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MARIA JULIA COELHO TERRAZAS OLMOS

THE POETRY OF MAYA ANGELOU AND THE AMERICAN CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Porto Alegre
2022

GRADUAÇÃO



Pontifícia Universidade Católica
do Rio Grande do Sul

MARIA JULIA COELHO TERRAZAS OLMOS

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MOVEMENT**

Monograph presented as a partial requirement
for obtaining a Teaching Degree in Language
Arts: English from the Language Arts: English
course at the Pontifical Catholic University of
Rio Grande do Sul.

Advisor: Débora Amorim Garcia Ardais, MA.

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Approved on July 5th, 2022.

Board of examiners:

DÉBORA AMORIM GARCIA ARDAIS, MA. – Advisor
(Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande Do Sul)

LUÍS ROBERTO AMABILE DE SOUZA JÚNIOR, PhD.
(Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande Do Sul)

BERNARDO JOSÉ DE MORAES BUENO, PhD.
(Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande Do Sul)

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Over the years, the only thing that kept me sane was other people. At times, I did not only feel like I was losing my grip but also went and lost it a couple of times too. I wanted to give up in so many ways. You were all there.

My beloved family: my siblings, Daniela and Pedro, and my parents, Clarice and Daniel. All these years of writing and I do not think words will show how deeply my love runs for you. My grandmother Olinda, who taught me how to tell stories. My aunt Tere, who will be greatly missed and whose selflessness touched many hearts. My friends Maria Eduarda, Thayná, Geórgia, Maranna, Nathali, Victor, Martha, Carolina, Angélica, and Neuza. You helped me when I thought help was not possible. My partner Gustavo, whose kindness inspires me. My schoolteacher Ângela, who wholeheartedly believed in what I wrote. My professors, who guided me through paths I was too scared to cross. And my students, who made me a better teacher and learner.

I keep running names in my head, thinking I will forget someone or that I will not be able to describe the importance of these people. However, you were all there and will continue to be somehow. It is impossible to forget what has made me who I am and what I aspire to become. All this knowledge I have gathered over the years would mean nothing without the meaning your love has given to me. I firmly believe in myself because you did too.

ABSTRACT

In this paper, a parallel between Maya Angelou's poetry and the civil rights movement (1940s, 1950s, and 1960s) will be constructed alongside what historical elements and literary resources she uses to express reality as she poses. Analyzing Angelou's work in relation to the events of the civil rights movement, a moment of struggle and revolution, is essential to honoring her memory as an activist. Placing her activism within her art, in relation to history, is important because it preserves Angelou's impact as a poet who is an activist. The poems are selected from *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou* (1994) by Maya Angelou. The poems are *My Guilt* (1969), *Harlem Hopscotch* (1971), *When I Think About Myself* (1971), *Riot: 60's* (1971), *America* (1975), and *These Yet to Be United States* (1990). These poems were selected because they displayed a potential parallel between what Angelou thought and spoke about topics related to civil rights ideology, history, other activists, and conflicts. The verses within these poems will be discussed through the lens of American history, Angelou's biography, and American culture. With the selected poems, this research intends to (1) identify elements in Angelou's poetry that indicate her activism toward the American civil rights movement (2) build something as close to a timeline as possible, connecting the movement to the historical, biographical, and cultural elements portrayed in her poems (3) identify the literary elements and poetry resources that the author adopts to report the reality of the movement and her way of thinking as an activist. The author's literary style in reporting her experience and perspective on the American civil rights movement will be analyzed and contextualized to deepen our comprehension of Angelou as an activist who is a poet. The selected bibliography for poem analysis includes History books (BRADLEY & FISHKIN, DIERENFIELD, GRAY, HOLT, among others) and theoretical books (EAGLETON, POUND, WOLOSKY, among others).

Keywords: Maya Angelou; poetry; American civil rights movement; History; Literature.

RESUMO

Esta monografia construirá um paralelo entre a poesia de Maya Angelou e o movimento pelos direitos civis das pessoas negras nos Estados Unidos da América (décadas de 1940, 1950 e 1960) através dos elementos históricos e recursos literários que a autora utiliza para expressar a realidade tal como ela se apresenta. A análise do trabalho de Angelou em relação aos acontecimentos do movimento dos direitos civis, um momento de luta e revolução, é essencial para honrar a sua memória como ativista. Identificar o seu ativismo dentro da sua arte, em relação à história, é importante porque preserva o impacto de Angelou como poeta e ativista. Os poemas foram selecionados a partir da coletânea *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou* (1994), de Maya Angelou. Os poemas são *My Guilt* (1969), *Harlem Hopscotch* (1971), *When I Think About Myself* (1971), *Riot: 60's* (1971), *America* (1975) e *These Yet to Be United States* (1990). Os poemas foram selecionados porque apresentaram um potencial paralelo entre o que Angelou pensava e falava sobre temas relacionados com as ideologias dentro do movimento pelos direitos civis, história, outros ativistas e conflitos. Os versos dentro destes poemas serão discutidos através das lentes da história e cultura americana, assim como da biografia da autora. Com os poemas selecionados, esta pesquisa pretende (1) identificar elementos na poesia de Angelou que indicam o seu ativismo em relação ao movimento por direitos civis (2) construir algo tão próximo de uma linha temporal quanto possível, ligando o movimento aos elementos históricos, biográficos e culturais retratados nos seus poemas (3) identificar os elementos literários e recursos poéticos que a autora utiliza para relatar a realidade do movimento e a sua forma de pensar como ativista. O estilo literário da autora ao relatar a sua experiência e perspectiva sobre o movimento será analisado e contextualizado para aprofundar a nossa compreensão de Angelou como ativista. A bibliografia selecionada para análise de poemas inclui livros de história (BRADLEY & FISHKIN, DIERENFIELD, GRAY, HOLT, entre outros) e livros de teoria literária (EAGLETON, POUND, WOLOSKY, entre outros).

Palavras-chave: Maya Angelou; poesia; direitos civis; história; literatura.

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1 INTRODUCTION

As obvious as it may sound, Maya Angelou is an American literary icon. She is an author who is often referenced, quoted, and remembered by many. Angelou's unique grasp of words continues to inspire lives even after death. During her lifetime, the author danced, sang, acted, and brilliantly wrote about her perception of the world and the self. Angelou understood the power of words and the responsibility that comes with being read. As a writer, she mirrored and shaped her life events into extensive autobiographical works. In Claudia Tate's *Black Women Writers at Work*, Angelou stated:

“My responsibility as a writer is to be as good as I can be at my craft. So I study my craft. I don't simply write what I feel, let it all hang out. That's baloney. That's no craft at all. Learning the craft, understanding what language can do, gaining control of the language, enables one to make people weep, make them laugh, even go to war. You can do this by learning how to harness the power of the word. So studying my craft is one of my responsibilities.” (TATE, 1984, p. 4).

As Marguerite Ann Johnson in Stamps, Arkansas, she read from great authors and their classics. As an activist, Angelou knew her knowledge of stories and the crafting of words could instigate change. In her first autobiography, entitled *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), Angelou reminisces about how literature worked both as a way to escape from prejudice and to enrich her mind. From what we can gather from her autobiographies, she felt she could provide that for others too. Her poetry, rooted in her experiences as a Black woman, displays both personal experiences and her view on historical moments as to what it means to be black in the United States of America. In a country built upon slavery, with its laws stemming from a long history of racism, Angelou is one of the faces of African-American activists alongside well-known names such as James Baldwin, Martin Luther King Jr., Angela Davis, and Malcolm X. Angelou's connections highlight the sense of community, which is an important and recurrent theme in Angelou's writing.

Encouraged by Langston Hughes and John Killens, Angelou went to New York and joined the *Harlem Writers Guild*, a group founded in 1950 for African Americans to develop their writing skills. James Baldwin, who Angelou considered a brother, also played an important role in encouraging her to write her first autobiography, as the author herself stated in interviews over the years. By the early 1960s, Angelou, after being inspired by a speech delivered by Martin Luther King Jr. at a church in Harlem, was already reportedly engaging in the American civil rights movement by organizing a show called *Cabaret for Freedom*, alongside actors Godfrey MacArthur Cambridge and Hugh Hurd, to raise funds for the

Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). It is only natural that these experiences reflected in her poetry and what way of thinking she wanted to convey through her poetry. Her activism is infused within her words even though the contents of her work are many, for the ideas of change and revolution forever shaped her writing.

The author's work, for being essentially autobiographical and non-fictional, gives way to a historical analysis of the elements that compose her poetry. It is important to analyze the impact of the civil rights movement in Angelou's writing because it is a great part of who she is and what makes America the country it is today. The country's long history of racism needs to be told from the point of view of those who experienced it firsthand. Having the perspective of a Black woman on racism paves the way for a better understanding of the Black experience in America. According to Malcolm X in a famously quoted speech he gave in Los Angeles, the Black woman is the most disrespected, unprotected, and neglected person in America (X, 1962). This paper intends to display precisely that: how Angelou's experience, especially as a Black woman, amidst the turmoil before, during, and after the American civil rights movement is displayed in her writing, specifically her poetry. Studying how her point of view and participation in the movement is shaped within her poetry showcases the importance of reporting the African-American narrative in literature.

In this paper, a parallel between Angelou's poetry and the civil rights movement will be constructed alongside what elements and literary resources she uses to express reality as she poses. Analyzing Angelou's work in relation to the events of the civil rights movement, a moment of struggle and revolution, is essential to honoring her memory as an activist. Placing her activism within her art, in relation to history, is important because it preserves Angelou's impact as a poet who is an activist. The poems are selected from *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou* (1994) by Maya Angelou. The poems are *My Guilt* (1969), *Harlem Hopscotch* (1971), *When I Think About Myself* (1971), *Riot: 60's* (1971), *America* (1975) (1975), and *These Yet to Be United States* (1990). These poems were selected because they display a potential parallel between what Angelou thinks and speaks about topics related to civil rights ideologies, history, other activists, and conflicts. The verses within these poems will be discussed through the lens of American history, her biography, and American culture. With the selected poems, this research intends to (1) identify elements in Angelou's poetry that indicate her activism toward the American civil rights movement (2) build something as close to a timeline as possible, connecting the movement to the historical, biographical, and cultural elements portrayed in her poems (3) identify the literary elements and poetry resources that the author adopts to report the reality of the movement and her way of thinking.

The author's literary style in reporting her experience as a Black woman and perspective on the issues pertaining to the American civil rights movement will be analyzed to deepen our comprehension of Angelou as an activist who is a poet. The selected bibliography for poem analysis includes History books (BRADLEY & FISHKIN, DIERENFIELD, GRAY, HOLT) and theoretical books (EAGLETON, POUND, WOLOSKY). The U.S. will be historically and critically contextualized through chapters 2 and 3, alongside some highlights of Maya Angelou's work and interviews. In chapter 2, we will construct a summary, as well as a critique, of the formation of America in a timeline that makes sense to the purpose of this paper. We need to understand how the United States of America as we know was formed, mainly by its colonial roots and slavery. Slavery generated a system that, to this day, has posed a threat to young African Americans throughout the country. In chapter 3, we discuss the civil rights movement, which is reported and analyzed with highlights of Angelou's life. Historical context is essential for understanding how to place the selected poems in time and in accordance with what we know of Angelou's activism.

Furthermore, in chapter 4, we discuss and analyze the poems as to what elements of poetry compose Angelou's style in reporting her experience and participation in the American civil rights movement. And, if so, how we can place them in a timeline alongside the reports we have of her participation, both from outside sources and Angelou herself.

2 FOUNDATIONS OF RACISM AND WHAT MAKES AMERICA

The United States of America is so deeply embedded into mainstream culture that collective memory about its history is easy to access. This collective memory is fed by movies, songs, books, TV shows, and so on. That is, people passively know about this nation without having to study or read much. We are so familiarized with the American way of living that it is as if it is our own. From seeing teenagers in movies wearing cheerleader uniforms to witnessing war tragedies from the U.S. invasion in Iraq, people intake that living as the “powerful Americans” is a goal to achieve in life. A few years of consuming American media can teach people the basics about the country’s culture, language, and foundations. We know how they behave in parties, how their education system works, and how their elections influence the world. It is easily absorbed into daily lives without much notice due to the political power the country holds over other nations. Popularly known as “the greatest country in the world”, John Smith, famous English colonizer, once said of this land when exploring Chesapeake Bay:

Within is a country that may have the prerogative over the most pleasant place ever known, for large and pleasant navigable Rivers. Heaven and earth never agreed better to frame a place for man's habitation, were it fully manured and inhabited by industrious people. Here are mountains, hills, plaines, valleyes, rivers, and brookes, all running into a faire Bay, compassed but for the mouth, with fruitful and delightsome land. (SMITH, 1624).

Indeed, such beautiful land must be paradise. Native Americans have known that for centuries. However, when looked at as a nation, the U.S. has more of a façade than actual greatness. Non-Americans often have the life goal of achieving the “American dream”. The idea of the American dream is still widely spread among countries with lesser political power. What it means to be American and what makes America the greatest country in the world are ideas constructed similarly to propaganda. We naively buy into this idea because of how simple it is: you work, so you have results, therefore, a better life. According to a 2020 report by the United Nations on international migration, “the United States of America remained by far the largest country of destination of international migrants with 51 million migrants in 2020.” (p. 10). It is easy to believe that there is a country in which people can achieve anything through hard work because working hard can feel tangible. We often come from countries with fewer opportunities, so any developed country presents itself as a chance for a better life. A country that is popularly known as the land of freedom is attractive to both its citizens and visitors.

Freedom is symbolic for the U.S., as it represents independence, which has also been culturally associated with being American. The concept of freedom is grand, romantic, and righteous. Not thinking about what freedom actually means and attaining a surface-level understanding of what it means to be free is freeing on itself. Meaning, being unaware of what makes people free turns the experience of being free an act of ignorance, and ignorance can be bliss. James Baldwin, in his essay collection *Nobody Knows My Name* (1992), states:

The country will not change until it re-examines itself and discovers what it really means by freedom. In the meantime, generations keep being born, bitterness is increased by incompetence, pride, and folly, and the world shrinks around us. (p. 48).

The shrinking of the world is fueled by said ignorance. Toni Morrison's famous quote, "if you are free, you need to free somebody else", is a strong statement about the power dynamics within freedom. Freeing is a part of freedom, too. One does not happen solely. America has bravely fought for liberty over the centuries, though at the expense of others. For that reason, the American concept of freedom falls under the illusion of the American dream. The illusion is precisely that freedom and liberty come to everyone equally. The American Revolutionary War is patriotically remembered, and as morally righteous and revolutionary as it seemed to fight for independence from the British, their ideas of justice and freedom contradicted their own practices. In 1619, the first enslaved Africans had been brought to North America. By the time of the Revolutionary War (1775 – 1789), Africans had already been taken away from their birthplace 156 years before.

In 1789, Americans ratified a constitution, the U.S. Constitution, by whites for whites. Serving as slaves, Black people had to assimilate into a culture that rejected their languages, religions, practices, and, above all, humanity. According to Bruce Dierenfield in his book *The Civil Rights Movement: The Black Freedom Struggle in America* (2021), "the Founding Fathers excoriated the British for enslaving them politically, even as the colonists enslaved Africans physically." (p.4). For example, Thomas Jefferson's racist views and enslavement of Black people during the time in which he fiercely protested for (white) man's right to liberty is often overlooked. Jefferson's 1790 statement that "every man and every body of men on earth possesses the right of self-government" is then also emptied of its virtue. He went as far as proposing to expel enslaved men after the age of 45 to Africa or the islands of the Caribbean (DIERENFIELD, 2021, p. 4).

This mentality has crossed centuries, for it is very present to this day. Financing and reinforcing the slave trade played a significant part in how white people perceive Black

bodies. Black people, even hundreds of years later, endure what slavery and segregation have imposed. Thomas C. Holt states that “the challenges to the Jim Crow order between 1955 and 1965 were clearly rooted in the generations of resistance that came before, and they cannot be understood without that prior history.” (2021, p. 13). To understand racism in America, it is necessary to review history. We can start by looking at how the economic and social demands of white people aligned with racist views of the last few centuries to justify slavery and segregation. Slave labor laid the ground for the U.S. to become one of the leading economies. Cotton, sugar, and tobacco generated so many profits for the country that the slave trade became essential for the thriving of these products and their trade. Enslaving others guaranteed a hierarchy between races, justified by the prejudice and superiority alleged by whites. The quest for freedom, then, is emptied of its beauty when it is in detriment of others. The slave trade walks hand in hand with racism, for they are two sides of the same coin. Racist ideals and pseudoscience were used to reinforce the notion that there was a hierarchy between races, legitimizing enslavement through philosophy and biology. Some “scientists” and physicians, such as Josiah Nott, even stated that Black people had inferior brains. (DIERENFIELD, 2021, p. 7).

Escaping the belief of American greatness is essential to shed light on the fact that the U.S., similar to other countries in the Americas, results from a system built upon slavery, which has fundamentally shaped the U.S. Moreover, it is undeniable that it has also framed how its citizens think, act, and interact. A system such as slavery relied on the dehumanization of Black people, which was reinforced by physical and psychological violence. James Baldwin wrote about the violence of lynchings in his short story *Going to Meet the Man* (1965), in which the lynching of a Black man is seen as an event to gather, watch, and enjoy. The lynching as an “event” can be seen throughout history (e.g. Sam Hose, Will Brown, Wyatt Outlaw). Billie Holiday, a friend of Angelou, in the song *Strange Fruit* (1939), composed by Abel Meerpol, sings:

Southern trees bear a strange fruit
 Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
 Black body swinging in the Southern breeze
 Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees
 Pastoral scene of the gallant South
 The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth
 Scent of magnolia, sweet and fresh
 And the sudden smell of burning flesh!
 (1:11 – 2:20)

The brutality in a body hanging from a tree is foulness becoming a spectacle, a way to display white supremacy and the powerlessness of Black people. America's history of violence toward African Americans demonstrates how human rights were privileges, not basic civil liberties and freedom. Progress has been slow throughout history. If put into a timeline, from the moment enslaved Africans were brought to the U.S. until abolition, there is a span of around 250 years, almost 3 centuries. It is naive to be confronted with such an extensive timeline and believe that its effects ended with abolition. Abolition did not mean an end to racism. Racism has consequences people still have trouble acknowledging. From slavery to abolition, and from abolition to the civil rights movement, changes happened because enslaved people found ways to survive. Whether they preserved their beliefs or found comfort in songs, whether with peace or justified violence, Black people survived. Culturally, they enriched the U.S. with what their ancestors had left: the heritage within food, clothes, languages, religion, and generations of family. Adapting to American culture was how Africans found a way to preserve their feelings for the home they were forced to abandon. Slave owners deliberately erased African cultures, separated Black families, and prohibited their customs in order to weaken bonds between Black people. Assimilation meant surviving, in the sense of not only staying alive but of having something that is yours when nothing else is. Historian Eric Foner, in a 2011 article for *The Nation*, says:

Indeed, the abolition of slavery, an indisputably moral exercise of national power, gave new meaning to Jefferson's description of the United States as an "empire of liberty." No matter how violent or oppressive, American expansion now meant, by definition, the expansion of freedom—a rhetoric alive and well today.

The freedom rhetoric is exemplified by the Civil War (1861 – 1865). The northern states had already outlawed slavery, which meant increasingly fewer slaves in the North. The South, however, still relied upon forced labor. Slaves were considered property and essential to plantations. Supporting slavery as an institution was beyond purely prejudice - it economically made sense and preserved white people's ownership of land. Furthermore, it also meant that the south remained rural precisely for having a slave-based economy and agriculture. According to Dierenfield (2021, p. 31), "from the time the American slave trade ended formally in 1808 to the Civil War in 1861, natural reproduction increased the number of slaves to nearly four million." In 1837, John C. Calhoun, a proslavery politician, responded to antislavery by saying that "instead of an evil, [slavery was] a good - a positive good", arguing that the two races were not only distinguished by color and other physical differences but also intellectual. According to law scholar Erwin Chemerinsky in a 2019 interview for the

Berkeley News (University of California, Berkeley), the “constitution’s biggest flaw was in protecting the institution of slavery.” There are many provisions which did so, as seen in Article 1, Section 9, which prohibited Congress from banning the importation of enslaved people until 1808. There is also Article 5, which prohibited this from being amended. Article 1, Section 2, stated that enslaved Black people in a state would be counted as three-fifths of the number of white inhabitants of that state. In Article 4, Section 2, there was the fugitive slave clause”, which stated that an escaped slave should be returned to their “owner”. (CHEMERINSKY, 2019). Furthermore, Chemerinsky argues that it took a Civil War to eliminate slavery, but that the racial inequalities from systematic oppression persist today.

A study about incarceration in the U.S. (*The Sentencing Project*, 2021) found that, through data collected in October 2019, “black youth are more than four times as likely to be detained or committed in juvenile facilities as their white peers.” In a 2018 study about racial disparity in suicide among U.S. youth (BRIDGE, HOROWITZ, FONTANELLA, et al.), suicide rates increased from 1993 to 1997 and 2008 to 2021 among black children while it decreased among white children of the same age (p. 697). Why do these disparities exist? As discussed in this paper, American morality was constructed alongside hypocrisy, controversy, and whiteness. The prejudice and interests of white people, whether cultural or economic, turned laws and basic human rights into a question of race rather than humanity, resulting in a system of injustice and bigotry. From the Founding Fathers to American presidential elections in the present, Americans struggle to see their own shortcomings. Silence is easier than admitting to a system that prevails over actual justice. The data about incarceration and suicide should be analyzed through the lens of history, too, for the events of the past formed a society segregated and shaped by foundations it refuses to acknowledge.

The violence Black people in the U.S. suffer now is different than the violence during slavery. However, this type of violence has only reshaped itself to fit modern life. For example, reports of police brutality toward African Americans have filled the news over the past decade, and nations across the world watched as George Floyd, one of many, sparked yet another outcry for justice in 2020. The consequences of violence and racism in the U.S. have names: Trayvon Martin, Daunte Wright, Breonna Taylor, Eric Garner, and many others. Before them, there was Emmett Till, Willie Edwards, and thousands of unnamed Black people who were murdered, lynched, and abused. It is no coincidence that a movement such as *Black Lives Matter (BLM)* has surfaced over the last years in the U.S. People needing to say that *Black* lives matter should be an indication there are reasons to state that they *do* matter. Before BLM, American history saw many protests regarding basic human rights to

minorities. The civil rights movement, which is the focus of this paper, was also an outcry for justice. Maya Angelou, in a 1973 interview with former White House Press Secretary Bill Moyers, discusses how much easier it is to deal with categories rather than humanity. The author states:

MAYA ANGELOU: It doesn't want to deal with the human quality of me.

BILL MOYERS: Stereotypes are easy...

MAYA ANGELOU: Exactly.

BILL MOYERS: Categories are more manageable?

MAYA ANGELOU: Oh, yes, exactly. All you have to do is just put a label on somebody. And then you don't have to deal with the physical fact. You don't have to wonder if they are waiting for the Easter bunny or love Christmas, or, you know, love their parents and hate small kids and are fearful of dogs. If you say, oh, that's a junkie, that's a nigger, that's a kike, that's a Jew, that's a honkie, that's a — you just — that's the end of it.

“That’s the end of it”, as Angelou puts. One of the arguments present in this paper is that a surface-level comprehension of concepts such as freedom puts an end to further instigating profoundness and discovery. Saying that one is simply a certain label is easier than recognizing one’s humanity and celebrating their differences. Angelou, also in the same interview with Moyers, discloses that we do not need to cross boundaries and get inside someone to understand them. Acceptance is more powerful, for it grants you freedom. For the author, “being free is being able to accept people for what they are, and not try to understand all they are or be what they are.” (1973). The author’s participation in civil rights activism paved the way for other protests to come. Not only hers, but of her peers and fellows, too. The effort it took to organize such a movement goes beyond financial support and numbers. Art plays a distinct role in shaping how people intake the cause and it is undeniably one of the foundations for civil rights. Black artists have a critical role in remembrance, and the storytelling within their art is a form of heritage. Whether these artists actively partake into social causes or not, the sole act of producing art is a way of exploring freedom in the way it was meant to be: not dictated by others.

Angelou’s biographies showcase her own quest for seeking meaning to freedom, and how freedom is achieved through not only rights, but through the realization that “we feel safest when we go inside ourselves and find home, a place where we belong and maybe the only place we really do” (ANGELOU, 2008, p.8) in contrast to realizing that “you only are free when you realize you belong no place.” (ANGELOU, 1973). Freedom for Angelou is, then, perhaps the act of finding solace within the self to face the challenges of the physical world. Since the foundations of America to the events that culminated into the civil rights

movement during the 1950s and 1960s, the United States have yet to achieve grounds of actual equality (or equity). The civil rights movement cannot be analyzed only as an isolated event, for there is a clear path of African American achievements that led to this breakthrough (only) a few decades ago. However, it is also important to note the significance of such a movement on its own, as it is seen as one of the largest mass movements in the U.S. to this day.

Contrasting the time between slavery in the U.S. and the country now is one way of pinpointing why and how this movement came to be, especially to non-Americans. Author Thomas C. Holt speaks of a long path of generations that planted the “seeds of the larger story that would unfold”, exemplified by the story of Carrie Fitzgerald, born in 1878, whose family shares the moment in which she did not leave her seat in a bus, similar to the story of Rosa Parks. In 1944, Fitzgerald boarded a bus in which the seats for Black people were occupied by white college students. When occupying a seat reserved for “whites only”, Fitzgerald was not doing so for being “part of a mass social movement” (p. 13), as we see through the history of Black people doing sit-ins. Holt says that, in contrast to the protests years later, there was no mobilization inside communities to elevate her individual protest or other grand gestures. It was simply a momentary act of defiance, which, nonetheless, is as important as Parks resistance.

She would quietly return to her usual routines, minding her garden and grandchildren. What many scholars have called the “classic” Civil Rights Movement, which spanned the decade between 1955 and 1965, is best understood, then, as a unique moment in the long history of African American resistance and struggle against racist oppression, a moment that included many of the elements missing from Carrie’s story. We must recognize as well, however, that that later moment was rooted in and built on the social, economic, and geopolitical transformations that made Carrie’s actions possible and that also shaped the conditions of possibility for the coming storm. (HOLT, 2021, p. 13).

Angelou often references her mother and grandmother as her figures of strength. Carrie Fitzgerald was one within her own family too, for Fitzgerald’s story is gladly told and shared by her descendants. Annie Henderson, referred to as “Momma” by Angelou and her brother Bailey, raised her grandchildren in Stamps, Arkansas, while running a general store. Vivian Baxter, Maya Angelou’s mother, becomes more present in Angelou’s life during her teenage years. Figures of strength come not only from famous martyrs or grand events. In Angelou’s writing and interviews over the years, she often reminisces about moments with her closest friends and family. It is clear that the author values communion as a means of enriching one’s views because the exchange of experiences gives room to comparison and reflection. The

author channeled this feeling into her activism, inspiring people around the world and inviting them to consider the meaning of home and belonging, as well as representation in “common” people. That is, connecting to those around us is a powerful tool in fight and resistance. Respect, as Angelou discusses in a 2003 interview for the *Smithsonian Magazine*, liberates. When discussing the birth of her son Guy Johnson, Angelou remembers how her mother, a nurse, helped her deliver the boy in the hospital.

MAYA ANGELOU: She got up on the table on her knees with me and put her shoulder against my knee and took my hand, and every time a pain would come she'd tell a joke. I would laugh and laugh [she laughs uproariously] and bear down. And she said, “Here he comes, here he comes.” And she put her hand on him first, my son. So throughout her life she liberated me. Liberated me constantly. Respected me, respected what I tried to do, believed in me. (2003).

So, freedom, for Angelou, is rooted in respect. Liberating one another starts by acceptance and respect, not understanding, as she previously stated. What makes America today is only a fraction of what she hoped it would become. From the Founding Fathers to the civil rights movement, Black lives filled history not only with tales of resistance and survival, but with the commonality of day-to-day life and people. It is a tiresome road, but, as Angelou says to Bill Moyers, one might encounter many defeats, but one must never be defeated. It is necessary to confront defeat, “get over it, all the way through it, and go on.” (1973).

3 A MOVEMENT FOR THE AGES

The present paper, as posed before, intends to discuss the civil rights movement in accordance with what poet Maya Angelou has shared throughout her life as an activist and, above all, seeker of meaning. For that, we must understand the events that led to the climax of the movement. Holt (2021), in his book *The Movement*, discusses the changes before famous protests and boycotts, such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955). For the author, the many historical transformations that led to the reshaping of lives and consciousnesses were set in motion by the First World War (p. 15). The Civil War is also part of a historical transformation, as it ended with the abolition of slavery. Looking at history, from when the Civil War ended in 1865, to 1914, when the First War started, Black people in the U.S. had been slowly climbing the ladder toward actual equality after abolition.

In 1860, president Abraham Lincoln's election stirred conflicts within the country. Lincoln was a part of the antislavery Republican party. His victory resulted in 11 Southern states leaving the Union by the end of 1860 and beginning of 1861. The North and the South had already been divided for years over slavery. A novel called *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), by Harriet Beecher Stowe, was a source of inspiration to the antislavery cause. In the book, Beecher portrays the atrocities of slavery and the conflicts between enslaved and free people. Abolitionism had been growing in the North, which, by the South's definition, was a threat to their states. Fearing that the federal government would attempt to end slavery, Southerners believed that the government did not have the right to interfere with state laws.

The Confederate States were formed by Southern representatives in Montgomery, Alabama, and Jefferson Davis was elected as their president. The start of actual military combat is considered to be the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter, in Charleston, South Carolina. Fort Sumter was a federal outpost, and the Confederacy's bombardment drove the federal troops to evacuate after a heated combat. What ensues over the next years is a back and forth of battles between South and North (e.g. *First Battle of Bull Run*, *Battle of Shiloh*, *Battle of Antietam*). The Union had far more resources and people than the Confederacy. On January 1st, 1863, Lincoln announces the Emancipation Proclamation, which states:

And by virtue of the power, and for the purpose aforesaid, I do order and declare that all persons held as slaves within said designated States, and parts of States, are, and henceforward shall be free; and that the Executive government of the United States, including the military and naval authorities thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of said persons.

[...]

And I further declare and make known, that such persons of suitable condition, will be received into the armed service of the United States to garrison forts, positions, stations, and other places, and to man vessels of all sorts in said service. (LINCOLN, 1863).

The document was a war measure, not an actual declaration of abolition. Enslaved African Americans were freed in territories held by the Confederacy. African Americans in Union territory were not covered by the Proclamation. The actual abolition in Northern states happened with the 13th Amendment in 1865. The Emancipation Proclamation exemplifies how the freedom of Black people has always been a matter highly controlled by interests of white people. That is, even if advocating for Black freedom, said interests were always the counterpart within the freedom discourse, almost as if they were put into a scale together to weigh their balance. According to the U.S. Library of Congress, Lincoln had issued a preliminary Emancipation Proclamation partly due to the heavy losses at the Battle of Antietam. This preliminary Proclamation threatened “to free all the enslaved people in the states in rebellion if those states did not return to the Union by January 1, 1863.”

Furthermore, it is not to say that Lincoln’s decision was not of great importance. However, it is to say that Black freedom had become a tool in war decisions, not a matter of human rights. Frederick Douglass, famous African-American abolitionist and orator, advocated for the enlistment of Black soldiers into the Union. Douglas argued that it was only right that African Americans should be allowed to fight for the end of slavery too. Douglass helped with recruitment after the Emancipation Proclamation. Around 180,000 African-American soldiers enlisted to fight for the Union.

The end of the Civil War took place in 1865, when Robert E. Lee surrendered to Ulysses S. Grant, future U.S. president (1869 – 1877). Historian James McPherson says, in a 2011 article for the *American Battlefield Trust*:

The Civil War started because of uncompromising differences between the free and slave states over the power of the national government to prohibit slavery in the territories that had not yet become states. [...] The incoming Lincoln administration and most of the Northern people refused to recognize the legitimacy of secession. They feared that it would discredit democracy and create a fatal precedent that would eventually fragment the no-longer United States into several small, squabbling countries.

So, was the Civil War ever about Black freedom or slavery as an institution? For African Americans, it was an achievement nonetheless. Abolition outweighs the matter of the freedom discourse, but the consequences of white supremacy still linger in the country today. The Civil War was followed by the Reconstruction Era, almost a decade (1865 – 1877) of

changes and adaptation to new amendments in the Constitution (13th, 14th, 15th) and unification of North and South. The amendments, contested by the defeated Confederacy, declared freed slaves as citizens with, supposedly, the same rights as white citizens in the U.S. Enslaved African Americans were legally free, but still not socially and economically equal to white Americans. According to the book *An Outline of American History* (1994), “the North completely failed to address the economic needs of the freedmen.” (p. n.d.) The Freedmen’s Bureau, an agency created to assist former slaves during the Reconstruction Era, did not meet the expectations or needs of said former slaves. The Bureau could not provide them with political and economic opportunity, or even protection. Facing the period after the Civil War meant not only facing racism, but acknowledging that the U.S. had to confront many other great flaws.

The South remained poor, devastated by the war, and economically dependent on the North. Segregation was reinforced by Southern laws and violence toward Black people was recurrent. *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), a landmark decision of the U.S. Supreme Court, issues the doctrine “separate but equal.” The Court ruled that racial segregation laws were not unconstitutional if each race had access to facilities “equal” in quality (GROVES, 1951). Reconstruction failed in integrating newly freed African Americans into American society. More specifically, white American society, and the struggle for equality and freedom would suffer greatly until the 20th century, when civil rights became a national issue.

Dierenfield (2021) argues that African Americans “never reconciled to their inferior status and kept searching for the best approaches that offered a way out, alternately pursuing assimilation with whites and independence from them.” A school of thought, as the author puts, was that Black people should “accommodate themselves to white power” (p. 21):

Booker T. Washington, a formerly enslaved Virginian and the nation’s most powerful black man, declared that agitating for equality was “the extremist folly” and urged black southerners—most of whom were impoverished and illiterate farm workers—to accept their second-class citizenship. As the founder of Alabama’s Tuskegee Institute, he delivered a controversial speech in 1895 in which he urged blacks to stay in the South, develop their farming and industrial skills, and cultivate the virtues of patience, enterprise, and thrift as the best path to economic security.

For Booker T. Washington, proving the Black men’s worth in the marketplace would eventually grant them political equality. W.E.B. Du Bois, on the other hand, challenged segregation with political action. In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois points that Washington was prompting Black people to tolerate inferiority to white people. Ida B. Wells-Barnett also criticized Washington for his stance. The journalist argued that he was “playing

into the hands of white Southerners.” (p. 22). In 1909, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was founded:

To chart a more militant direction, black and white progressives, including Du Bois and Wells-Barnett, founded in 1909 what became the largest and most important civil rights organization of the twentieth century, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The fledgling reform organization attracted considerable attention when it convinced the U.S. Supreme Court to strike down state laws exempting whites from literacy tests and when it called for a boycott of *The Birth of a Nation*, the popular movie that glorified the KKK. (DIERENFIELD, 2021).

In 1916, a great number of African Americans left the South during the First War, heading North, where they could live with less fear of the relentless racial violence and economic disadvantages that they encountered in the South. This migration is known as the *Great Migration*, and it spanned from 1916 to early 1970s. As previously stated, Holt (2021) argues that the First World War was what set a significant transformation in the U.S. toward Civil Rights. For the author, the migration pattern induced by the war reshuffled the nation’s racial geography and reconfigured social and political terrain (p. 15). During this period, African Americans headed to Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Detroit, establishing communities of their own, as we can see in Harlem, a neighborhood in Manhattan. Although the migration provided Black Americans with better quality of life than in the South, that did not mean they had reached equal grounds to white Americans. They still faced informal work, segregated neighborhoods, and the aggressiveness of white people when blaming them for the economic problems and violation of racial norms (DIERENFIELD, 2021, p. 23).

Between the wars, the NAACP played the role of leader in the civil rights movements occurring at the time. Lynching rates of Black men were high, voting was not equal, and segregation was still a problem. Furthermore, there was divergence within the movement. Ideologies among African Americans varied from socialist approaches to unionism. In 1919, the *Red Summer* happened, in which white Americans’ violence toward Black Americans escalated to the point of murder, persecution, and terrorism across the country. At the time, The New York Times’ headline for October 5th read:

FOR ACTION ON RACE RIOT PERIL; Radical Propaganda Among Negroes Growing, and Increase of Mob Violence Set Out in Senate Brief for Federal Inquiry The War's Responsibility. Reds Inflaming Blacks. Industrial Clashes. I. The Facts--1919. II. The Failure of the States. III. A National Problem. IV. Consequences of Lynching. V. The Danger. (NEW YORK TIMES, 1919).

By 1928, a few years after the First War, Maya Angelou is born in St. Louis, Missouri. She was the second child of Bailey Johnson and Vivian Baxter, granddaughter to Annie Henderson and sister to Bailey Jr. Angelou's parents ended their marriage when she was around 3 years old, sending her and Bailey Jr. to Annie Henderson (Momma) in Stamps, Arkansas. Henderson was Angelou's paternal grandmother and she ran a general store. Henderson's store received a lot of Black workers in Stamps, which granted her financial stability during the Great Depression in 1929 and the First War in 1916. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou describes a great part of her childhood in Stamps alongside her brother. When Angelou and Bailey were sent back to live with their mother, she was already eight years old. Vivian Baxter's partner, described as "Mr. Freeman" in the book, starts molesting Angelou, later raping her. Freeman is sentenced but temporarily released. Angelou's family is informed that he was beaten to death during his temporary release. For that reason, Angelou falls mute for almost five years, only ever speaking to her brother Bailey, believing that her confession killed him. During this time, the author found solace in literature, especially poetry. Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem *Sympathy* (1899) is Angelou's inspiration for the title of her first autobiography.

In 1936, which was around when Angelou was eight years old, the United States had already faced high rates of unemployment and changes in administrations (President Roosevelt's election and New Deal initiative). In terms of early century culture, the radio, which was free, was a big part of America's routine. Listening to soap operas was a form of distraction from the current economic crisis and overall dread hanging over the country. Black Americans, who thus far had been facing an even worse economic situation, started to move for equality. Black voters started supporting the Democratic Party and played a significant part in Roosevelt's election. The 1930s also saw the birth of the Harlem Renaissance. Angelou, after the traumatic event, was once again living with her grandmother, back in Stamps, Arkansas.

By the 1940s, World War II broke, and industrialization was at large. Black Americans left the South for "defense-related jobs but were kept from filling them". (DIERENFIELD, 2021, p. 54). A. Philip Randolph, America's most famous union leader, pressured Roosevelt's administration into establishing the *Fair Employment Practice Committee* (FEPC). The committee was set to "prevent job discrimination in war mobilization" (p. 54). Dierenfield (2021, p. 55) quotes a former U.S. Army corporal:

I spent four years in the army to free a bunch of Dutchmen and Frenchmen, and I'm hanged if I'm going to let the Alabama version of the Germans kick me around when I get home. No sirree-bob! I went into the army a nigger; I'm comin' out a man.

Once again, Americans are faced with the U.S.'s inability to follow the ideals they so invasively fought for. The country's appeal to be great is overshadowed by its deep desire to pursue its long-lost Tara, as in 1939's *Gone with the Wind*, Hollywood's blockbuster and everlasting fantasy. In 1947, Harry Truman, which had alleged ties to the KKK, was elected. He was the first president to directly speak to the NAACP in a meeting. His administration, surprisingly, supported African Americans through actual practical means. At this time, Maya Angelou was around nineteen years old, already a mother to 3-year-old Guy Johnson, and pursuing a career in entertainment. The period of most turmoil for civil rights began in the late 1940s. Now, the civil rights movements across the country had to awaken and mobilize crowds of Black folks once more, as well as appeal to white ones, to achieve equality and justice.

On July 26, 1948, President Harry Truman issues an executive order to end segregation in the American army. The U.S., by the 1950s, was starting to notice African American culture, especially music and sports. White artists popularized the works of Black artists, exploiting their creative efforts to develop identities. The middle of the century presented African Americans with new obstacles for racial justice. *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) ended racial segregation in public schools but many schools remained segregated. Emmett Till, fourteen years old, is brutally murdered after being accused of flirting with a white woman. Till's murderers are acquitted, sparking national attention and outrage. Angelou was twenty-seven years old and in Europe:

During this time, she traveled worldwide as a performer and a writer. Between 1954 and 1955, Angelou toured Europe as a cast member of *Porgy and Bess*, an opera set in South Carolina. Angelou's travels across Europe and her work as a performer are captured in her third autobiography, *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry like Christmas* (1976). In 1957, she recorded her first album, *Calypso Lady*, which was followed by her move to New York City to join the *Harlem Writers Guild* and pursue acting. (HORTON, p. n. d.).

According to Angelou's official website, the author met Martin Luther King Jr. in New York in 1960. Deeply moved by one of his speeches in Harlem, the author, along with comedian Godfrey Cambridge, created the play *Cabaret for Freedom*. The proceeds from the play were given to the *Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (SCLC), which, to this day, continues to be an American organization that focuses on civil rights, but to an international

level. The organization was founded in 1957 by MLK, following the *Montgomery Bus Boycott* in Montgomery, Alabama. Rosa Parks had been arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white man on the bus, which sparked the boycott. Starting on December 5, 1955, it lasted 381 days, ending on December 21, 1956. The result of the boycott was the desegregation of the Montgomery bus system. Historically, the boycott was “one of history’s most dramatic and massive nonviolent protests, stunning the nation and the world.” (SLCL, n.d.). Rosa Parks' refusal to give her place was symbolic and became one of the beacons of hope and struggle for the years to come. The United States was now entering the era of the modern civil rights movement. Jim Crow laws had long ruled the country, since the Reconstruction period (1865-77) after the American Civil War to the 1950s.

From the late 1870s Southern U.S. state legislatures passed laws requiring the separation of whites from “persons of color” in public transportation and schools. Segregation was extended to parks, cemeteries, theatres, and restaurants in an attempt to prevent any contact between Blacks and Whites as equals. Although the U.S. Constitution forbade outright racial discrimination, every state of the former Confederacy moved to disfranchise African Americans by imposing biased reading requirements, stringent property qualifications, or complex poll taxes. (UROFSKY, 2021).

Bus boycotts spread across the South, and leaders of the *Montgomery Improvement Association* (MIA), which had MLK as president, met in Atlanta in 1957 to form a regional organization. This association would help people coordinate protests across the country’s southern region. Before this, in 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that “separate but equal”, a legal doctrine in the country’s constitutional law, was unconstitutional. The Supreme Court argues that segregation produces unequal education and harms Black youth. Desegregation of schools begins and integration starts. The 1960s came in filled with organized sit-ins, more boycotts, and international attention to the cause. Maya Angelou’s poetry encompasses the turmoil of this time and before. Her shared thoughts on ancestry, heritage, generational suffering, and fear for the present can be felt through the poems selected for this paper. Her engagement in the cause aligned with her arts, providing Angelou with a way to contribute financially to the movement, as seen when she formed the play to raise funds for the SCLC. By the time she published her first poetry collection (1971), the U.S. had gone through most of the turmoil involving civil rights protests.

The U.S. Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, with the Public Law 88-352 (78 Stat. 241) prohibiting discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex or national origin. This act also had provisions which forbade discrimination on the basis of sex, as well

as, race in hiring, promoting, and firing. In 1965, Malcolm X was assassinated during a rally in New York City. In 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated on his hotel room's balcony. Maya Angelou published her first autobiography the following year. The 1970s started with the historical events of the 1960s' lasting efforts [such as The Greensboro Four (1960), Freedom Rides (1961), the Birmingham Demonstrations (1963), the famous March on Washington (1963), in which MLK delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech, the Selma-Montgomery March (1965), Black Panther Party formation (1965)]. The years from the 1940s to the 1970s saw a lot of progress in terms of equality between races. Martin Luther King Jr.'s letter, written during his arrest in Birmingham, says:

We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and Godgiven rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jetlike speed toward gaining political independence, but we still creep at horse-and-buggy pace toward gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter. Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, 'Wait.' But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television . . . then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair . . . (KING, 1963).

MLK's letter is one example of the feelings that arose during the climax of the civil rights movement. Angelou's activism is similar, and has shared that her "equipment tends to be that of a social humanitarian and a poet." (FULLER, 2014). Throughout her life, Maya Angelou fought for equality by seeking a sort of inner strength that could be shared to defeat injustice. It is fascinating how positive Angelou is despite the many reasons she had to be otherwise. Her activism is rooted in the belief that there are reasons to cherish one another or, simply, accept that people will always be different. In more recent years, before her death in 2014, one of Angelou's mottos had been to be a rainbow in someone's cloud, inspired by an African-American song from the 19th century.

Heritage, once more, is important for Angelou and others in the cause, for it grants retrospective on achievements and ancestral strength. King's statement "then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait" shows that waiting meant enduring possibly another century of mistreatment. The civil rights movement culminated because of a long line of freedom fighters and common people seeking the liberties that should not be a question of race, but of humanity.

4 ANALYZING THE POET AND ACTIVIST MAYA ANGELOU

Maya Angelou's life is vastly discussed and studied. Her autobiographies have proved that biographical works move and provoke masses just as much as fiction. Angelou wrote about her own self using instruments common in fiction writing, which led her to national acclaim. Often referenced, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) is the first volume in her autobiographical series. In this book, Angelou reminisces and reflects about her life from a young age until pregnancy at sixteen. The book has a broad spectrum of emotions, ranging from silent rage to loss, euphoria, and absolute joy. Through questioning and insightful revelations about power dynamics, race, gender, childhood, imagination, and discovery of the self, Maya Angelou lays the ground for exploring one's place on earth as she poses her reality for the reader to also reflect and compare. Angelou's other volumes of autobiography continue the narrative of her life as she ages, always reflecting upon past and present events. The unity the author seeks might be interpreted as Angelou trying to connect to the human experience by thriving on our differences rather than not acknowledging them.

The experience of pain is one, but that of how one feels pain is singular. Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska has said that seeking sincerity in memoirs is rather pointless, for what is actually worth asking is "what version of his self and world the author's chosen — since there's always room for choice." (p. 55) We only know of Angelou what she chose to share, and it is precisely her sharing of her activist side that this paper intends to unravel, contextualize, and sort according to American history. This analysis uses her poetry as the main tool for research on such aspects. Angelou's poetry displays an inner self that can be traced historically and biographically, for the author crafted her writing to accommodate her life in a way that is both personal and universal. When talking about race, Angelou's writing gravitates toward the feeling of ancestry, often by seeking solace in the ways of history. Angelou pays homage to those gone while uplifting those present. Valuing what came before her is Angelou's way of making sense of the present, which is an aspect we can see in the poems selected for this paper.

In the 1960s, Angelou was a part of the behind scenes of civil rights organizations. After *Cabaret for Freedom's* success, she was nominated the coordinator of the SCLC's New York Office. Angelou was now close to activists such as MLK, Rustin, and A. Philip Randolph. During her travels in Egypt, Angelou married civil rights activist Vusumzi Make and moved to Cairo, leaving her position at SLCL behind. There, she got a job as the only woman editor in the magazine *The Arab Observer*, reporting on anticolonial Africa. Even in

another continent, Angelou remained actively engaged with civil rights activism. When in Ghana, Angelou protested outside the American Embassy in the capital. There, she joined with others to oppose segregation and apartheid.

A few years later, Angelou returned to the U.S. and was again in the presence of her American peers and fellows. At the time, she toured the country after MLK asked her to help promote the *Poor People's Campaign*. The same year (1968), MLK was assassinated. Angelou focused more on her writing. Her love for language came from her childhood and years of introversion due to the trauma of being raped. During her years of not-speaking, she read Dickens, Poe, Shakespeare, but, more importantly, she dove deep into Black authors' works. Langston Hughes and Paul Lawrence Dunbar filled her mind with the sensitivity of poetry. Mrs. Flowers, an important figure in Angelou's *Caged Bird* (1969), taught her the wonders and importance of spoken word, eventually leading Angelou to speak again:

“Now no one is going to make you talk—possibly no one can. But bear in mind, language is man's way of communicating with his fellow man and it is language alone which separates him from the lower animals.” That was a totally new idea to me, and I would need time to think about it. “Your grandmother says you read a lot. Every chance you get. That's good, but not good enough. Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning.” (p. 72).

According to Vicki Cox (2006), Angelou wanted to contribute to the cause because her friends were “speaking out against prejudice in their music, plays, books, and songs”, leading her to search for something more than show business. Yasmin Y. DeGout, in her 2005 article *The Poetry of Maya Angelou: Liberation Ideology and Technique*, says that Angelou's poetry reached the national consciousness after she read her poem *On the Pulse of Morning* at Bill Clinton's inaugural speech. DeGout praises Angelou for her ability to translate “personal experience into political discourse.” (p. 2). Terry Eagleton (2006), in *How to Read a Poem*, discusses the origins of poetry and how it was just a branch of rhetoric, such as history. The word in the ancient world had both textual and political sense because it meant both the study of verbal tropes and figures, as well as the art of persuasive public speech. The author also discusses that “verbal embellishment distracted you from the facts” and how language started to be seen as an obstacle to pure truth. It was an influence on how people perceived things (p. 11, 12). As mentioned before, the beauty of the word and possible embellishments moved Angelou to higher intellectual grounds rather than tackled her from seeing actual meaning.

The selected poems for the intended analysis are *My Guilt* (1969), *Harlem Hopscotch* (1971), *When I Think About Myself* (1971), *Riot: 60's* (1971), *America* (1975), and *These Yet*

to *Be United States* (1990). They span within her collections of poems over the years, all compiled into *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou* (1994). In *Riot 60's*, Angelou mentions Detroit, Newark, and New York. Known as the *Long, hot summer of 1967*, it refers to the racial tension experienced by Americans at the time, especially African Americans. Poverty, segregation, and racial discrimination were still happening on a large scale, despite previous court rulings about racial equality. In 1965, the Watts riots broke in Los Angeles after Marquette Frye was stopped for drunk driving, resulting in a physical struggle between Frye and officers.

Angelou's way of depicting these riots is through metaphor: the author possibly compares the rise of these riots to light. To turn on a light, more specifically "a hundred Watts", means to illuminate what was previously in the dark, which we can see in the poem's fourth stanza. The attention these riots received were of national scale. The author, in the first and third stanzas, mentions and names what seems to be local businesses burning, which extends the idea of light and turns it into fire. According to Ezra Pound in his *Literary Essays* (1968), a "proper and perfect symbol is the natural object" (p. 9). Symbolism in poetry, for Pound, requires a symbolic function that does not obtrude the sense and the poetic quality of given passages. If a person does not understand the symbol, the author risks having their work diminished by the reader's lack of understanding. Symbolism, then, becomes not a tool, but an obstruction to the poem. The symbol of light present in *Riot 60's* falls under Pound's definition of symbolism that does not obtrude.

Lighting: a hundred Watts
 Detroit, Newark and New York
 Screeching nerves, exploding minds
 lived tied to a policeman's whistle
 a welfare worker's doorbell
 finger
 (ANGELOU, 1994, p. 38).

In the poem's fifth stanza, Angelou reproduces spoken language, more specifically a Southern accent, which can be seen as a link between police brutality and the South's history of chasing and lynching African Americans. In the sixth stanza, there is also a depiction of a chase resulting in violence. The verses "shoot him in the belly/shoot him while he run" possibly depict the disadvantages African Americans had during these protests against the police departments, as well as how cowardly these attacks by the police were.

[...]
 Chugga chugga chigga

git me one nigga
 lootin' n burnin'
 he won't git far'

[...]
 national guard nervous with his shiny gun
 goose the motor quicker
 here's my nigga picka
 shoot him in the belly
 shoot him while he run
 (ANGELOU, 1994, p. 39).

In her poetry, Angelou is very vocal about her anger towards injustice, her sensibility for love and her sadness when facing death, provoking readers to feel rather than solely think. Grief, love, and death are explored in simple rhyme, imagery, metaphor, and symbols. Those used to poetry might argue that Angelou excessively used rhyme. However, through a historical lens, more specifically music history, we can see how much of African American music genres she has paid homage to. The resemblance to blues becomes apparent when the poems are recited. In videos of the author reciting and acting her own poems, the blues metric is seen in the *call and response* element present in her work. Call and response is a fundamental characteristic of blues and African culture. Speaker and listener interact through an audience dynamic in which a response from the public is expected for the call of the presenter. Angelou's discourse always expects a reaction from readers. As a practice of union and participation, this format became common among African Americans, and it is seen in African American churches across the U.S. Religion played an important part in the civil rights movement, as a way of finding comfort and communion, but also in raising funds for protests. Angelou was very religious herself and often said we are children of God in her works and interviews over the years.

The poem *Harlem Hopscotch* describes what happens in a hopscotch game. The physicality present in the poem, the act of jumping to play this game, becomes the rhythm in the verses, again bringing the musical element often present in Angelou's writing. Jumping on one foot, going from side to side, could be an analogy for the African American experience. You are inside a set of rules and you must follow it with dexterity to win. You are also bound to obey them no matter what. The subject within the poem, likely the author herself, at the end, distances themselves from the game and plays differently. Putting two feet on one spot is considered breaking the rules. The subject denies it so. They said she lost; she says she won. The rules were purposefully broken because the author believed in following her own path, even if dangerous. There could also be a parallel between how Black Americans dealt with poverty and racial violence in Harlem – jump here, jump there, but do not stop anywhere. And

do not give up, keep playing the game. Harlem, at the time, was a scenario for protests. In 1964, James Powell, fifteen years old, was killed by an officer. Six days of confrontation and resistance followed. Angelou's connections to Harlem started with the Harlem Writers Guild in the late 1950s.

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 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, 1994, p. 51).

The narrative of her activism, constructed for the purpose of this paper, proceeds with *My Guilt*. Malcolm X and MLK, well respected leaders of the movement and friends of Angelou, had been killed in 1965 and 1968 respectively. She is very expressive of her guilt and grief for the losses that went beyond a personal level. They were losses for an entire community; therefore, the grief has multiple sides. As she writes about still being alive, the complexity of the guilt appears. There is no direct relation between their assassinations and Angelou, but the connection is there. The guilt is a possible reflection of her feelings of incapacity and passiveness. What she protests, then, comes from a place of guilt instead of pride because she feels as if she failed them and the cause somehow. It is a sad realization, a sort of slump the author finds herself in. It displays, once again, the hardships and sacrifices in a social revolution, which is seen in naming Vesey, Turner, and Gabriel. The author is possibly referring to previous freedom fighters Denmark Vesey (1767 – 1822), Nat Turner (1800 – 1831), and Gabriel Prosser (1776 – 1800). Ancestry, in this poem, is then not a source of strength, but of resentment toward the self. Metaphor is seen in the verse *My sin is "hanging from a tree,"* for the sake of symbolism, in which "hanging from a tree" is a mention of lynchings.

My crime is "heroes, dead and gone,"
 dead Vesey, Turner, Gabriel

dead Malcolm, Marcus, Martin King.
They fought too hard, they loved too well.
My crime is I'm alive to tell.

My sin is "hanging from a tree,"
I do not scream, it makes me proud.
I take to dying like a man.
I do it to impress the crowd.
My sin lies in not screaming loud.
(ANGELOU, 1994, p. 45).

When I think about myself, one of the author's most celebrated poems, was recited by the author in Salado, Texas (1988). Before she started, she pointed that the laughs mentioned in the poem, to those who do not know Black features, might sound like she is laughing. She wrote the poem for a maid she saw in a bus in New York, laughing each time the bus moved or stopped. The survival apparatus that Angelou describes is used to avoid confrontation and display submissiveness. The laugh is to mitigate situations that actually cause anger, sadness and feelings of oppression. The subject simply laughs, "extending her lips and making a sound." There is also a historical element present in the poem about the Jim Crow Era, in which no title of respect could be given to Black folks. They could be called boy, girl, uncle, aunt, but not Mr. and Mrs. The subject, when thinking about herself, feels pathetic and powerless. Jim Crow customs and attitude lasted even after the U.S. prohibited discrimination by race with the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Sixty years in these folks' world,
The child I works for calls me girl,
I say "Yes ma'am" for working's sake.
Too proud to bend,
Too poor to break,
I laugh until my stomach ache,
When I think about myself.
(ANGELOU, 1994, p. 29).

In this poem, Angelou criticizes the disrespect rooted in racism while wondering why she cannot stop laughing "for working's sake". It aches the subject to do so, but confrontation might result in losing the job. The repetition is found in the verse *When I think about myself*, and the incomplete syntax also contributes to the rhythm of the poem. Wolosky (2008) says that syntax plays a distinct role in poetry and can contribute to rhythm, diction, and flow, a dramatization of parts, as she calls (p. 24).

Syntax is inevitably a technical and dry subject: dry as bones. But, like bones, syntax remains the understructure holding together the poem as its more enticing imagery or logic or composition or melodious language unfolds. In ordering and mediating both the structure and the reading experience of the poem, syntax, like dry

bones, can awaken and rise to new and exciting poetic life. (WOLOSKY, 2008, p. 43).

In *America*, Angelou criticizes her birth country for its façade of greatness, which is also one of the critiques in this paper. We have imagery largely composing this poem with sceneries commonly present in American culture and history. Mines, borders, abundance, and pride, all which relate to what it means to be American, are juxtaposed with the U.S.'s inability to actually make use of their land, promises of justice, and overall noble causes. DeGout (2005) discusses the power of community in Angelou's poetry, which *America* seems to criticize too. It is a divided country. According to DeGout, sharing deep trauma and pain undertakes the healing process and creates a community of healers (p. 7). Angelou often seeks to listen and also be heard, something that is lacking in the country and is in dire need of reconfiguration. The civil rights movement, at its peak in the 1960s, only happened because communities of African Americans gathered, shared, and fought for something in common.

The gold of her promise
has never been mined

Her borders of justice
not clearly defined

Her crops of abundance
the fruit and the grain

Have not fed the hungry
nor eased that deep pain
(ANGELOU, 1994, p. 85).

These Yet to be United States follows *America's* argument of a country that is yet to be born. In this poem, we see Angelou discussing the U.S.'s potential of being great. By the time this poem was published (1990), Angelou had seen the main events of the sixties. The poem's title is a call to keep seeking improvement. The civil rights movement cannot be defined in terms of winning/losing because there are still ways to go. The achievements of the past decade laid the ground for a stronger community now protected by law. She talks of a country that can make "nations bow in fear" but cannot deal with its own suffering. The poem has an accusatory tone that is achieved through usage of second person, as seen in the verses *Your open mouth in anger / Your bombs can change the seasons, / You dwell in whitened castles*. As someone who saw one of the greatest mass movements in the U.S., Angelou still felt there was room for improvement and injustices still clouding over the country.

Why are you unhappy?

Why do your children cry?
They kneel alone in terror
with dread in every glance.
Their nights are threatened daily
by a grim inheritance.
(ANGELOU, 1994, p. 241).

The poem has undertones of pleading in the questions *Why are you unhappy? / Why do your children cry?*. They play into Angelou's confrontation of the country in this poem, which is addressed through personification. The vocabulary is composed mainly of negative emotions (terror, suffering, fear), displaying that there are still issues in the nation. This poem shared a side to the author that wishes to keep going and expanding the progress of the last decades. Angelou's activism continued throughout her life. In 2011, Barack Obama awarded her with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor in the U.S. She was eighty-three years old and being recognized by the country she often criticized. For that reason, Maya Angelou continues to be an icon of freedom. She showed that breaking the rules, as she posed in *Harlem Hopscotch*, is necessary for survival and progress. *These Yet to be United States* closes one way of analyzing Maya Angelou as poet who was an activist. The historical analysis supported the author's reasons to remain outspoken after the events of the civil rights movement. This sequence of poems, a fraction of her legacy, depicts Angelou's lifelong vocalness about oppression.

5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Maya Angelou's eloquence was beautifully shaped by her love for literature, which contributed to Angelou finding her voice as an activist. Connecting history to the author's poetry supports the storytelling present in her works. The significance of analyzing the civil rights movement and her contributions at the time is in the preservation of what she chose to share with audiences. As stated at the beginning of the paper, through her interview with Tate (1984), Angelou believed in the power of crafting words to fit a purpose, as seen in the selected poems. Reviewing American history from slavery to the present moment served as a baseline for understanding Angelou's activism.

Exploring the freedom rhetoric served as a critique of the U.S.'s contradictory behavior toward African Americans. The country's progress is stalled by its inability to recognize its flaws. The importance of reporting the African-American narrative in literature is in contributing to the country's history and culture. Freedom is not simply granted and issues are solved. It is constant reaffirmation and preservation. Angelou's activism became a model that uplifted and helped others. Her positive view on life is possible because of how she dealt with the negative situations in her trajectory. The respect that precedes freedom comes from the Self and the Other. Understanding is not needed to respect existence. The sensitivity of Angelou's work proves that poetry can be a tool to move many lives. Holt (2021) supports the idea that there is still a struggle happening in the country after the events of the sixties:

Thus does it echo the protean insight of the civil rights song, "Freedom is a constant struggle." It was no accident that the seemingly plaintive refrain of that song became increasingly popular as the struggles of the 1960s grew more intractable and the list of Movement martyrs grew longer. [...] Freedom is a prize won not in a single campaign, but in a long struggle waged by a determined and committed people. (HOLT, 2021, p. 119).

Angelou saw literature as a way to instigate change. Her poetry was rooted in her experiences as a Black woman, someone who knows oppressions from both race and gender. Encouraged by other Black artists, Angelou started writing and building her craft with determination. As her work matured, the author started to become an icon in literature too. The parallel between her poetry and activism is given when we see her poems as tools for motivation, a key-factor in activism. Furthermore, it engages people to the cause and invites them to question their position in the dynamics within the "greatest nation in the world."

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APPENDIX A – SELECTED POEMS

My Guilt (1969) by Maya Angelou

My guilt is "slavery's chains," too long
the clang of iron falls down the years.

This brother's sold, this sister's gone,
is bitter wax, lining my ears.

My guilt made music with the tears.

My crime is "heroes, dead and gone,"
dead Vesey, Turner, Gabriel,
dead Malcolm, Marcus, Martin King.
They fought too hard, they loved too well.
My crime is I'm alive to tell.

My sin is "hanging from a tree,"
I do not scream, it makes me proud.
I take to dying like a man.
I do it to impress the crowd.
My sin lies in not screaming loud.

Harlem Hopscotch (1971)

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 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.

When I Think About Myself (1971) by Maya Angelou

When I think about myself,

I almost laugh myself to death,

My life has been one great big joke,

A dance that's walked,

A song that's spoke,

I laugh so hard I almost choke,

When I think about myself.

Sixty years in these folks' world,

The child I works for calls me girl,

I say "Yes ma'am" for working's sake.

Too proud to bend,

Too poor to break,

I laugh until my stomach ache,

When I think about myself.

My folks can make me split my side,

I laughed so hard I nearly died,

The tales they tell sound just like lying,

They grow the fruit,

But eat the rind,

I laugh until I start to crying,

When I think about my folks.

Riot: 60's (1971) by Maya Angelou

Our

YOUR FRIEND CHARLIE pawnshop

was a glorious blaze
 I heard the flames lick
 then eat the trays
 of zircons
 mounted in red gold alloys

Easter clothes and stolen furs
 burned in the attic
 radios and teevees
 crackled with static
 plugged in
 only to a racial outlet

Some
 thought the FRIENDLY FINANCE FURNITURE CO.
 burned higher
 When a leopard-print sofa with gold legs
 (which makes into a bed)
 caught fire
 an admiring groan from the waiting horde
 "Absentee landlord
 you got that shit"

Lighting: a hundred Watts
 Detroit, Newark and New York
 Screeching nerves, exploding minds
 lives tied to
 a policeman's whistle
 a welfare worker's doorbell
 finger
 Hospitality, southern-style
 corn pone grits and you-all smile
 whole blocks novae
 brand-new stars

policemen caught in their
 brand-new cars
 Chugga chugga chigga
 git me one nigga
 lootin' n burnin'
 he won't git far

Watermelons, summer ripe
 grey neckbones and boiling tripe
 supermarket roastin' like the
 noonday sun
 national guard nervous with his shiny gun
 goose the motor quicker
 here's my nigga picka
 shoot him in the belly
 shoot him while he run

America (1975) by Maya Angelou

The gold of her promise
 has never been mined

Her borders of justice
 not clearly defined

Her crops of abundance
 the fruit and the grain

Have not fed the hungry
 nor eased that deep pain

Her proud declarations
 are leaves on the wind

Her southern exposure

black death did befriend

Discover this country
 dead centuries cry

Erect noble tablets
 where none can decry

"She kills her bright future
 and rapes for a sou
 Then entraps her children
 with legends untrue"

I beg you

Discover this country.

These Yet to Be United States (1990) by Maya Angelou

Tremors of your network
 cause kings to disappear.
 Your open mouth in anger
 makes nations bow in fear.
 Your bombs can change the seasons,
 obliterate the spring.
 What more do you long for?
 Why are you suffering?

You control the human lives
 in Rome and Timbuktu.
 Lonely nomads wandering
 owe Telstar to you.
 Seas shift at your bidding,
 your mushrooms fill the sky.
 Why are you unhappy?

Why do your children cry?

They kneel alone in terror
with dread in every glance.

Their nights are threatened daily
by a grim inheritance.

You dwell in whitened castles
with deep and poisoned moats
and cannot hear the curses
which fill your children's throats.



Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul
Pró-Reitoria de Graduação
Av. Ipiranga, 6681 - Prédio 1 - 3º. andar
Porto Alegre - RS - Brasil
Fone: (51) 3320-3500 - Fax: (51) 3339-1564
E-mail: prograd@pucrs.br
Site: www.pucrs.br