “hegemonic ideas” by providing “counter-hegemonic knowledge that fosters changed consciousness.”¹⁷⁹ Angelou contributed to the articulation of a counter-narrative about the black collective’s identity.

¹⁷⁷ Maya Angelou, “Maya Angelou Speech Essence Awards, YouTube, 1992.

¹⁷⁸ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, (New York: Routledge, 2000): 202.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 15, 258, 285.

The significance of Angelou's alternative stories in which she opposed the dominant white narrative about the collective black identity is demonstrated in Amy C. Wilkins' article "Becoming Black Women: Intimate Stories and Intersectional Identities." Her theory correlates with Collins' theory because she argues that "the stories we tell shape both how we appear to others and how we think about who we are."¹⁸⁰ Stories bring "imposed and chosen meaning" which results in an individual's perception of a sense of self.¹⁸¹ According to Wilkins, stories can "be a source of change"¹⁸² in societies and "are a means of creating individual, authentic-feeling selves and a way of connecting to a collectivity."¹⁸³ This way, they have "the potential to reconcile tensions between imposed and chosen identities."¹⁸⁴ For this reason, Angelou's alternative perspective on identity through storytelling had the potential to bring significant change to society.

Maya Angelou highlighted her stories of becoming to help and inspire others. Notably, towards the end of her life, she focused more on self-betterment than earlier in her life. She also participated in *Oprah's Master Class* episodes in which Oprah features influential Americans who have contributed to society and share their most important life lessons. This is significant because Oprah and Angelou, both highly successful black women, often collaborated on Oprah Winfrey's shows to speak about their lives to inspire and provide a different narrative from the imposed narrative by dominant white society for black women. As time passed, Angelou's stories on identity shifted towards self-betterment by constructing one's own identity.

¹⁸⁰ Amy C. Wilkins, "Becoming Black Women: Intimate Stories and Intersectional Identities" *Social Psychology Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (2012): 176.

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 174.

¹⁸² Ibid, 183.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

Part of the reason that the focus of her stories changed was because Angelou's role in the public spotlight changed as she grew older. This is due to her achievements as well as her age. In her earlier speeches and interviews, Angelou's success was still ongoing and the interviews and speeches focused on her most recent accomplishments, whereas later interviews and speeches focused on reflection and the most important life lessons Angelou still felt necessary to convey. Angelou also attained a role as a matriarch in society towards the end of her life and interviewers often related their questions to current matters that society dealt with at the time and what Angelou's advice or take on these matters was.

Linda Wagner-Martin argues in *Maya Angelou: Adventurous Spirit* (2016) that Angelou attained a role as spirit leader towards the end of her life. She contends that this was historically a role in African societies that older women inhabited to maintain spiritual health in communities.¹⁸⁵ Furthermore, she connects this tradition to Angelou's role in society towards the end of her life in which she often appeared in the public media to convey life lessons. One of these lessons was that Angelou regularly emphasized that she was "better today than [she] was the day before yesterday."¹⁸⁶

Angelou argued that the most influential people in her life were her grandmother and mother. Maya Angelou referred to her grandmother as the person who taught her the norms and values she had had until the end of her life. This correlates with Eyerman's theory that black feminists often looked at "their grandmothers, as a source of inspiration and redemption."¹⁸⁷ Another study by Kumea

¹⁸⁵ Linda Wagner-Martin. *Maya Angelou: Adventurous Spirit*. (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016): 191.

¹⁸⁶ Maya Angelou, interview by Johnetta B. Cole, *Smithsonian Museum*, YouTube, 2014.

¹⁸⁷ Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009), 194.

Shorter- Gooden and Chanell N. Washington published in the Elsevier called “Young, Black, and Female: the Challenge of Weaving an Identity” demonstrates the same notion arguing that black female adolescent’s role models were typically “African–American women, often their mother or another relative.”¹⁸⁸

Towards the end of her life, Angelou embraced a similar role as her grandmother who was her matriarch. After Angelou became a “spirit leader” for the wider public, she could represent her (grand)mother whose lessons were deeply imbedded in the Southern black culture, by conveying the lessons she was taught through storytelling. This way, Angelou contributed to the representation of black women in her stories through storytelling. By drawing from the lessons she had learned from her mother, grandmother and their ancestors, Angelou told stories to inspire black women and humankind in general to be the best they could be. Black women featured in her stories prominently, and she, herself, served as a role-model that the barriers of the intersectional and systematic oppression against black women could be broken.

One of the stories Angelou told regularly was connected to a painting by Phoebe, called Suzuki’s Funeral, which she had inherited from her grandmother. Angelou said:

Whenever I’m obliged to do something, I take that painting and I look at that painting and there’s an empty chair. And I think, ‘Now, what would Grandma do. What would she say?’ I can almost hear her voice say, ‘Now, Sister, you

¹⁸⁸ Kumea Shorter-Gooden and Chanell N. Washington, “Young, Black, and female: the challenge of weaving an identity” *Journal of Adolescence*, 19, no. 5 (1996): 470.

know what's right. Just do right. You don't really have to ask anybody. The truth is, right may not be expedient, it may not be profitable, but it will satisfy your soul.'¹⁸⁹

Whenever Angelou repeated her grandmother's words, she would imitate her deep voice and Southern accent. Angelou took these lessons and elaborated on it by saying that one should always "[t]ry to be all you can be to be the best human being you can be." She believed this would result in other people to "add their prayers to your life." She argued that "if your name is mentioned and people say, 'Oh, hell, oh damn.'" Angelou started to laugh after this and said: "I think you're doing something wrong. But if you're name is mentioned and people say, 'Oh, she is so sweet, he is so nice ... God bless her.'" She nodded her head and continued, "There you are.... Try to live your life in a way, that you will not regret years of useless virtue and inertia and timidity."¹⁹⁰

It was Maya Angelou's mother, who liberated Angelou to step into her self-worth. As mentioned in chapter two, Angelou's mother encouraged Angelou to resist racism by pursuing her dream to become a cable cart conductor, teaching her that she could accomplish anything she set her mind to as long as she was willing to fight for it. Her mother, Vivian Baxter, also taught Angelou to love herself. When Maya Angelou was twenty-two years old, she told her:

¹⁸⁹ Maya Angelou, "3-Word Secret To Living Your Best Life," *OWN*, Oprah's Master Class, 2014.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

You know, you're very kind, and you're exceedingly intelligent. Those two virtues rarely go together. You are one of the greatest women I've ever met. Dr. Mary Mcleod Bethune, Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt and my mother, you belong in that category."¹⁹¹

Notably, Angelou's mother names predominantly black women, and Eleanor Roosevelt who was a strong ally of black women, to be "the greatest women". Most importantly, these women are known for their resistance against dominant white society and made a significant difference. By telling Angelou that she "belong[ed] in that category" her mother wanted to teach her that she could achieve anything. This was especially important for a young black girl to learn because society was not fostered to support them. On the *Oprah Winfrey Network*, Angelou adds to this story by explaining what these words meant to her:

I can remember the way the sun fell on the slats of the wooden seats [in the cable cart]...I thought, 'Suppose she's right. She's intelligent and she's too mean to lie, so suppose I am going to be somebody.' She released me. She freed me to say, 'I may have something in me that would be of value. Maybe not just to me.' You see? That's love.¹⁹²

Angelou used this story to empower black women aiming to pass its message on so that they could internalize their worth. Maya Angelou's life's accomplishments are

¹⁹¹ Maya Angelou, interview by Armstrong Louis, YouTube, Howard Stirk Holdings, 2008.

¹⁹² Maya Angelou, "Dr. Maya Angelou: 'Love Liberates', *OWN*, Oprah's Master Class, 2014.

the evidence that she internalized this lesson which adds value to its message. In an interview with *Mavis on Four* she explained, very simply, that she had accomplished her dreams because, “I know what I want to achieve.”¹⁹³

Maya Angelou also believed it was extremely important to tell the truth. Even though she pursued the act of doing right, she wanted to convey the message that it is human to make mistakes. She especially wanted to emphasize the need to be there for young people whose mistakes were not accepted by society. Furthermore, Angelou argued that she recognized a pattern in society in which parents lied to their children about past mistakes in order to protect them from these pitfalls thinking it would help them to do better. She wanted to convey another message by highlighting a personal experience and demonstrating that mistakes in life do not mean that there is no way back. In an interview with *Mavis on Four* Angelou tells about the time that she just had her baby and fell into prostitution, highlighting that she felt: “terribly confused.” Her eyes filled with tears as she recalled that she “wanted somebody to say, ‘You’re wonderful.’” She explained that “a pimp told [her she] was wonderful and he just needed a little help.”¹⁹⁴ Angelou aimed to demonstrate the importance of admitting mistakes so young people understand that it is okay to make mistakes and learn from them to do better in the future. To demonstrate this, she acted out a young person – with tears still in her eyes from her previous remarks – to represent young people that were full of life but got disappointed after they realized they could not live up to their seemingly flawless parents, who had lied about past mistakes. Angelou recognized the emotions young adolescents experienced “with all these urges, feeling lost, undecided, insecure” and wrote *Gather Together In My Name* (1974) so that

¹⁹³ Maya Angelou, interview by Nicholson Mavis, *Mavis on Four*, ThamesTV, 1984.

¹⁹⁴ Maya Angelou, interview by Nicholson Mavis, *Mavis on Four*, ThamesTV, 1984.

other people who don't have that kind of courage, could gather in my name. To encourage young people, to remind them that they may encounter many defeats, but they must not be defeated. And maybe it's necessary to encounter the defeats, to build some character, to develop some courage.¹⁹⁵

These interviews allowed Angelou to tell the stories behind her autobiographies. This story transcends the story told in her autobiography, allowing the reader and listener to gain more insight.

Angelou knew that she could reach people through television who did not read. To demonstrate this, she told a story about a young girl who had seen Maya Angelou on television:

Suddenly I looked and there were two hands, black, with false finger nails, young hands, and I followed the hands up, and there was false hair, lots of it, and to a young face, about eighteen, false eyelashes. It was ten o'clock in the morning, she was a young street prostitute. She leaned over, she had heard me on television, she leaned over and said, 'You give me hope.' Now, if no one else said anything to me ever, this is sufficient.¹⁹⁶

It is noticeable that Angelou represents a black girl in this story which might indicate her understanding that it is most difficult for a black girl to recover from past mistakes in society because it is set up against them. However, she was a

¹⁹⁵ Maya Angelou, interview by Nicholson Mavis, ThamesTV, Mavis on Four, 1984.

¹⁹⁶ Maya Angelou, interview by The National Visionary Leadership Project, *NVLP*, YouTube, 2001.

role-model that proved that it was possible to do so, which makes these stories so significant.

Angelou demonstrated in these interviews and speeches that one is always in the process of becoming. She wanted to highlight that it was human to make mistakes, and human to rise from these mistakes and to learn from them and she demonstrated that with her personal stories.

Another lesson from Angelou's grandmother she often passed on was imbedded in the story about the times her grandmother would be braiding her hair, and say, "Sister, when you get, give. When you learn, teach."¹⁹⁷ Angelou said that,

These are lessons to live by. I thought for a long time that my grandmother was God. She was so tall. And she used to tell me, 'Sister, Momma don't know what she's gonna do, Momma's just gonna step out on the Word. Just step out on the word of God.' Faith is evidence of things not seen.¹⁹⁸

Sometimes, Angelou would add that her grandmother would be braiding her hair because she explained that her hair was very big. In this way, Angelou also contributed to the representation of black women through storytelling because even basic anecdotes such as braiding their hair lacked representation in popular culture. There are speeches by Angelou that can now be found on YouTube in which she gave sermons in black churches and would add to this story that her grandmother would put her hand in Angelou's neck in order to make sure not to break it when she combed

¹⁹⁷ Maya Angelou, "Love Liberates," OWN, Oprah's Master Class, 2014.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

her hair. The whole audience would burst out in laughter and sounds of recognition when she mentioned this.¹⁹⁹

Angelou often told stories about her grandmother's religious lessons which she passed on to her audience. Angelou believed her religion to be at the root of her identity. As Angelou's grandmother taught Angelou to "step out on the word of God", Angelou also emphasized how religion connected to self-love and protection. Furthermore, Angelou argued that she drew her sense of worth and humility from her religion referring to that as the most valuable lesson.

If I think of my life as a class of what I've really learned, I've learned a few things. First, I'm aware that I'm a child of God. It's such an amazing understanding. To think that the 'It' which made flees and mountains, rivers and stars, made me. What I pray for is humility. To know that there's something greater than I.²⁰⁰

Interestingly, Angelou connected protecting herself to her religion. She did not only protect herself in order to take care of herself, but also to keep her soul immaculate because of her belief that she would meet God one day. She told this in a story in which she highlighted the best advice she believed she had ever given to her son. Part of this advice was that

[t]here's a place in you that you must keep unviolated, you must keep it pristine, clean so that nobody has the right to curse you or treat you badly,

¹⁹⁹ Maya Angelou, "Dr. Maya Angelou Vistinging Glide Memorial Church in San Fransisco," YouTube, 2012.

²⁰⁰ Maya Angelou, interview by Oprah Winfrey, OWN, Oprah Winfrey Show, 2013.

nobody...because that may be the place you go to when you meet God. You have to have a place where you say, ‘Stop it, back up...Say no when it’s no. Say so, back it up, because that place has to remain clean and clear.’²⁰¹

This lesson is rooted in her religion and aimed to teach her son, and later her audiences, to protect themselves as well as stand up for themselves when they were treated unjustly. Again, these lessons were relevant for the black community, and especially black women, because they were often discriminated against.

Angelou encouraged people to remain positive. Even in a general lesson such as the following, Angelou related it to the black experience:

[A]s often as possible, you laugh. Don’t force it, but the Bible says, ‘A cheerful spirit is good medicine.’ And we are just now finding in medical research that that is true. And maybe why black people have lived so long and have fewer wrinkles and so forth.²⁰²

In both the speech and the interview, Angelou succeeded this remark by referring to the African saying, “Be careful when a naked person offers you a shirt,” highlighting African carry-overs in black culture. In the speech she emphasized that we “need to find that wondrous thing and uniqueness in ourselves to remind us that everyone is worthy.” In her speech *Live & Unplugged*, Angelou also referred to the love of the

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Maya Angelou, interview by the National Visionary Leadership Project, *NVLP*, YouTube, 2001.

black slaves, who sacrificed themselves for their descendants explaining that “it’s living close to death that kept my race alive.”²⁰³ This way, she drew from the black experience to explain the power of love:

That is love, when any human being is willing to allow herself or himself at the most demean level, at the most dehumanized level, thinking that by doing so, he or she can assure the survival of yet another human being, that is love.²⁰⁴

Furthermore, love is an important aspect in Angelou’s stories which she considered to be the source of “any good thing.” Interestingly, she continuously referred back to somebody (or an entity) that loved her, in which she found her identity, self-worth, and sense of freedom. Furthermore, she believed love to be the source of one’s ability to forgive.

On Oprah Winfrey’s *Super Soul Sunday*, she explained that “love is that condition in the human spirit, so profound, that it allows us to forgive.”²⁰⁵ Maya Angelou connected her theory on forgiveness to a saying by Terence, who “was a black man, slave, sold to a roman senator. He was freed by that senator and became the most popular playwright in Rome, in 154 B.C.” He became known for his saying, “I am a human being, nothing human can be alien to me.” Angelou was a fervent believer of this statement. She introduced this concept in her early interviews as well

²⁰³ Maya Angelou, “Maya Angelou Live and Unplugged,” *Black Heritage Channel*, YouTube, 1987.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Maya Angelou, interview by Oprah Winfrey, OWN, Oprah Winfrey Show, 2013.

as in *Oprah's Master Class* in her late eighties.²⁰⁶ She believed that all human beings have the same components in them to do both good and bad. However, she said, one can “intend to use [his] energies constructively as opposed to destructively.”²⁰⁷

Thus, Angelou drew from the black experience to explain the notion of love. Then she went on to explain that forgiveness is rooted in love and used that as a fundament to relate it to Terance saying, to proof the equality of human beings. This demonstrates how Maya Angelou drew from the black experience to explain different concepts such as love and forgiveness to ultimately demonstrate the equality of human beings through storytelling.

Collectively Becoming

As demonstrated in chapter two, Maya Angelou played a significant role in working through the cultural trauma of slavery in the public spotlight. The way in which cultural trauma is represented is inextricably linked to the configuration of a collective identity.²⁰⁸ By contributing to create a platform to work through the cultural trauma of slavery, Angelou simultaneously contributed to the reconstruction of a collective identity. Similar to Angelou's discourse on cultural trauma, she also offered an alternate narrative for the black collective identity which was rooted in pride, resilience and strength.

²⁰⁶ Maya Angelou, interview by Merv Griffin, YouTube, Merv Griffin Show, 1982; Maya Angelou, interview by Oprah Winfrey, OWN, Oprah Winfrey Show, 2013.

²⁰⁷ Maya Angelou, interview by Oprah Winfrey, OWN, Oprah Winfrey Show, 2013.

²⁰⁸ Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009), 2.

Angelou's perception of the collective black identity was rooted in the New Negro Movement, which was at its height during her upbringing, and that of the Civil Rights Movement. The New Negro movement consisted of voices such as Du Bois' who coined the term 'double consciousness' which signified "always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."²⁰⁹ Inherently linked to this notion was the new term, African American, as a way of identification. This reflected double consciousness as it indicated two roots of origin, with the memory of slavery as the middle ground. Du Bois also expressed music to be at the core of African-American culture. Since music had generally been accessible for slaves, it contained the core of their collective identity. The New Negro movement also "link[ed] the individual to the collective through the concept of racial pride and the role of culture in that process."²¹⁰ Furthermore, it reinterpreted the past by drawing from Africa as a source of pride and dignity which their identity derived from. Eyerman argues that the uniqueness of the New Negro Movement lies in the control it could take "over his own self-perception as a step toward control over his own destiny."²¹¹

During the Civil Rights Movement, "mass media, especially film and radio, would play a central role in the contemporary process of collective identity-formation, as would a range of social movements and their organizations."²¹² Protests and social movements played an important role in the formation of a collective identity as these were portrayed predominantly in the mass media. Furthermore, "movement

²⁰⁹ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. (New York: Bantam Books, 1903), 3.

²¹⁰ Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009), 91.

²¹¹ *Ibid*, 113.

²¹² *Ibid*, 130.

intellectuals articulated collective identity in an altered historical context.”²¹³ Even though Africa was an important source in the vocalization of the collective identity, the heritage of slavery became the center of identity-formation.²¹⁴ Furthermore, during this era and as a result of a head start in working through the trauma of slavery

redemption would come through rejecting the legacy of slavery, most importantly the psychological burden it continued to impose on the African American, and then being reborn as blacks, no longer Negroes, hyphenated Americans, or anything other than original and authentic black people.²¹⁵

In other words, redefining oneself as black, correlated with the notion to look beyond slavery and root identity in the newly defined Africa. Eyerman contends that “the return to the ancestral culture, if not place, was a central ingredient in the secular black nationalism of the mid-1960s.”²¹⁶

One way in which Maya Angelou contributed to the formation of a collective identity was through her program *Blacks, Blues, Black!* (1968) in which she told stories about cultural carry-overs that indicated traces of African culture in black culture and demonstrated how their identity came to be. It was meant to provide black people with an entertaining program that informed them about the roots of their culture and identity. Slavery and the effects of slavery served a prominent role in the program and Angelou encouraged black people to stay united in their differences.

²¹³ Ibid, 174.

²¹⁴ Ibid, 181.

²¹⁵ Ibid, 189.

²¹⁶ Ibid, 194.

Dressed in West-African garments, Angelou contributed to the representation of black culture through storytelling, addressing a wide public through television.

When Angelou appeared on the *Merv Griffin show*, Griffin remarked Angelou looked like royalty, referring to her African dress and hairdo, to which she replied, “Well, there may be that in it.”²¹⁷ In an interview with Johnetta B. Cole, Angelou wondered if “we really come from Africa or did we bring it with us? I know that the spirit I found in West-Africa when I was living there, and ... I have to say that my people have literally brought their spirit with them.” In the same interview, she recalls her grandmother singing a hymn in church which Angelou sang for her African husband, who recognized the melody from his native country in West Africa. This demonstrates that Angelou perceived her identity to be rooted in her African ancestry and this is what she carried out to the popular culture.

Even though Angelou demonstrated clear carry-overs from the African ancestry of the black community, she firmly believed that their ancestors’ slavery past formed and altered their identity which developed towards a new black American identity. For example, she spoke about her enslaved ancestors’ resilience and courage, which she believed to be foundational to the black American identity. This remark connects to the black intellectuals’ vision of black American identity rooted in the slavery past.

Look at us [black people] and say, amazing, we’ve come a long way...Amazing, here we are, still here and still moving on up...Imagine it, laying in each other’s urine and feces and menstrual flow. Imagine it, and

²¹⁷ Maya Angelou, interview by Merv Griffin, *Merv Griffin Show*, YouTube, 1982.

getting off that slave ship and standing on that auction block being bought again. Getting up before sunrise, going to bed after sunset. Imagine it, and still walking down the street as if she has oil wells in her backyard.²¹⁸

The last line in this quote refers to Angelou's poem, "Still I Rise", in which she celebrated black resilience and endurance. She wrote in the last stanza of this poem:

I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.²¹⁹

Angelou often recited this poem on stage or during interviews. Considering her enslaved ancestors' resistance and experiences as sacrifices was an innovative way of approaching black history, which countered the dominant voice. Angelou changed this version by honoring the ancestors for the sacrifices they had made so that their descendants could flourish. In order to exemplify this message, she often referred to a story about an encounter with Tupac Shapur, who she met on the set to film the movie

²¹⁸ Maya Angelou, interview by Johnetta B. Cole, *Smithsonian Museum*, YouTube, 2014.

²¹⁹ Maya Angelou, *Maya Angelou: The Complete Poetry*, (New York: Random House, 2015), 159.

Poetic Justice. Angelou recalled that he was cursing so much “you could see the blues come out of his mouth.”²²⁰ As mentioned before, Angelou considered cursing to be very dangerous and would not allow that type of language to be used around her. She took him away from the crowd, and after Tupac had calmed down, she asked him:

[W]hen was the last time anyone told you how important you are? You’re the best we have. We need you desperately. Do you know that our people stood on auction blocks for you? Did you know we got up before sunrise and slept after sunset so that you could stay alive [and] you could be here this day?²²¹

Angelou re-established Tupac’s identity rooted in his ancestry to remind him of his worth. In an interview with George Stroumbolopoulos, she repeats this saying that she believed that when an individual could understand that he had already been paid for and realized how valuable that makes them, they could then go forward and “pay for somebody else who is yet to come.”²²² Angelou would regularly connect this to humanity in general suggesting that all ancestors have paid for the people that are alive today in one way or another:

Everybody here has already been paid for. Whether the ancestors came from Eastern Europe, trying to escape the Pogroms... If the ancestors came anywhere in Europe or for that matter from South America, Mexico or any of the islands trying to find a place that would hold all the people. If the

²²⁰ Reuben Cannon and Marquetta Glass. *And Still I Rise*. Directed by Bob Hercules and Rita Coburn Whack (2017; United States of America: American Masters Pictures), Netflix.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Maya Angelou, interview by George Stroumbolopoulos, *George Stroumbolopoulos Tonight*, YouTube, 2014.

ancestors came from Asia, in the 1850s, to build this country, unable legally to bring their mates for decades. Or if the ancestors came from Africa, unwillingly, lying spoon-fashion in the filthy hatches of slave ships, in their own and in each other's excrement, and urine, and menstrual flow. They have paid for each of us already.²²³

Even though Angelou's most prominent representation of black culture is by celebrating their resilience, strength and courage, she could also be critical towards developments in the culture. In an interview with Howard Stirk Holdings, she argued that the black community had "lost a sense of self" and "an ability to teach [their] children a sense of self."²²⁴ She elaborated on this in an interview for The National Visionary Leadership Project arguing that

Somebody dropped a ball...A generation of people thought, 'I'm gonna send my kids to [names prestigious universities] and everything will be alright. And so I don't have to tell them about how awful it was in the thirties, fourties and even fifties. They don't have to know that. Wrong, it was very clear he/she who does not learn from his/her history is doomed to repeat it and repeat it and repeat it ad nauseum.²²⁵

Angelou countered this by representing her history in the popular media. She warned for the danger of keeping the past silent and emphasized the importance of knowing

²²³ Maya Angelou, "Dr. Maya Angelou Gives Commemorative Poem – 2010 National Urban League Conference," YouTube, 2010.

²²⁴ Maya Angelou, interview by Armstrong Louis, *Howard Stirk Holdings*, YouTube, 2008.

²²⁵ Maya Angelou, interview by the National Visionary Leadership Project, *NVLP*, YouTube, 2001.

about one's roots. Furthermore, she argued that "[black] parents sent their kids off to white schools thinking this would make them even, normal, and, well, white."

However, Angelou started laughing remarking that "it did not." She continued to explain that "going to school will not make you white." Increasing in laughter she said: "I have 53 doctorates, which means I have been to 53 universities and it didn't have any effect at all on my complexion."²²⁶ The underlying message in this remark is the emphasis on the fact that skin-color does not say anything about a person's ability to achieve.

Angelou often referred to the effect skin-color could have to a person's sense of self in her interviews. She represented black culture through these stories by highlighting their resilience but also the struggle it could be to be discriminated against and the effort it took to deal with it.

My great blessing would be, if I had that power, I would make everybody an African American. At least for a week...Know what it's like. Know what it's like to get on a bus or any public conveyance and have everybody look at you as if you have stolen the baby's milk. Like, look at you and turn their face away. And still, say, 'I forgive you...'²²⁷

Angelou often referred to the need to forgive in her stories about dealing with racism because she believed that forgiveness leads to a sense of freedom, which ultimately supports someone in their process towards self-betterment. In a story

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Maya Angelou, interview by Johnetta B. Cole, *Smithsonian Museum*, YouTube, 2014.

told on *Super Soul Sunday* with Oprah Winfrey, Angelou spoke about the importance of forgiveness:

It's one of the greatest things you can give to yourself, to forgive... You are relieved of carrying that burden of resentment. You really are lighter, you feel lighter... I had to get to a place where I could forgive the man who had raped me when I was seven years old. I had to get there and that was a matter of incredible mental gymnastics. And then I had to think of what I had done to other people and see how I'd been forgiven, whatever I've done I've been forgiven.²²⁸

Angelou wanted to emphasize that people should protect themselves by forgiving, so that they would not have to carry the heavy “burden of resentment,” which is an understandable response when one is continuously discriminated against.

Even in a specific topic such as the black collective identity, Angelou knew how to turn her stories into something that was relatable to anybody. In an interview with Henry Louis Gates for *PBS*, Angelou remarked that

Heritage is so complex that we have to be simple and we have to consider ourselves global. And it takes a lot of courage to do that, but human beings are more alike than we are unlike and no human being can be more human than another.²²⁹

²²⁸ Maya Angelou, interview by Oprah Winfrey, OWN, Oprah Winfrey Show, 2013.

²²⁹ Maya Angelou, interview by Henry L. Gates, *PBS*, 2008.

In an interview with Charlie Rose, Angelou explained how she drew from the black collective identity in order to speak about humanity. Angelou tells a story about the way she wrote the inaugural poem for President Clinton. The first line of the poem introduces a rock, a tree and a river which she explains derive from three symbols in different spirituals. They are highly personal as Angelou tells about her connection to these songs and sings them. Remarkably, she notes that the symbols were rooted in “that particular genius and African-American soul...then I could talk about all of us.”²³⁰ This suggests that Angelou drew from the collective black identity in order to establish soulstones which enabled her to speak about and for humanity.

In one of her last interviews towards the end of her life, Angelou explained to George Stroumboulopoulos what her main goal is, which represents the way in which Angelou told all her stories. She said, “what I really want to do is be a representative of my race, of the human race.”²³¹ Interestingly, she first refers to her own race before specifying the human race. This was at the core of all her stories. Angelou first highlighted her race before connecting it to the human race. She continued to say:

I have a chance to show how kind we can be. Of how intelligent and generous we can be. I have a chance to teach and to love and to laugh. I know that when I finish doing what I was sent here to do I will be called home. And I will go home without any fear, trepidations.²³²

²³⁰ Maya Angelou, interview by Charlie Rose, *Charlie Rose*, YouTube, 1993.

²³¹ Maya Angelou, interview by George Stroumboulopoulos, *George Stroumboulopoulos Tonight*, CBC, 2014.

²³² Ibid.

Highly aware of her position in the public spotlight, Angelou established soulstones that people could relate to in her stories by highlighting these characteristics. In this way, she continued her fight for racial equality until the end of her life.

Conclusion

The spring of 2019 marked the one year anniversary of Beyoncé's performance at Coachella in which she headlined as the first black woman since its debut in 1999. To mark its anniversary, she released a Netflix documentary of this performance accompanied by a surprise album release. Throughout the documentary, which portrayed unique film material of the Homecoming tour, Beyoncé honors black excellence, dedicating the tour to those who cleared this path for her. Countless of black artists are featured throughout the documentary whose quotes are portrayed on big screens. Maya Angelou is among the few influential black people whose audio footage is played throughout the performance. We hear Nina Simone sing "Lilac Tree," Morrison read that "if you can surrender to the air, you can ride it," and Malcolm X argue that black women are the most discriminated against in society.

Maya Angelou's excerpt in which she is interviewed by George Stroumboloupoulos is significantly longer than the other audio material. In this interview, she explains that she wants to be a representative of her race. Moreover, when the trailer for the documentary was released, it was Angelou's voice that accompanied the footage shown. Angelou's prominent position in the trailer and the documentary demonstrates Beyoncé's emphasis on the representation of Maya Angelou's spoken words. The fact that Angelou's spoken word is featured and not a quote from one of her many written works demonstrates the importance of her oratory and the significant impact it has had on one of the most influential people alive today. Beyoncé used her platform to pass Angelou's oratory on to millions of people all over the world, which indicates how relevant her message is to this day.

Whereas previous research on Maya Angelou's written works has provided remarkable insights about her personage and literary ingenuity as a writer, a thorough

analysis of her oratory in interviews and speeches has been neglected. Even though Angelou's autobiographies and her later publications give remarkable insights into her life and achievements, I argue that a major part of her continuous struggle as a civil rights activist laid in her public appearances in which she used the African-American tradition of storytelling to contribute to the representation of black America in order to empower and encourage them and to reach people globally to counter the ongoing inequality in society. I contend that Maya Angelou did this by speaking from her own experience as well as the black experience, but ultimately related her stories to human experiences anyone could identify with by establishing soulstones. This tactic aimed to encourage people to see each other's similarities instead of differences in order to create mutual understanding and to see each other as equals.

This thesis aimed to analyze Maya Angelou's contribution to the representation of black culture in popular media through the African-American tradition of storytelling. Maya Angelou frequently appeared in the popular media for interviews and speeches in which she told stories that often focused on resistance and identity. Aligned with the African-American tradition of storytelling, Angelou also knew how to captivate her audience by performing her stories, acting out certain characters, singing her favorite spirituals and gospel songs and evoked the audience to laugh, cry, meditate and reflect on her stories.²³³

This thesis demonstrates an aspect of Angelou's contribution to the representation of black culture and the continuation of her activism that has not been focused on before. The broadcasted interviews and speeches give insight in the way Angelou aimed to represent black culture non-verbally and through her oral

²³³ Janice D. Hamlet, "Word! The African American Oral Tradition and its Rhetorical Impact on American Popular Culture," *Black History Bulletin* 74, no. 1 (2011): 27.

storytelling. Her appearance played an important part in her representation of black culture. For example, wearing her hair natural on stage reinforced her remarks about her pride in the black race. Furthermore, the African-American tradition of storytelling was a fundamental aspect of Angelou's answers in interviews and at the base of her speeches. The way that she told her stories and the most prominent themes that she highlighted correlate with the ancient tradition which can be traced back to African communities before colonization.²³⁴ This is the reason for my focus on broadcasted interviews in this thesis.

This thesis also demonstrates how Angelou adapted the tradition, not only speaking from her perspective for black people only but also for all people. Drawing from her own experience and by contributing to the representation of black culture through the popular media, Angelou continued her activism for equality by aiming to make people realize that their commonalities outweigh their differences.

Angelou could use her role in the public spotlight to speak about the black community, contributing to the representation of her (enslaved) ancestors and the black experience after slavery. She regularly spoke about topics such as segregation, the Jim Crow South, the Civil Rights Movement and considered this movement to be ongoing until the end of her life. As Angelou became popular in the public spotlight right after –what historians consider to be– the end of the Civil Rights Movement, Angelou also became an important voice during the post-civil-rights era. She continuously argued the Civil Rights Movement had not come to an end and aimed to encourage people to continue to strive for equal rights. Her appearances in popular

²³⁴ Banks-Wallace, Joanne. "Talk that Talk Storytelling and Analysis Rooted in African American Oral Tradition," *Qualitative Health Research* 12, no. 3 (2002): 410- 426.

shows with famous interviewers or on (inter)national channels contributed to her ability to reach a broad audience, among which she could reach people who would not have been likely to read her books. Furthermore, Angelou kept the Civil Rights Movement's achievement and leaders relevant as she was a Civil Rights activist herself. Her friendships with Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, enabled her to keep their legacy alive and continue to speak out on their ideas through storytelling. Furthermore, she would often refer to them in stories and provide information about them that was previously unknown.

One of the themes in Angelou's stories this thesis focused on resistance. Drawing from Mieke Bal's trauma theory, I argue that storytelling contributed Angelou's process to work through her personal trauma of sexual assault and the way her public interviews allowed Angelou to re-enact her trauma in the presence of witnesses which helped her to transfer her "traumatic memory" to "the narrative memory."²³⁵ In this way, Angelou demonstrated how she overcame the trauma of rape and dealt with its aftermath. Moreover, she emphasized how specific aspects of black culture – such as the black church – had influenced her to resist her sexual trauma and the way it supported her to overcome it. Furthermore, she always made sure that these stories functioned to inspire people by showing them that adversity could be transformed into a valuable lesson or a positive outcome. For example, Angelou told stories about the meaning behind certain poems, such as "The Mask" in which she tells about Mrs. Rosie who inspired her to write the poem to bring to light "Uncle Tomming" in society. This is also evident in her story about her uncle Willie, who was often subjected to racism and discrimination because of his handicap but still

²³⁵ Mieke Bal, *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*. Ed. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer. Hannover, NH: UP of New England, 1997: vii-xvii.

maintained a positive outlook on life and left behind a legacy of which the influences are still alive today. The public spotlight also allowed Angelou to tell the stories behind her writings to make their impact bigger by opening a conversation about them and the societal issues that inspired these poems.

When Angelou spoke about the black collective in connection to resistance, she focused on the cultural trauma of slavery and its aftermath, always emphasizing how they had survived and overcome strongly. Furthermore, she applied her theories on overcoming her personal trauma and adversities to inspire the collective. Drawing from Eyerman's theory on the cultural trauma of slavery, I argue that Angelou contributed to the representation of black culture by providing a different narrative about the slavery past, celebrating their African roots as a source of pride and dignity.²³⁶ Angelou is among the first people to appear in the popular media to speak openly about the effects of racism and segregation on television. This way, she was able to create a platform that could reach across the country to work through the cultural trauma of slavery in retrospect and could provide a perspective of black history that was actively ignored by the dominant voice in society.

Angelou continuously spoke about the importance of self-love and improving oneself continuously and endlessly. By applying Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory on intersectionality to Maya Angelou's stories, I argue that Angelou focused on empowering black women.²³⁷ In this way, she was able to contribute to their representation in the popular media and to renegotiate and reconstruct an alternative identity which countered dominant stereotypes that were imbedded deep within

²³⁶ Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009.

²³⁷ Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," *Feminist Legal Theory* 8, no. 1 (1989): 139-167.

society. Through storytelling and her role in the public spotlight, Angelou could use her personal stories of becoming to inspire and empower black women to resist oppression. Interestingly, Angelou often drew from stories and lessons her grandmother and mother had taught her. In this way, Angelou conveyed her (grand)mother's lessons to a broad public.

The content of these lessons are significant to analyze as they provide insight into the messages Angelou considered to be relevant to pass on during the times that she conveyed them in. Furthermore, the popular media allowed Angelou to pass these oral stories on to a broader public. Whereas Angelou passed the stories on which were told to her from (grand)mother to (grand)daughter, Angelou passed these oral stories on to millions of people across the world. Angelou combined her grandmother's, mother's, and her personal wisdom in her storytelling to inspire, empower and encourage black women, as well as to contribute to their representation in society. In line of Angelou's storytelling these stories still contained aspects that any human being could identify with.

On the collective level, Angelou told stories about possible cultural carry-overs their ancestors took from Africa which were still evident in black culture. Drawing from Eyerman's theory on the interconnectedness of the cultural trauma of slavery and the construction of a collective identity, I compare Angelou's stories on black collective identity and relate them to the times that she highlighted them. Furthermore, I argue how she provided an alternative narrative about the collective black identity than the dominant white voice had provided in society. By drawing from her African roots as a source of pride, she contributed to the renegotiation of a collective identity that acknowledged the cultural trauma of slavery but also

approached it from a standpoint of pride, honoring their ancestors for the sacrifices they made so they could flourish.

She often told stories about identity aspects she recognized in communities in West-Africa that she was raised with as well. Another important aspect of her stories was grounded in music. For example, Angelou told stories about melodies of spirituals that her African friends recognized in their own songs or how she sang an African song to her friend in West-Africa of which she did not know the meaning and it turned out to be a slave's outcry to his homeland. This way, Angelou contributed to the representation of black culture, their history and connected their collective identity to their African ancestry. Angelou considered the most important aspect of the collective black identity to be the sacrifice that their ancestors had made during their enslavement and the generations after who endured Reconstruction and the Jim Crow era so they could flourish.

Maya Angelou's greatest gift to humanity, was perhaps her talent to tell a specific story about her experiences as a black woman in America and to wondrously convey it in a way, that a young girl – such as myself – from a little town in the East of the Netherlands could listen to that story and recognize a truth and similarity in it. This ability enabled Angelou to reach millions of people across the world and, more importantly, made them empathetic because they recognized the truth in her oratory. She had a profound gift to bring her message across in a way that different people from different races, creeds, religions, cultures and continents could understand and empathize with. This ultimately helped to change the dominant culture and led to a more honest representation of black culture in the popular media.

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