

FORMS OF LOSS AND BELONGING IN THE POETRY OF MAYA ANGELOU

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1: Introduction

This thesis is interested in the narratives of belonging that arise out of losses that are linguistic, cultural and historical, as seen in the poetry of the African American poet, Maya Angelou. By encouraging reader participation, Angelou's poetry expresses loss and belonging through narratives that, while mediated by categories of race, class and gender, often transcend these same categories. This thesis will focus on Angelou's poetry inasmuch as the poems also relate to themes of loss and belonging¹ within Angelou's narrative. *I argue that the study of loss and belonging in Angelou's poetry is essential as it draws the reader's attention to ideas of "home", "kinship" and "self" through relationships of belonging that are integral to Angelou's culturally-mediated narrative. Further, relations of belonging in Angelou's narratives reach towards a universal notion of belonging that often redefine notions of "home", "kinship" and "self". Within the framework of American literary criticism, Angelou's personal narrative is political because the author expresses loss and belonging as an inalienable right belonging to all people, the right to have their stories told.* Writing from the late twentieth to the early twenty-first centuries, Angelou's work coincided with a growing interest in racial and gendered studies within African American and American literature. It was also around this time that a growing body of critical studies of, and about, the diaspora and globalisation emerged. An offshoot of diasporic studies was critical meditations on the nature of belonging.

As a critical theme associated with migration, transnationality and the diaspora, belonging is usually studied in relation to how migrants from various places establish kinship relations with members of their community within the host country (Ilean 55-74; Croucher

¹ Belonging, here, is understood as kinship affiliations—racial, gendered and nationalist— that emerge from losses which are linguistic, cultural and historical.

115; Meinhof and Galasiński 1-11). Language plays a crucial role in cementing relations of belonging. According to Ulrike Hanna Meinhof and Dariusz Galasiński, language is so vital to belonging that “everyday life is implicated in constructing and confirming multiple identities which may intersect, cross over, overlap, challenge or complement one another” (Meinhof and Galasiński 13). Despite the transnational implications of belonging, for the migrant subject, language also serves as a reminder of loss. In the book, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticisms 1981-1991* (1991), for instance, Salman Rushdie writes that language (in this case, English) is riddled with so many biases that its use by the “native” speaker reminds the migrant subject of his belonging elsewhere (Rushdie 18-19). This “elsewhere” is a place of loss since, having migrated from his/her home country, the migrant subject finds himself/herself contending with memories of a place and home s/he has left behind that his/her present life does not accommodate. Rushdie writes that while the experience of the loss of home is a universal one, for the

[W]riter who is out-of-country and even out-of-language...[the loss of home]...is more concrete...by the physical fact of discontinuity, of his present being in a different place from his past, of his being “elsewhere” (Rushdie 12).

Rushdie hints, here, at both the legal (citizenship status) and cultural ramifications of being a migrant subject. The book *Statelessness: the quiet torture of belonging nowhere* (2008), published by Coventry Peace House, reports that forced migration has become a chronic problem in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Loss of home, due to political unrest and persecution, has forced many migrants into a condition of statelessness. The book identifies two forms of statelessness or loss of national identity: the first is a form of statelessness that arises out of legal complications surrounding the identity of a child who has not been registered at birth or whose parents are from different countries with ambiguous

laws relating to citizenship (*de jure* statelessness); the second is the statelessness that emerges from a condition where the host country does not have procedures in place to accommodate the migrant (*de facto* statelessness) (Coventry Peace House 13-14). Although it is the latter—*de facto* statelessness or *de facto* loss of nationhood—that accounts for most of the discrimination that migrants face in the host country, loss of home and nationhood themselves trigger a desire to “revisit” the home country through various cultural symbols and artefacts. In the book, *Longing Within Belonging: The Cultural Politics of Settlement* (2002), Suzan Ilcan writes that the belonging, for the migrant, “ends with the memories and losses incurred by the places left behind and all the paths forgone” (Ilcan 1). Ilcan writes that while historical losses trigger identities that are transnational in character, these identities are also marked by a longing for stability and “home”—a “longing that resides with and within belonging.” (Ilcan, 60). Quoting Salman Rushdie, Ilcan writes:

All migrants leave their past behind, although some try to pack it into bundles and boxes—but on the journey something seeps out of the treasured mementoes and old photographs, until even their owners fail to recognize them, because it is the fate of the migrants to be stripped of history, to stand naked amidst the scorn of strangers upon whom they see the rich clothing, the brocades of continuity and the eyebrows of belonging. (qtd. in Ilcan, 71).

According to Ilcan, therefore, loss is an integral part within, and of, the migrant subject’s desire to belong. Maya Angelou’s poems such as “Caged Bird”, “No Loser, No Weeper” and “Child Dead in Old Seas” allude to these losses and corresponding desires to belong. The poem “Caged Bird”, found in the poetry collection *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou* (1994), speaks of the loss of, and the longing for, freedom. “Caged

Bird” has, for its central character, a bird whose wings have been clipped and whose feet are tethered to the bars of a cage. And yet, this same bird who expresses anguish at its imprisonment sings in a way that the free bird of the same poem cannot. In fact, the caged bird is the one who sings while the free bird —knowing the sky to be his/hers —remains silent.

In the poem, Angelou suggests the urgency of poetry is through its relation to the loss of freedom. Poetry or the ability to create links Angelou’s poem to the history of slavery when the subject of African descent was denied his/her freedom. Although the poem could be read as a metaphor for the author herself, it also encapsulates the lives of those characters who people Angelou’s poems —the drug addict of “Junkie Monkey Reel” and “Letter to an Aspiring Junkie”, the girl of “No Loser, No Weeper” who anticipates losing her lover and the daughter of “Child Dead in Old Seas” who pines for her dead father. All of these characters are bound by a present that denies them the possibility of living on their own terms. Central to reading these characters, are those poems where Angelou invites the reader to share in her life’s work — as a “black” teenager in “The Thirteens (Black)”, as a fellow traveller in “Here’s to Adhering” or as a lover in “Come. And Be My Baby”. It is as if, in assuming these various roles, the reader comes into contact with the people who have influenced the poet’s own life and, in doing so, participates in her narrative. It is through these text-and-reader interfaces that Angelou’s poetry creates what Rushdie calls “imaginary homelands” or countries of the mind that, because of physical alienation, can only be imagined and reproduced through cultural artefacts like literature (Rushdie, 10).

This Chapter covers five inter-related objectives showing the aims intended for the study as far as Angelou’s poetry is concerned. Following the section on the objectives and scope, is the rationale of the project which focuses on the reasons why the study is conducted and its relevance. The next section will introduce Angelou’s poetry in relation to her life.

This will be followed by a review of literature assessing previous work on loss and belonging as well as other critics' assessment of Angelou's works. The review of literature will also point out the gaps in previous research on the topic. The next section is on research methodology and the theoretical position that I take in my study of Angelou's poetry. The Chapter will conclude with the questions that the dissertation hopes to answer and brief summaries of the remaining chapters.

1.2: Objectives and Scope of the Study

The objectives of this study are firstly, to gauge, whether by drawing a connection between Angelou's poetry and the critical climate at the time when she was writing, a new understanding of the "universal" can be reached through a resolution of the 'social relevance of poetry' versus 'art for art's sake' impasse; the first objective also extends to a second objective which is to examine how narratives of loss and belonging in Angelou's poetry show African American literature is a literature for all; the third objective is to examine how Angelou's poetry revises and "reads" English language texts and narratives; in relation to how English language texts and narratives are read, a fourth objective would be to understand what the African American presence in the Western canon implies for literature in English as a whole; finally, the dissertation aims to examine how hierarchies in narratives of belonging are resolved in Angelou's poetry.

The scope of the thesis encompasses narratives of loss and belonging in Angelou's poetry as it is placed within the American and African American critical traditions from the 1970s to the 2010s. While the primary texts for the thesis are taken from Angelou's poems found in *Now Sheba Sings the Song* (1986) *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou* (1994) and *Celebrations: Rituals of Peace and Prayer* (2009), the thesis situates the poems within the socio-cultural and literary traditions at the time in which Angelou was writing.

Thus, critical history² becomes a tool through which narratives of loss and belonging in Angelou's poetry can be studied. Additionally, the study—by focusing on Angelou's poetry in relation to critical history— attempts to arrive at a new idea of the universal that combines both the site-specific language of African American dialects and how the dialects revise canonical English narratives.

1.3: Rationale for the Project

Angelou was writing, from 1970 to 2014, at an interesting time in American literary scholarship. According to Jed Rasula, in the book *The American Poetry Wax Museum: Reality Effects 1940-1990* (1999), American literary scholarship in the late twentieth century was largely influenced by research that negated social contexts and made most American poets visible as figures in wax (Rasula 465). On the other hand, the same American literary criticism focused on social relevance in relation to African American poets, thus relegating narratives of loss and longing in African American poetry to what was visible as social commentary (Gates 5). As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. writes in the book, *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self* (1987), social determinism in understanding belonging assigned a particularity to African American literature to the extent that the literature itself was stripped of its universal implications (Gates 19). The African American poet, in particular, was a prey to tokenism that made his/her poetry visible as mere representations of race, gender or class (Rasula 277-279). The many critical readings of Angelou's poetry reflect these changes.

While there have been attempts to read Angelou's writing through the lens of travel (Junker and Sanford 37-48), cartography (Bejan 147-156), nation (Stamant 101-126) and trauma (Henke 107-120; Vermillion 243-260), most readings of Angelou's writing are

² By critical history, I mean the advances in socio-cultural and literary criticism during the 1970s to the 2010s, particularly in American and African American studies.

centred around issues of race and gender (Walker 17-36; Koyana 67-84; Barnwell 133-146; Manora 359-375; Lupton 257-276). Within three decades, Angelou herself had produced eight autobiographies, two cookbooks and five volumes of poetry—a body of work that is open to multiple reading perspectives. While a numerical account of Angelou’s works shows that the author was prolific, very little attempt has been made to explore the relation between loss and belonging in Angelou’s poetry and its connections with criticism at the time in which Angelou was writing. There are at least two reasons why such a study is meaningful. First and foremost, critical history will offer us a temporal perspective of belonging—how belonging has been interpreted over the years and what has changed or stayed the same during the time within which Angelou was writing. A second advantage to studying the relation between Angelou’s poetry and critical history is if we understand Angelou as a woman of her times. Although Angelou, in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), was writing about the South during the 1930s, she was also writing a story that needed to be intelligible to a 1960s to 1970s audience. Thus, relations of belonging in Angelou’s poetry become meaningful because the author perceives a certain kind of audience to her writing.

As Angela Y. Davis notes in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (1999), poetry’s audience plays the role of an “imagined community” to which the poet belongs (Davis 61-62). Moreover, Wolfgang Iser, in the essay “The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach” (1972) writes that reading, far from being a passive activity, “is active and creative” resulting in an “awakening of responses within the reader himself.” (Iser 280). Similar to a performance, therefore, reading awakens the reader’s responses to “the forms of things unknown” or to forms of belonging based on African American cultural practices (Henderson 2-77).

1.4: Author and Primary Texts

Maya Angelou (4 April 1928 - 28 May 2014) was born Marguerite Ann Johnson in St. Louis, Missouri. No sooner had she begun life in her place of birth, however, than she and her brother were put in a train to Stamps, Arkansas following the separation of her parents. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), she recollects the effects that the displacement had on her. She writes, “If growing up was painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat” (Angelou 6). Although the South was, for Angelou, a well-spring of belonging, memories of the childhood displacement would follow her throughout her life and would be replicated in various ways and in different contexts. Apart from being a writer, Angelou also worked as a calypso singer, a dancer, a cable car conductor (the first African American to do so), a chef, a civil rights activist, an editor of a newspaper in Egypt, a university administrator in Ghana, an actor, a film director (the first African American woman to direct a feature film) and a sex worker. Angelou’s travels, and the professions she was employed in, typify the life of the African American working-class blues singer (Davis 98-102). In a similar fashion to the blues singer, Angelou’s poetry draws upon her experiences as a working-class subject. *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou* (1994), which is a collection of Angelou’s poems from 1971 to 1994, contains figures and tropes drawn from her working-class experiences. Poems such as “Mamma Welfare Roll”, “Woman Work”, “Coleridge Jackson”, “Pickin’Em Up and Layin’ Em Down”, “Junkie-Monkey-Reel” and “John J.” dwell on working-class lives and narratives within the African American community. A majority of the poems in the collection focus on the profane or secular component of African American poetry in that they are mostly themed around sexuality, the body and everyday life within the African American community.

Busy with her myriad professions, however, it was not until the 1960s that Angelou seriously considered becoming a writer. On the invitation of John Oliver Killens in 1959,

Angelou moved to Harlem, New York with her son and became a member of the Harlem Writers Guild. As Hortense J. Spillers writes in the essay, “Formalism Comes to Harlem” (1982), Harlem symbolises, for many African Americans, a place that stands for “a common ground of reference for Afro-American cultural experience” (Spillers 59). As the epicentre of the Black Arts Movement, Harlem was the place where many African Americans could hope to translate their experience of race into art forms that were uniquely “black” (Spillers 58-63). Angelou discovered, however, that writing invited strong criticism. In *The Heart of a Woman* (1986, 1991), Angelou dwells on the nature of writing: “I had gathered from the evening’s meeting that making a decision to write was a lot like jumping into a frozen lake” (Angelou 43). Braving criticism, however, was not an exception to the African American community: “Trying to overcome was black people’s honorable tradition.” (Angelou 43). Writing was a way by which Angelou could overcome the losses she encountered in her life, in the same manner as African American writers had been doing prior to Angelou’s own decision to become a writer. Given the losses in her life, from the loss of home early in her life, her mutism owing to rape when she was seven and the numerous other losses she encountered throughout her life, writing was, for Angelou, a means of retrieving the self in the face of loss. As she herself writes in the poem “The Lesson”: “I keep on dying,/Because I love to live” (Angelou 140). Carol E. Neubauer writes in the essay “Maya Angelou: Self and a Song of Freedom in the Southern Tradition” (1990), however, that Angelou’s preoccupation with loss inevitably leads her to the South (Neubauer 114-142). Where poetry is concerned, this literal and figurative movement was to inspire narratives of belonging that are based on the spirituals.

In 1981 Angelou moved to Winston-Salem upon accepting a lifetime professorship in American Studies at Wake Forest University, North Carolina. But her move back to the South, as she revealed in the essay “Why I Moved Back to The South” (1982), was to come to

terms with the history of a place that “is an often bitter, and bitterly beautiful Black race memory” (Angelou 130). Angelou’s essay, referring to the legacy of slavery, shows that she was well aware of the fact that the South was the first home of the African slave in America.

She wrote:

Ninety-eight percent of all African slaves brought to this country [America] stumbled from the ships of bondage, here. They came out of the fog of dislocation, here...And they shed their first tears, here, on this Southern soil. (Angelou 130).

In her capacity as a teacher and mentor, Angelou worked to heal the psychological and emotional wounds of racism and racial violence to be found in both personal and cultural memories, hers and the Southern African American community. She became to many young people, as Denene Millner puts it, “Mother Maya.” (Millner, unpaginated <https://www.ebony.com/black-history/mother-maya/>). It was a role she took seriously as is evidenced from the dedications of her numerous books to both biological and non-biological children. It is also a role derived from the tradition of African American poetry, particularly, the spirituals.

In the book *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the “Racial” Self* (1987), Henry Louis Gates, Jr. writes that any critical engagement with African American poetry begins with the spirituals. As songs that combine both the promise of physical manumission and a quest for transcendence, the spirituals are a combination of the sacred and the secular. Gates writes that the spirituals also confer upon the African American poet a “traditional role” as the “consciousness, or superconsciousness, of his or her people” (Gates 176). In the latter-half of her career, from 1994 onwards, Angelou took on this role. The poetry collection, *Celebrations: Rituals of Peace and Prayer* (2009) shows a more meditative aspect of Angelou’s poetry. There is still an awareness that the self is situated within a community, but

also a realisation that the self owes this community something in return for nurturing its talent. Although poems such as “Prayer” draw upon American holiday celebrations such as Thanksgiving, Angelou indirectly thanked the African American community for inspiring her: “For those who have no voice we ask You/to speak...” (Angelou 102). As Priscilla R. Ramsey notes in the essay, “Transcendence: The Poetry of Maya Angelou” (1984), the transcendental in Angelou’s poetry comes from the poet’s acknowledgement of the role of the community to inspire “fantasy, song [and] hope” (Ramsey 152).

On the 28th of May 2014, Angelou breathed her last in her home in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Tributes poured in from across the world at the news of her demise with Barack Obama describing her as “a truly phenomenal woman.” Angelou’s journey ends where her self-awareness began—in the South. This thesis will examine narratives of loss and belonging in Angelou’s poetry in *Now Sheba Sings the Song* (1987) as well as the poetry collections *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou* (1994) and *Celebrations: Rituals of Peace and Prayer* (2009).

1.5: Review of Literature

Sheila L. Croucher, in the book *Globalization and Belonging: The Politics of Identity in a Changing World* (2004), writes that belonging is inevitably connected to the idea of citizenship, even when globalisation has called to question the idea of the state as a territorial entity. Croucher writes that the state, as an entity that grants citizenship, “continues to be the primary site and coordinator of belonging.” (Croucher 70). Studying the trends of belonging in Rwanda, America and Mexico, however, Croucher observes language-driven entities that influence belonging—that of the nation and ethnicity. Operating through “symbols, heroes, memories and myths”, nationhood and ethnicity foster belonging based on shared cultural values and historical experiences (Croucher 101). Croucher, however, makes a distinction between nationhood and ethnicity. Quoting Max Weber, she writes, “the sentiment of ethnic

solidarity does not by itself make a nation” (qtd. in Croucher 118). To clarify her point, Croucher states that it is only when an ethnic group “achieves a degree of self-consciousness that manifests itself as widespread support for or mobilization of in pursuit of a state, they have become a nation” (Croucher 118). For Croucher, therefore, the difference between nationhood and ethnicity is one of territory, couched in the realisation of a state. In the case of the African American subject, ethnic solidarity and nationhood combine to produce a territorial site of belonging, especially, the symbolic and literal return to Africa. Moreover, the influence of nationhood and ethnicity on African American belonging exposes hierarchies of race, gender and class within language.

In the book, *Constructing Belonging: Race, Class, and Harlem's Professional Workers* (2003), Sabiyha Prince writes that racism and racial inequality continues to dominate the lives of African American subjects well into the twenty-first century. According to Prince, racial segregation has resulted in predominantly African American neighbourhoods (such as Harlem) becoming centres of African American cultural life (Prince 12-26). Although Prince does not dwell on the cultural aspects of belonging, her study shows that women were often surrogate mothers to non-biological children. Belonging comes from women playing crucial roles in caring for biological and non-biological kin within the African American community (Prince 91-97). Prince's observations about the nurturing potential of African American women are supported by critics like bell hooks who, in the book *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (2009), remarks that African American women, particularly grandmothers, shape an “aesthetic of being” and belonging through a vernacular that challenges standardised English by exposing the fallacies and inherent ambiguities in standardised English. According to hooks, it is the language of African American mothers and grandmothers that influences how African American culture has evolved into a distinct

aesthetic (hooks 121-134). Language, as a marker of belonging fostered by women, is not unique to the African American community alone.

In the book *Narratives of Place, Belonging and Language: An Intercultural Perspective* (2012), Máiréad Nic Craith, quoting Ernst Cassirer, writes that human beings live in “a symbolic universe” where language plays an important role in shaping human experience (Nic Craith x). For the writer who is a migrant, Nic Craith continues, language often acts as an intermediary, a “mother tongue” whereby people who come from the same place are able to relate to one another and establish belonging in the adopted country. Moreover, the “mother tongue”, as is usually understood, is “commonly associated with the person of the mother and the language she speaks with her child” (Nic Craith 76). This understanding of the “mother tongue” as a language that is passed on from mother to child, thereby establishing kinship relations or belonging, resonates quite well with critical themes in Angelou’s work. What remains unexplored is how this mother-child relation—a relation based on belonging— translates into, and influences, the formal components of Angelou’s poetry. Her poetry has, as this review of literature shows, been largely studied in relation to Angelou’s autobiographical narratives, leaving aside those relations of belonging that are non-biological. It is this gap in the literature that this dissertation attempts to fill—how non-biological relations of belonging are crucial in understanding the formal and universal characteristics of Angelou’s poetry. In reviewing critical material on Angelou’s work, I have chosen those materials that focus on the poet’s relationship of belonging to the women in her life.

Recent scholarship on Angelou’s writing has focussed on at least two relations of belonging that have influenced the poet. The first relationship of belonging is Angelou’s relationship with her paternal grandmother, Annie Henderson, and the second is the poet’s relation to her mother, Vivian Baxter. In other words, Angelou’s subject position is seen to be

derived from, and projected onto, these female characters in her life (Manora 359-375; Lupton 257-276). In the essay “Singing the Black Mother: Maya Angelou and Autobiographical Continuity” (1990), Mary Jane Lupton perceives a mother-child relation that runs as a common theme throughout Angelou’s oeuvre. Lupton writes:

In flux, in defiance of chronological time, the mother-child configuration forms the basic pattern against which other relationships are measured and around which episodes and volumes begin or end. Motherhood also provides the series with a literary unity, as Angelou shifts positions—from mother to granddaughter to child—in a non-ending text that, through its repetitions of maternal motifs, provides an ironic comment on her own sense of identity. For Angelou, despite her insistence on mother love, is trapped in the conflicts between working and mothering, independence and nurturing—conflicts that echo her ambivalence towards her mother, Vivian Baxter, and her apparent sanctification of Grandmother Henderson, the major adult figure in *Caged Bird*. (Lupton 260).

Lupton, in the passage cited above, identifies a mother-child relation around which all other relations of belonging in Angelou’s writing are organised. According to Lupton, the sense of belonging that Angelou expresses in relation to her mother and grandmother influences Angelou’s own idea of motherhood and her belonging towards people within her community. Angelou’s relationship with the maternal figures in her life also informs the development of her self. Significantly, Lupton perceives Angelou’s belonging as one that defies historical or chronological time. For Lupton, the idea of motherhood is one that remains with the reader long after Angelou’s works have been read. Lupton’s analysis of Angelou’s writing follows what Ron Eyerman terms “generational memory” in that past

events and encounters are carried over into the present through their revival by succeeding generations (Eyerman 10-22). Belonging, in such cases, becomes meaningful to the extent that the memory of the past or the deceased informs the subject's notion of "home", "kinship" and "self". In the case of Maya Angelou, kinship narratives often revolve around a woman-centred sense of belonging (Megna-Wallace 49-55). This is especially true of poems such as "Phenomenal Woman", "Our Grandmothers", "Still I Rise" and *Now Sheba Sings the Song* (1987) where the speaker expresses belonging through a perspective that is woman-centered. In particular, we see how the African American woman responds to contexts that encourage a sense of belonging which is otherwise limiting and, more often than not, based on loss.

It is through the association of Angelou's loss and longing with the self-denying narrative of slavery that we understand her work as one that is based on historical and cultural losses. Thus, in her appraisal of Angelou's sense of self, Yolanda M. Manora — in the essay "What are you looking at me for? I didn't come here to stay: Disruption, Displacement and Black Female Subjectivity in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*" (2005) — has the following to say of Angelou's subject position:

As *Caged Bird* opens, Maya and her older brother Bailey, Jr. have been sent by train across country from California to Stamps, Arkansas to live with their paternal grandmother, Annie Henderson. Grandmother Henderson, or Momma, as the children call her, seems to typify a certain image of the Black woman that, though superficially benign, has been wielded as a weapon against her by the dominant culture, the Matriarch. (Manora 367).

Like Lupton, Manora credits Angelou's subject position to her relationship with Annie Henderson, Angelou's paternal grandmother. Unlike Lupton, however, Manora perceives Angelou's belonging as derivative, emerging out of historically assigned roles imposed upon

the African American woman. Patricia Hill Collins, in the book *Black Feminist Thought: knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (2009), writes that the Black Matriarch is a stereotype of the African American woman going as far back as slavery (Collins 76-86). In her belonging to her grandmother, therefore, Angelou confronts a maternal figure whose position within the world she inhabits has already been spoken for. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), for instance, Angelou speaks of Annie Henderson as a woman composed of “African-bush secretiveness and suspiciousness that had been compounded by slavery and confirmed by centuries of promises made and promises broken” (Angelou 189). By associating the figure of Annie Henderson with slave history and experience, Angelou gives us a text; a point of reference by which her own evolution into womanhood can be understood. In the essay, “The Heart of the Matter: Motherhood and Marriage in the Autobiographies of Maya Angelou” (2009), Siphokazi Koyana writes that the examples of womanhood practised by her paternal grandmother and her mother enabled Angelou to develop a non-traditional approach to mothering and marriage. According to Koyana, the lack of a male figure early in Angelou’s life, taught her to adopt an unconventional approach when she was raising her own child (Koyana 49-66). According to Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, however, Angelou’s belonging is traceable to the poet’s encounters with the enslaved past (Fox-Genovese, 221-235).

In the essay “Myth and History: Discourse of Origins in Zora Neale Hurston and Maya Angelou” (1990), Elizabeth Fox-Genovese opines that the memory of slavery weighs heavily on the African American writer. Fox-Genovese writes:

Slavery negated the individualism of blacks singly, negated the autonomy of blacks as a community. And these very negations bound “free” blacks to the history of their enslaved brothers and sisters. In dissociating themselves from the condition of their enslaved people,

they [African American writers] risked dissociating themselves from their people—from their race. (Fox-Genovese 222).

Fox-Genovese, in the passage cited above, argues that the memory of slavery is significant in establishing relations of belonging within the African American community. The memory of slavery is especially influential in the lives of African American writers who revive its memory in order to assert their embeddedness within the African American community. It is a belonging, however, that begins with negation or loss as, historically, slavery deprived the African American of his/her identity and freedom. The memory of slavery results in a loss of narrative voice for both the African American woman and man as Angelou reveals in the poem “A Black Woman Speaks to Black Manhood” found in the poetry collection, *Celebrations: Rituals of Peace and Prayer* (2009).

Significantly, Fox-Genovese, in her appraisal of Angelou’s writing, credits Angelou’s understanding of loss to her experiences in the South. Fox-Genovese perceives Angelou’s narrative of the South as a special kind of homecoming. The roads of the South map, according to Fox-Genovese, a collective identity that brings together “disparate communities and scattered women in the throbbing center of a common past” (Fox-Genovese 221). It is a past, however, that is recollected quite differently in the various stages of Angelou’s life.

According to Fox-Genovese, Mrs. Flowers functions as a bridge between the “oral and literary culture, between the black community of Stamps and *Jane Eyre*.” (Fox-Genovese 233). Upon hearing Mrs. Flowers recite Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*, for instance, young Angelou marvels:

Her voice slid in and curved down through and over the words. She was nearly singing. I wanted to look at the pages. Were they the same that I had read? Or were there notes, music, lined on the pages, as in a hymn book? Her sounds began cascading gently. I knew from listening to a

thousand preachers that she was nearing the end of her reading, and I hadn't heard, heard to understand, a single word. (Angelou 97).

The figure of Mrs. Flowers merges, in this instance, with that of the African American preacher.³ Like the preacher, who improvises the biblical text to preach to an African American congregation, Mrs. Flowers reveals how canonical literature could become a “black” text. While the words in Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities* remain the same, Mrs. Flowers transforms their meaning through her delivery of the text as African American poetry. In her capacity as a teacher, therefore, Mrs. Flowers re-configures Angelou’s engagement with literature and, through literature, the world. Through her tutelage, Angelou not only memorizes passages from Shakespeare and Dickens but also learns how canonical, Eurocentric texts can be improvised to suit the African American condition. In the essay, “Shakespeare as Fetish” Marjorie Garber writes that Angelou’s fascination with Shakespeare is based on a fetishisation of the English bard, more specifically, a “mother’s phallus” (Garber, 250). Garber asks, “What would happen it were *in fact* discovered that Shakespeare was a black woman...through some diligent feat of archival research?” (Garber 250). For Angelou recognition of “blackness” within the English literary canon, a “blackness” inherent in language that allowed her to re-interpret Shakespeare’s writings, would result in poems that appeal for an end to racial inequalities and discrimination. In poems such as “Forgive” and “A Georgia Song”, for instance, Angelou urges an end to the racial violence that has marked her experiences of “home” and belonging. Both poems — “Forgive” and “A Georgia Song” — are replete with the images of magnolias and parasols blowing in the wind. The poems also refer, however, to the memory of slavery — conveyed rather euphemistically in the poem “Forgive” as “ships pregnant/with certain cargo” (Angelou 229). The reality of slaves and

³ This image of Mrs. Flowers also reflects upon the image of Martin Luther King, Jr. in *A Song Flung Up to Heaven* (2002, 2008). King’s speech in Carnegie Hall is described by Angelou along similar lines (Angelou 142).

their descendants working on the land sustains, in these poems, the fantasy of the South. In other words, relations of belonging within the African American community sustain the narrative of America, especially the South, as a land of plenty and prosperity.

In the essay “Nigrescence: Mapping the Journey in Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*” (2009), Remus Bejan observes that race constitutes an ever-present discourse within Angelou’s narrative, charting out the author’s belonging to land and community. Angelou’s sensitivity to racial identity, according to Bejan, motivates her to write as an African American subject:

For African Americans, racial identity is bound up in both the historically specific politics of representation and experience and the effects of repression that occur upon entry into the symbolic structures of language and culture, the social and political relations of everyday life, and active involvement with the racial projects of American society. (Bejan 148)

As the passage cited above reveals, Bejan argues that ethnicity plays an important role in ordering relationships of belonging within Angelou’s narrative. Racial identity positions the African American subject or reader within “the social and political relations of everyday life” (Bejan 148) and assigns historical meaning to these relations. Since the African American subject has been deprived of personal and cultural histories, however, retrieval and remembrance in relation to history also results in the loss of narrative voice (Gates 90). In the poetry of Maya Angelou, loss of narrative voice is expressed in poems such as “Mourning Grace”, “The Lesson” and “The Singer Will Not Sing” found in *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou* (1994) where Angelou, aware of the inadequacies of language, longs for the reader’s presence to bear witness to her loss.

In the essay “The Poetry of Maya Angelou: Liberation Ideology and Technique” (2009), Yasmin Y. DeGout observes that there are people in Angelou’s poems “not known to us [the readers] but who reflect strength or racial pride” (DeGout 130). Racial identity, in DeGout’s opinion, enables Angelou’s belonging to members of her community. Significantly, the poems that DeGout chooses to represent Angelou’s racial belonging— “Times-Square-Shoeshine-Composition,” “When I Think About Myself,” “To A Freedom Fighter,” “Woman Me,” “Song for the Old Ones,” “Through the Inner City to the Suburbs,” “Willie,” “Weekend Glory” and “Worker’s Song” —reflect the lives of those whose kindness towards Angelou restores her sense of belonging and faith in the human community. One is reminded, for instance, of Louise in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), L. C. and Troubadour in *Gather Together in My Name* (1974), the embassy cook in *The Heart of a Woman* (1981, 1991), the African steward in *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986) and Abner Greene in *Singin’ and Dancin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas* (1976). Through her interactions with the peripheral characters in her narrative, Angelou comes to a realisation that being black in America need not mean relinquishing one’s own dignity in the face of overwhelming odds. Where poetry is concerned, these relations of belonging enable Angelou to speak for subjects whose narratives have already been spoken for within the American context. Memory of loss binds the characters in Angelou’s narrative to shared relations of belonging. By using black dialects, Angelou alludes to a belonging whose expression is based on encounters with loss (Gates 167-195).

1.5: Methodology and Theoretical Framework

In this dissertation, I will be doing a textual analysis using the theory of dialectical forms developed by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Houston A. Baker, Jr. and Toni Morrison, among others. Through a qualitative methodology, involving inter- and intra-textual analysis as

methods, this thesis hopes to uncover “black” dialects within Angelou’s poetry inasmuch as they symbolise the African American presence within the Western canon.

In the essay “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature” (1994), Toni Morrison writes that African American literature exists at the precise juncture where standardised English gives way to black dialects. According to Morrison, black dialects is the language of the “ghost in the machine” of American literature. The “ghost” who speaks black dialects, according to Morrison, “has shaped the choices, the language, the structure—the meaning of so much American literature” (Morrison 377). Further, in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1994), Morrison identifies the ghostly presence in American narratives to be the African American subject who enables the white writer to venture into forbidden territory. Morrison states that the presence of the Africanist subject in American literature enabled the white writer to articulate “fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious” (Morrison 17). According to Morrison, therefore, the presence of the Africanist subject is central to the way American literature is understood as a literature that is self-reflexive and, hence, “universal”.⁴ But since the Africanist subject has already been imagined by white writers, the African American engagement with black dialects emerges from a position of loss. In writing in “black” dialects, the African American poet speaks in languages that suggest loss that is linguistic, cultural and historical (Gates 167-195).

In the book *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the “Racial” Self* (1987), Henry Louis Gates Jr. argues that the African American poet’s encounter with language is often characterised by loss. Gates writes:

⁴ Here, I understand “universal” literature as a literature that is self-contained, reflecting timelessness because it appeals to readers across space, time, genders, races and nationalities.

Afro-American dialects exist between two poles, one English and one “lost” in some “mythical” linguistic kingdom now irrecoverable. Dialect is our only key to the unknown tongue; and in its obvious relation and reaction to English, it contains, as does the Yoruban mask, a verbal dialectic: that is, a dialectic between some form of an African anti-thesis all the while obviating the English thesis. This dialectic, in turn, establishes a new set of oppositions that plague the writer ‘dedicated to purifying the language of the tribe. (Gates 172).

Gates suggests that the African American poet’s use of dialects is traceable to a “lost” source — an African heritage that the poet retrieves in order to express his/her belonging to an African American narrative. In the poetry of Maya Angelou, Africa is mythicized through its manifestation within relations of belonging. One is reminded, for instance, of poems such as *Now Sheba Sings the Song* (1987) where the biblical narrative of Solomon (the English thesis) is spoken of from the perspective of a mythical (and archetypal) Queen of Sheba (the “lost”, African anti-thesis) and “To a Husband” where matrimony is expressed as the poet’s belonging to a land (Africa) and its people. Because black dialects allude to a “lost” source, however, their use represents a symbolic “cutting off of the tongue” in comparison to standardized English. Gates observes that black dialects are expressions of “a broken memory” based on losses that are both linguistic and racial (Gates 183). In Angelou’s poetry, black dialects are observed in the poet’s use of catachresis, incomplete gerunds, the fusing of one word with another and either the shortening or lengthening of words to replicate the way language sounds:

Dancin’ the funky chicken

Eatin’ ribs and tips

Diggin’ the latest sounds

And drinkin' gin in sips... (Angelou 165-166).

Ain't nobody better'n my Daddy,

you keep yo' quauter,

I ain't yo' daughter,

Ain't nobody better'n my Daddy.

...

No lady cookinger than my Mommy,

smell that pie,

see I don't lie

No lady cookinger than my Mommy. (Angelou 117).

In both the “Ain’t That Bad” and “Little Girl Speakings”, cited above, Angelou uses black dialects to give form to narratives that evoke belonging by virtue of their relation to a loss that is linguistic, cultural and historical (Gates 88-119). In the poem “Little Girl Speakings” in particular, awareness of loss in relation to the standardized narrative results in the formulation of “new” words such as “cooker” and “quater”. It is precisely where standardized English gives way to black dialects, however, that narratives of loss account for belonging within Angelou’s poetry. In the essay “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature” (1994), Toni Morrison writes that black dialects mediate the exchange between the African American writer and his/her readers in the way that language “speaks and bespeaks a particular world and its ambience” (Morrison 386). Black dialects, therefore, are languages embedded in belonging. By using black dialects, Angelou fashions a blues text in which the act of creation or poetry is also inclusive of its interpretation. In the essay, “The Blues Root of Contemporary Afro-American Poetry” (1978), Sherley Anne Williams writes that, within the blues, the “poet (singer) and audience

share the same reality” (Williams 77). According to Williams, it is this “shared reality” that enables the audience or reader of blues poetry to identify with the poem. Williams suggests, that in replicating the blues, the poet enters into a relation of belonging with his/her community (Williams 87).

In the book *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (1984), Houston A. Baker suggests that the replication of the blues in African American literature alludes to a belonging that is nurtured within oppressive contexts. Baker writes:

To suggest a trope for the blues as a forceful matrix in cultural understanding is to summon an image of the black blues singer at the railway junction lustily transforming experiences of a durative (unceasingly oppressive) landscape into the energies of rhythmic song. (Baker 7).

Implicit in Baker’s explanation is the potential of the blues to refute all forms of subjugation. The blues as a railroad junction, Baker tells us, is a site of “transience” where the juncture is a temporary stopping point for other ways of expression, other ways of creating. The singer or poet is placed at the crossroads where the ability to create also entails the “translation” of experience into song. Baker continues:

The singer and his production are always at this intersection, this crossing, codifying force, providing resonance for experience’s multiplicities. Singer and song never arrest transience —fix it in “transcendent form.” Instead they provide expressive equivalence for the juncture’s ceaseless flux. Hence, they may be conceived of as translators. (Baker 7)

Analogous to Gates' idea of the African deity of the crossroads, Esu Elegbara, Baker contends that the African American poet is metaphorically positioned at the juncture or crossroads where the act of creation or poetry also entails the "translation" of experiences that are otherwise subject to repression. Freedom to create, therefore, also results from a condition where these freedoms are curtailed.

A fusion of both African and Euro-American musical styles, the blues are dialectical in nature in that the retrieval of ancestral heritage implied by African sources is negated by a narrative of exploitation underlying the Euro-American influences (Baker 27). In other words, a singer's ability to articulate a poem in the form of the blues proceeds from loss —where s/he could not have sung the blues at all. Thematically too, the blues reflect this loss being themselves "lyrical statements of injustice, despair, loss, absence, denial and so forth." (Baker, 7). In addition, the blues allude to a historically unknown, "lost" source. Marshall W. Stearns, in the book *The Story of Jazz* (1958), observes that the exact date for the onset of the blues in America can never be identified. Quoting Russell Ames, Stearns writes:

The date of the first blues will probably never be known. The more we learn, the earlier it seems to have been. "African songs of proverbial wit and ridicule were one likely source," says Russell Ames, "and African songs of pity and sorrow another" (Stearns 105).

Like their literary representations as black dialects, the probable sources for the blues are traceable to a "lost" African heritage. It is a heritage, as Stearns implies, that is "lost" because historical narrative cannot account for their emergence within the American context. Angelou's replication of the blues as black dialects, therefore, is as personal as it is political. By replicating the blues, Angelou's poetry draws attention to subjective responses to belonging, an area of study that is often overlooked in Western critical discourse (Guru and Sarukai 50-66). The appearance of the blues as black dialects enables Angelou to

contextualize individual experiences through relations of belonging that members of her community can readily relate to (Gates 171-172).

As poetic forms that are inclusive of verbal utterance, black dialects are especially noticeable in live performances such as the blues where use of popular phrases such as the rhyme “Two, four, six, eight...” invites already-known responses from the audience.⁵ Thus, in using dialects, the modern blues poet or singer creates a community of readers by taking recourse to linguistic expression that is serviceable to both the writing of poetry and its (almost) instantaneous interpretation. Being inclusive of the literary source it represents —the reader for whom the American literary narrative already speaks —employment of black dialects suggests that the African American poet has as much prerogative as his/her white counterpart in deciding which literary narrative(s) would best represent his/her sense of belonging. Like black dialects, replication of the blues in Angelou’s poetry alludes to a shared reality between poet and reader (Williams 72-87). Because black dialects presuppose loss in relation to belonging, their use is aptly suited for a people whose belonging to the American literary narrative is already racialized. In the essay “The Conservation of ‘Race’” (1989), Anthony K. Appiah observes how the racialisation of language continues to be a barrier in the appreciation of African American literature. Appiah writes:

It’s true that the question of race is central to Afro-American literature,
but it is also central to every other area of black life in the United States.
If the question must be addressed in the context of Afro-American
literary studies, it is because it is the most significant of the academic

⁵ In this case, the response is: “We ain’t gonna integrate...”. The poem is a game rhyme sung by African American children during a game of double-dutch. The rhyme has elements of protest in that it is an inversion of a similar rhyme-scheme sung by racial supremacists during the Integration Years in Little Rock, Arkansas. (qtd from Gates 103).

quarters in which the form of essentialism I have dubbed “racialism” is entrenched. (Appiah 52)

In his essay, Appiah makes a distinction between “racism” and “racialism”. Racism, according to Appiah, is that form of discrimination perpetuated within society against peoples on the basis of their physical characteristics. On the other hand, racialism is the supporting ideology or narrative which justifies racism at the level of social interaction. Appiah argues that while racism is prevalent in all facets of American society, racialism has its roots in academic institutions. Appiah’s observation is supported by critics like bell hooks who, in the book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984) observes that while various inroads have been made by African American critics within academia, questions of race and gender still continue to favour the dominant, white perspectives of belonging. Being anti-male and individualistic, white feminist perspectives often overlook those narratives of belonging that are enriching despite their existence within highly oppressive contexts. Narratives of kinship, home and the community-based notions of the self are some of the relations of belonging that white feminist ideology either perverts or treats as marginal within its discourse (hooks 1-15). Within the poetry of Maya Angelou, for instance, white feminist perspectives cannot account for the themes of loss and longing expressed in poems such as “A Zorro Man”, “To a Suitor” and “To a Husband” where relations of belonging are expressed as erotic love shared between man and woman. More importantly, white feminist perspectives fall short of identifying how blackness within language allows the African American poet to express belonging through narratives based on loss.

1.5: Research Questions and Chapterisation

Given the scope of the study, I hope to answer the following questions that correspond to narratives of loss and belonging in Angelou’s poetry: How do historical losses reflect corresponding narratives of belonging in Angelou’s poetry? Is there continuity

between narratives of loss and belonging in Angelou's poetry —if so, who or what provides this continuity? In order to answer these questions, I have divided the thesis into the following chapters:

Chapter Two, titled "Racial and Gendered Stereotypes in Angelou's Poetry", contextualises Angelou's writing within the postindustrial United States. Angelou's poems address the need for an African American woman's narrative to combat systemic racial and gendered biases. Against the backdrop of institutional failure and racism that characterised relations of belonging in the postindustrial context, Angelou's poems call for a need to revive belonging within the African American community through a retrieval of the role of the African American woman as a guardian of communal heritage. The chapter attempts to show that the retrieval of this role is hampered by pervasive forms of stereotyping of the African American community at the level of socio-cultural interaction.

Chapter Three, titled "The Memory and Narrative of Africa in Maya Angelou's Poetry", examines mythical representations of Africa in Angelou's poetry and shows how the narrativisation of Africa provides an imaginative, ideological mooring to the themes of loss and belonging in Angelou's poetry. Ideologies based on the symbolic narratives of, and about, the African homeland anchor narratives of loss and belonging in Angelou's poetry to a national imaginary where the poet of African descent can seek belonging with members of her community within the African diaspora.

Chapter Four, titled "Performative History in Maya Angelou's Poetry", re-examines narratives of loss and belonging Angelou's poetry as they relate to the performative display of the "black" body. I analyse the tropes of home, kinship and self in Angelou's poetry temporally through an approach within African American criticism that focuses on the display of the African American body. Further, by arguing that African American literature exposes the political biases of Eurocentrism (couched in the concept of the "universal") I show how

African American literature is a literature for all, demanding the same degree of serious study deemed essential for canonical English texts. The Chapter, therefore, argues for a re-definition of the universal that allows African American literature to come into its own as a literature for all.

Chapter Five is the conclusion which will summarize the arguments made in the previous chapters and provide directions for further research.

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Chapter 2

Racial and Gendered Stereotypes in Maya Angelou's Poetry

2.1: Introduction

This chapter contextualises loss and belonging in relation to the representation of African American women in Maya Angelou's poetry. Loss and belonging in Angelou's poetry, as seen in this chapter, is related to the way the African American woman is represented within socio-cultural and political institutions in postindustrial America.

By the late 1960s, the American literary canon included a vast array of poets, many of whom professed distinct racial or gendered identities. Complementarily, a need was also felt to include these poets within an "American" literary narrative. The Americanization of literature, and poetry in particular, emphasized the significance of cultural heritage as a means to negotiate "belonging"-ness within the American context. In relation to the African American poet, the emphasis on culture negates shared relations of belonging in favour of an American nativism based on their historical *appearance* as racial and gendered subjects. (Michaels 38-56).

In the essay, "American Modernism and the Poetics of Identity" (1994), Walter Benn Michaels observes that the current emphasis on culture as a means to re-claim "belonging"-ness within, and in relation to, the American literary narrative is fraught with contradiction. On the one hand, the emphasis on culture enables the articulation of belonging as communal heritage and identity separate from the American literary narrative. On the other hand, this articulation, as a "unique" form of identity, rests on the extent to which it can also be used as a token to represent a "democratic" agenda within the process of canon formation (Michaels 38-56).

Having already been cast as a representative of slavery, the African American poet remains subject to a "belonging"-ness that valorizes his/her cultural heritage to the extent that

s/he also remains visible as an epitome of racial and gendered oppression. Within such a paradigm, the literary and historical figures of Zora Neale Hurston and Harriet Jacobs, among others, are revived as tokens for racial and gendered oppression (McKay 151-163).

Institutional racism which informed tokenism promoted what Toni Morrison, in the book *The Origin of Others* (2017), observes is a denial of individuality and personhood for members of the African American community. Morrison writes that the romanticization (through stereotypes) of any person constitutes an attempt to “deny...personhood, the specific individuality we insist upon for ourselves.” (Morrison 39). In the book, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (2009), Patricia Hill Collins notes that belonging to the African American community enabled the African American woman to challenge stereotypes propagated by the white community. Collins writes:

As mothers, othermothers, teachers, and churchwomen in essentially all-Black rural communities and urban neighbourhoods, U. S. Black women participated in constructing and reconstructing...oppositional knowledges. Through lived experiences gained within their extended families and communities, individual African-American women fashioned their own ideas about the meaning of Black womanhood. (Collins, 13).

In a preceding paragraph, Collins defines “oppositional knowledges” as American-based experiences that make African-derived social systems necessary for surviving racial and gendered injustices in America (Collins 12). In their capacities as mothers, othermothers, teachers and churchwomen, African American women draw upon African social practices to foster kinship and belonging within the African American community. These forms of belonging, according to Collins, challenge deep-seated stereotypes—such as the Mammy

figure and the Black matriarch—which have been passed down as valid socio-cultural representations of the African American woman (Collins 83).

In a 2014 essay printed in *Essence* magazine, however, Maya Angelou expressed a peculiar development that had beset relations of belonging within the African American community. An excerpt from her essay conveys Angelou's disappointment as she witnesses the dissolution or loss of familial/familiar roles played by African American women within America. Angelou writes:

Until about thirty years ago, it seemed we advanced and pulled our people with us; we pulled our families with us. Like the turtles that carried its babies on its back, it was the way we Black women came through slavery and managed our affairs, somehow, through the hoax of Reconstruction, through the years of lynching, through the years of migrations and perpetual dislocations. Now it appears that the strings that had held us together have been untied and we're seeing the result —the children are running crazy in the streets.

(Angelou, 20-22)

Having sustained relations of belonging within the American community for generations, Angelou observes that the historical role played by the African American woman — as the creative well-spring of her community — had all but petered out. Although the number of African American women within the professional fields had significantly increased by 2014, Angelou perceived a loss of communal heritage where everyday interactions were concerned. The longing that Angelou felt for an African American woman's heritage, literary and otherwise, is inclusive of narrative losses sustained by the African American community in the years following the Second World War. *Angelou's longing for an African American heritage, I argue in this chapter, stems from the racial*

injustice and discrimination that the African American community faced in postindustrial America. The persistence of racial and gendered stereotypes both within and outside the African American community makes it impossible for the African American subject to truly belong in America.

In the next section of the Chapter, “Institutional Racism and the Impossibility of Belonging,” I draw a connection between racial and gendered stereotypes and the practice of institutional racism in America. This section is followed by a section titled “Prevalence and Internalisation of Stereotypes Within the African American Community”, which is a critical appraisal of the internalisation and prevalence of racial and gendered stereotypes within the African American community. The latter section also includes Angelou’s response to racial and gendered discrimination. The concluding section argues that racial and gendered stereotyping stands in the way of the African American subject’s desire to re-claim his/her heritage.

2.2: Institutional Racism and the Impossibility of Belonging

In her essay, “Apartheid U. S. A.” (1985, 2009), Audre Lorde commented on the effects of institutional racism on African American lives. She wrote:

There has recently been increased discussion among African-Americans concerning crime and social breakdown within our communities, signaled in urban areas by highly visible groups of unemployed Black youths, already hopeless and distrustful of their or their elders’ abilities to connect with any meaningful future. Our young Black people are being sacrificed to a society’s determination to destroy whomever it no longer needs for cheap labor or cannon fodder. (Lorde 70)

Within the context of America's postindustrial economy, Lorde observed that racism within American social and political institutions led many African American youth to a life of crime. These unemployed African American youth, according to Lorde, were testament of a society that treated people belonging to minority communities, including African Americans, as expendable (Lorde 64-72). Lorde's observations are supported by critics like Isabel Wilkerson who, in the book *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (2020), remarks that American society is so stratified that the silence surrounding this social stratification works to the benefit of the dominant community (Wilkerson 12-20). In the poem, "Weekend Glory", Maya Angelou captures the effects of institutional racism on African American lives. Written in the form of the "blues", Angelou begins her poem thus:

Some ditchy folks
don't know the facts, posin' and preenin'
and puttin' on acts,
stretchin' their necks
and strainin' their backs.

They move into condos
up over the ranks,
pawn their souls
to the local banks.

Buyin' big cars
they can't afford,
ridin' around town,
actin' bored.

If they want to know how to live life right

They ought to study me on a Saturday night... (Angelou 206)

The poetic persona whose voice is heard in Angelou's poem is an African American woman working in a factory. In the lines quoted above, the African American woman observes a class hierarchy in the day-to-day lives of Americans. "They", according to the African American woman, have supplanted work with the materialistic values of the society in which "they" live ("They move into condos/up over the ranks/pawn their souls/to the local banks"). As a result, most of the wages earned by the mainstream American citizen-subjects are spent in paying heavy mortgages instead of improving their own quality of life. On the other hand, in spite of her apparent poverty, the African American woman is able to spend her wages at the beauty parlour "for her own self's sake" (Angelou 206). Angelou, in this poem, draws upon African American cultural narratives. She voices an age-old tradition of African American woman's heritage wherein the economic values of work translate into the ability to care for oneself and others (Collins 54). In the book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (2009), Patricia Hill Collins perceives economic independence as a crucial factor that determines the African American woman's survival within the racist context in America. According to Collins, the ability to earn for oneself can be "empowering and creative" for the African American woman as earning a living implies that the African American subject has control over her earnings, unlike the system of exploitation that prevailed during slavery, (Collins 54). Therefore, the African American woman of Angelou's poem is independent because, in knowing that her wages are hard earned, she is able to spend them in any way she chooses. Further, in a society driven by material possession (Warnes 125), the African American woman chooses to spend her wages on leisure. Despite this fact, the African American woman also observes a conundrum in the way she is seen and portrayed within American society:

Folks write about me.

They just can't see
how I work all week
at the factory.
Then get spruced up
and laugh and dance
And turn away from worry
with a sassy glance... (Angelou 207)

Angelou reveals, in these lines, the working-class “blues” that inform the African American woman’s behaviour. While the rest of society sees her cavorting with men and partying on “Saturday night”, the work that she does at the factory is taken for granted by the consumers whom she refers to in the poem as “they”. Thus, even though “they” accuse her of living hand-to-mouth on a daily basis, the African American woman also knows that the materialistic ends of American society are met by her own ability and willingness to work:

They accuse me of livin'
from day to day,
but who are they kiddin'?
So are they. (Angelou, 207)

In spite of society not being aware of the African American woman’s role in their lives, the poetic persona knows that “they” are dependent on her labour to sustain their vision of an American Dream. It is this “black”-ness and its narrative effacement, therefore, that the African American woman celebrates each Saturday night in the night clubs and dance halls of America’s inner-city settlements. In choosing an African American woman to voice labour concerns of Americans elsewhere in the United States, Angelou also draws attention to a

category of “belonging”-ness that has beleaguered African American professionals in current academic scholarship.

Narratives of belonging represented by the African American woman exist in an uneasy relation to the American literary narrative. For one thing, most relations that inform African American women’s “belonging”-ness to the American community — their positions as working-class mothers, their sexual relations and their historically assigned roles as representatives of communal heritage — are contradictions to the American ideal. Writing on the nature of the African American woman’s position in America, Audre Lorde — in the essay “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” (1984)—observes that any African American woman who professes a cultural pedagogy is trapped in a double bind. Not only does the African American woman contend with racial and sexual objectification in relationships outside the African American community, but similar forms of discrimination also thwart relations of belonging from within. Lorde writes:

Within Black communities where racism is a living reality, differences among us often seem dangerous and suspect. The need for unity is often misnamed as a need for homogeneity, and a Black feminist vision mistaken for betrayal of our common interests as a people. Because of the continuous battle against racial erasure that Black women and Black men share, some Black women still refuse to recognize that we are also oppressed as women, and that sexual hostility against Black women is practiced not only by the white racist society, but implemented within our Black communities as well. (Lorde 119-120).

Although a larger number of African American women from the 1960s onwards were allowed admission into professional fields, racial and gendered politics within institutions prevented many revolutionary and radical ideas to percolate from within these institutions

into mainstream American society (Lorde 114-123). According to bell hooks, in the book *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (2000), one reason for the loss of kinship within African American community is the “color caste hierarchy” within the community (hooks 90). hooks writes that the favouritism that lighter skinned African Americans received created a class hierarchy within the community itself (hooks, 89-100). Angelou’s “Weekend Glory”, by emphasising the African American working-class woman, explores a belonging that is overlooked within both white feminist critical theory as well as in elite representations of the African American working-class woman. Apart from the white community, Angelou suggests that the “they” which she refers to in “Weekend Glory” also constitute what hooks calls “the new black elite” in American society or African American subjects who, having come into wealth, have consumerist lifestyles that are akin to the white, middleclass households (hooks 89-100). In the poem “Impeccable Conception”, Angelou writes about the middle-class life of the “new black elite”:

I met a Lady Poet
who took for inspiration
colored birds, and whispered words,
a lover’s hesitation.

A falling leaf could stir her.
A wilting, dying rose
would make her write, both day and night,
the most rewarding prose.

She’d find a hidden meaning
in every pair of pants,

then hurry home to be alone
and write about romance. (Angelou 193).

Angelou, in the title, compares the biblical narrative of the virgin birth of Jesus Christ with the act of poetic creation. The “Lady Poet” Angelou speaks of is a veritable Madonna whose “belonging”-ness to the natural world is unquestioned. Her belonging, however, belies a more pathological existence. In defining herself only by the things she observes, she is denied the thrill of active engagement with her own environment. While her poem itself is complete, untarnished by the vagaries of life, the “Lady Poet” remains isolated — cut off from the natural elements and people that inhabit her world and, therefore, *even* from herself. The loss within belonging, in this poem, is suggested by Angelou’s use of the word “romance”. Although nature and the lovers that the poet writes about are romantic, it is the illusion of romance which sustains the world of the Poet—she writes about love without having experienced it herself. Built around the stereotype of the Black Lady, Angelou’s poem shows a representation of the middle-class African American woman as a person who is so devoted to her work that she has no time to spare for relationships with other people (Collins 88-89). Angelou’s representation of the middle-class, educated African American woman suggests that even when the African American subject achieves social mobility and can join the ranks of the upper middle-class in American society, racism (propagated through stereotypes) still influences the society’s perception of the African American subject (See hooks 91).

By cultivating self-respect, however, the African American woman can command the admiration of the people around her and rise above the stereotypes that deny her personhood. In the poem “Phenomenal Woman”, the reader gets a sense that the poetic persona is in command of herself. The poetic persona celebrates her body in spite of knowing what American society thinks of her. Angelou writes:

Pretty women wonder where my secret lies.
I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model's size
But when I start to tell them,
They think I'm telling lies.
I say,
It's in the reach of my arms,
The span of my hips,
The stride of my step,
The curl of my lips.
I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That's me. (Angelou 130).

Angelou, within this poem, draws attention to the African American woman's body: "the reach of my arms,/ The span of my hips,/ The stride of my step..."(Angelou 130). Unlike the women who embody conventional notions of beauty, the African American woman is neither childishly "cute" nor are her bodily proportions suitable for a professional career in the fashion industry. She is, however, in possession of a "secret" that makes her appear larger-than-life in the eyes of her observers. The phenomenal qualities of the African American woman, Angelou reveals, is in the way her body itself houses a "belonging"-ness that the audience/observers fail to recognize. Angelou continues:

I walk into a room
Just as cool as you please,
And to a man,
The fellows stand or

Fall down on their knees.
Then they swarm around me,
A hive of honey bees.
I say,
It's the fire in my eyes,
And the flash of my teeth,
The swing in my waist,
And the joy in my feet.
I'm a woman
Phenomenally... (Angelou 130-131)

In the lines quoted above, Angelou reveals that the African American woman is a phenomenon because the romanticized vision to which she is subject (suggested by the men swarming around her like bees), obfuscates a longing to be seen in her own terms (“...when I start to tell them,/They think I’m telling lies” and “When I try to show them,/They say they still can’t see.”(Angelou 130)). Thus, the society in which the African American woman lives—the women, the men and even the readers— remains collectively enamoured by assumptions about gendered/human experience through its negation of the African American woman’s voice. Much like Janie in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the African American woman of Angelou’s poem inspires awe and wonderment because the self-sustaining markers of worth that she draws upon (“swing of my waist”, “click of my heels” and “fire in my eyes” (Angelou 130-131)) are beyond the reach of her observers. In the poem “Lady Luncheon Club” it is this self-assured woman who casts a critical eye on the politics within women’s clubs. Angelou writes:

Her counsel was accepted: the times were grave.
A man was needed who would make them think,

And pay him from the petty cash account.

Our woman checked her golden watch,

The speaker has a plane to catch.

Dessert is served (and just in time).

The lecturer leans, thrusts forth his head

And neck and chest, arms akimbo

On the lectern top. He summons up

Sincerity as one might call a favored

Pet.

He understands the female rage,

Why Eve was lustful and

Delilah's

Grim deceit.

Our woman thinks:

(This cake is much too sweet). (Angelou 146-147)

In the lines quoted above, Angelou shows that the Black Lady is a person whose opinion is well-respected in the ladies' club. It is she who organizes for a speaker to come to an event that the club hosts. The person who speaks, however, is a man who patronizes what we can assume is a largely female audience. It is implied, tongue-in-cheek, that "when times...[are]... grave" the person who can provide insight into the situation is a male member of the community (Angelou 146). This particular speaker makes an attempt to connect with

his audience by affecting sincerity and referring to the biblical characters of Eve and Delilah. As women who in the Bible brought doom upon their partners (See Gen. 3.6; Judg. 16.19), the reference to them in Angelou's poem combines the biblical narratives with the stereotype of the Black Lady through the image of women who emasculate their partners. In speaking about Eve and Delilah, the male speaker suggests that the ladies who make up the audience also resemble their biblical counterparts in their desire to emasculate men. Rather than listening to the patronizing tone of the speaker, however, the poetic persona chooses to dwell on the practical aspects of organising an event such as the cake which is "too sweet" (Angelou 146). Angelou continues:

He sighs for youthful death
And rape at ten, and murder of
The soul stretched over long.

Our woman notes:
(This coffee's much too strong).

The jobless streets of
Wine and wandering when
Mornings promise no bright relief.

She claps her hands and writes
Upon her pad: (Next time the
Speaker must be brief). (Angelou 146-147)

Despite the male speaker's attempt to connect with the audience, the Black Lady remains unaffected by his speech. She concludes, instead, that his speech is too lengthy for

the occasion, and plans an improvement at the next such engagement. Unlike the poetic persona in “Phenomenal Woman” where privilege emerges from the personality of the African American subject, the poetic personas in the poems “Impeccable Conception” and “Lady Luncheon Club” are women who, according to bell hooks, have “jumped on the bandwagon” of white feminist endeavours aided by their possession of material wealth (hooks, 105). These elite personae, however, do not address the problems faced by the working-class poor within the African American community, except as tokens for their charity (See hooks 101-110). In the poem “Momma Welfare Roll”, Angelou uses the stereotype of the Black Matriarch to highlight the losses that the African American woman faces as a working-class woman. Angelou writes:

Her arms semaphore fat triangles,
Pudgy hands bunched on layered hips
Where bones idle under years of fatback
And lima beans.
Her jowls shiver in accusation
Of crimes clichéd by
Repetition. Her children, strangers
To childhood toys, play
Best the games of darkened doorways,
Rooftop tag, and know the slick feel of
Other people’s property.

Too fat to whore,
Too mad to work,
Searches her dreams for the

Lucky sign and walks bare-handed
Into a den of bureaucrats for
Her portion.
“They don’t give me welfare.
I take it.” (Angelou 148)

The domineering figure of the Black Matriarch is alluded to in the poem through the pose that the woman on welfare roll adopts, arms akimbo. Her imposing figure dominates over the lives of her children and those of the officials who hand out welfare. Angelou also suggests a loss of innocence since her children, rather than playing with toys, take to stealing—they “know the slick feel of/Other people’s property.” (Angelou 148). Although the Black Matriarch is seen as domineering and even emasculating by most of the people in American society, Angelou suggests that she is also rather vulnerable since her own children, faced with extreme poverty, take to a life of crime. The effects of racism on African American lives that Lorde talks about in “Apartheid U. S. A.” is seen in Angelou’s poem through the inability of the poet persona to escape her situation. The mother on welfare, in Angelou’s poem, also coincides with the image of the “welfare queen”.

A stereotype that emerged within the postindustrial American context, the “welfare queen” is represented in popular culture as a single mother who “is overweight, refuses to work, and lives off the government’s largess” (Nadasen 53). She is also represented, according to Premilla Nadasen in the essay “From Widow to ‘Welfare Queen’: Welfare and the Politics of Race” (2007), as “sexually promiscuous” since her children are born out of wedlock (Nadasen 52-54). In Angelou’s poem, the moral parameters that the mother on welfare breaks is seen in the way her children become extensions of their mother’s apparent laziness and lack of a moral compass. Just as their mother is portrayed as a social misfit, so the children are social outcasts, engaging in criminal activities. Going against the stereotype,

however, Angelou suggests that the welfare mother is not solely responsible for her state of affairs. She is “Too fat to whore/ Too mad to work” (Angelou 148). Thus, Angelou hints that the African American woman on welfare has limited choices where work is concerned. Because the society’s perceptions are stacked against her, potentially disqualifying her from government assistance, the mother on welfare roll does not receive welfare, she takes it.

In her epilogue to *The Feminine Mystique* (1974), Betty Friedan perceives an ideological schism between American women who identify with their professions and the female “others” they seek to represent. Friedan writes:

Perhaps women who made it as “exceptional” women don’t really identify with other women. For them, there are three classes of people: men, other women, and themselves; their very status as exceptional women depends on keeping other women quiet, and not rocking the boat. (Friedan 368).

Professionalism, Friedan opines, has caused many educated women to think of themselves as free of the racial, gendered and classist discourses that otherwise impinge upon the lives of domestics, stay-at-home mothers and other working-class citizens judged to be “non-professional”. For Angelou, the corrective to gendered and racial discrimination was an alliance between African American women and men.

2.2: Prevalence and Internalisation of Stereotypes Within the African American

Community

In a 1986 interview with Sal Manna, Angelou stated that racism was a pressing issue in American society. Angelou said that racism had become so pervasive that “it is a habit” (Manna and Angelou 160). The equally important and as pervasive challenge, however, was the pervasiveness of racial stereotypes about the African American woman within the community itself. As Collins observes in *Black Feminist Thought: knowledge, consciousness*

and the politics of empowerment (2009), most of the stereotypes associated with the African American woman were internalised by the African American community as a whole (Collins 94). In the poem “Shaker, Why Don’t You Sing?”, Angelou urges the African American man to “sing” for her sake. By showing the yearning of the African American woman for her lover, Angelou humanizes the stereotype of the hoochie. Angelou writes:

Evicted from sleep’s mute palace

I wait in silence

for the bridal croon;

your legs rubbing insistent

rhythm against my thighs,

your breath moaning

a canticle in my hair.

But the solemn moments,

unuttering, pass in

unaccompanied procession.

You whose chanteys hummed

my life alive, have withdrawn

your music and lean inaudibly

on the quiet slope of memory.

O Shaker, why don’t you sing? (Angelou 216)

Revolving around the theme of erotic love, “Shaker, Why Don’t You Sing?” reflects other poems in Angelou’s oeuvre such as “They Went Home”, “No Loser, No Weeper” and “Here’s to Adhering” where the poetic persona experiences sadness from being abandoned by her lover. In “Shaker, Why Don’t You Sing?”, the abandonment by the lover is expressed as

a voice that has fallen to memory: it “lean[s] inaudibly/on the quiet slope of memory.” (Angelou, 216). The words “mute”, “silence”, “unuttering” and “quiet” also hint at a physical presence that is no longer there. Taking after the book of Solomon in the Bible, Angelou compares the lover’s voice to a canticle which also doubles as a bridal song. In the next verse, however, the profound alienation triggered by the loss of her lover is made even more palpable by the numerous sounds that punctuate the night. Angelou continues:

In the night noisy with
street cries and the triumph
of amorous insects, I focus beyond
those cacophonies for
the anthem of your hands and swelling chest,
for the perfect harmonies which are
your lips. Yet darkness brings
no syncopated promise. I rest somewhere
between the unsung notes of night.

Shaker, why don’t you sing? (Angelou 216)

By writing about “street cries” and insects mating, Angelou obliquely denotes the absence of love in the poetic persona’s life. Here, the loss of the lover’s song in the first verse also connotes the loss of his physical presence—his hands and chest are compared to an “anthem” and lips are “harmonies” (Angelou 216).

As a stereotype that dominated American popular media, the hoochie represents the African American woman as one who is “uneducated, possesses little social status and sex is her primary commodity” (Tyree 398). The sexual connotations in the poem build on the stereotype of the hoochie. By calling her lover a shaker, the poetic persona hints at the fact

that the lover is not as sexually inclined as she is. By showing that the hoochie yearns for her lover, however, Angelou reveals that the relationship between the African American woman and man goes beyond the mere sex-for-money narrative associated with the stereotype of the hoochie. Sexual intercourse, in the poem, is the basis for creation—it is the cause behind the songs that the lover used to sing. The unheard song of Angelou’s “Shaker, Why Don’t You Sing?” is present in another poem, “Caged Bird.”

Inspired by Paul Laurence Dunbar’s “Sympathy”, “Caged Bird” is about the loss and longing for freedom. Angelou writes:

A free bird leaps
on the back of the wind and floats downstream
till the current ends and dips his wing
in the orange sun rays
and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks
down his narrow cage
can seldom see through
his bars of rage
his wings are clipped and
his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown

but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom... (Angelou 194).

“Caged Bird” has, for its central character, a bird whose wings have been clipped and whose feet are tethered to the bars of a cage. And yet, this same bird who expresses anguish at its imprisonment, sings in a way that the free bird of the same poem cannot. In fact, the caged bird is the one who sings while the free bird —knowing the sky to be his/hers —remains silent. Significantly, the caged bird in Angelou’s poem is identified as male. The connection between the lover of “Shaker, Why Don’t You Sing?” and the bird of “Caged Bird” is one of contrast. While the former is silenced by his physical absence, the latter’s yearning for what he does not know (freedom) causes him to sing. Both subjects resemble each other through their association with the unknown. In “Shaker, Why Don’t You Sing?” the male is not privy to the sadness he instills in his beloved and the bird of “Caged Bird” longs for a freedom which he has not yet experienced. One also finds in both poems a reference to poetry. If, etymologically, a poem means something which is created then the lovemaking and the unheard song in “Shaker, Why Don’t You Sing?” also prefigure this meaning. In “Caged Bird”, however, the link to creation is suggested through the loss of freedom. Angelou continues:

The free bird thinks of another breeze
and the trade winds soft on the sighing trees
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn-bright lawn
and he names the sky his own.

But a caged bird stands on a grave of dreams
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom. (Angelou 194-195)

The free bird, in the poem, is symbolic for white, masculinist societies where the subject does not have to struggle for a place to belong—the free bird “names the sky his own” suggesting that he is at home no matter where he is (Angelou 194). The caged bird, however, has to struggle to belong. In the essay “Historical Perspectives of Stereotypes on African American Males” (2019), Evi Taylor et al. write that stereotypes about African Americans emerged from slavery and their continued influence in American society prevents African Americans (particularly, African American men) from accessing the same social opportunities available to members of the white community. Typically represented as lazy, violent, unintelligent and criminal, the stereotypes propagated about the African American man deny him the right to live on his own terms (Taylor et. al., 213-225). In the poem “Junkie Monkey Reel”, Angelou explores the negative impact that stereotypes have on African American men. She writes:

Shoulders sag,
The pull of weighted needling.
Arms drag, smacking wet in soft bone
Sockets
Knees thaw,
Their familiar magic lost. Old bend and
Lock and bend forgot.

Teeth rock in fetid gums.
Eyes dart, die, then float in
Simian juice... (Angelou 139)

Like the poems “Pickin’ Em Up and Layin’ Em Down”, “Coleridge Jackson” and “John J.”, “Junkie Monkey Reel” represents the African American man. In the poem, the subject is given to substance abuse. Thus, he represents the African American stereotype of the criminal and delinquent. The abuse is so advanced that his body has lost its form: the “[s]houlders sag”, the bones have become “soft”, the “[k]nees thaw” and the eyes float in “Simian juice” (Angelou 139). The body, which is supposed to symbolise the subject’s humanity, is given over to narcotics to such an extent that he now resembles an ape-like creature. Angelou’s reference to the simian likeness of her subject draws upon the legacies of slavery.

In the essay, ““Man Cannot Behold It Without Contemplating Himself”: Monkeys, Apes and Human Identity in the Early American Republic” (1999), Brett Mizelle writes that in eighteenth century displays of animals, primates stood in as substitutes for the African subject. The primate’s docility as well as the fact that it was a wild animal, was supposed to point towards the subject of African descent having the same qualities (Mizelle 144-173). In

Angelou's poem, the docility of the African American subject is alluded to in his listlessness, brought on by the consumption of narcotics. The reference to slavery, however, hints at the fact that the subject himself has internalised the stereotype by being a slave to narcotics.

Angelou continues:

Brains reel
Master charts of old ideas erased. The
Routes are gone beneath the tracks
Of desert caravans, pre-slavery
Years ago.

Dreams fail,
Unguarded fears on homeward streets
Embrace. Throttling in a dark revenge
Murder is its sweet romance.

How long will
This monkey dance? (Angelou 139)

Angelou suggests that the African American subject of her poem, in being a slave to narcotics, has forgotten his roots—the pre-slavery era that is buried in a mind that is too addled to contemplate its significance. Because he has internalised the stereotype of the lazy, good-for-nothing individual, his ambitions remain unfulfilled. In addition, Angelou suggests that his dependence on narcotics, by causing his dreams to die, kills him too. Racial stereotypes affect both African American men and women. In a verse from the poem “Our Grandmothers”, Angelou dwells on the negative stereotypes associated with African American women. Angelou writes:

She heard the names,
swirling ribbons in the wind of history:
nigger, nigger bitch, heifer,
mammy, property, creature, ape, baboon,
whore, hot tail, thing, it... (Angelou 254).

In the verse cited above, Angelou associates the contemporary objectification of the African American woman to the legacy of slavery. Just as slavery reduced human labour to property, so the stereotypes of African American women that prevailed during the twentieth century reduce the African American subject to a “thing, it” (Angelou 254). As Patricia Hill Collins reveals, the internalization of these stereotypes by the African American subject renders African American women “conduits for racial oppression” (Collins 80). Angelou suggests, however, that solidarity between African American men and women could circumvent the negative impact of racial stereotyping. The poem “Son to Mother” illustrates this line of thought. Angelou writes:

I start no
wars, raining poison
on cathedrals,
melting Stars of David
into golden faucets
to be lighted by lamps
shaded by human skin.

I set no
store on the strange lands,
send no

missionaries beyond my
borders,
to plunder secrets
and barter souls.

They
say you took my manhood
Momma.
Come sit on my lap
and tell me,
what do you want me to say
to them, just
before I annihilate
their ignorance? (Angelou 238).

In the poem, the poetic persona positions himself against Western nationalist narratives. Unlike Nazism and colonialism, the speaker of the poem does not yearn for territorial expansion. He is not a missionary in foreign lands seeking to steal resources and convert natives. Nor is he like Adolf Hitler who sent millions of Jews to their deaths. The power that the persona wields is in defending his mother against the racial stereotyping. He realises that his mother is represented in the American imagination as a Black Matriarch who emasculates men, including him. In a gesture that reflects role reversals, he asks his mother to sit on his lap and, like a child, tell him how he should “annihilate” those who speak against her (Angelou 238). Although the poetic persona is not Hitler or a colonialist to re-write world history he does, in fact, perform a historical service—that of solidarity with African American women. By doing so, the poetic persona does his part in changing society’s

perceptions of the African American woman and, in a sense, re-writes history in her favour. Instead of territorial expansion, the war that the son fights in favour of his mother and others like her is an ideological one. “Son to Mother”, however, reflects solidarity between man and woman in the private sphere. In the poem “A Black Woman Speaks to Black Manhood”, Angelou solicits a similar solidarity between African American men and women on a public stage.

Recited by Angelou at the Million Man March on the 16th of October 1995, “A Black Woman Speaks to Black Manhood” is an appeal to both African American men and women to set aside gendered differences brought on by racism and class hierarchy within American society. The Million Man March was organized by African American activist, Louis Farrakhan, who is currently the leader of the Nation of Islam. The march itself was held to protest against the continued racial and class discrimination propagated by the American state towards the African American community. Within African American cultural politics, allusions to the Million Man March are made in Spike Lee’s movie, *Get on the Bus* (1996) wherein the opening sequence of Lee’s narrative depicts a chain-lead teenager forced to attend the march (See Eyerman 219). Like Lee, Angelou—in “A Black Woman Speaks to Black Manhood”—foregrounds the memory of slavery to speak of racial solidarity within the African American community. It is in the way she evokes the memory of slavery, however, that the poem becomes essential to understand the gendered nature of African American belonging. Angelou writes:

Our souls look back
In wondrous surprise
At how we have made it
So far from where we started.

Fathers, brothers, uncles
Nephews, sons, and friends
Look over your shoulders
And at our history

The night was long
The wounds were deep
The pit has been dark
Its walls were steep... (Angelou 51-52)

In the poem, Angelou appeals to a collective memory. She compares the history of slavery to a pit, reminiscent of the lion's den in the Bible (Dan. 6.16-17). Surviving slavery, Angelou suggests, is "wondrous" and miraculous (Angelou 51) because of the work of Providence. Just like Daniel survived the lions' den through the miraculous divine intervention, so the African American community too can marvel at how they have survived three hundred-odd years of enslavement, ostensibly through a miracle. Because the African American community has survived the dark times of slavery, however, they have cause to rejoice—in verse eleven of the poem, Angelou urges the audience to clap their hands and "celebrate" (Angelou 54). Before urging her community to rejoice, however, Angelou deems it necessary for her audience and herself to be reminded of their shared history. She continues:

I was dragged by braids
On a sandy beach
I was pulled near you
But beyond your reach
You were bound and gagged

When you heard me cry
Your spirit was wounded
With each wrenching try

For you thrust and pulled
Trying to break free
So that neither of us
Would know slavery

You forgot the strength
Of the rope and the chain
You only remember
Your manhood shame

You couldn't help yourself
And you couldn't help me
You've carried that fact
Down our history... (Angelou 52-53)

Angelou, here, addresses the helplessness that the African American subject feels at the thought of enslavement. Evoking the memory of the Middle Passage ("sandy beach"), Angelou suggests that the man of African descent felt emasculated since he was unable to help his female counterpart. In the book, *Dismantling Black Manhood: An Historical and Literary Analysis of the Legacy of Slavery* (1997), Daniel P. Black observes that the physical assaults (sexual and otherwise) made on the women of African descent on board the slave ships, induced a feeling of emasculation within the latter. According to Black, the physical

brutalities faced by the African woman in the slave ships, “dismantled” black manhood since the African man could no longer come to her aid as he was traditionally wont to do. Black writes:

[B]eing unable to protect women from physical abuse or to avenge their suffering rendered one a dysfunctional husband, father, brother, or son, as far as [African] men were concerned (Black 48).

Black’s book shows that the continued oppression of the woman of African descent ensures that her male counterpart continues to feel emasculated, even when “free” (Black 112-120). The woman of African descent, here, becomes a reminder of the latter’s failure to protect those from his own community, and hence, his “manhood shame” (Angelou 53). Angelou suggests, however, that both men and women of the African American community are one in their oppression. In the poem, Angelou writes that both the African man and woman were physically overpowered. The woman was “dragged by...[her]...braids” and the man was “bound and gagged” (Angelou 52). Through Angelou’s reference to the memory of slavery, particularly the limitations that slavery sets on the racial and gendered body, the symbol of the caged bird is evoked. It is because the African American community has survived such a past, however, that Angelou urges her community to rejoice. She writes:

We have survived
Those centuries of hate
And we do not deny
Their bruising weight

Please my many million men
Let us lay that image aside

See how our people today

Walk in strength and pride

Celebrate, stand up, clap hands for ourselves

and those who went before

Stand up, clap hands, let us welcome kind

words back into our vocabulary

Stand up, clap hands, let us welcome

courtesies back into our bedrooms

Stand up, clap hands, let us invite generosity

back into our kitchens

Clap hands, let faith find a place in

our souls

Clap hands, let hope live in our hearts

We have survived

And even thrived with

Passion

Compassion

Humor

and style

...

Clap hands, celebrate

We deserve it

Jubilate! (Angelou 54-56)

Angelou urges the African American community to celebrate their survival. Central to this celebration is the domestic space with its gendered connotation as a space belonging to African American women. The bedrooms and kitchens in Angelou's poem resemble what Tasha Choma-Sampson writes are "safe spaces" for both men and women within the African American community (Choma-Sampson 105-117). Since such spaces are dominated by women, they also represent places within which distinct narratives told from the perspective of African American women originate. Similar to Alice Walker's retrieval of a racial and gendered identity rooted in the African American woman's heritage and storytelling (See Walker 401-409), Angelou suggests that the "Compassion/ Humor/ and style" that the African American community has inherited would not have happened without the strength and survival of the African American woman (Angelou 55). The significance of this heritage and narrative of survival is expressed by Angelou in a 1973 interview with Bill Moyers.

In response to Bill Moyers' question on the historical role played by African American women, Angelou says:

Angelou: No black man at any time in our history in the United States has been able to feel that he didn't need that black woman right against him, shoulder to shoulder –in that cotton field, on the auction block in the ghetto, wherever. That black woman is an integral if not a most important part of the family unit...And I believe that we have to thank black women not only for keeping the black family alive but the white family.

Moyers: Why is that?

Angelou: Because black women have nursed a nation of strangers. For hundreds of years they literally nursed babies at

their breasts who they knew when they grew up would rape their daughters and kill their sons. (Moyers and Angelou 21-22).

Angelou, in the interview cited above, identifies the African American woman as a central, *integrative* figure within American socio-political institutions. Angelou suggests that the modern nuclear family, as a national symbol for “home”, has been made possible through denial of the same for countless African American women. In spite of these losses, the African American woman displays resilience and strength in her relationships with others, both within and outside her community. Remembrance of this heritage is, perhaps, essential at a time when “blackness” is defined no more than by its racialized representation of belonging *to* the American literary narrative.

2.4: Conclusion

This Chapter has shown that the retrieval of the African American woman’s heritage is hampered by pervasive forms of stereotyping of the African American community at the level of socio-economic interaction. Institutional bias against the African American subject exacerbates racial and gendered discrimination, allowing the stereotypes to thrive. In the book, *American Tantalus: Horizons, Happiness, and the Impossible Pursuits of US Literature and Culture* (2014), Andrew Warnes observes that the commodification of American literature and culture began with the founding of the American nation. Tracing the roots of the sublime to the works of Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, Warnes writes that the quest for transcendence in American literature and culture came at the cost of removing labour—especially slave labour—from the American landscape and literary narrative (Warnes 101). Thus, Warnes implies that the sublime in American literature and culture is arrived at through the loss of the very humanity by which America is deemed a nation of “equal rights for all men.” For the African American community, this loss would impel a longing for a “new” narrative couched in a symbolic return to the “lost” homeland of

Africa. The next chapter, therefore, will examine the African American subject's longing for her "lost" homeland, revisited through narratives of belonging.

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Chapter 3

The Memory and Narrative of Africa in Maya Angelou's Poetry

3.1: Introduction

The previous chapter showed how the African American subject within the postindustrial American context felt an absence of belonging in her milieu which resulted in a longing for a connection to her heritage. In the late 1980s and 1990s, a move towards re-claiming this “lost” heritage came from within the African American community. When critics such as bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Houston A. Baker, Jr. exposed the gendered and racial biases within the Western critical tradition, they called for a reformation of what constituted African American critical practice and identity. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., for instance, advocated for a criticism that was based on the rituals and methods of reading that originated in Africa, most notably, an idea of reading and interpretation founded on the Yoruban deity, Esu Elegbara (Gates 3-43). Such critical forays, made in order to find an alternative to Eurocentrism, and to ground African American literature in what Gates called a distinct “black cultural matrix” (Gates xxi), resulted in Africa symbolising—for many African American people—a metaphorical (and, in some cases, a literal) return to the “lost” homeland. Molefi Kete Asante’s book, *Afrocentricity: A Theory of Social Change* first published in 1980 and then re-published in 2003, was a key text advocating for belonging by reviving the Back to Africa movement of the 1920s.

In the book, *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change* (2003), Molefi Kete Asante proposes an African-centred ideology and narrative as a way to challenge Eurocentric domination. In this context, Asante writes:

This book is written with the idea that an African renaissance is possible only if there is an African ideology, distinct from a Eurocentric

ideology, that allows African agency, that is, a sense of self-actualizing based upon the interests of African people. (Asante 1).

In arguing for an African ideology distinct from a Eurocentric one, Asante envisions a supporting narrative that would give meaning to African-based art and literature. Recognition of the self-actualising properties of Afrocentric ideology would come from the African subject's embracing his/her African past. Asante, however, is by no means the first and only critic of African origin to propose a return to Africa. As early as 1926 Marcus Garvey, under the aegis of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, was telling African Americans about the need to return to Africa. In an editorial for *The Negro World* dated January 30, 1926, Garvey clarifies what he meant when he advocated for a "Back to Africa" movement. Garvey writes:

It [Back to Africa] does not mean that all Negroes must leave America and the West Indies and go to Africa and build up a government...

I desire each and every one to realize that the Universal Negro Improvement Association is not teaching Negroes to throw away opportunities that maybe beneficial to them: to the contrary, we say to all Negroes in America, the West Indies and elsewhere, seize all opportunities that come to you, but remember that our success educationally, industrially and politically is based upon the protection of a nation founded by ourselves. And that nation can be nowhere else but in Africa. (Garvey 1).

In his editorial, Garvey makes it clear that by "Back to Africa" he does not mean a physical journey of African Americans to Africa. Rather, Garvey asserts that the freedom of the African people, then under the yoke of colonialism, would serve the best interests of the

African diaspora. Further, the idea of a unified African nation mediates belonging for all people of African descent. Asante's theory of Afrocentricity draws on Garveyism but it alters Garvey's theory in the recognition that the African nation evokes, more than just a physical landscape, a spiritual oneness and belonging for all people of African descent. Asante writes:

Afrocentricity is the logical outgrowth of the collective conscious will of the people; the collective conscious will is derived from Afrocentricity. What seems like a tautology is. Afrocentricity and collective conscious will are one. It is impossible to have a people who accept one without accepting the other. (Asante 61).

Belonging, according to Asante, is derived from an Afrocentric ideology just as Afrocentricity itself promotes belonging for all people of African descent. Further, belonging as founded on Afrocentric ideology privileges the collective will of the people over individualistic concerns. Asante's stance on Africa reflects a growing body of work in the late twentieth century that seeks to establish an African diasporic identity and belonging for people of African descent. Asante's theory itself, however, is riddled with gendered biases. Commenting on gendered relations within the African diasporic narrative that he has created, Asante writes:

In order to get the brother she wanted a sister went through numerous outer changes of sartorial fashions, hairstyles, and manner of speech. After he had begun relating to her she ceased her outer changes and the relationship went from bad to worse. She accused him of not being interested in her for herself but because of her fashions and styles. (Asante 71).

Asante's perception of the African American woman reflects a blind-spot and a sexist orientation where belonging is concerned. According to Asante, the woman of African descent uses Afrocentric ideology to her own ends by focusing on outward adornment: "sartorial fashions, hairstyles, and manner of speech" (Asante 71) Asante's blind-spot regarding the African American woman echoes mainstream sexist notions that women in general are given to superficial graces and are solely concerned with language and mannerisms for appearances' sake. In having the specificities of her experiences speak for the belonging of women elsewhere in the African diaspora, Angelou's poetry redefines the nationalist and gendered rhetoric within the Afrocentric narrative. *In this Chapter, I argue that it is the spiritual and symbolic narrative of Africa, manifest through racial and gendered tropes, that influences Angelou's perception of a "lost" homeland.*

The next section, "Cleopatra, Sheba, Hagar and Other Cultural Figures of the African Homeland", examines how the memory of Africa in Angelou's poetry is connected to the gendered and racial tropes such as Cleopatra, Sheba and Hagar associated with the African homeland. This is followed by a section titled "The African Homeland, the "Orient" and the World" which examines the position of Africa as an Orientalist construct and how this position influences Angelou's Africanist paradigm in relation to the world. The Chapter concludes by asserting that the symbolic forms associated with the African homeland, manifest through racial and gendered tropes, constitutes Angelou's attempt to re-define a primarily masculinist idea of Africa.

3.2: Cleopatra, Sheba, Hagar and Other Cultural Figures of the African Homeland

It can be demonstrated that Angelou's African-centred belonging precedes Asante's theory. As early as 1971, Angelou had written a poem titled "To a Husband" that, while expressing love shared between a heterosexual couple, publicizes and politicizes belonging through its evocation of an African-centred narrative. Angelou begins "To a Husband" by

invoking Enobarbus' description of Cleopatra's barge in Act II. ii.195-210 of William Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. Angelou signifies on the Shakespearean narrative, however, by reversing the roles of the wooer and the wooed. Angelou writes:

Your voice at times a fist
Tight in your throat
Jabs ceaselessly at phantoms
In the room,
Your hand a carved and
Skimming boat
Goes down the Nile
To point out Pharoah's tomb.

You're Africa to me
At brightest dawn.
The Congo's green and
Copper's brackish hue,
A continent to build
With Black Man's brawn.
I sit at home and see it all
Through you. (Angelou 18).

While Cleopatra plays the role of the seducer in Shakespeare's narrative, in Angelou's "To a Husband", it is the African male who seduces and woos the female. The dalliance between the African male and his lover in Angelou's poem serves as a narrative of belonging through which memory of the "lost" African homeland is encountered. Significantly, it is through the African male that memory of the "lost" homeland is evoked: "You are Africa to

me” (Angelou 18). As David Lowenthal, in the essay “Past Time, Present Place: Landscape and Memory” (1975) writes:

But the past is not only recalled; it is incarnate in the things we build
and the landscapes we create. We make our environment comfortable
by incorporating or fabricating memorabilia, and we feel at home with
new products when their camouflage evokes the old. (Lowenthal 6).

In having her husband embody African landscapes such as the Nile and the jungles of the Congo basin, Angelou’s narrator speaks of a belonging that is in the past and, therefore, inaccessible. The memory of Africa is, at best, “phantoms” at which the narrator’s husband “jabs”. The narrator yearns, moreover, for a “lost” homeland that has been familiarized through literature—hence the reference to Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* in the first verse of the poem becomes an appropriate reference. But while belonging in Shakespeare’s narrative is shared by subjects in the upper echelons of society, Angelou’s narrator is acutely aware that the resplendent scene in Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* is created through the servitude of the native African people. This awareness enables a second level of signifying. Angelou writes that the continent of Africa is built “With Black Man’s brawn.” (Angelou 18). In observing thus, Angelou politicizes and makes public the belonging that Shakespeare’s narrative obfuscates. The Nile and its riches may belong to the Egyptian Queen and her lover, but only so because the African rowers of her barge and the African children playing “Cupids” make this possible. Angelou signifies upon Shakespeare’s narrative, therefore, by identifying the Afrocentric roots to Eurocentric statements of belonging. As Edward W. Said writes in *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (1995), the East— such as it is represented in Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*—was created to satisfy the European need for an imaginative space to belong to. Said writes:

For a historian of Middle Kingdom Egypt, ‘long ago’ will have a very clear sort of meaning, but even this meaning does not totally dissipate the imaginative, quasi-fictional quality one senses lurking in a time very different and distant from our own. For there is no doubt that imaginative geography and history help the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatizing the distance and difference between what is close to it and what is far away. This is no less true of the feelings that we would have been more ‘at home’ in the sixteenth century or in Tahiti. (Said 55).

Much like the European “historian of Middle Kingdom Egypt”, the narrator of Angelou’s “To a Husband” re-imagines the landscape of Africa to validate her belonging to her husband and through him, her belonging to a sense of “home”. But while the European historian re-imagines the landscape of the East to exert power over the Orient, Angelou’s narrator, in doing so, reveals the human cost of Eurocentric belonging. Thus, memory of the Nile and its association to the “lost” homeland of Africa is remembered through various intersubjective alliances throughout Angelou’s poetic oeuvre —as sorrow over the past in “Africa”, as a memory of forgotten mothers in “Woman Me”, “For Us, Who Dare Not Dare” and *Now Sheba Sings the Song* (1987) and as an expression of solidarity and belonging with minority communities in “On the Pulse of the Morning”.

What counts for the imaginative component of geography are the cultural tropes that mediate belonging. Said writes:

In the depths of this Oriental stage stands a prodigious cultural repertoire whose individual items evoke a fabulously rich world: the Sphinx, Cleopatra, Eden, Troy, Sodom and Gomorrah, Astarte, Isis and Osiris, Sheba, Babylon, the Genii, the Magi, Nineveh, Prester John,

Mahomet, and dozens more; settings, in some cases, names only, half-imagined, half-known; monsters, devils, heroes; terrors, pleasures, desires. (Said 63).

It is to these cultural tropes that mediate belonging to the Orient that Angelou turns for her re-imagined African “home”. In the poem “The Mothering Blackness”, Angelou uses the cultural tropes of Sheba and Hagar to speak about Afrocentric displacement. Angelou writes:

She came home running
back to the mothering blackness
deep in the smothering blackness
white tears icicle gold plains of her face
She came home running

She came down creeping
here to the black arms waiting
now to the warm heart waiting
rime of alien dreams befrosts her rich brown face
She came down creeping

She came home blameless
black as yet Hagar’s daughter
tall as was Sheba’s daughter
threats of northern winds die on the desert’s face
She came home blameless. (Angelou 22).

“The Mothering Blackness” anticipates Angelou’s later poem, “Mother: A Cradle to Hold Me”. In both poems the lost homeland or Africa is represented as the proverbial mother nurturing her child. Due to these European literary constructions of the Orient, the latter’s sense of belonging has been lost and is retrievable only through myth. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in the essay “Dis and Dat: Dialect and the Descent” (1978) writes:

Afro-American dialects exist between two poles, one English and one “lost” in some “mythical” linguistic kingdom now irrecoverable. Dialect is our only key to that unknown tongue; and in its obvious relation and reaction to English, it contains, as does the Yoruban mask, a verbal dialectic between some form of African anti-thesis all the while obviating the English thesis. (Gates 94).

If Angelou’s “The Mothering Blackness” represents the poet’s attempt to reach back into her linguistic and cultural past to retrieve what was lost, then the poet’s invocation of Hagar and Sheba in the poem acquires potency. Sheba and Hagar are representatives of a belonging that has been so thoroughly fictionalised that their manifestations are negatively stereotyped in Western canonical discourse; and, going by Asante’s perception of African American women, beyond the purview of Afrocentric discourse as well. In the biblical narrative, Hagar appears in the book of Genesis 16.1-16 and Genesis 21. 9-21. An Egyptian servant of Abraham’s wife, Sarah, Hagar bore Abraham’s illegitimate son, Ishmael. Further, in Galatians 4. 22-23, the apostle Paul refers to Abraham’s progeny as that of a son being born of the flesh (from Hagar) and a son being born of the Spirit (from Sarah). The carnal relationship that Hagar is supposed to have had with Abraham, albeit at Sarah’s insistence, legitimizes the popular Eurocentric perception of the African woman as a temptress. It is through the representation of Hagar, therefore, that the “lost” African homeland is characterised as sexually and morally deviant as opposed to the propriety and civilised

conduct of the West, as represented by Sarah. Angelou's allusion to the relationship between Hagar and Abraham, moreover, alludes to the white slave masters' practice of raping slave women of African descent by. Being a "bondswoman" or a slave, Hagar's descendants —the daughters of Angelou's "The Mothering Blackness"—do not have a claim to their father's property; in this case, their claim to belong to Africa or "home" is via their mother, Hagar. They are recognised through their belonging to a kinship structure that is illegitimate from the perspective of Eurocentric reason. Hortense J. Spillers in the essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe", however, asserts:

The flesh is the concentration of "ethnicity" that contemporary critical discourses neither acknowledge nor discourse away. It is this "flesh and blood" entity, in the vestibule (or "pre-view") of a colonized North America, that is essentially ejected from "The Female Body in Western Culture", but it makes good theory, or commemorative 'herstory' to want to 'forget,' or to have failed to realize, that the African female subject...is not only the target of rape—in one sense, an interiorized violation of body and mind—but also the topic of specifically *externalized* acts of torture and prostration that we imagine as the peculiar province of *male* brutality and torture inflicted by other males. (Spillers 458).

According to Spillers, the privileging of narratives of sexual violence where the African woman is concerned obscures the other physical assaults made on the African woman by slave owners and overseers. Spillers says that, like African males, African females too were subject to physical assaults and brutality in order to make them subservient. But while Spillers' observations are valid, the rape of African women by white men did produce physical evidence in the form of mulatto offspring.

In *Now Sheba Sings the Song* (1987), Angelou turns to the inter-racial and cross-cultural figure of the mulatta to write a poem centred on female experiences within the African diaspora. Often depicted and labelled as “tragic” because of her dubious parentage, the mulatta represents a physical presence that is a mixture of the “white” and “black” worlds. She is, as Diana Adesola Mafe writes in *Mixed Bodies, Separate Races: The Trope of the “(Tragic) Mulatto” in Twentieth-Century African Literature* (2007), a “figure between the monolithic racial constructs of ‘white’ and ‘black’” (Mafe 2). It is in questioning the rigid racial boundaries within both the Eurocentric and Afrocentric paradigms that the mulatta represents a revised national narrative for people of African descent. She embodies the gendered component of the “double-voiced” text in Gates’ *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (1988) as well as the gendered “double consciousness” of the black subject that Du Bois speaks of in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903, 2009). The mulatta symbolizes, moreover, a memory of the “lost” African homeland that is based on displacement—where the memory of place signifies un-belonging *in spite of* belonging.

Angelou dedicates *Now Sheba Sings the Song* (1987) to “all [her] black, brown, beige, yellow, red, and white sisters”. Thus, in her dedication, Angelou evokes the narrative possibilities couched within the figure of the mulatta. The mulatta who could be black, brown, beige, yellow, red or white is seen as a universal subject for women of African descent and, like her historical predecessors, acts as a cultural intermediary between Europe and Africa (Mafe 36). The interplay between East and West is suggested in the title of the poem itself. Drawing upon biblical narrative, Angelou seeks —as she mentions in a 1986 interview— to lend a voice to the Queen of Sheba (Angelou and Manna 164). In *Now Sheba Sings the Song* (1987), Angelou articulates the subject position of a woman whose presence in the Bible is only as a witness to King Solomon’s fame and wealth. The entry of the Queen

of Sheba in the Bible is immediately followed by a description of King Solomon's wealth (See 1 Kings 10. 14-29). Angelou begins *Now Sheba Sings the Song* (1987) by tracing her lineage to the African homeland:

Mother told her secrets to me

When I rode

Low in the pocket

Between her hips.

I learned the rhythm of her song

'Child, this world is not your home.'

History does not dissolve

In the blood. (Angelou 8-12).

Africa is represented by Angelou as a proverbial womb, a "pocket" of the world. In a similar context, Asante also states, "The African continent *gave birth* to Africans" (Asante 13; emphasis added). That is, the continent of Africa is the place where African-centred nationalities and identities are nurtured. What Angelou learns from her belonging to Africa, however, is a song or poetry: "Child, this world is not your home" (Angelou 12). Echoing the Christian hymn, "This World is Not My Home", Angelou re-imagines Africa through the spiritual landscapes of "home" and belonging. The spiritual manifestations of the homeland are embodied by the women of African descent. Referring to the river Limpopo in South Africa, for instance, Angelou writes:

My eyes, reflecting the Limpid Limpopo

Look beyond the past

For my children whose future rest on their closed eyelids. (Angelou 19)

The song or poem inherited from Mother Africa by her daughters, however, is one of displacement and loss. Africa as a geographical and physical entity cannot be called “home” and inspire belonging for women of African descent because it represents a landscape that has, in the past, already been conquered. Angelou recollects this aspect of her belonging in successive lines. Angelou continues:

Centuries have recorded my features, in Cafes and

Cathedrals, along the water’s edge.

I awaited the arrival of the ships of freedom

On the selling stage as men proved their power in a

handful of my thigh. (Angelou 22).

The continued oppression of women of African descent, Angelou suggests, is tantamount to having them relive their enslaved past in the present. But while Africa, as a physical entity, cannot offer refuge for her displaced descendants, as a spiritual and ideological entity it enables a sense of belonging that cuts across continents. Images of Africa (her “features”), embodied by her descendants, are also to be found “in Cafes and/Cathedrals” across Europe and the Western world. The women of African descent, therefore, represent living, breathing entities that serve as powerful reminders of survival in spite of European/Western domination and colonial excesses. The ideological implications of Africa as a spiritual entity that would foster belonging in the African diaspora is not lost on Asante. In Chapter One of *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change* (2003), Asante observes:

We are a people who appreciate the continuum of the spirit and matter;

we do not distinguish between them. Indeed, our spirit, a personalism

and humanism, animates matter as well as spirit...

Mythology referred to a people's place in the universal scheme of things. Karenga correctly understood that we had to organize our mythology in order to give purpose, identity and direction. All people have a mythology; Africans who have not given up their ethnic culture have their own mythologies that say how the world began and their place in it. (Asante 28).

Referring to the animistic origins of African thought, Asante fashions a national narrative for people of African descent based on spiritualism. Significantly, it is myth that takes precedence over history as the essence that would foster belonging for people of African descent. Mythology, according to Asante, gives "purpose, identity and direction" to the African national narrative and its people. In referring to Sheba, Cleopatra and Hagar, Angelou herself participates in the process of myth-making. In recollecting the narratives of Sheba, Cleopatra and Hagar, Angelou alludes to the mythologies underlying a contemporary African landscape that has, due to colonialism and globalisation, been subjected to change.

3.3: The African Homeland, the "Orient" and the World

In the book *The Origin of Others* (2017) Toni Morrison writes about what Africa meant for the Western world:

As grist for Western mills, accommodatingly mute, conveniently blank, indisputably foreign, Africa could be made to support a wide variety of literary and / or ideological requirements. It could withdraw as scenery for any exploit, or leap forward and implicate itself in the woes of any foreigner; it could contort itself into frightening, malignant shapes upon which Westerners could contemplate evil, or it could kneel and accept elementary lessons from its betters. (Morrison 102-103).

According to Morrison, the “blank” slate that Africa is supposed to represent, enabled Eurocentric subjects to cast the continent as an exotic “other”. This narrative of Africa and its peoples enabled the Eurocentric narratives to promote ideas of universality that privileged the Eurocentric point-of-view. Africa herself, however, also encompassed a spiritual centre that, Morrison says, is “the canvas upon which a portrait of a wiser, or sadder, or fully reconciled self could be painted” (Morrison 103). What Simon Schama, in *Landscape and Memory* (1996), writes about the United States in relation to how myth inspires belonging to land, is also true of the African homeland. Schama writes:

The designation of the suburban yard as a cure for the afflictions of city life marks the greensward as a remnant of an old pastoral dream, even though its goatherds and threshers have been replaced by tanks of pesticide and industrial-strength mowing machines. And it is just because ancient places are constantly being given the topdressings of modernity (the forest primeval, for example, turning into the ‘wilderness park’) that the antiquity of the myths at their core is sometimes hard to make out...

To see the ghostly outline of an old landscape beneath the superficial covering of the contemporary is to be made vividly aware of the endurance of core myths. (Schama 16).

Myths, according to Schama, constitute the enduring, “spiritual” connection that one has towards home and a sense of belonging to a place. It is the appearance of the lost, “old landscape” in the form of the spouse that, in Angelou’s “To a Husband”, excites the poet’s curiosity. Myths associated with the “lost” homeland assign meaning to the idea of home; defining, in its turn, relationships of belonging within a contemporary setting. For a people whose culture is under constant threat of erasure, nostalgic and mythical recollections of the

“lost” homeland serve, as Asante explains, “to give purpose, identity and direction” (Asante 28). More than a bulwark against contemporary cultural erosion, therefore, nostalgia for the lost homeland serves its purpose for future generations within the African diaspora. In the poem “Mother: A Cradle to Hold Me”, Angelou examines generational memory in relation to the African-centred national narrative. Belonging to the “lost” homeland begins with a creation myth:

It is true
I was created in you.
It is also true
That you were created for me.
I owned your voice.
It was shaped and tuned to soothe me.
Your arms were molded
Into a cradle to hold me, to rock me.
The scent of your body was the air
Perfumed for me to breathe. (Angelou 69).

In a similar way in which Africa has been represented in “The Mothering Blackness” and *Now Sheba Sings the Song* (1987), Africa is, in “Mother: A Cradle to Hold Me”, represented as a veritable womb in which traditional motherly attributes such as nursing, nurturing and caring for one’s children are realised. But while Africa is the metaphorical womb that creates her children, Africa herself has to be created for the displaced African: “It is true/I was created in you./It is also true/ That *you were created for me*” (Angelou 69; emphasis added). The metaphor of the womb, therefore, works both ways — first, through the implication of Africa being the mother for children of African descent and second,

through Africa herself being re-imagined and re-created by the said children belonging to the African diaspora. Literature or written narratives play an important role in the re-conceptualisation of an Africa for Africans. Examining the role of narratives in constructing the “Orient”, Said, in *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (1995), writes that representations of the Orient existed in the form of texts written by Orientalist scholars. Said observes:

...[T]he Orient studied was a textual universe by and large; the impact of the Orient was made through books and manuscripts, not, as in the impress of Greece on the Renaissance, through mimetic arts like sculpture and pottery. (Said 52).

Said suggests that written narratives played a crucial role in forming ideas about the geographical region we identify as the Orient. The reliance on textuality where the Orient is concerned, however, produced different responses from Oriental natives. In the essay “African Signs and Spirit Writing” (1996), Harryette Mullen observes that while African American writers do draw from oral sources, written narratives form an equally potent symbol of their belonging. One reason for this, Mullen writes, is because the symbolic significance of the written word is traceable to African origins. Mullen writes:

An African American tradition of literacy as a secular technology and a tool for political empowerment, through appropriation of public symbols, and participation in mainstream cultural discourses, co-exists with a parallel tradition of visionary literacy as a spiritual practice in which divine inspiration, associated with Judeo-Christian biblical tradition, is syncretically merged with African traditions of spirit possession... (Mullen 626).

While the secular implications of the written word remained within the province of the material world, Mullen suggests that its symbolic significance drew upon the fusion of African spirituality with Christian notions of “divine inspiration.” Just as the preacher (in the Judeo-Christian tradition) is thought of as a medium through which God’s word is spoken, so the poet of African origin becomes a spiritual guide or leader through which the soul of the African diasporic nation is communicated. Mullen writes that the evocation of the “African ancestor-spirit” is essential for arriving at the spiritual centre underlying African American narratives (Mullen 627). Mullen’s emphasis on “visionary texts” as she calls them, echoes W. E. B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903, 2009) where Du Bois observes that the sorrow songs or the blues are poems that reflect the “soul” in excess of the material condition of the African American subject (Du Bois 167-177). For Asante, the emphasis on African spirituality enables a fusion of the material with a transcendental undertaking of the idea of belonging:

We are a people who appreciate the continuum of the spirit and matter;
we do not distinguish between them. Indeed, our spirit, a personalism
and humanism, animates matter as well as spirit... (Asante 28).

In evoking the memory of the Mother, therefore, Angelou— in “Mother: A Cradle to Hold Me” — also evokes belonging through the re-incarnation of African ancestors. The fusion of the African ancestor-spirit with matter is highlighted in Angelou’s association of belonging with mortality.

Just as *Now Sheba Sings the Song* and “To a Husband” draw upon the textual traditions within canonical narrative, “Mother: A Cradle to Hold Me” is also a re-telling of a canonical narrative. “Mother: A Cradle to Hold Me” is a re-telling of William Ross Wallace’s “The Hand that Rocks the Cradle is the Hand that Rocks the World” (1890). Writing at the turn of the nineteenth century, Wallace’s poem reflects the Puritanical influence on American

poetry. The image of the woman, in this poem, merges with the unsullied American frontier characterized by the biblical promise of rainbows and the innocence of childhood. At the fringes of Wallace's poem, however, hangs an ominous trepidation. The same sky that illuminates the mother's world with divine light is also given to "tempests" and "storms". In other words, Wallace's idea of the mother as a divine gift is undercut by the fact that this gift (along with its claim to immortality) might fall short of the promised Elysium. Metaphors of divinity in Wallace's poem sustain the iconic image of the mother—set apart, as it were, from day-to-day circumstances; even death. Angelou's African mother is the ideal reflection of Wallace's poem, however, precisely because her value as poetry or creation is conceivable within everyday situations. The African mother of Angelou's poem is memorialized through a belonging that allows her daughter to inhabit her form. Angelou writes:

You thought you knew me,
But I did know you,
You thought you were watching me,
But I did hold you securely in my sight,
Recording every movement,
Memorizing your smiles, tracing your frowns.
In your absence
I rehearsed you,
The way you had of singing
On a breeze,
While a sob lay
At the root of your song. (Angelou 72).

In learning and repeating her mother's gestures, the daughter carries on her mother's legacy. The fusion of spirit (memory of the mother/home) with matter (the daughter who

embodies the mother's form) ensures the survival of African-centred belonging long after the physical form of the mother or home becomes no more than a memory. The memory of home embodied by members of the African diaspora, therefore, enables the passing down of African cultural values to future members of the community. Culture provides the necessary symbolic meaning to the homeland. Commenting on the symbolism inherent in cultural narratives, Schama, in *Landscape and Memory* (1996) writes, "Landscapes are culture before they are nature; constructs of the imagination projected onto wood and water and rock" (Schama 61).

Angelou's projection of gendered cultural tropes onto the memory of the lost homeland is, as we have seen, present in many of her poems. The projection of cultural tropes in relation to the "lost" homeland enables Angelou to come to terms with her belonging to a place. In the poem "Kin", dedicated to her brother, for instance, Angelou projects her memory of the "lost" homeland through the evocation of a primeval landscape peopled by none other than Sheba, Eve and Lilith. Angelou writes:

We were entwined in red rings
Of blood and loneliness before
The first snows fell
Before muddy rivers seeded clouds
Above a virgin forest, and
Men ran naked, blue and black
Skinned into the warm embraces
Of Sheba, Eve and Lilith.
I was your sister. (Angelou 158).

Africa is, in this poem, conceived as a home in which encounters with the archetypal ancestor-spirits (Sheba, Eve and Lilith) are realised. It is a home, moreover, that—before the onset of colonialism—nurtured pre-determined relations of belonging. Belonging to Bailey,

her brother, Angelou suggests, is as natural to her as belonging to the “lost” African homeland. Here, the manufactured memory of place sustains belonging within a contemporaneous setting which in turn influences Angelou’s perception of herself: “I was your sister” (Angelou 158; emphasis added). Angelou expresses, in the poem, what Asante calls an “African *personalism*” in that the self is aware of its belonging to others through a spiritual connection to land (Asante 104). Asante states:

As Karenga has said, we are not into spookism. We are, however, into African *personalism* energizing every aspect of nature... For us, therefore, the trees and mountains have always possessed essences. (Asante 104).

For Angelou, therefore, the cultural tropes of Sheba, Eve and Lilith in the guise of African ancestor-spirits animate her belonging to the “lost” African homeland. By evoking and chanting their names, Angelou retrieves a landscape that was lost. In associating the cultural tropes of Sheba, Eve and Lilith with primeval Africa, Angelou imagines a landscape through her sense of belonging to the African diasporic nation. In the poem “Our Grandmothers”, the “lost” African landscape is evoked through the chanting of names given to Africans and African slaves:

She heard the names,
swirling ribbons in the wind of history:
nigger, nigger bitch, heifer,
mammy, property, creature, ape, baboon,
whore, hot tail, thing, it... (Angelou 254).

In order to rule over Africa, the European colonizer needed to enslave its people. The naming of Africans was one way in which the European master could rob the African of

his/her personhood (Benston 3-11). Here, the perception of the African as a “creature, ape, baboon” (Angelou 254) goes hand-in-hand with the Eurocentric perception of Africa as a primitive land. If the African people themselves were no more than animals—symbolizing a loss of personhood—then the European could assert his/her will over them. The conflict between East and West plays out as a conflict between the civilised world (Europe) and the untamed, primitive lands of Africa (See Schama 91). As Kimberly W. Benston in the essay “‘I Yam what I Am’: Naming and Unnaming in Afro-American Literature” (1982), notes:

“Nigger” is a mechanism of control by contraction; it subsumes the complexities of human experience into a tractable sign while manifesting an essential ability to *see* (to grasp, to apprehend) the signified... “Nigger,” as the white name for the blackness-of-blackness, is a name for difference which serves the ideological function of imbuing “whiteness” with a “sense” it primordially lacks. (Benston 5).

According to Benston, the word “nigger” is used by the people of the dominant class and colour, to assert control over the people of African descent. Control over the African population is exerted by implying that there is a distinct “nigger-like” essence to their character, foregoing the complexity of individual experiences. But as Benston also notes, the Eurocentric naming of the African people was ideological in that it pointed out an identitarian deficiency within white culture. Angelou, therefore, does not end her poem with the European naming of African people. In a radical act of “un-naming” Angelou, in verse nineteen of the poem, writes:

These momma faces, lemon-yellow, plum-purple,
honey-brown, have grimaced and twisted
down a pyramid of years.
She is Sheba and Sojourner,

Harriet and Zora,
Mary Bethune and Angela,
Annie to Zenobia. (Angelou 256).

The chanting of names, as Angelou does in verse nineteen of “Our Grandmothers”, marks a process of “self-creation and reformation of a fragmented familial past” (Benston 3). The self becomes the site where this past is re-enacted. Echoing the biblical verses of Jeremiah 17.8 and Psalm 1.3, Angelou writes her refrain: “I shall not be moved” (Angelou 256). The symbol of the tree in the biblical verses is re-interpreted to represent an African ancestral tree beginning with Sheba. Belonging, therefore, is traced through a genealogical line associated with a memory of the African homeland, but also of other African women, in myth and history. Memory of the “lost” African homeland, represented by the tree, the pyramid and the Queen of Sheba becomes an ideological and spiritual mooring for women of African descent. Thus, the women of verse twenty of the poem become the contemporary inheritors of a belonging that has survived in spite of the Eurocentric naming of the African people. Angelou writes:

She stands
before the abortion clinic,
confounded by the lack of choices.
In the Welfare line,
reduced to the pity of handouts.
Ordained in the pulpit, shielded
by the mysteries.
In the operating room,
husbanding life.
In the choir loft,

holding God in her throat.
On lonely street corners,
hawking her body.
In the classroom, loving the
children to understanding. (Angelou 256).

The women belonging to the African diaspora, therefore, become contemporary reflections of the steadfastness and the enduring legacy of their ancestors. In the poem, “When Great Trees Fall”, Angelou revives the symbol of the African ancestral tree to speak of a belonging that cuts across gendered identities. Originally titled “Ailey, Baldwin, Floyd and Mayfield”, “When Great Trees Fall” is Angelou’s paean to the lost African homeland—“great trees” referring to the ancestors whose lives animate her memory of the homeland. Here, Angelou’s reconstruction of Africa resembles what Michael Rothberg in the book *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonisation* (2009) terms as “multidirectional memory” or memories that are intertextual since they interact with “different historical memories.” (Rothberg 3). Angelou’s evocation of the “lost” homeland is inspired by touristic elements of nineteenth century European encounters with Africa. Recalling nineteenth century adventure narratives, particularly H. Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* (1885), Angelou writes:

When great trees fall,
rocks on the distant hills shudder,
lions hunker down
in tall grasses,
and even elephants
lumber after safety.

When great trees fall
in forests,
small things recoil into silence,
their senses
eroded beyond fear. (Angelou 266).

Unlike the primeval landscape of “Kin”, the African landscape in “When Great Trees Fall” is reminiscent of nineteenth century adventure fiction such as H. Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* (1885). Chapter Four of *King Solomon’s Mines* sees the protagonist, Allan Quatermain, hunting an elephant in the jungles of East Africa. The “Lost World” novel is also peopled by treacherous African women; most notably, Gagool. When not conspiring to kill off the Europeans (like Gagool), however, African women (like Foulata) pander to the European’s whims and are readily sacrificed for the European’s cause. As Vivek Nenmini Dilip and Rakesh Sengupta observe in the essay “The Tourist and Enlightenment: Man Fridays of Fanny Parkes” (2013), colonial forays into the East have created the modern tourist’s belonging to the “known unfamiliar”. Known because there is no region so meticulously chartered as the East but unfamiliar because in exoticising the Orient, the Eurocentric narrative cannot account for the Orient’s humaneness (Dilip and Sengupta 145-148). The colonial oversight in Eurocentric accounts of the Orient reveals, as Asante notes, a technocratic underpinning to Eurocentric narrative and ideology. Asante writes:

Progress, for the West, is not more knowledge but more technique. How to do it faster, smoother, longer, louder and with greater exploitation becomes the passkey to a techno-scientific future. (Asante 104).

Asante’s observation is, of course, tinged with his encounters with the modern technocratic state. Asante continues:

The bankruptcy of western technics is clear for all to see. Those who participate in Western technics seek technical solutions to everything. It is again the strong inherent desire in European man growing out of the nomadic, hunting context of Europe that makes him seek conquest of nature. Accordingly the land was harsh and yielded little food, so machinery would rid the world of poverty...Men die, so all disease would be conquered eliminating the pathology that caused death, and so forth. Scientific godfathers would control everything and everyone and science would remain supreme. (Asante 104-105).

Unlike the Eurocentric reliance on technology, Asante's Afrocentric paradigm advocates a symbiotic, mutual relationship between humans and their environment. When pointed at the subject of African descent, however, the technocratic lens reifies the voyeuristic pleasure one gets from viewing human beings as specimens or scientific objects. In poems such as "The Telephone", "Televised" and "Sons and Daughters", Angelou laments the modern subject's dependency on technology. The "anthropological gaze" that makes it possible for the European tourist to satisfy his/her longing for a "lost" world (Dilip and Sengupta 147) is mediated by technology. "Televised" and "Sons and Daughters" are especially poignant because the Eurocentric gaze is focused on children of African descent. In the poem "Televised" Angelou writes:

Televised news turns
a half-used day into
a waste of desolation.

If nothing wondrous preceded
the catastrophic announcements,
certainly nothing will follow, save

the sad-eyed faces of
bony children,
distended bellies making
mock at their starvation.
Why are they always
Black?
Whom do they await? (Angelou 246).

Contemporary Europe, in “Televised”, is represented as a sterile landscape (“a waste of desolation”) fit for consumption by a contemporary audience. What accounts for the sterility are the cultural images associated with belonging to the African homeland: “sad-eyed faces of/bony children” with “distended bellies”. As with the anthropological gaze that influenced nineteenth century Eurocentric literature, technology robs its subjects of personhood. For all its developments, Europe still needs starving African children to manufacture its sense of belonging to the human community. It is through the losses that the African diasporic nation suffers that, Angelou implies, Eurocentric belonging is realised. The biblical Sheba comes to mind where, like Sheba, the presence of a “less developed” Africa allows Europe to appear as a saviour of the destitute. In the poem “Sons and Daughters” Angelou appeals to the international community to recognise the human faces of Africa.

Written for the Children’s Defense Fund, “Sons and Daughters” places the African diasporic nation at the centre of the narrative. In this poem, Angelou attempts to write about a sense of belonging that overcomes the Eurocentric, textual narrative. Angelou writes:

Turn your face to me
Please
Let your eyes seek my eyes
Lay your hand upon my arm

Touch me. I am real as flesh
And solid as bone.

I am no metaphor
I am no symbol
I am not a nightmare
To vanish with the dawn
I am lasting as hunger
And certain as midnight. (Angelou 38-39).

Given that technocratic narratives deprive the African diasporic subject of personhood (“You can see me die/On the nightly news” (Angelou 35)), Angelou focuses on the corporeal form of belonging. “[E]yes”, “arm”, “flesh” and “bone” are what constitute the African subject’s belonging just as the same is true for any human being. Belonging, therefore, is based on what can be seen, felt and, keeping in mind the nature of poetry, heard. These corporeal forms extend beyond the reach of Eurocentric representations of African belonging—beyond metaphors, symbols and nightmares. Through the evocation of the “lost” homeland, the Afrocentric narrative is re-instated as a necessary catalyst to belonging:

Come, you my relative
Walk the forest floor with me
Where rampaging animals lurk,
Lusting for my future
Only if your side is by my side
Only if your side is by my side
Will I survive. (Angelou 41).

The memory of Africa evoked through Angelou's reference to the forests where "rampaging animals lurk" becomes necessary for belonging across races and cultures. It is this memory too that sustains belongingness in "new" contexts such as is found in the poems "A Brave and Startling Truth" and "On the Pulse of the Morning".

Although "A Brave and Startling Truth" and "On the Pulse of the Morning" have been read as quintessential "American" poems (Burr 180-194), the poems are Afrocentric in their appeal for cross- and inter-cultural belonging. Recited at the Presidential Inauguration of Bill Clinton on the 20th of January 1993, "On the Pulse of the Morning" pays homage to the memory of the African homeland/Mother through the evocation of the "old" landscape represented by the "Rock", the "River" and the "Tree". Angelou writes:

A Rock, A River, A Tree
Hosts to species long since departed,
Marked the mastodon,
The dinosaur, who left dried tokens
Of their sojourn here
On the planet floor,
Any broad alarm of their hastening doom
Is lost in the gloom of dust and ages. (Angelou 270).

Like the mastodon and the dinosaur, the African homeland/Mother is one that existed before cultural markers gave the memory of place a name. It is the site of origin from which all manner of creation came and from which all forms of belonging in the human community arise. If this were true, then the memory of African homeland/Mother is a natural corollary for belonging across cultures. Thus, in verse nine of the poem, Angelou writes:

There is a true yearning to respond to

The singing of the River and the wise Rock.
So say the Asian, the Hispanic, the Jew,
The African, the Native American, the Sioux,
The Catholic, the Muslim, the French, the Greek,
The Irish, the Rabbi, the Priest, the Sheik,
The Gay, the Straight, the Preacher,
The privileged, the homeless, the Teacher.
They hear. They all hear
The speaking of the Tree. (Angelou 271).

By associating inter-cultural belonging with the memory of the African homeland/Mother, Angelou points towards a new definition of the Afrocentric paradigm and narrative. The African homeland/Mother becomes a universal symbol of belonging for subjects of African descent. Angelou's gendered reading of the nationalist imperative, therefore, redefines and overcomes the sexist inclinations of Afrocentric belonging. Angelou's subject position as a woman of African descent and, therefore, aware of just how "miniscule" the Earth and humanity is (Angelou 19), is also important in understanding her appeal for global peace in the poem, "A Brave and Startling Truth".

"A Brave and Startling Truth" was recited by Angelou at the United Nations General Assembly in June, 1995. Similar to "Sons and Daughters", "A Brave and Startling Truth" is an appeal to the nations of the world to re-consider the human cost of war. Angelou begins the poem by appealing to the human community:

We, this people, on a small and lonely planet
Traveling through casual space
Past aloof stars, across the way of indifferent
suns

To a destination where all signs tell us

It is possible and imperative that we learn

A brave and startling truth... (Angelou 15)

Citing the Preamble to the American Constitution, Angelou begins the poem by evoking hope. Just as the Preamble of the American Constitution imagines an ideal nation by granting its citizens democratic rights, so Angelou suggests that the nations of the world, too, should work towards the same end. Hope, in the poem, is evoked through a suggestion that while human beings are insignificant in comparison to other heavenly bodies, they can still perceive a “truth” that has the power to amaze. Angelou reveals, in the successive lines of the poem, that this “brave and startling truth” (Angelou 15) is the essential goodness of the human community. Before she unravels this “truth”, however, she dwells on the negative impact that humans have had on each other and the world:

And when we come to it

To the day of peacemaking

When we remove our fingers

From fists of hostility

When we come to it

When the curtain falls on the minstrel show

of hate

And faces sooted with scorn are scrubbed

clean

When battlefields and coliseum

No longer rake our unique and particular

sons and daughters

Up with the bruised and bloody grass

To lay them in identical plots in foreign soil... (Angelou 15-16)

Angelou, here, speaks from the position of a subject of African descent—one who has been at the receiving end of racial and gendered excesses. Her reference to the “faces sooted with scorn” and “the bruised and bloody grass” in which humanity’s progeny are buried hints at a history that has been unkind towards people of African descent. As a person who shares in the collective trauma of her community, Angelou speaks for nations around the world who have had similar experiences. She continues:

When the rapacious storming of the churches

The screaming racket in the temples have

ceased

When the pennants are waving gaily

When the banners of the world tremble

Stoutly in a good, clean breeze

...

When we come to it

Then we confess that not the Pyramids

With their stones set in mysterious perfection

Nor the gardens of Babylon

Hanging as eternal beauty

In our collective memory

...

These are not the only wonders of the world... (Angelou 17-18)

Angelou, here, represents a world that is steeped in strife. More so, for the people of African descent who have faced the brunt of colonial excesses and political mismanagement. In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963, 2004), Frantz Fanon writes that colonialism “creates the spiral, the spiral of domination, exploitation and looting” (Fanon 14). In Angelou’s poem, the effects of colonialism are seen in the “rapacious churches” and “screaming” temples (Angelou, 17). In the poem, the buildings and structures themselves are reminders of colonial excesses meted out against the colonised natives. Angelou writes, however, that the ancient civilisations “are not the only wonders...” of the world (Angelou 18). In verse eight of the poem, Angelou writes:

When we come to it
We, this people, on this miniscule globe
Who reach daily for the bomb, the blade
and the dagger
Yet who petition in the dark for tokens of
peace
We, this people, on this mote of matter
In whose mouths abide cankerous words
Which challenge our very existence
Yet out of those same mouths
Can come songs of such exquisite sweetness
That the heart falters in its labor
And the body is quieted into awe... (Angelou 19)

The “startling truth”, as revealed by Angelou in this verse, is the fact that the same people who are responsible for bloodshed also have the power to heal the wounds brought on by war and conflict. Although Angelou, here, may seem to speak to the white colonisers

(those “[w]ho reach daily for the bomb, the blade,/the dagger” (Angelou 19)) her words are also addressed to the people who, having been colonised, experience anger and are perpetrators of violence within the postcolonial context (Fanon 3). The woman of African descent—Angelou herself—reminds a flailing humanity that there is hope if one were to surrender weapons in favour of peace.

3.4: Conclusion

This Chapter attempted to show that narratives of loss and belonging in Angelou’s poetry are connected to the way Africa as a “lost” homeland is represented and remembered in Angelou’s poems. More than a geographical and physical landscape, the continent of Africa exerts its influence through cultural motifs, metaphors and tropes. The symbolic forms of the “lost” homeland, such as Angelou’s reference to Sheba, Eve and Lilith, trace the memory of the homeland through a retrieval of the maternal form as the origin of African-ness. This retrieval of the African homeland as a maternal form re-defines a primarily masculinist Afrocentric belonging by positing a symbolic Africa from the perspective of women of African descent. Interestingly, Angelou sees the influence of Africa as a narrative of belonging that, while inviting a spiritual connection or belonging to the past, also addresses the contemporary belonging through its narratological influence on contemporary representations of women of African descent such as welfare mothers, sex workers and televised children. The next chapter will examine the poetic forms and narratives that, emerging from the performative displays of the African body, invite a new appraisal of belonging in Angelou’s poetry.

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Chapter 4

Performative History and the Middle Passage in Maya Angelou's Poetry

4.1: Introduction

The previous chapters have attempted to show that loss and belonging in Maya Angelou's poetry are situated within the discourses of gender, race and nation. But since the thesis, so far, has also shown that Eurocentric narratives are themselves not free of nationalist, gendered and racial preoccupations, it also follows that political concerns are embedded in the idea of the "universal" (Purtschert 1039-1051; Spelman 32-41; Gates 19-21). In other words, the universal longing to belong—rather than being understood in generic terms—should take into account the gendered, racial and nationalist tropes that inform its appearance as a politically neutral narrative (Butler 2). It becomes imperative at this juncture, therefore, to re-examine narratives of loss and belonging in Angelou's poetry through a perspective that, by addressing political motive, best reflects the idea of universal belonging; or, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in the book *Figures in Black: Words, Signs and the "Racial" Self* (1987) puts it, "a black formal cultural matrix" that enables African American literature to come into its own as a literature for all (Gates xxi).

Kimberly Juanita Brown, in the book *The Repeating Body: Slavery's Visual Resonance in the Contemporary* (2015), points the way for such a universal approach based on African American belonging. In Chapter Three, we had seen that the search for an African heritage caused the African American critic to locate belonging within a "black" critical tradition. Brown's conceptualisation of the Middle Passage figure, Iemanjá, follows in this tradition. Iemanjá, according to Brown, is a guardian of transitions, being a "Middle Passage spirit figure" (Brown 144). Brown also writes that Iemanjá is "a figure of sexual excess, physicality, fecundity, and spirituality" (Brown 144). Being endowed with both physical and spiritual connotations, Iemanjá prefigures an approach to narratives of loss and belonging that

is transformative. That is, narratives of belonging that, while taking into account gendered and racial oppression as factors that impose limits on the body, offer also the possibility of transcending these limits (Birke 42-49). Brown also writes that the figure of Iemanjá maps a “temporal order” within the articulation of belonging (Brown 6). This chapter is concerned with the temporal character of narratives of loss and belonging in Angelou’s poetry. It shows how Angelou’s poetry engages with corporeality and its representations as aspects of belonging that are traceable over time. *I argue that, by focussing on the body, Angelou’s poetry draws upon the history of “black” folk performances as conduits for the expression of belonging. I further argue that similar to how the figure of Iemanjá represents shared cultural and historical narratives, so the African American body represented in Angelou’s poetry encompasses the narratives associated with the history of the Middle Passage.*

The following section, “Objects in Performance, The Slave Auction and Saartjie Baartman”, traces the history of performance from the slave auction to Saartjie Baartman. The section shows how the objectification of the enslaved body is also expressed, in Angelou’s poems, as objects that stand as substitutes for the body. The next section, “Death and the Middle Passage” dwells on the nature of mortality as evinced by the memories of the Middle Passage. This is followed by a section titled, “Topsy, Minstrel Shows and the “Happy”/ “Dancing” Slave”, that examines how Angelou’s poems build upon the image of the “happy”/ “dancing” slave. The section titled “Lynching as Performance, the “Black” Christ and the Working Bodies of the African American Folk” examines how Angelou talks about the bodies of African American subjects lost to lynchings in her poems. Angelou’s poems show how “black” bodies constitute a site of the divine and, therefore, offer transcendence. The Chapter concludes with how Angelou’s poems, written through the history of “black” performance, enable her to construct an “audience” to her writing, thus reflecting agency on her part by showing how her poetry should be read and why.

4.2: Objects in Performance, The Slave Auction and Saartjie Baartman

According to Paul Gilroy, the Middle Passage is a place and historical event that symbolizes “transfiguration, displacement, migrations, journeys” (Gilroy 111), “geographical and cultural displacement” (Gilroy 133), “ambivalence” (Gilroy 140), “hybridity and intermixture...a meeting of heterogeneous multiplicities” (Gilroy 144) and “flows, exchanges, in-between elements” (Gilroy 190). According to Gilroy, it is through these “flows” and “exchanges”, metaphorically implied by the events of the Middle Passage, that belonging is fostered throughout generations of African American subjects. Narrative plays an important role in cementing relations of belonging (gendered, racial and nationalist) within the African American community.

Remarking on the role of historical narrative in mediating belonging within the African diasporic context Gilroy notes that the telling of stories among the African American community serves to bind individuals belonging to the community to a common past. The recollection of slave history enables the community to share kinship relations in which race functions as a familiar trope for the African American subject (Gilroy 99). In the book *Tradition and the Black Atlantic: Critical Theory in the African Diaspora* (2010), Henry Louis Gates, Jr. writes that these narratives are manifest through cultural symbols and racial tropes (Gates 139-140). These symbols and tropes function, according to Gates, like masks or representative forms of the poet (See Gates 88-120) In the book *Of Women, Poetry, and Power: Strategies of Address in Dickinson, Miles, Brookes, Lorde, and Angelou* (2002), Zofia Burr writes that the masks or “speaker selves” that Angelou adopts in her poetry enable her to articulate belonging. Conversely, it is through the masks or “speaker selves” that the reader engages with the identity of the poet. Burr writes:

The poetry I discuss selects and constructs its addressee, which means also that the speaker has more authority and flexibility to construct herself, or her speaker-selves. (Burr 11).

The “speaker-selves”, therefore, encompass representational forms of the poet. These representational forms offer reading perspectives by including the reader as an active participant in the making of the text. Just as the poet’s “speaker-selves” serve to make the poet intelligible to the reader, they also influence how a reader interacts with the text (Burr 10-11). Burr, therefore, suggests that there is a performative kernel to Angelou’s poetry which enables the reader to engage with the forms of belonging that make up Angelou’s world.

As a metaphor for migration, the Middle Passage finds expression in Angelou’s life through memories of loss and displacement. In Angelou’s early poetry, this loss is typically manifest as the loss of love. The poems, in expressing themes of erotic love, necessarily draw attention to the body since the body is the medium through which belonging is expressed as sexual desire and orientation (See Grosz 187-210). Poems such as “They Went Home”, “The Gamut”, “A Zorro Man”, “Late October”, “No Loser, No Weeper”, “When You Come to Me”, “Remembering”, “In a Time”, “Tears”, “The Detached”, “Let’s Majest”, “After”, “On Diverse Deviations”, “Mourning Grace” and “How Can I Lie to You” form the first part of Angelou’s first collection of poems, *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water ’fore I Diie* (1971). Based on the theme of erotic love, the poems express yearning for a relationship that is untainted by the vagaries of life. The theme of erotic love, moreover, situates loss and belonging within the context and politics of the everyday, characteristic of blues poetry and narratives (Davis 6). “No Loser, No Weeper”, for instance, compares the loss of a beloved to the loss of ordinary things such as the loss of a dime, a doll and a watch. It is as if the loss of affection, though unwanted, is as expected as losing a coin. But the speaker is intent on expressing just how painful that loss can be. Angelou writes:

“I hate to lose something,”

then she bent her head,

“even a dime, I wish I was dead.

I can’t explain it. No more to be said.

’Cept I hate to lose something.

“I lost a doll once and cried for a week.

She could open her eyes, and do all but speak.

I believe she was took, by some doll-snatching sneak.

I tell you I hate to lose something.

“A watch of mine once, got up and walked away.

It had twelve numbers on it and for the time of day.

I’ll never forget it and all I can say

Is I really hate to lose something.

“Now if I felt that way ’bout a watch and a toy,

What you think I feel ’bout my lover-boy?

I ain’t threatening you, madam, but he’s my evening’s joy.

And I mean I really hate to lose something.” (Angelou 12).

The “performative” context, in this poem, is established through the story that Angelou, in the guise of a girl, tells the reader and the “madam” who is addressed in the final stanza. Angelou highlights the African American subject’s experience by referring to her body. The posture of her body (“she bent her head”) shows that the girl (Angelou’s speaker-self) is dejected and her dejection goes hand-in-hand with the loss she had recently

encountered in the form of the loss of her lover. The loss of her lover causes despair: the speaker wishes she were dead. But just in case the reader cannot comprehend her sense of loss, the speaker goes on to mention other things that she has lost—a watch and a doll—and the time it took for her to grieve and get over their loss.

Angelou, here, expresses what Paul Gilroy, in the book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), calls “being in pain” or the blues (Gilroy, 203). A form of the African American vernaculars, the blues—according to Gilroy—are love stories that encompass “both a radical, personalised re-registration of time and a diachronic understanding of language whose enduring effects are the games black people in all western cultures play with names and naming” (Gilroy 203). While Gilroy does not refute the role of the individual self, he does imply that the self is composed of numerous selves that have gone before it. More importantly, the self is historically situated through narrative. In the poem “No Loser, No Weeper”, the speaker’s articulation of her loss is also a culmination of the numerous losses that her race and gender has had to go through because of slavery (See Gilroy 201). Since, under slavery, the treatment of African slaves as property prevented them from having kinship ties with members of their own families (Spillers 257-279), the loss of one’s lover or “husband” is comparable to losing a watch or a toy. By associating the loss of a loved one to the loss of everyday objects, Angelou builds upon a narrative of loss and belonging that is founded on the objectification of the African American body to the extent that its subject is robbed of any semblance of self. In the poem, the speaker is anonymous, representing, as Houston A. Baker writes, in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (1987), an “already ‘X’(ed)” source of poetry (Baker 3). Within the contemporary context, the loss of the body to objectification, as symbolised by the African slave, is analogous to the consumption of “black” images within a capitalist society. Quoting M. Jacqui Alexander, Brown, in *The Repeating Body: Slavery’s Visual Resonance in the*

Contemporary (2015), writes that the contemporary visualisation of the “black” body “stem[s] from the crises of capitalism’s various plantations” (qtd. in Brown 76) or, to put it more succinctly, the contemporary commodification of slave heritage and narrative (Brown, 108). Angelou’s poem, “No Loser, No Weeper” can be read as a poem that situates the origin of this commodification through an oblique reference to the history of slavery. More specifically, the ritualised display of African slaves at the auction block.

In the essay, “Slavery and the Theatre of History: Ritual Performance on the Auction Block” (2011), Jason Stupp writes that apart from the sale of African slaves, slave auctions also attracted white audiences who were gathered at the marketplace in search for entertainment. The auction, which involved “singing and dancing and the comic antics of the auctioneer” (qtd. in Stupp, 65) provided ample motivation for both propertied and non-propertied whites to indulge in racial discrimination and oppression while ostensibly enjoying a spectacle. Slave women, in particular, were subject to “private” performances in which their sexual proclivities—in relation to their bodies—were openly discussed. A slave woman’s fairer skin, for instance, was seen as a mark of virtue and, on this basis, fetched a higher price (Stupp 70). Quoting Anthony Pinn, Stupp writes that the “ceremony” associated with slave auctions “marks the slave as possessed in a dual sense: whites *own* black bodies and, because negroes are tools for the achievement of white desire, whites *inhabit* black bodies.” (qtd. in Stupp 64). By associating the loss of love to the loss of objects, however, Angelou—in “No Loser, No Weeper”—overturns the dominant community’s attempt at ownership of the African American body. She turns the gaze back on the reader by insinuating, through such associations, that she is aware of how the loss of her lover might be interpreted by the dominant culture. This link to objectification is captured in the refrain of the speaker: “I hate to lose *something*” (Angelou 12; emphasis added). Angelou suggests, here, that the objectification to which she is subject also objectifies her readers along the same terms. Since

the reader (like the speaker of the poem) remains unnamed, this reciprocal objectification makes the reader a fictive respondent to the performance of history.

Similar to “No Loser, No Weeper”, the poem “The Telephone” also dwells on the substitution of human emotion with an object (a telephone). Angelou writes:

It comes in black
and blue, indecisive
beige. In red and chaperons my life.
Sitting like a strict
and spinstered aunt
spiked between my needs
and need.

It tats the day, crocheting
other people’s lives in neat arrangements,
ignoring me,
busy with the hemming
of strangers’ overlong affairs or
the darning of my
neighbors’ worn-out
dreams... (Angelou 64).

In “The Telephone”, cited above, the longing for human contact is transferred onto a man-made object, a telephone. Just as the objects in the poem “No Loser, No Weeper” represent loss of relationships, the telephone in “The Telephone” becomes a substitute for the emotions which the speaker-self feels upon being isolated. It is the telephone that is “indecisive”, that “chaperons” the life of the speaker like a “spinstered aunt”. These

emotions, assigned to an object by the speaker, hint at the extent to which the speaker-self and the people using a telephone are slaves to technology. It is as if the telephone embodies the desires of the people who use it while the people themselves can only become frustrated at the telephone not ringing. Angelou continues:

From Monday, the morning of the week,
through mid-times
noon and Sunday's dying
light. It sits silent.
Its needle sound
does not transfix my ear
or draw my longing to
a close.

Ring. Damn you! (Angelou 64)

The telephone's significance, as revealed in the poem, is because it symbolises a connection to people that is missing from the highly individualised and lonely life that the speaker-self leads in his/her environment. Away from the people who love him/her, the speaker-self attaches importance to the telephone as it is an object that connects her to the people s/he loves. One is reminded, for instance, of bell hooks' own experiences of loneliness in a metropolitan city following her journey from the southern agrarian environment. hooks writes, "Leaving home evoked extreme feelings of abandonment and loss. It was like dying" (hooks 9). But, just as the hermeneutics of the Middle Passage suggests ambiguity and contradiction, so the symbol of the telephone in the poem is also rife with contradiction and ambiguity. On the one hand, it provides a "passage" to the world beyond the speaker's immediate environment, and, on the other hand, it is precisely in filling this lack within the

speaker's life that the telephone also symbolises a dependence on technology to the extent that, Angelou suggests, the telephone regulates the life of the speaker-self—it “chaperons” his/her life.

“The Telephone” is one among many of Angelou’s poems that addresses the negative impact of technology on contemporary living. In the poem “Southeast Arkansia”, Angelou traces the loss of personhood in favour of technological advancement to the history of slavery. Angelou writes:

After Eli Whitney’s gin
brought to generations’ end
bartered flesh and broken bones
Did it cleanse you of your sin
Did you ponder?

Now, when farmers bury wheat
and the cow men dump the sweet
butter down on Davy Jones
Does it sanctify your street
Do you wonder?

Or is guilt your nightly mare
bucking wake your evenings’ share
of the stilled repair of groans
and the absence of despair
over yonder? (Angelou 107)

The “you” that Angelou addresses in this poem is the reader who also plays the role of the white overseer. She also asks successive generations of white men if they feel any remorse for the sins of the past, especially for the oppression caused by slavery. Angelou refers to the industrial revolution in America, specifically Eli Whitney’s cotton gin, which contributed to the rise in demand for slaves in order to run the cotton mills of the South. While the machinery was a substitute for human labour, it could not completely erase the vestiges of slavery. The questions that Angelou asks at the end of each verse are rhetorical because technological advancement cannot completely erase the memory of slavery. Evoking the Middle Passage, Angelou also refers—in the second verse of the poem—to loss of life at sea (the agricultural produce buried in Davy Jones’ locker). Although slave labour is effectively removed from view in the industrial economy, the produce which gets wasted is reminiscent of the African slaves who lost their lives in the passage from Africa to the Americas. The buried wheat and the sweet butter lost on land and at sea are reminders of the slaves who worked to produce them. As bell hooks notes in *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1982, 1990), the experiences of African peoples on board the slave ships in the Middle Passage were made particularly traumatic through the erasure of the past, including a common language that would enable the African subjects to come together as a group. hooks writes:

Crucial in the preparation of African people for the slave market was the destruction of human dignity, the removal of names and status, the dispersement [*sic*] of groups so that there would exist no common language, and the removal of any overt sign of African heritage. (hooks 19).

The obliteration of language through the denial of names as well as African symbols and narratives results in a loss of identity. In “Southeast Arkansia” this loss of identity is

suggested through the cotton gin and the agricultural produce replacing the bodies of the slaves. The “bartered flesh and broken bones” as well as the “groans” and the “despair” of the enslaved subject are replaced by machines that erase both the personal and collective histories of the enslaved body. There can be no despair “over yonder” because the body of the enslaved subject has already been substituted, in the present life, by machines. It is against such historical and cultural erasures that Angelou’s poetry speaks about belonging in the African American community. *By speaking for, and about, the African American community, Angelou responds to the call of history and we, the readers, respond in turn to Angelou’s call by reading her work.* The performance of historical narrative and associated tropes mediates this exchange between poet and reader. A selection of Angelou’s poems that focuses on the female form and body highlights how historical performances are crucial to any understanding of belonging in Angelou’s poetry.

Poems such as “They Went Home”, “Phenomenal Woman”, “Woman Me”, “A Zorro Man” and *Now Sheba Sings the Song* (1987) in Angelou’s oeuvre draw attention to the female form and body. In these poems, Angelou hints at the history of African American women whose bodies have been objectified for the viewing pleasure of a white audience. In “A Zorro Man”, for instance, Angelou refers to the “clitoral image” of the African American woman, connecting the desire of the speaker-self to the history of slavery wherein the bodies of people of African descent were objectified and exploited in order to drive the slave economy (Baker 27). In the same poem, Angelou also reverses the sexual objectification of the African American woman’s body by making the speaker-self a willing participant in the act of love-making. Angelou writes:

Here
in the wombed room
silk purple drapes

flash a light as subtle
as your hands before
love-making

Here
in the covered lens
I catch a clitoral image of
your general inhabitation
long and like a late dawn in winter

Here
this clean mirror
traps me unwilling
in a gone time
when I was love
and you were booted and brave
and trembling for me. (Angelou 9).

In the poem cited above, Angelou compares the room in which the lovers meet to a point of origin (“wombed”) by which she arrives at a sense of self, reflected in the “clean mirror”. There is an allusion to sensuality suggested by the presence of “silk purple drapes”. The fact that the room is “wombed” also suggests fertility and the start of something new—a future, perhaps, that is realised through a child. The word “Here” at the start of each verse, however, is significant as it also insinuates that there is a place that is not-here. While the speaker-self in the poem feels protected, secure in the knowledge that her love is reciprocated by her Chicano lover (the Zorro Man), she also realises that there is an alternate reality where

her feelings and those of her lover will not be looked upon favourably. The room, which provides a sense of privacy and security, also traps her in a world which does not reflect the racism and gendered discrimination that goes on outside of it (the not-here of the poem). The speaker expresses ambivalence at her condition. She yearns for a “gone time” or a past where her feelings of admiration, reciprocated by her lover, cause her to luxuriate in his attention. The “clean mirror” of the room suggests that the speaker is under no illusion as to the fact that the love which she experienced in the past, when her lover was “booted and brave” has all but dissipated.

One is reminded, for instance, of the living display of Saartjie Baartman or Sarah Baartman in Europe during the nineteenth century and, following her death, the display of her genitalia and buttocks at a museum in Paris. Reflecting on the political implications surrounding the display of Baartman’s body, Patricia Hill Collins in the book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (2009) observes that the voyeurism associated with this display was pornographic, bringing into focus the overlapping of race and gender in controlling the bodies and sexualities of women of African descent. Collins writes:

[T]he fact that Sarah Baartman was both African and a woman underscores the importance of gender in maintaining notions of racial purity. In this case Baartman symbolized Blacks as a “race.” (Collins 148).

Further, in the book *African Diasporic Women’s Narratives: Politics of Resistance, Survival, and Citizenship* (2014), Simone A. James Alexander writes that Baartman’s performances, which required her to “gyrate provocatively in front of a gaping white audience” and mimic a wild animal, mark her body as bestial and promiscuous (Alexander 24-25). Additionally, Alexander writes that the erasure of Baartman’s personal history in

favour of her exoticised performance as the Hottentot Venus, symbolises a loss of personhood which made it possible (in tandem with the pornographic lens) for her body itself to be rendered as a commodity (Alexander 25-29). In the play *Venus* (1990), Suzan-Lori Parks, dramatizes the commodification of Baartman's body. Caught within the system of exploitation in nineteenth century Europe, Parks shows how Baartman's buttocks became a spectacle, "[a]n ass to write home about" (Parks, "Overture"). Reduced to her body parts, Parks also suggests that Baartman found it difficult to experience true love (See Parks 101-108). In Angelou's oeuvre, poems such as "They Went Home", "After" and "Remembering" articulate what Baartman would have felt in the absence of love as well as her longing for companionship in her life. In "They Went Home", the speaker-self expresses what it means to be the "other" woman in love with married men. Angelou writes:

They went home and told their wives
that never once in all their lives,
had they known a girl like me,
But...They went home.

They said my house was licking clean,
no word I spoke was ever mean,
I had an air of mystery,
But...They went home.

My praises were on all men's lips,
they liked my smile, my wit, my hips,
they'd spend one night, or two or three.
But... (Angelou 7).

Similar to “A Zorro Man” Angelou, in “They Went Home”, draws attention to the body of the African American subject. Unlike “A Zorro Man”, however, where the feelings of the speaker-self are reciprocated by her lover, the speaker-self in “They Went Home” suffers acute loneliness at being left behind. Angelou’s reference to the speaker-self’s smile, wit and hips in the last verse of the poem can be seen as analogous to the image of Baartman, as these also suggest entertainment. The sexualised and objectified body of the African American woman, in Angelou’s poetry is in the direct line of inheritance to earlier African American female bodies, whether at slave auctions or in exhibitions in Europe, inciting passion and exploitation but denying personhood and love to the individual in question. The temporary nature of the entertainment is alluded to by the fact that the many lovers that the speaker-self has always return to their wives—they go “home.” The places that the lovers go home to, seem to be in opposition to the hidden pleasures they receive in the company of the speaker of the poem. The social status that the men receive from being in conventional marriages and relationships, however, supersedes the concern they might have felt for the speaker of the poem. The feelings of abandonment that the speaker-self might have experienced is expressed in the poem “After”. Angelou writes:

No sound falls
from the moaning sky
No scowl wrinkles
the evening pool
The stars lean down
A stony brilliance
While birds fly.

The market leers

its empty shelves
Streets bare bosoms
to scanty cars
This bed yawns
beneath the weight
of our absent selves. (Angelou 21)

“After” is a poem filled with a sense of loss and desolation: there are markets with “empty shelves” and streets with “scanty cars” that mark the urban landscape. Similar to “The Telephone”, where the inanimate object communicates the feelings of the speaker, so in “After” the sky “moans” for the speaker who cannot do the same, the evening pool “scowls” at the thought of the lost lover and the bed “yawns”. The only sign of bodies being present in the poem is the bed being a reminder of love-making and, subsequently, the lost lover. The last verse also suggests an alternate reading—that of the lover being physically present but so emotionally distant that s/he could very well not have been in the company of the speaker-self. One is reminded, in this instance, of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* where, in Book IX, line 372 of the epic, Adam tells Eve to leave his presence because, as he puts it, “for thy stay, not free, absents thee more” That is, a lover whose very presence reminds the speaker-self that s/he is not truly loved because the lover wishes to be someplace else. In “Remembering”, Angelou associates the memory of the “lost” lover to the metaphor of the Middle Passage. Angelou writes:

Soft grey ghosts crawl up my sleeve
to peer into my eyes
while I within deny their threats
and answer them with lies.

Mushlike memories perform
a ritual on my lips
I lie in stolid hopelessness
and they lay my soul in strips. (Angelou 14)

In this poem, Angelou compares the lives of those she had lost to “ghosts” that haunt her memory. The memories of those who are dead are ill-defined—they are grey (neither black nor white) and “[m]ushlike”. These memories, however, expose Angelou to the lure of history: “they lay my soul in strips.” (Angelou, 14). The “strips”, here, also hint at the keloid scars on the backs of slaves following a whipping. Although the auctioned slaves and Saartjie Baartman are no longer living, they haunt the memory of the poet, especially connected to the memory of the Middle Passage which (like Angelou’s memories of the ghosts of the past) connotes loss, ambivalence, movement, transitions. In reviving the memories of the Middle Passage through the figures of the anonymous slaves and figures such as Saartjie Baartman, Angelou resurrects the memory of the dead to express her longing to belong.

4.3: Death and the Middle Passage

In the essay “Death as a Metaphor of Self” (1999), Liliane K. Arensberg suggests that Angelou’s preoccupation with death in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) is related to rebirth. Arensberg writes:

The unsettled life Angelou writes about in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* suggests a sense of self as perpetually in the process of becoming, of dying and being reborn, in all its ramifications. Thus death (and to some extent its companion concept, rebirth) is the term by which her “identity theme” operates. It is the metaphor of self that most

directly and comprehensively communicates Angelou's identity.
(Arensberg 115).

Like Gilroy, Arensberg identifies displacement and loss of place or "home" as a crucial factor in moulding Angelou's sense of self. But while Arensberg acknowledges that the presence of death in Angelou's narrative can be accounted for through the literal loss of life experienced by the African American in the southern United States, Gilroy stretches this loss further to the experience of the African slave in the Middle Passage. What happens in the American South, according to Gilroy, replicates and reaffirms the historical events of the Middle Passage. According to Gilroy, the experiences of the Middle Passage resulted in an "inclination towards death away from bondage...that is opposed to the formal logic of and rational calculation characteristic of modern western thinking" (Gilroy, 68). In poems such as "Child Dead in Old Seas", "Mourning Grace", "The Lesson", "The Singer Will Not Sing" and "My Guilt" Angelou dwells on the nature of mortality as evinced by the memories of the Middle Passage. In the poem "Mourning Grace", for instance, Angelou invites the reader (in the guise of a lover) to share in her life's work. Angelou writes:

If today I follow death,
go down its trackless wastes,
salt my tongue on hardened tears
for my precious dear time's waste
race
along that promised cave in a headlong
deadlong
haste,
Will you
have

the
grace
to mourn for
me? (Angelou 24).

Shoring up narratives of loss and longing, Angelou suggests, is like dying. The word “race”, here, has a double meaning; it suggests racial belonging but also flight, a yearning to have memories of the past persist within the present. Further, Angelou speaks of racial belonging by evoking the Middle Passage. She journeys through “trackless wastes” or the seas salted by tears suggesting the loss of life and sufferings of the Middle Passage (Angelou 24). The significance of undertaking the journey, however, resides in the presence of a reader/audience who will bear witness to the poet’s quest for racial memory. As Gilroy observes, the memory of historical loss is a powerful reminder of kinship and belonging. Gilroy writes:

The turn towards death also points to the ways in which black cultural forms have hosted and even cultivated a dynamic rapport with the presence of death and suffering. This has generated specific modes of expression—and some vernacular philosophical preoccupations that are absolutely antagonistic to the enlightenment assumptions with which they have had to compete for the attention of the black public... It is integral, for example, to the narratives of loss, exile, and journeying which, like particular elements of musical performance, serve a mnemonic function: directing the consciousness of the group back to significant, nodal points in its common history and its social memory. (Gilroy 198).

The presence of the dead in the memory of the living, according to Gilroy, serves to cultivate racial belonging by reinstating historical memory that, because of the globalised, de-industrial context (Gilroy 99), is bound to be forgotten. This “looking back” to, and temporal journey through, history and historical narrative results in a language that is traceable over time or as Gates writes in *Words, Signs and the “Racial” Self* (1987), an “idea of the self...[that is]...inextricably interwoven with our ideas of time” (Gates 100) Angelou’s poetry retrieves historical memory and its attendant kinship narratives to point towards a collective realisation of what constitutes the “self”. In “Child Dead in Old Seas”, the memory of the Middle Passage is expressed as a longing of a child to re-unite with her dead father. Angelou writes:

Father,
I wait for you in oceans
tides washing pyramids high
above my head.
Waves, undulating
corn rows around my
black feet.
The heavens shift and
stars find holes set
new in dark infirmity.
My search goes on.
Dainty shells on ash-like wrists
of debutantes remember you.
Childhood’s absence has
not stilled your

voice. My ear
listens. You whisper
on the watery passage... (Angelou 116).

The memory of the Middle Passage, in this poem, is imprinted onto the body of the speaker-self. The waves that resemble corn rows at the speaker-self's feet hint at the loss of African lives at sea. Referring to Ariel's song in Act I.ii.396-404 of *The Tempest* (1960), Angelou's speaker expresses her yearning to re-unite with her dead father. Like the presumed dead father of Ariel's song who transforms into elements of the sea, both the father and the child in Angelou's poem share in the experience of death in the Middle Passage and transform into sea-objects worn by debutantes. Angelou, here, suggests that the vestiges of the Middle Passage, including the loss of African lives, are present in the coming-of-age celebrations on land; celebrations that do not overtly acknowledge death. Artefacts such as shells worn on the white, "ash-like" wrists of debutantes suggest the extent to which life itself is dependent on a loss (such as death) which is irrevocable. The significance of death for the African subjects on the Middle Passage is also because it encompasses a utopian dream of being free from bondage (See Gilroy 199). Angelou continues:

Deep dirges moan
from the
belly of the sea
and your song
floats to me
of lost savannahs
green and
drums. Of palm trees bending
woman-like swaying

grape-blue children

laugh on beaches

of sand as

white as your bones

clean

on the foot of

long-ago waters.

Father.

I wait for you

wrapped in

the entrails of

whales. Your

blood now

blues

spume

over

the rippled

surface of our

grave. (Angelou 110-111).

In the last two verses of the poem, Angelou refers to a funeral song, a dirge that, while announcing death, also hints at a state of existence that is utopian where the speaker-self and her community are free from their suffering as slaves: “Of palm trees bending/woman-like swaying /grape-blue children/laugh on beaches” (Angelou 110). There is also a hint of re-birth. In the last verse of the poem, Angelou refers to the biblical narrative of Jonah. Similar

to Jonah's experience in the belly of "a huge fish" (Jon.1.17), the child of Angelou's poem also waits for her "father" in the belly of a whale. Here, the term "father" carries a dual meaning of being both the mortal father (since he is dead) as well as an eternal, divine father who delivers his "child"/Jonah from suffering. *The Middle Passage in Angelou's poems, therefore, shows ambiguity since it is a metaphor for both the "negative" meaning of death as the ultimate end, as well as a life-affirming memory in the sense of death being a release from the imperfect world. That is, a world that is not marred by slavery.*

Remembrance of the Middle Passage constitutes a bodily re-enactment of the past. In the poem "The Lesson", for instance, the memory of the dead and, therefore, what was lost, is so powerful that the poet's body itself is a reminder of the "kin" who are no longer with her. Angelou writes:

I keep on dying again.
Veins collapse, opening like the
Small fists of sleeping
Children.
Memory of old tombs,
Rotting flesh and worms do
Not convince me against
The challenge. The years
And cold defeat live deep in
Lines along my face.
They dull my eyes, yet
I keep on dying,
Because I love to live. (Angelou 140).

The poet's body, here, becomes a receptacle through which lost kinship narratives are revived. Poems such as "Phenomenal Woman", "Our Grandmothers" and "Mother: A Cradle to Hold Me" also build on the idea of retrieval of memory through the body. In such a case, "dying" is needed to reinforce and renew narratives of "past" belonging in the present life: "I keep on dying,/because I love to live" (Angelou,140). The significance of the cycle of death and re-birth or renewal as symbolised by the Middle Passage is essential in order to come to terms with a historical narrative that so often grants the African American subject the short end of the stick where representation is concerned (hooks 13-14).

4.4: Topsy, Minstrel Shows and the "Happy"/ "Dancing" Slave

In the book *African Diasporic Women's Narratives: Politics of Resistance, Survival, and Citizenship* (2014), Simone A. James Alexander writes that the figure of Saartjie Baartman evokes questions of citizenship. Alexander notes that the perception of Baartman's body as primitive and exotic constituted a "denial of citizenship" (Alexander 20). Since Baartman's body did not fall in line with French and English beauty standards, Baartman was regarded as an anomaly and she was considered undeserving of citizenship (Alexander, 20-38). In this section we shall see how, similar to Baartman, the stereotype of the "happy" or "dancing" slave was promoted in the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries to justify the enslavement of peoples of African descent. While the stereotype of the "happy" slave, propagated by the dominant community, connotes a subject of African descent who is content with his/her lot, it also prefigures a denial of citizenship since it is assumed that a slave who is happy need not require a change in his/her circumstances, more specifically, require freedom (Murphy, 88-92). According to bell hooks, the stereotype of the "happy" slave began with the experience of the African peoples in the Middle Passage. hooks writes:

White people who observed African slaves as they departed from the ships on American shores noted that they seemed to be happy and joyful. They thought that the happiness of the African slaves was due to their pleasure at having arrived at a Christian land. But the slaves were only expressing relief. They believed no fate that awaited them in the American colonies could be as horrific as the slave ship experience.

(hooks 20)

Having been tortured into submission, the enslaved subject's joy at seeing land was misconstrued by the slave masters as evidence of happiness (hooks 19-20). Angelou's poems such as "Pickin Em Up and Layin Em Down", "Junkie-Monkey-Reel", "John J." "Coleridge Jackson", "Times-Square-Shoeshine-Composition", "Harlem Hopscotch" and "Through the Inner City to the Suburbs" build upon the image of the "happy"/ "dancing" slave.

Through the motif of the journey, the poem "Through the Inner City to the Suburbs" provides a spatial dimension to the expression of racial belonging. Angelou writes:

Secured by sooted windows
And amazement, it is
Delicious. Frosting filched
From a company cake.

People. Black and fast. Scattered
Watermelon seeds on
A summer street. Grinning in
Ritual, sassy in pomp.

From a slow-moving train

They are precious. Stolen gems'

Unsaleable and dear. Those

Dusky undulations sweat of forest

Nights, damp dancing, the juicy

Secrets of black thighs... (Angelou 144).

Re-imagining Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro", Angelou begins her poem by giving shape and form to the "black bough" in Pound's poem. The "black bough" against which humanity moves and resembles petals (Pound 12), Angelou suggests, is the African American community. The sense of kinship and belonging is established through the location that the community lives in, the inner-city. There, the African American "family" enjoys working-class delicacies such as a cake made at a retail business. There is a sense of pride in being African American—the subjects are "sassy in pomp". Angelou's allusion to watermelons, however, is drawn from racial iconography. Originally symbolising freedom for the African American subject, the watermelon took on more sinister meanings during the post-emancipation era in the United States when the fruit was understood by the white community to mean "uncleanliness, laziness, childishness, and unwanted public presence" of the African American community who benefitted from the sale and consumption of watermelons (Black 66). According to William R. Black, in the essay "How Watermelons Became Black: Emancipation and the Origins of a Racist Trope" (2018), the symbolic significance of the watermelon from a fruit that signified financial independence to one that signifies a racist trope constituted a denial of citizenship for the African American subject since it was believed that a childish, unclean and lazy person could not practice self-governance (Black 64-86). It is in both senses of the watermelon, signifying a freedom and the watermelon as a denial of citizenship that Angelou uses it in her poem. When enjoyed

within the African American community, in the inner-city, eating a watermelon is a cause for celebration. As the journey moves from the inner-city to the suburbs, however, the dynamism associated with belonging to the African American community changes. Angelou continues:

Images framed picture perfect

Do not move beyond the window

Siding.

Strong delectation:

Dirty stories in changing rooms

Accompany the slap of wet towels and

Toilet seats.

Poli-talk of politician

Parents: "They need shoes and

Cooze and a private

Warm latrine. I had a colored

Mammy..."

The train, bound for green lawns

Double garages and sullen women

In dreaded homes, settles down

On its habit track.

Leaving the dark figures dancing

And grinning. Still

Grinning. (Angelou 144-145).

While the African American community in the first four verses of the poem represent a thriving humanity, they are relegated to second-class citizens in the last three verses of the same poem. The African American subjects, in the poem, represent what Simone A. James Alexander writes of in *African Diasporic Women's Narratives: Politics of Resistance, Survival, and Citizenship* (2014), as a “country within a country” or subjects who, because of their diasporic origins, maintain questionable citizenships within the country they migrate to (Alexander 10). For the white families for whom they work, the African American subjects are no more than “Dirty stories” sully the suburbs. The terror that African Americans associate with whiteness (hooks, 89-107) is seen in the way with which life in the suburb is associated with “sullen [white] women” who depend on African Americans, particularly African American women, to clean their houses and look after their children. What is lost in the suburb is the sense of belonging and community associated with race. The last three lines of the poem, however, hint at the performative origins of belonging, particularly, minstrel shows during the nineteenth to the early half of the twentieth century.

Among the most popular minstrel shows during the early twentieth century were the Uncle Tom shows based on the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe (Murphy, 88). In the essay, “*Unrest and Uncle Tom: Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company's Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land*” (1995), Jaqueline Shea Murphy provides a background to nineteenth and early twentieth century minstrel shows in America. According to Murphy, the minstrel shows were parodies of African slaves and their vernacular cultures. They were intended to keep African slaves in their place, mostly by assigning fixed racial identities or stereotypes to the African subject (Murphy 88-92). Cultural figures like Topsy frame the narratives of belonging in relation to the racial self.

Represented in minstrel posters as a dancing slave, Topsy is directed by Augustine St. Clare—in Chapter Twenty of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852, 1981)—to dance for Ophelia. It is

through the dance's grotesque associations with slave cultures, however, that Ophelia shares in the white audience's fascination with the "black" body. The rhythm of the dance is described by Stowe as "wild" and Topsy makes "odd guttural sounds" said to be characteristic of her race. By enjoying Topsy's dance, however, Ophelia shares in the white audience's need to assert power over the slave's body (Stowe 271). In Angelou's poems, it is the "sullen [white] women" (contemporary representations of Ophelia) who exercise control over the African American woman's body. The scene from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is played out wherein the African American subject is reduced to "dancing" for his/her white employers. Thus, it is the figure of grinning Topsy— a symbol of racism —which haunts the immaculate homes of the American suburbs in Angelou's "Through the Inner City to the Suburbs". What Stowe imagines as home and belonging for the American community engenders a powerful critique by Angelou within the American social context through a belonging that is based on racial identity. By evoking the image of Topsy, Angelou turns the gaze back on the white audience. She suggests that while members of the white community assert their power over African Americans through racial stereotyping, the African American themselves can overturn this gaze by reminding the white community of their racial prejudices.

The trope of the happy and dancing slave is present in other poems written by Angelou such as "Times-Square-Shoeshine-Composition", "Harlem Hopscotch", "Junkie-Monkey-Reel", "Pickin' Em Up and Layin' Em Down" and "Coleridge Jackson". The speaker selves in these poems take after folk representations of the African American man such as Sambo, Shine, Railroad Bill and Stagolee among others. "Pickin' Em Up and Layin' Em Down", for instance, takes after the folk figure of Railroad Bill. Angelou writes:

There's a long-legged girl
in San Francisco
by the Golden Gate.

She said she'd give me all I wanted
but I just couldn't wait.
I started to
Pickin em up
and layin em down,
Pickin em up
and layin em down,
Pickin em up
and layin em down,
gettin to the next town
Baby.

There's a pretty brown girl
in Birmingham.
Boys, she little and cute
but when she like to tied me down
I had to grab my suit and started to
Pickin em up
and layin em down,
Pickin em up
and layin em down,
Pickin em up
and layin em down,
gettin to the next town
Baby.

I met that lovely Detroit lady
and thought my time had come
But just before I said 'I do'
I said 'I got to run' and started to
Pickin em up
and layin em down,
Pickin em up
and layin em down,
Pickin em up
and layin em down,
gettin to the next town
Baby.

There ain't no words for what I feel
about a pretty face
But if I stay I just might miss
a prettier one some place
I started to
Pickin em up
and layin em down,
Pickin em up
and layin em down,
Pickin em up
and layin em down,

gettin to the next town

Baby. (Angelou 59-60).

The motif of the journey connects the speaker-self of Angelou's poem to the folk narrative of Railroad Bill. Just as the folk figure of Railroad Bill is a rebel haunting the American railroads so the speaker-self in the poem rebels against the accepted order, particularly, the American nuclear family. Being non-monogamous, his relationships with many lovers point towards kinship structures that are different from those espoused by white middle-class families (Keil 8). The speaker-self of the poem is, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. observes in *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self* (1987), a proverbial picaro, living at the margins of the society to which s/he belongs (Gates 81-82). Similar to the quintessential American picaro, such as Huckleberry Finn, Angelou's speaker-self expresses a disregard for the rules that govern polite society. He does not wish to get married or settle down the way most men are expected to. Socially, moreover, the many lovers embody the trope of migration and journeys in relation to the African American subject. Houston A. Baker notes in the book, *Long Black Song: Essays in Black American Literature and Culture* (1990), that casual love affairs were characteristic of African American belonging and literature (especially the blues) as the narrators moved from place-to-place in search of work (Baker 34). According to Angela Y. Davis in the book, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (1999), travelling was linked to sexuality and brought with it "a taste of liberation" (Davis 77). The blues poet or singer, in being able to choose his/her sexual partners, experienced liberties that were not possible during slavery. Quoting Ben Sidran, Davis writes that these liberties, gave rise to the "traveling musician, who had taken on the role of Truth-teller from the black Preacher, the role of trickster, or 'bad nigger', from the Devil...[and]...became the ultimate symbol of freedom" (qtd. in Davis 69). In the poem, "Pickin' Em Up and Layin' Em Down" the

speaker-self as Railroad Bill becomes a symbol of the travelling musician and the “bad nigger” figure by causing women to fall in love with him without intending to make good on his promises to them. The trope of the “bad nigger” also appears in the poem “Coleridge Jackson”. Angelou writes:

Coleridge Jackson had nothing
to fear. He weighed sixty pounds
more than his sons and one
hundred pounds more than his wife.

His neighbors knew he wouldn't
take tea for the fever.

The gents at the poolroom
walked gently in his presence.

So everyone used
to wonder why,
when his puny boss, a little
white bag of bones and
squinty eyes, when he frowned
at Coleridge, sneered at
the way Coleridge shifted
a ton of canned goods from
the east wall of the warehouse
all the way to the west,
when that skimpy piece of

man-meat called Coleridge
a sorry nigger,
Coleridge kept his lips closed,
sealed, jammed tight.
Wouldn't raise his eyes,
held his head at a slant,
looking way off somewhere
else.

Everybody in the neighborhood wondered
why Coleridge would come home,
pull off his jacket, take off
his shoes, and beat the
water and the will out of his puny
little family... (Angelou 234-235)

Angelou begins the poem by drawing the reader's attention to Coleridge Jackson's body. He is "sixty pounds/more than his sons and one/hundred pounds more than his wife" (Angelou 228). His physical strength is further highlighted when we learn that he can shift a ton of canned goods from one end of a warehouse to another. Angelou suggests that, given his abilities, Coleridge Jackson should not feel insecure or be frightened of his employer. By suggesting that Coleridge Jackson is insecure and frightened, leading to him beating his family, Angelou leads us to look more closely into his character. He shares the narrative of the speaker-self in the poem "Pickin' Em Up and Layin' Em Down" in that they both draw from the tradition of travel narratives characteristic of blues poetry. Travel songs "articulated

the collective desire to escape bondage that pervaded the musical culture of slavery” (Davis 70). But while the speaker-self of “Pickin’ Em Up and Layin’ Em Down” is in control of his behaviour, the same cannot be said of Coleridge Jackson. Similar to the mariner of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), a proverbial albatross hangs around the neck of Coleridge Jackson, racism. Racism enables the feeble white employer to exert control over Coleridge Jackson and set limits on what his body can and cannot do at the workplace. It also causes Coleridge Jackson to take out his frustrations on his wife and children, to the delight of his white employer. Angelou continues:

Everybody, even Coleridge, wondered
(the next day, or even later that
same night).

Everybody. But that weasly little
sack-of-bones boss with his
envious little eyes,
he knew. He always
knew. And
when people told him about
Coleridge’s family, about the
black eyes and the bruised
faces, the broken bones,
Lord, how that scrawny man
grinned.

And the next
day, for a few hours, he treated

Coleridge nice. Like Coleridge
had just done him the biggest
old favor. Then, right
after lunch, he'd start on
Coleridge again. (Angelou 236).

In writing about domestic violence Angelou, in “Coleridge Jackson” follows the tradition of blues singers such as Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday who have written candidly about instances of domestic violence within the African American community (Davis 19-32). Angelou traces domestic violence to the legacies of slavery—it is because Coleridge Jackson is a “slave” to his white employer, that he inflicts violence on his wife and children. Because the white employer emasculates Coleridge Jackson by treating him badly, Coleridge Jackson inflicts violence on his wife and children in order to regain his sense of manhood and sense of self. It is recognition of this reality that causes the white employer to grin: he knows that by treating Coleridge Jackson like a slave, he will succeed in enslaving other African American subjects too. The memory of slavery, here, is “the site of black victimage and thus of tradition’s intended erasure” (Gilroy 189). “Pickin’ Em Up and Layin’ Em Down” and “Coleridge Jackson” reveal a more complex understanding of the legacies of slavery. While the former looks back at slavery through the lens of survival, the latter shows how the vestiges of slavery continue to impose social hierarchies to the detriment of the African American subject. In the poem “Harlem Hopscotch” Angelou addresses both these perspectives concerning the narrative of slavery. Angelou writes:

One foot down, then hop! It’s hot.
Good things for the ones that’s got.
Another jump, now to the left.
Everybody for hisself.

In the air, now both feet down.
Since you're black, don't stick around.
Food is gone, the rent is due,
Curse and cry and then jump two.

All the people out of work,
Hold for three, then twist and jerk.
Cross the line, they count you out.
That's what hopping's all about.

Both feet flat, the game is done.
They think I lost. I think I won. (Angelou 51)

Similar to the first four verses of "Through the Inner City to the Suburbs", the place within which "Harlem Hopscotch" is set is in the inner-city in Harlem, New York. The game of hopscotch, in this poem, is also a performance of racial identity and belonging. As the body of the speaker-self moves while playing the game, what s/he enacts is also the social realities of being an African American subject. The performance of race is seen in the way Angelou alternates the movements of the speaker-self's body with his/her social condition. Unemployment, overdue bills and an empty larder certainly cause anxiety. But rather than lament one's condition, the speaker-self puts on a show of seeming to be happy. Playing hopscotch, here, is a metaphor for tricking the white audience into thinking that the speaker-self is happy. As Andrew Warnes writes, in the book *American Tantalus: Horizons, Happiness, and the Impossible Pursuits of US Literature and Culture* (2014), Harlem, during the 1920s, was "an underworld" which rich New Yorkers regarded as "a playground, a

pleasure zone in which...[they]...could flout prohibition, escape...[their]...own manners, even have a little fun” (Warnes 85). Angelou’s poem reveals that part of the reason why Harlem attracted so many from America’s privileged class was because the black, “hopping” body also channelised the white desire for actions that are prohibited in the white community’s own social circle (Morrison 66). *More often than not, however, the channelising of white desire through the “black” body would result in a literal erasure of the African American subject. Narratives of, and about, lynchings would highlight the African American body as a medium for white desire in a more traumatic context.*

4.5: Lynching as Performance, the “Black” Christ and the Working Bodies of the African American Folk

According to Judith L. Stephens, lynching mediated social interactions between the African American and the white community. Stephens maintains that the purpose of lynching was to remind African Americans of their place in society—defined, as it were, by the limits of their bodies (Stephens 655-671). As a public spectacle, moreover, the lynching of African American men and women in postbellum America mimicked cultural performance. In his essay, “Lynching Performances, Theatres of Violence” (1999), Kirk W. Fuoss maintains that lynching involved a “performance complex” wherein a system of legal, administrative, gendered and recreational components worked simultaneously to make lynchings possible (Fuoss 1-37). In poems such as “My Guilt”, “My Arkansas”, “Miss Scarlett, Mr. Rhett and Other Latter-Day Saints”, “Lord, In My Heart” and “A Georgia Song”, Angelou talks about the bodies of African American subjects lost to lynchings. Lynching narratives, in Angelou’s poetry, invite a re-appraisal of what it means to belong to the Southern landscape. “My Arkansas” is especially poignant as the speaker situates loss within her belonging to the South, which was once the author’s home. Angelou writes:

There is a deep brooding
in Arkansas.
Old crimes like moss pend
from poplar trees.
The sullen earth
is much too
red for comfort.

Sunrise seems to hesitate
and in that second
lose its
incandescent aim, and
dusk no more shadows
than the noon.
The past is brighter yet.

Old hates and
ante-bellum lace are rent
but not discarded.
Today is yet to come
in Arkansas.
It writhes. It writhes in awful
waves of brooding. (Angelou 143).

In her clear nod to Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit", Angelou retrieves memories of belonging associated with lynching narratives. The poplar trees that are used for hanging

African American subjects in Holiday's song are also present in Angelou's memory of "home". The trees carry memories of "[o]ld crimes" and the blood from Holiday's poplar trees seeps into the earth in Angelou's poem. By associating narratives of lynching with nature, Angelou suggests that the South cannot divest itself of this history; that the memories of those who are lynched are indistinguishable from the landscape which Angelou calls her home. There is also a sexual and, therefore, a corporeal underpinning to the performance of lynching.

Commenting on the relationship between lynching and sexuality Angela Y. Davis, in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (1999) writes: "In the popular imagination, lynching was the established order's ideological affirmation and corporeal destruction of black hypersexuality" (Davis 195). Carried out on the suspicion of the African American man raping white women, lynchings were a "public performance of hegemonic masculinity" wherein the bodies of lynched African American men were seen as both "bestial and immoral" as well as possessing "sexual potency and virile strength" that white men lacked (Simien 4). The African American body marked by race, therefore, elicited from the white audience both aversion and desire (Simien 4-5). Angelou associates these memories of belonging to the historical narrative of slavery. Through lynching, Angelou suggests that the violent excesses committed against the African slave during slavery are relived in the twentieth century: "Old hates and/ante-bellum lace are rent/but not discarded" (Angelou 143). Here, the lace which is "rent" is a metaphor for the white women whom African American men were accused of raping. In "My Arkansas", it is the absence or loss of the African American subject's body that draws attention to Angelou's belonging to "home". The loss of the body draws the attention of the reader to a landscape that writhes much like the bodies of lynched African Americans whose lives have been obscured by narratives that represent the South as a paradise for white families. Angelou's

poem criticizes white narratives of belonging such as those represented in popular American narratives such as Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936).

Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* foregrounds the white woman's body through the character of Scarlett O'Hara at the expense of the African American subject working in the plantations. The novel begins by drawing the reader's attention to the whiteness of Scarlett O'Hara's body and establishing its relationship to the land. Scarlett O'Hara's body is described as "magnolia-white" and the dress which she wears is "green flowered" (Mitchell 1). By making Scarlett O'Hara indistinguishable from the landscape of the South, Mitchell suggests that Scarlett O'Hara's belonging to the land is inviolable; that the Civil War which was fought to end slavery was actually an attempt by the Northern army to wrest power away from the white families of the South. In Mitchell's narrative, therefore, the white body of Scarlett O'Hara symbolises a territory over which the American dream of belonging is fought; slavery being the excuse through which control over women's bodies is made acceptable. This is seen in the way Rhett Butler insists on Scarlett O'Hara taking care of herself while she is pregnant even though Scarlett O'Hara admits to not liking babies (Mitchell 414). In the poem "Miss Scarlett, Mr. Rhett and Other Latter-Day Saints", Angelou responds to such narrative constructions of the South and what they imply for the African American subject. Angelou writes:

Novitiates sing Ave
Before the whipping posts,
Crisscrossing their breasts and
tearstained robes
in the yielding dark.

Animated by the human sacrifice

(Golgotha in blackface)

Priests glow purely white on the
bas-relief of a plantation shrine.

(O Sing)

You are gone but not forgotten.
Hail, Scarlett. Requiescat in pace.

God-Makers smear brushes in
blood/gall
to etch frescoes on your
ceilinged tomb.

(O Sing)

Hosanna, King Kotton... (Angelou 32)

Written in the form of a litany, the poem begins by describing a ritual in which novices are initiated into the canonisation of American figures. What are canonised are the literary forms of Scarlett O' Hara and Rhett Butler from Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* and Little Eva from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The souls of Scarlett O' Hara and her partner are canonised on the relics of slave history. The novitiates say their prayers before a whipping post and plantation shrines where African American subjects were lynched ("Golgotha in blackface"). It is against the "darkness" of African American lives that the whiteness of the ceremony appears pure and unblemished. The blood smeared on the frescoes recalls the Passover lambs of Exodus 12.5 which were killed so that the Israelites could escape Egypt to Canaan, the Promised Land (Exd. 12.5). As a metaphor in Angelou's poem, they point to the

African American lives that have been lost or sacrificed in favour of the Southern home which Mitchell, in *Gone With the Wind*, describes as “a pleasant land of white houses, peaceful plowed fields and sluggish yellow rivers” (Mitchell 4). Angelou continues:

Shadowed couplings of infidels
tempt stigmata from the nipples
of your true believers.

(Chant Maternoster)

Hallowed Little Eva.

Ministers make novena with the
charred bones of four
very small
very black
very young children.

(Intone D I X I E)

And guard the relics
of your intact hymen,
daily putting to death,
into eternity,
The stud, his seed,
His seed
His seed.

(O Sing)

Hallelujah, pure Scarlett,

Blessed Rhett, the Martyr. (Angelou 32-33)

In the poem, Angelou combines Christian iconography with the ritual of lynching. The body of Scarlett O' Hara houses a hymen which is intact, hinting at the immaculate conception of Christ through the Virgin Mary. Within the poem, however, this same figure sacrifices the children of her partner ("your intact hymen,/ daily putting to death,/ into eternity,/ The stud, his seed,/ His seed/ His seed." (Angelou, 33)) or the children born to Rhett Butler (a white man) out of wedlock from African slaves. The body of the African subject which is erased and killed—replaced by sacrificial blood in the fourth verse of the poem—materialises in the eighth verse as "charred bones of four/ very small/ very black/ very young children" (Angelou, 34). Here, by referring to the killing of four African American girls in a church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963, Angelou suggests that the legacies of lynchings continue to haunt future generations of the African American subject, effectively erasing "black" bodies from the American landscape and narrative. The adulation and reverence that white folk figures such as Scarlett O' Hara, Rhett Butler and Little Eva receive, Angelou suggests, obfuscate narratives of actual crimes committed against African American subjects who are the true sacrificial lambs/ the "Black" Christs of the Southern imagination.

In the poem, Angelou refers to the image of the "Black" Christ in the second verse: "Golgotha in blackface." (Angelou, 33). The narrative of the "Black" Christ is taken from Countee Cullen's 1929 poem, "The Black Christ". In his poem, Cullen draws a parallel between the Crucifixion and the lynching of the African American man. Just as the wounded body of Christ represents also a path to salvation, so Cullen compares the body of the lynched

African American man to the transcendental, an escape from bondage and the vestiges of slavery:

The air about him shaped a crown
Of light, or so it seemed to me,
And sweeter than the melody
Of leaves in rain, and far more sad,
His voice descended
...
For there he stood in utmost view
Whose death I had been witness to;
But now he breathed; he lived; he walked... (Cullen 99-107).

The dead who are resurrected appear in Angelou's poem, "Lord, In My Heart" dedicated to Countee Cullen. Angelou writes:

Holy haloes
Ring me round

Spirit waves on
Spirit sound

Meshach and
Abednego

Golden chariot
Swinging low

I recite them

in my sleep

Jordan's cold

and briny deep

Bible lessons

Sunday school

Bow before the

Golden Rule

Now I wonder

If I tried

Could I turn my

cheek aside

Marvelling with

afterthought

Let the blow fall

saying naught

Of my true Christ-

like control

And the nature

of my soul... (Angelou 88-89)

Angelou, in this poem, compares her tribute to Countee Cullen to being schooled at church. Countee Cullen resembles figures from the Bible like Meshach, Abednego, Elijah and Christ. In other words, Countee Cullen is “resurrected” by Angelou as the eternal “Black” Christ. This is done through the association of Biblical imagery with the Middle Passage. In verse two, Angelou refers to the Holy Spirit in Genesis 1.2. Just as the Spirit hovers over the face of the Earth, so Countee Cullen, resurrected as the Spirit, hovers over the waves of the Middle Passage. Here, the Middle Passage symbolises a historical moment whose memory encapsulates the lives of ancestors, literary and otherwise. The metaphor of the Middle Passage and its connection to Countee Cullen are seen, like the biblical verse, as the places where racial consciousness begins: “*I recite them/in my sleep*” (Angelou 85; emphasis added). Similarly, the river Jordan mentioned in Joshua 3.15-17 as well as 2 Kings 2.8-2.14, is also metaphorical for the “crossing over” of the African American people into salvation with the aid of the ancestral spirits. Angelou’s association of the eternal with the body that is subject to death enables her to speak of freedom for the African American community within contemporary contexts. The obscene and grotesque in Angelou’s poetry, as symbolised by the African American body, offers an ironic commentary on the un-Christian practices in America (See Dickson-Carr 138). Angelou continues:

Would I strike with

rage divine

Till the culprit

fell supine

Hit out broad all

fury red

Till my foes are

fallen dead

Teachers of my

early youth

Taught forgiveness

stressed the truth

Here then is my

Christian lack:

If I'm struck then

I'll strike back. (Angelou 89)

Angelou suggests, in the remaining verses of the poem that, unlike the image of Christ taught in Sunday School, the “Black” Christ inspires his subjects to stand up against injustice. Angelou, here, evokes the image of the “Black” Christ as one who questions divinity as an absolute character of God, just as Countee Cullen himself had expressed in the poem, “The Black Christ” (See Cullen 84). Similar to how Cullen in “The Black Christ” speaks of a God

who is invested in human tragedy because he is present within the body of his worshippers, so Angelou also hints at a faith in which worship is accompanied with the fight for social justice because the divine is within the body of the African American subject. Poems such as “In My Missouri”, “Old Folks Laugh”, “Woman Work” and “Song for the Old Ones” which focus on the lives of working-class African American subjects reveal why social justice is an integral part of the African American literary tradition. “In My Missouri” draws upon the figure of Iemanjá. Angelou writes:

In my Missouri

I had known a mean man

A hard man

A cold man

Gutting me and killing me

Was an Ice man

A tough man

A man.

So I thought I'd never meet a sweet man

A kind man

A true man

One who in darkness you can feel secure man

A sure man

A man.

But Jackson, Mississippi, has some fine men

Some strong men

Some black men
Walking like an army were the sweet men
The brown men
The men.

In Oberlin, Ohio, there were nice men
Just men
And fair men
Reaching out and healing were the warm men
Were good men
The men.

Now I know there are good men and bad men
Some true men
Some rough men
Women, keep searching for your own man
The best man
For you man
The man. (Angelou 263-264)

Similar to the speaker-self of “Pickin’ Em Up and Layin’ Em Down”, the woman of “In My Missouri” is a travelling blues woman. The performative element in this poem is replicated in the way that, by revealing her sexual exploits, the poet persona also advises the reader to be patient when it comes to finding a partner. The speaker-self expresses the desire typical of blues women who “are rarely wives and almost never mothers” (Davis 12). She moves from place-to-place looking for love but never settling down for one man. Like the

goddess Iemanjá, therefore, the speaker-self is also “a figure of sexual excess, physicality, fecundity” (Brown 144). She urges the readers to find a partner that is best suited for them but not before sampling the varieties of men in different places. In the book, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (1999), Angela Y. Davis writes that travel connotes, for the blues women, an ability “to exercise some control over their lives, especially over their sexual lives” (Davis 74). The liberty that travel affords is essential since domesticity usually implies doing back-breaking work as the poem “Woman Work” shows. Angelou writes:

I’ve got the children to tend
The clothes to mend
The floor to mop
The food to shop
Then the chicken to fry
The baby to dry
I got company to feed
The garden to weed
I’ve got the shirts to press
The tots to dress
The cane to be cut
I gotta clean up this hut
Then see about the sick
And the cotton to pick... (Angelou 153).

In Angelou’s poem, the daily chores performed by the African American woman evoke the memory of her enslaved past. In her role as an “other mother”, the African American woman establishes kinship with children and members of the Southern community,

white and black. The memory of belonging in the South is evoked through the performance of gendered roles within the household as well as outside of it such as the cutting of cane and the picking of cotton. The Mammy figure of Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* coincides, in Angelou's poem, with contemporary racial representations of the working-class African American woman. The contemporary working-class identity of the African American woman, epitomised in the Aunt Jemima figure of the 1960s, is an extension of the kinship relations and racial belonging that thrived during slavery (Brown 108).

According to Kimberly Juanita Brown, in the book *The Repeating Body: Slavery's Visual Resonance in the Contemporary* (2015), the Aunt Jemima figure was a 1960s working-class re-imagining of the Mammy figure. Portrayed as asexual but also maternal, the Aunt Jemima figure, as Brown notes, "symbolised servitude and obedience and was the epitome of the happy slave... imbued with an intense physicality" (Brown, 108). Portrayed also as a woman with large hips and big buttocks, the Aunt Jemima figure justified the exploitation of the working-class African American woman based on physical standards set during slavery. Londa Schiebinger, in the essay "Theories of Gender and Race" (1999), notes that eighteenth century anthropologists justified slavery by associating the wide pelvises of African women as a naturally endowed body part which enabled African women to give birth more easily than white women. According to Schiebinger, this narrative built around African women allowed slave masters to exploit the labour by making slave women work in the fields during pregnancy and shortly after parturition (Schiebinger 26). The Aunt Jemima figure, therefore, builds upon what Houston A. Baker, Jr. —in the book *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (1987)—terms the "economics of slavery". According to Baker, the treatment of the African-born subjects as property dehumanised him/her to the extent that their numerous roles as individuals got lost within the system of exploitation that made slavery possible (Baker 27). By foregrounding the work that the

African American woman does, Angelou shows how the sexualities of African American women are permissible only to the extent that they will be of service to white households. The African American woman in “Woman Work” is valued by the households she works for because she is seen to possess maternal instincts which, in the eyes of her white employer, make her fit for domestic work. The African American woman herself, however, succumbs to despair at being treated as no more than a workhorse. Angelou continues:

Shine on me, sunshine

Rain on me, rain

Fall softly, dewdrops

And cool my brow again.

Storm, blow me from here

With your fiercest wind

Let me float across the sky

Till I can rest again.

Fall gently, snowflakes

Cover me with white

Cold icy kisses and

Let me rest tonight.

Sun, rain, curving sky

Mountain, oceans, leaf and stone

Star shine, moon glow

You’re all that I can call my own. (Angelou 153-154).

In the absence of witnesses to her life, the speaker-self wishes for death. She asks for the sun, rain, and other natural elements to help her escape from her predicament. The snow which falls in winter is re-imagined as the snow which falls on her grave. Just as the Saartjie Baartman and the Topsy figures who symbolise both the irretrievable losses of slavery as well as the survival in spite of the losses, the Aunt Jemima figure, too, is imbued with some positive connotations.

According to bell hooks, in *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (2009), the close proximity that African American women had by working as domestic servants in white households, gave rise to narratives about white families within African American literature. African American domestic workers were able, according to hooks, to act “as informants [bringing] knowledge back to segregated communities—details, facts, observations, and psychoanalytic readings of the white Other” (hooks 89). hooks implies, therefore, that the experience of the African American domestic worker within white households allows her to construct her own notions of “whiteness”. This representation of whiteness by the African American subject is significant since life within the white household often replicated systems of oppression that prevailed during slavery (See Fox-Genovese 195-196). In the poem, “Song for the Old Ones” Angelou shows how knowledge of white ideology enabled the African American folk to survive in highly oppressive contexts. Angelou writes:

My Fathers sit on benches
their flesh counts every plank
the slats leave dents of darkness
deep in their weathered flanks.

They nod like broken candles
all waxed and burnt profound

they say “It’s understanding
that makes the world go round.”

There in those pleated faces
I see the auction block
the chains and slavery’s coffles
the whip and lash and stock.

My Fathers speak in voices
that shred my fact and sound
they say “It’s our submission
that makes the world go round.”

...

They’ve laughed to shield their crying
then shuffled through their dreams
and stepped ’n’ fetched country
to write the blues with screams.

I understand their meaning
it could and did derive
from living on the edge of death
They kept my race alive. (Angelou 108-109).

Unlike the white narrative which seeks to memorialise the Founding Fathers of
America on the slopes of Mount Rushmore (Schama 385-399), the Fathers of the African

American race are remembered through song or poetry: they “write the blues with screams” (Angelou 108). They are also the carriers of a history that white America is intent on forgetting: their bodies leave “dents of darkness” on the wooden planks and their faces are lined with the memories of slavery. By putting on “Uncle Tomming” behaviour and “Aunt Jemimas’ smiles” (Angelou 108), however, they ensure the survival of the race. The African American folk of Angelou’s “Song for the Old Ones” display resilience in spite of their apparent willingness to conform to white people’s expectations of how African American subjects should behave. They also display some level of trickery in their dealings with the white community. Similar to the trickster figures in African American folk culture and narratives, the African American folk in Angelou’s poem outwit the white master by appearing affable and lazy; that is, by putting on “Uncle Tomming” behaviour and “Aunt Jemimas’ smiles” (See Baker 21-27). In the poem “Old Folks Laugh”, Angelou gives the reader an insider’s view into the “lazy” lives of the African American folk. Angelou writes:

They have spent their
content of simpering,
holding their lips this
and that way, winding
the lines between
their brows. Old folks
allow their bellies to jiggle like slow
tamborines.
The hollers
rise up and spill
over any way they want.
When old folks laugh, they free the world.

They turn slowly, slyly knowing
the best and worst
of remembering.
Saliva glistens in
the corners of their mouths,
their heads wobble
on brittle necks, but
their laps
are filled with memories.
When old folks laugh, they consider the promise
of dear painless death, and generously
forgive life for happening
to them. (Angelou 227)

Reminiscent of W. B. Yeats' poem, "When You Are Old" (1895), Angelou's "Old Folks Laugh" dwells on aging and wisdom that comes from age. There is a difference, however, between Yeats' idea of old age and Angelou's. While Yeats, in "When You Are Old", views aging as a desire to be young again and to regret the romantic losses of the past, Angelou understands old age as an acceptance of mortality and the disappointments in life. The "soft look" of youthful eyes in Yeats' poem is transformed into aging bodies in Angelou's "Old Folks Laugh"—into round bellies, salivating mouths and brittle necks. Just as Angelou—in "Phenomenal Woman"—had spoken of a body whose proportions defy conventional notions of beauty, so the aged bodies in "Old Folks Laugh" represent an alternative notion of beauty in a culture that favours youth. The apparent grotesqueness of the aging body is counterbalanced by the richness of memory and experience in old age. Thus,

African American folk in Angelou's poem also look forward to death as an end to life's sufferings, especially a life that is a constant reminder of their unbelonging.

According to Alma Jean Billingslea-Brown, in the book *Crossing Borders Through Folklore: African American Women's Fiction and Art* (1999) folk forms such as the blues, work songs, tales, jokes and legends inform a belonging which resist white representations of the African American subject (Billingslea-Brown 2). The significance of these folk forms in attributing a sense of self is reflected in Angelou's own narrative. In the autobiography, *Gather Together in My Name* (1985), Angelou takes on various identities naming herself Rita as a cook in a Caribbean restaurant (Angelou 12), Marguerite as a dancer (Angelou 114) and, finally, in *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* (1985) as Maya Angelou when she performs at the Purple Onion (Angelou 90). The many selves that Angelou dons recalls Gates' "mask-in-motion" (Gates 91) where the ability to adopt various identities signifies Angelou's ownership over her body and, therefore, herself. *Gather Together in My Name* (1985), especially alludes to the performative origins of belonging. Referring to the biblical verse found in Matthew 18.20, Angelou urges her readers to "gather together" as an audience to her life and work. The gathering itself, taking after the biblical verse, connotes a form of worship—with Angelou as Iemanjá—bringing the readers together and enveloping them in her history. The poem "Prayer" reflects Angelou's intention to connect her body of work to the events of the Middle Passage.

Written as a poem of thanksgiving, "Prayer" is similar to poems such as "When Great Trees Fall", "A Brave and Startling Truth" and "On the Pulse of the Morning" which combine memories of loss with spirituality. Angelou writes:

Father Mother God, thank You for Your
presence during the hard mean days.
For then we have You to lean upon.

Thank You for Your presence during the
bright and sunny days, for then we can
share that which we have with those who have less.

And thank You for Your presence during the
Holy Days, for then we are able to
celebrate You and our families and our
friends.

...

Dear Creator, You, the borderless sea of
substance, we ask You to give to all the
world that which we need most—Peace.

Amen. (Angelou 101-103).

What is interesting about Angelou's poem is that belonging—which Angelou expresses through the theme of love in her poetry— results in an ambivalent idea of God, one who is neither male nor female. The ambiguous gender of a divine entity reflects the many folk figures within Angelou's poetry viz., the anonymous slave, Saartjie Baartman, Topsy, Railroad Bill, the travelling blues man and woman, the lynched African American subject and the old folks. All of these figures are drawn from both masculine and feminine genders and are historical as well as cultural. These cultural and historical losses sustained through the metaphor of the Middle Passage are embodied, in the poem "Prayer", by a God who is a "borderless sea", thus, reaffirming the diasporic origins of African Americans. Although "Prayer" is a hymn of thanksgiving to the divine, Angelou obliquely thanks the community in

whose selves the divine resides. This spiritual oneness—manifest as gendered, racial and nationalist belonging—re-unites Angelou’s *body* of work through a retrieval of losses founded on the history of slavery.

4.6: Conclusion

In the book *The Repeating Body: Slavery’s Visual Resonance in the Contemporary* (2015), Brown writes that the goddess Iemanjá “is a creation of the people” (Brown 145). By situating loss and belonging within the lives of the folk (the embodied forms of Iemanjá), Angelou’s poetry reveals black dialects to be the language of a true “black cultural matrix” (Gates xxi). Drawing upon the historical display of the African American body, Angelou’s poetry transcends the limits of race, gender and nation without negating the social contexts that make her poems relevant even today. Narratives of loss and belonging in Angelou’s poetry, therefore, re-define the American literary narrative by unveiling the African American subject and her voice as the historical and literary kernel within belonging. It is she who, in naming herself, also names the “audience” which reads her work.

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Chapter 5

Conclusion

In his appraisal of Maya Angelou's poetry, Harold Bloom states that Angelou's poems appeal to a popular sensibility because they make "no formal or cognitive demands on the reader" (Bloom 1). Contrary to Bloom's assessment, however, the preceding chapters have shown that Angelou's poetry is as formally complex as it is popular. The popularity of Angelou's poetry is because it draws upon cultural figures and narratives that have made their way into the American popular imagination. Formalistically, these narratives of loss and belonging—being temporally situated in Angelou's poetry—are crucial to any assessment of Angelou's poetry. The literary, historical and cultural narratives assign meaning to loss and longing, thus making Angelou's poetry intelligible to the intended reader. As the preceding chapters, especially Chapter Three and Four, have shown, the universality of belonging has to do with the experience of diaspora within the African American community. Theoretically, however, the universality of belonging is also—as seen in the preceding chapters—because African American subjects embody discourses of gender, race and nation that are prevalent in Eurocentric, "universal" narratives of belonging. Although this theoretical assertion requires further elaboration that is beyond the scope of the present thesis, the experience of diaspora requires elucidation, especially in relation to the African American subject as a symbol of universal belonging.

As globalisation sweeps across the world, many diasporic communities find themselves in marginalised positions in relation to the countries they migrate to (Nic Craith 1-2). Máiréad Nic Craith in the book, *Narratives of Place, Belonging and Language: An Intercultural Perspective* (2012) points out, however, that we are all diasporic subjects in the sense that our environments—even our places of birth—change with the passage of time. She writes, "We are migrants in time, if not in space" (Nic Craith 3). The diasporic experience is, therefore, a universal reality. In order to deal with the changing realities of time and place,

diasporic subjects often resort to symbolic narratives in order to make their experiences intelligible to themselves and to others (Warjri and Sengupta 109-113). Thus, in Chapter Three, we see that the narrative of Africa in Angelou's poetry is symbolic of a lost homeland as well as a metaphor for a belonging that can be reclaimed through poetry. What is reclaimed are the aspects of belonging, viz. narratives of home, kinship and self, that characterise the diasporic subject's—in this case, Angelou's—longing for an ideal world. In this sense, the longing within belonging exposes an ideological contradiction in relation to the African American subject.

While the longing for the lost homeland is influenced by the past, remembered through figures such as Eve, Lilith and Sheba, this past narrative is intended to augment the sense of belonging of future generations of African American subjects. The past-within-the-future constitutes one aspect of the political character of Angelou's poetry. By bequeathing memories of the past to future generations of African Americans, Angelou ensures that its memory survives as a narrative. Remembering these narratives are essential in the sense that younger generations can fall back on narrative resources that account for the difficulties they face because of racism or gendered biases. In his book, *Time and Narrative Volume I* (1983), for instance, Paul Ricoeur states that narrative is the human experience of time. That is, narratives, when told, testify to the humanity of those who tell them through how they experience time (Ricoeur ix). Narratives of loss and belonging, therefore, in mapping the African American subject's historical experience, also testify to their humanity. This assertion of the human in the telling of a tale is essential since the memories associated with the stories reveal hierarchies of race (black vis-à-vis white), gender (feminine vis-à-vis masculine) and nation (African vis-à-vis American).

What is interesting to note in Angelou's poetry and the narratives of loss and belonging underlying the poems, is the extent to which discourses of race, gender and nation

combine to influence the African American subject's experience of belonging. In Chapter Two, for instance, we see that discourses of race, gender and nation intersect to give meaning to loss and belonging. The position of African American women within American society and in relation to American history is the backdrop against which narratives of loss and belonging in connection to Angelou's poetry can be read and understood.

I have also shown, in Chapter Two of the thesis, that the African American woman is the centre around which social relations in America revolve. She is the carrier of memory as well as the person to whom the American nuclear family—symbolic of the American Dream—owes its existence. Loss, as revealed in this Chapter, is due to the fact that the African American woman must care for the well-being of children (mostly white) while neglecting her own. Thus, the gains that American society makes, as far as belonging is concerned, come at the expense of African American women themselves being denied the comfort of caring for their own family. Belonging or kinship relations in the American context, therefore, hinge on the kinship losses sustained by African American women. As far as language is concerned, the hierarchies of race, gender and nation within the American social context give way to poetry that focuses on the African American woman's body as a site of resistance to racism and gendered biases.

Apart from discourses of race, gender and nation that influence belonging, the narrative of slavery constitutes an important narrative of belonging underlying Angelou's poetry. The narrative of slavery, as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese writes in the article "Myth and History: Discourse of Origins in Zora Neale Hurston and Maya Angelou" (1990), is a story of negation or loss of narrative voice at both the individual and collective levels (Fox-Genovese 221-225). But the same narrative also highlights the presence of the African American subject—particularly, the African American woman—through the hypervisualisation of the enslaved body. According to Kimberly Juanita Brown, in the book *The Repeating Body*:

Slavery's Visual Resonance in the Contemporary (2015), the visibility of the African American woman's body testifies to the legacy of slavery within the current global, diasporic context. Just as the bodies of women of African descent were displayed at auction blocks and European museums as objects for ownership, so the contemporary display of the African American body in popular culture builds upon white, patriarchal assumptions of "black" bodies as bodies that can be owned (Brown 42).

As Chapter Four has shown, however, the African American woman's body is also a site of resistance to white, patriarchal attempts at ownership. The African American body testifies to the survival of the people of African descent in spite of Eurocentric attempts at historical and bodily erasure. Together with the narratives within American popular culture, the narratives of the African American body, beginning with the display of the anonymous slave at the auction block, are multi-layered and speak of a history of survival in spite of narrative effacement within various performative contexts. Thus, the history of African American literature and belonging is also the history of its performance.

In Angelou's poetry, the performative element to belonging is evoked through a retrieval of the maternal body. The retrieval of the maternal body is especially linked to poetry as a genre through which loss and belonging is expressed. As Julia Kristeva notes in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984) the maternal body is retrieved through articulation in language, especially poetic language. Since poetic language (manifest as assonance, repetition, rhythm and sound play) is often based on gestures, images and objects within the poet's environment (Kristeva 25-26), it follows that the performative is site-specific and influences how belonging is articulated as narrative or poetry. In Angelou's poetry, we see that the loss and belonging are intertwined, appearing in various points of African American experience as narratives of and about the body. As Houston A. Baker notes in *Long Black Song: Essays in Black American Literature and Culture* (1999), these experiences and

narratives give rise to a “lingua franca” among the subjects for whom belonging also entails the expression of memories that historical narratives omit—a vernacular (Baker 113). That is, language that facilitates belonging to the extent that its articulation also depends upon its expression as loss.

In the book *Words, Signs, and the “Racial” Self* (1987), Henry Louis Gates, Jr. remarks that African American literature often dwells on the inarticulate or experiences that do not find their way into language (Gates 169). What is unarticulated in Angelou’s poetry is the tendency of Eurocentric texts to obscure the presence of the “black” subject within their narratives. Narratives of loss and belonging in Angelou’s poetry show, as revealed in Chapters Three and Four, the extent to which Eurocentric narratives mask the African American subject’s belonging. As Ta-Nehisi Coates observes in the book *Between the World and Me* (2015), hierarchies within language rob the “black” body of agency (Coates 7). The position of the African American woman in relation to narratives of belonging, for instance, is held in place through hierarchies of race, gender and nation both within and outside the African American community. But if, as Coates points out, race itself is a construct (Coates 7), then the idea of what constitutes racial identity can be questioned and subverted. Femininity appears as a way by which white, masculinist representations of the African American subject can be subverted.

Typically relegated to the domestic sphere, characteristics of femininity such as submissiveness, silence and care are rarely exposed to public scrutiny (Davis 28). Where the African American subject is concerned, femininity resists a straightforward reading of the African American body as a masculine entity. Femininity in relation to the African American subject, as shown in chapters Three and Four, draws inspiration from cultural figures like Topsy, Uncle Tom and Aunt Jemima. What is notable about these African American sources of femininity (as opposed to white, middle-class figures of the same) is the fact that they are

already placed within the public domain and imagination. Thus, the feminised African American subject and trope subverts traditional perceptions of female-ness by positing what belongs in the private sphere to have an influence within the public domain. By doing so, Angelou's poetry foregrounds feminine notions of care, nurturing and hospitality as crucial elements of belonging. This focus on feminine attributes as a way to subvert hierarchies within language opens up narrative possibilities into more intimate spaces of identity formation. In the book, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (1994), Elizabeth Grosz points out that the "interiority" of subject formation is influenced by factors such as "perspective, insight, reflection, desire and agency" (Grosz xi). Studies linking the African American body to non-conventional notions of beauty show that African American criticism is well on its way to re-claiming aspects of belonging that have otherwise been subject to repression (See Durham 35-49). As Grosz also remarks, the interiorities of identity formation are themselves embedded within a variety of social and cultural mores and customs (Grosz 138-159). The presence of the African American body, for instance, ensures the survival of African socio-cultural practices such as the practice of fictive kinship or belonging within contemporary contexts (Spruill et al. 23-30). Where use of language or poetry is concerned, particularly with the poetry of Maya Angelou, the idea of fictive kin and belonging opens up narrative possibilities through the reading of performative *con-texts* that are Eurocentric in nature.

Recent events, such as the police brutalities that prompted the #BlackLivesMatter movement, have shown that racism is still alive and well in America. According to Reshawna L. Chapple et al. in the article "Do #BlackLivesMatter? Implicit Bias, Institutional Racism, and Fear of the Black Body" (2017), fear of the "black" body and institutional racism have contributed to the recent spate of police violence against the African American subject (Chapple et al. 3-11). As Houston A. Baker, Jr. argues in *Long Black Song: Essays in Black*

American Literature and Culture (1999), however, the fear of the “black” body has its roots in the race theories of the nineteenth century. Mostly written by white men, race theories promote racism and racial bias by making an entire community culpable for an individual’s action and/or behaviour (Baker 5). Thus, what is read as Literature in institutions has the propensity of encouraging racial bias within the social context. As far as belonging is concerned, racism has encouraged the reading of African American literature as a literature that can only belong to the African American community (Gates 24). The resulting insularity has served to isolate what is truly a literature of global magnitude. As the thesis has shown, moreover, the African American subject herself encompasses identities that are beyond the strictures of race and race relations while addressing racial injustice. This “two-ness” of African American narratives, to borrow a phrase from Du Bois, has encouraged solidarities among other communities who have joined hands with the African American community to combat racism across cultures and nationalities.

Finally, narratives of loss and belonging in Angelou’s poetry show that, alongside the struggle for social justice in the political arena, one needs to focus on factors such as resilience and fortitude in the search for political rights. Although traditional approaches to resilience have understood the term to mean a rather conservative approach to politics (Humbert and Joseph 215-223), the thesis has shown that resilience is a key ingredient in the face of social and political crises, especially when social and political institutions work against the subject realising her full potential. By focusing on the African American folk as the source of belonging, Angelou shows that belonging is also based on survival in spite of narrative effacement. The Uncle Toms and Aunt Jemimas of Angelou’s poetry live on although Angelou herself has died. Thus, the enduring legacies of Angelou’s work are the folk who are the subjects of her body of work. Where literature is concerned, narratives of belonging based on “black” folk figures and representations advance a new idea of literary

narrative—one that, while drawing on Western critical practice—belongs to the marginalised and oppressed or, as Houston A. Baker (quoting Frantz Fanon) says in *Long Black Song: Essays in Black American Literature and Culture* (1999), “the wretched of the earth” (Baker 47)

Based on the conclusions stated above, future research will focus on re-imagining a “black” canon through theoretical and experiential insights provided by the African American critical tradition. This proposed work will necessarily involve going beyond Maya Angelou’s body of work and into other writers’ oeuvres. It is hoped that such an undertaking will shed light not only on African American literature but also on the “place” of literature itself within the shifting dynamics of the human condition.

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by Jobeth Ann Warjri

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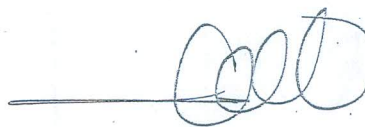
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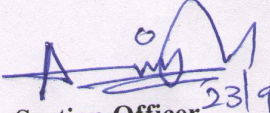
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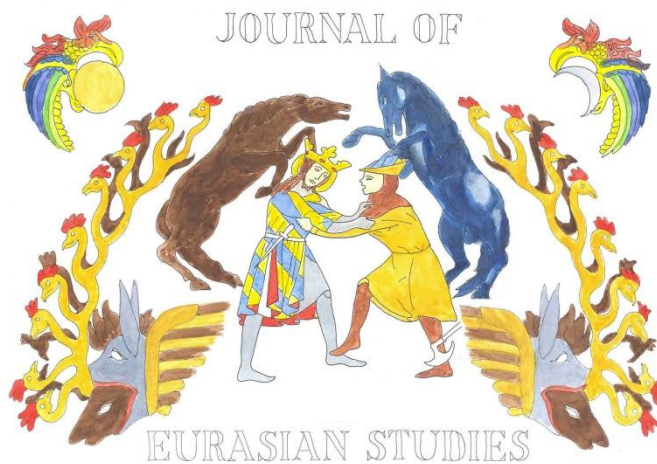
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