

The Poetry of a Movement: An Analysis of 20th Century African-American Poetry

How is the subject of African-American civil rights portrayed in a selection of poems by Maya Angelou and Langston Hughes?

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Abstract

This essay explores **how the subject of African-American civil rights is portrayed in the poetry of Maya Angelou and Langston Hughes**. The scope of this essay includes the various contexts for the two poets and their poems as well as the language usage within their writing to versify a complex subject rooted in the earliest history of African-American integration into American society.

The essay begins by considering the background information needed to understand the poets and their literature including contextual research about the Civil Rights Movement as well as biographical information about the poets and the poems chosen for this investigation. This is followed by an in-depth analysis of the poetic language used to illustrate the African-American struggle for civil rights with a consideration of how language usage supports its function against a backdrop of American political circumstances. The stylistic devices investigated include: the motifs of freedom and dreams, symbolism, poetic devices, tone, mood, and poetic structure.

Thorough analysis of their use of stylistic and poetic devices indicated the common themes of the strength of solidarity and the difficulty of fulfilling the American dream. In deliberately selecting the poems for this investigation as well as analyzing the biographical and literary evidence, I discovered that these themes are kindred to the subject of African-American civil rights and the iconic works of Angelou and Hughes. The evidence I gathered from these poems and their authors led me to conclude that while Hughes and Angelou employed similar literary devices to portray the subject of African-American civil rights, they did so with divergent intentions and inevitably different contexts. To detect similar themes related to the same subject in poems written 60 years apart demonstrated to me the unwavering nature of literature and the subject of African-American civil rights over the passage of time.

(300 words)

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Introduction

Maya Angelou and Langston Hughes are icons in the development of literature and their work thoroughly expresses the subject of African-American civil rights, despite their different contexts. The Civil Rights Movement is often bookended with the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott as its start and the passing of the Voter Rights Act in 1965 as its end (Waskey). However, these dates merely mark crucial moments in African-American history. The root causes and lasting effects of the Civil Rights Movement show that it is truly that – a movement. It is a movement whose goals are yet to be achieved and whose causes are embedded in a time long before 1955. Therefore, for the sake of this essay, it is reasonable to refer to the Civil Rights Movement as the duration of the African-American struggle for freedom and equality. The similarities in the messages of African-American literature between writers who were immersed in civil rights activism like Angelou and those such as Hughes who were prominent decades before, demonstrate its continuity. Ultimately, while the poetry of Hughes and Angelou could be read through different lenses, within the context of civil rights, several similarities and differences appear in message and usage. Both poets adeptly use poetry as the vehicle with which to explore the indispensable details of this movement, amplifying the subtle voices and emotions often neglected by other mediums and sculpting a complex subject into the fewest of meaningful and deliberate words. While portraying the subject of civil rights in their poems, Hughes and Angelou make use of motifs, symbolism, poetic devices, a distinctive tone and mood, and poetic structure, illustrating that solidarity is pivotal in overcoming strife as well as the difficulty in attaining the American dream of universal freedom and equality.

Beginnings

Throughout the civil rights era, the African-American voice in literature slowly emerged, becoming an expressive channel with which to expand the educational opportunities for the African-American population formerly known as slaves. Even before the Civil Rights Movement, African-Americans were expressing themselves and their collective struggles. As early as the 19th century, a slave narrative began to surface, characterizing the discrimination they faced. This was strengthened by the era of segregation that followed the Civil War (Andrews). In the 20th century, several platforms for African-American writers were created such as the Colored American Magazine and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, with the sponsorship of poetry readings, community theatres and literary magazines (Andrews). In the 1920s, the Harlem Renaissance catalyzed the advancement of the literature of what was called the New Negro Movement (Andrews). “New negroes” were characterized as having a new “self-confidence” and “assertiveness” and were encouraged to question white supremacy and promote racial pride in their writing (Andrews).

Hughes and Angelou

One influential writer and poet that grew out of the Harlem Renaissance was James Mercer Langston Hughes. Born in 1902 to Carrie and James Hughes as an only child, Hughes grew up in Missouri and Kansas after his parents separated (Bloom). He later ended up in New York, guided by a keen desire to experience Harlem and his writing received recognition from famous Harlem Renaissance writers like Claude McKay and W.E.B DuBois (Bloom). Hughes’ developed passion for jazz and blues was reflected in his first publication, *The Weary Blues*. As described by poet Tim Seibles in *A Profile of 20th Century American Poetry*, Hughes believed that poetry was the solution to the weakening self-esteem in the black community and

emphasized the need for African-Americans to stay true to their culture (Myers and Wojahn 166). In many ways, Seibles was right in identifying this as Hughes' primary purpose. Hughes capitalized on the lenient conventions of poetry, combining African-American culture and lyricism with words. His work bolstered a resilient African-American narrative and questioned American values with reference to the prevalent issues of his time.

Maya Angelou was a writer that grew out of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1970s. Born as Marguerite Johnson in Missouri in 1928, striking parallels are drawn between the family turmoil and nomadic nature of Hughes and Angelou's upbringing. Her parents divorced when she was three and, along with her brother, she was sent to live with their paternal grandmother in Arkansas (Kort). The community she grew up in endured the worst of poverty and racial oppression and at the age of seven she was raped by her mother's boyfriend, forcing her into silence (Kort). In 1940, she found her voice in San Francisco where Johnson took Maya Angelou as her stage name as a singer and actor (Kort). In the 1960s, Angelou served as the leader for the northern sector of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and collaborated with leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X (Kort). She published her first autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* in 1970 and several poetry collections in the following years (Kort).

Selected Poetry of Hughes and Angelou

Two powerful poems written by Langston Hughes – “The Negro Mother” and “Let America Be America Again” – illustrate the subject of African-American civil rights. “The Negro Mother” is a lyrical poem, published in 1931 in Hughes' *The Negro Mother and Other Dramatic Recitations* (Hughes 10). It is written from the first person perspective of a mother as she

describes her symbolic legacy over generations. It epitomizes the arising confident narrative that sprung from this time period (Myers and Wojahn 159) and exemplifies Hughes' "presentation of the matriarchal archetype" seen in several of his poems (Miller). By giving voice to a mother as a muted yet relatable figure, he highlights the unity of African-Americans over generations. "Let America Be America Again" was written by Hughes in 1935 (Hughes 10). The poem explores the political perspective of discrimination faced by African-Americans and questions the American dream. Angelou also explores the subject of African-American civil rights in her poems: "Caged Bird" and "Million Man March Poem." "Caged Bird" was published in 1983 as part of Angelou's collection *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?* (Kort). It is inspired by Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem, "Sympathy," and the intertextuality between the poems demonstrates the potency of the metaphorical representation of the caged bird (Wilson 34). "Million Man March Poem" was written for a political demonstration that took place in 1995 to, "promote African-American unity and family values" ("Million Man March"). Angelou performed this poem among the estimated 400,000 to 1.1 million people who attended the march ("Million Man March"). These poems are suitable illustrations of African-American civil rights and pursue the subject from a plethora of viewpoints, providing ample enlightenment of the general perspectives at the time.

Analysis

Angelou and Hughes' poems portray the subject of the African-American civil rights using the motif of freedom. In "Caged Bird," Angelou utilizes a contrast between a free bird and a caged bird to highlight the theme of the difficulty of attaining true freedom in American society. While the free bird is able to fly autonomously, the caged bird's "wings are clipped" and his "feet are tied / so he opens his throat to sing" (12-14). In "Million Man March Poem," Angelou uses

this concept to further express the perpetual struggle for freedom. She writes in the third stanza, "You have been paid for in a distant place, / The old ones remind us that slavery's chains / Have paid for our freedom again and again" (22-24). A payment is considered a final, non-negotiable action and by integrating "again and again," Angelou is suggesting that the sacrifices made during slavery have never sufficed to fully pay for freedom. Literary critic Jacqueline Thursby affirms this in saying, "The caged bird in the narration will never know freedom, and perhaps it senses that, but its spirit is still unbroken." Hughes analogously uses this motif in his poem "The Negro Mother" writing, "I am the dark girl who crossed the red sea / Carrying in my body the seed of the free" (7-8). Later in the poem, the mother refers to her children saying, "I had to keep on! No stopping for me - / I was the seed of the coming Free" (27-28). Through the mother's voice, Hughes is showing the reader that from slavery to civil rights, the historical sacrifices made targeted a common goal of freedom. In "Let America Be America Again," Hughes mocks the American dream in saying, "(There's never been equality for me, / Nor freedom in this 'homeland of the free')" (15-16). Hughes' frequently references "the homeland of the free" and always in quotations. This subtle allusion to the American national anthem, scorns the freedom that is promised and cherished in the American dream. He says later, "And torn from Black Africa's strand I came / To build a 'homeland of the free'" (49-50). Hughes is stressing the dissonance between what was promised and the reality when it comes to African-American integration into society. In particular, poetry aids Hughes in voicing the frustrations of African-Americans by reaching them on a personal level while cogently questioning the flaws of their unequal treatment and ultimately illustrating the theme that true freedom is difficult to attain.

Hughes and Angelou use the motif of dreams to convey a similar message about the attainability of freedom and equality. In "Caged Bird," Angelou writes, "But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams," suggesting that the aspirations of those who wished to escape oppression have died repeatedly in the past, negatively connoting dreams (26). Conversely, in "The Negro Mother," Hughes takes a more optimistic approach to dreams by highlighting their indestructibility. He writes, "I nourished the dream that nothing could smother / Deep in my breast – the Negro Mother" (29-30). The rhyme and cadence highlights the pride in this proclamation and supports his propitious outlook on dreams. In "Let America Be America Again," Hughes frequently presents dreams in congruence with the American dream as something lost with a need to be restored, echoing the prime messages of the Civil Rights Movement like Martin Luther King Jr's "I Have a Dream" speech in 1963 (Mullen). Evidence for the intertextuality of Angelou and Hughes' message comes from his poem "Dreams" where Hughes wrote:

Hold fast to dreams
for if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly (1-4).

This clearly echoes Angelou's message in "Caged Bird" and it is fascinating that both poets not only refer to the death of dreams, but use the metaphor of a restricted bird to communicate this motif. Ultimately, this implies that the frequency that African-Americans faced inequality was as recurring as the use of the motif itself. The "bird" in this metaphor never attained true freedom, so the need to advocate for it remained.

Hughes and Angelou use symbolism in their poems to portray the subject of African-American civil rights. Song is symbolic in "Caged Bird" as it represents non-violent

rebellion for the bird. This parallels the context of the piece as non-violent protests, like those led by Martin Luther King Jr., were used when other forms of rebellion were restricted by African-American circumstances, promoting a peaceful approach to seeking equality. Song is also a symbol in Hughes' poem, "The Negro Mother." In the second stanza he writes, "Three hundred years in the deepest South: / But God put a song and a prayer in my mouth" (15-16). Here, song symbolizes hope and faith as the mother characterizes herself as a vehicle of the divine intentions of God. In "Let America Be America Again," Hughes also uses song as a symbol of hope in saying:

For all the dreams we've dreamed
And all the songs we've sung
And all the hopes we've held
And all the flags we've hung (56-59).

In "The Negro Mother," Hughes uses a seed as a symbol of hope and new beginnings as it is twice presented as the seed of imminent "freedom". Hughes also uses a torch as a symbol of hope to move from darkness to light, paralleling a transition from hopeless to promising circumstances. Both poets' use of these symbols highlights hope in the face of adversity. This optimistic message is one that reflects their own perspectives on African-American civil rights. Angelou "knew personally the oppression, fear, and deprivation many African-Americans were forced to live with on a daily basis" (Thursby). However, Hughes' writing grew out of the New Negro Movement which encouraged racial pride (Andrews) and while much of his work was published "at the height of the Great Depression," (Tunç) he finds optimism in his hope for the future and desire to project that to the African-American community. These optimistic symbols not only demonstrate the theme that solidarity is needed to overcome oppression, but lift the spirits of their audience to remain strong despite a history of pain and suffering.

Hughes and Angelou use the structure of their poems to portray the subject of African-American civil rights. Angelou structures “Caged Bird” and “Million Man March Poem” in similar form and progression. They both have clear rhyme schemes but variable line length and syllable count. The six stanzas of “Caged Bird” alternate between the caged bird and free bird descriptions and the third stanza is repeated in the last one. She starts with three septets, then two quatrains, and an octet. “Million Man March Poem” is longer with seven stanzas and the first stanza repeated three times. In the second half of the poem, the stanzas get longer until the last three lines, composed of a rhyming couplet and a stand alone line. Hughes, however, writes “The Negro Mother” with less uniform organization to versify the way a mother would address her children. While Hughes does employ an AABB rhyme scheme and all lines have similar lengths, the poem is less religiously divided and speaks to Hughes’ confidence and experience as a poet. “Let America Be America Again,” the longest of the four poems, is noticeably more structured. It has 13 main stanzas, with several stand-alone line interjections and similar line length. The construction of the four poems are closely related to their function. “Let America Be America Again” addresses the more political aspects of African-American civil rights so the metrical structure and cadence delivers this message as a speaker might deliver their speech to an audience. Literary critic Jacqueline Thursby wrote about “Million Man March Poem”: “The poem has a strong cadence, and in 1995, when Angelou read it to the crowd...the massive gathering was quiet and listened to her respectfully.” “Million Man March Poem” and “Let America Be America Again” were written for political purposes and their functions are perhaps best understood when spoken aloud. One does not need to see the poems on paper to appreciate their cadence or construction and for this reason, they are accessible to the wide audience Thursby describes.

Hughes and Angelou utilize several poetic devices to convey the subject of African-American civil rights. In "Caged Bird," personification creates bold visuals that aid in her characterization of the birds like, "The free bird leaps / on the back of the wind" (1-2). Then describing the caged bird: "his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream" (27). The personification of the tranquil wind contrasts the dark personification of a shadow. This juxtaposition emphasizes the sheer disparity between the lifestyles of the two birds and as Thursby observes, it "contrasts the beauty of freedom and the tragedy of confinement." In "Million Man March Poem," Angelou uses anaphora in the seventh stanza where "Clap hands" is repeated seven times and "Let us come together" is repeated twice. The unity in clapping hands and first person "us" stresses solidarity in overcoming oppression. Hughes also uses anaphora to emphasize his message. He writes, "Let America be America again. / Let it be the dream it used to be. / Let it be the pioneer on the plain" (1-3). He later characterizes the different kinds of people contributing to American history by repeating "I am" in lines 19-22 and 31-34 in "Let America Be America Again" and 7,9, and 11 in "The Negro Mother." This repetition establishes homogeneity among a group of different characters in history who have all endured hardship, emphasizing that the question of civil rights transcends solely the African-American population. Hughes also incorporates many similes. In "The Negro Mother" he contrasts the imagery of the speaker's face saying, "Look at my face – dark as the night / Yet shining like sun with love's true light" (5-6). Later he writes, "God put a dream like steel in my soul" (17). These similes convey strong, absolute comparisons that characterize the Negro Mother as bold and confident, part of the narrative that Hughes wanted to develop for African-Americans. In "Let America Be America Again" he writes, "From those who live like leeches on the people's lives / We must take back our land again" (72-73). This simile also presents a vivid comparison, suggesting that oppressors draw vitality from the lives of the people similar to the verminous connotation of

leeches drawing blood. Angelou's "Caged Bird" also uses the extended metaphor of birds to represent the human condition under oppression. Hughes uses alliteration in "The Negro Mother" saying, "strong in struggle and strife," effectively drawing attention to those words and highlighting the strength in African-American resilience (43). In general, Hughes use of poetic devices bring a more immediate effect whereas Angelou's subtle metaphors require critical reflection to appreciate. However, the effect remains the same. The conventions of poetry allow both poets to convey their perspective on civil rights in a way that highlights the beauty and strength of what other mediums might focus on as a primarily political movement.

With a distinctive mood, Hughes and Angelou are able to eloquently portray the campaign for African-American civil rights. These moods echo the emotions of African-Americans and emphasize the solidarity in rallying behind the cause for equal rights. In "Caged Bird," Angelou incorporates several mood shifts corresponding to the juxtaposition of the caged and free bird descriptions. The first stanza has somewhat of a tranquil mood that shifts to a sympathetic mood in the second and third stanzas as she describes the caged bird. In the fourth stanza, it is more peaceful and in the fifth and sixth stanzas, the mood changes to somber and grim. By paralleling the mood shifts with the caged bird and free bird sections, the reader becomes immersed in the dynamic progression of the characters of both birds and is able to see a reflection of human emotions in the them. In "Million Man March Poem," the mood commences as helpless. Angelou directly addresses the reader by saying, "Your hands were tied, your mouth was bound, / You couldn't even call out my name" (7-8). However, following the fourth stanza, the mood becomes significantly more triumphant and hopeful. Perhaps what most exemplifies this mood are the last three lines of the poem: "The ancestors remind us, despite the history of pain / We are a going-on people who will rise again. / And still we rise" (50-52).

The triumphant tone aids Angelou in emphasizing the theme that solidarity is necessary in overcoming adversity using a first-person narrative. The progression of the mood in Hughes' poem, "The Negro Mother," is similar. In the first stanza, the mood is pitiful and sympathetic as the mother describes life as a slave. However, like "Million Man March Poem," this shifts in the second and third stanzas to hopeful and optimistic as she describes her desires for the future generations. Hughes and Angelou's similar use of mood shifts in "Million Man March Poem" and "The Negro Mother" emphasize their hope for civil rights in America. The proportions of sections in both poems with pessimistic moods are significantly smaller than those with optimistic moods, implying that their intentions are primarily to emphasize their hope for the subject while remaining cognizant of the realities. However, the mood in "Let America Be America Again" differs to the other poems because it remains patriotic throughout. Professor Tanfer Tunç argues that Hughes' interpretation of the American dream is that, "people of all races can learn from each other and draw unity from shared experiences." However, this only scratches the surface of Hughes' understanding of America's potential. His patriotic mood provides evidence for his natural belief in America's guiding principles. He did not just desire to see racial coexistence in America. He patriotically believed that the original concept of America entailed equality for all. Hughes' intentions in this poem are more politically motivated than the other three and for this reason, its patriotic mood fits its function.

In exploring the tone in their poems, it is clear that Hughes and Angelou's tone shifts add to a purposeful account of different perspectives of African-American civil rights. Angelou's tone in "Caged Bird" oscillates between hopeful and hopeless from stanza to stanza and even between lines, creating conflict in her tone. In describing the song of the caged bird, Angelou writes with a helpless tone: "a fearful trill / of things unknown," and follows this with, "but longed

for still,” presenting a contrasting optimism (31-33). In “Million Man March Poem,” Angelou’s tone starts off as melancholic and nostalgic and shifts in the seventh stanza where Angelou uses diction like, “love”, “revise”, “together”, “cleanse”, “joy”, “courtesy”, “gentleness”, and “care,” to create a more compassionate and spirited tone. While the tone in “The Negro Mother” is different, the structure of the tone shifts are very similar. In the first stanza, the mother narrates with a miserable, despairing tone which becomes more aspiring when she describes her hope for the future she has instilled in her children. The tone becomes more determined as she issues a call to action by addressing, “All you dark children in the world out there” (33). The tone in “Let America Be America Again” is comparatively unique and complex to Angelou’s poems. Hughes includes several interjections in the beginning that are featured parenthetically or in italics, separating them as the narrator’s independent, inward thoughts. The tone in these interjections is very sarcastic and contrasts the patriotic tone of the poem’s body, similar to Angelou’s fluctuating tone scheme. After the third stanza, the skeptical, bitter tone of these interjections seem to become part of the narrative itself, as if the speaker gains the confidence to voice his opinions openly. In the fifth stanza, Hughes deviates from his previous ABAB rhyming pattern and uses exclamation marks to create this bitter yet proclamatory tone:

Tangled in that ancient endless chain
Of profit, power, gain, of grab the land!
Of grab the gold! Of grab the ways of satisfying need!
Of work the men! Of take the pay!
Of owning everything for one’s own greed! (26-30)

This tone is maintained until a very determined 10th stanza, concluding with his desire to see America’s potential restored. The tone shifts used by both poets show their attempt to approach the subject of African-American civil rights from several perspectives and articulate the narrative associated with each stance.

Conclusion

Hughes and Angelou published their poems in varying contexts, the earliest and latest of the four being 64 years apart. However, the parallels in their portrayal of the subject of the African-American struggle for civil rights demonstrate both the endurance of the topic, and the literature of the two writers. While maintaining a distinctive style, both writers successfully employ the motifs of freedom and dreams, symbolism and various poetic devices. Their poems, written with several tone and mood shifts and a structure suited to their function, passionately describe different themes related to African-American civil rights. The conventions of poetry like rhyme and rhythm allow Hughes and Angelou to impact the reader in a way that any other medium could hardly achieve. Hughes and Angelou's works display similitude in the devices used and themes uncovered, but are scarcely the same. Hughes wrote his poems during a period of development for the African-American narrative and his belief in the promotion of African-American self-esteem is reflected in the optimism of "The Negro Mother" and "Let America Be America Again." Angelou's "Caged Bird" foreshadows a gloomy future for the oppressed whereas her "Million Man March Poem" suggests that there is strength in unity. Context aside, each poem points to a continuous struggle for freedom and equality that is yet to be achieved. Their anthemic works mark the historical significance of the use of literature to illustrate the subject and remind us of the timeless nature of this continual struggle for civil rights.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Let America Be America Again By Langston Hughes

Let America be America again.
Let it be the dream it used to be.
Let it be the pioneer on the plain
Seeking a home where he himself is free.

(America never was America to me.)

Let America be the dream the dreamers
dreamed-
Let it be that great strong land of love
Where never kings connive nor tyrants
scheme
That any man be crushed by one above.

(It never was America to me.)

O, let my land be a land where Liberty
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,
But opportunity is real, and life is free,
Equality is in the air we breathe.

(There's never been equality for me,
Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.")

*Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark?
And who are you that draws your veil across
the stars?*

I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,
I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.
I am the red man driven from the land,
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek-
And finding only the same old stupid plan
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.

I am the young man, full of strength and
hope,
Tangled in that ancient endless chain
Of profit, power, gain, of grab the land!
Of grab the gold! Of grab the ways of
satisfying need!
Of work the men! Of take the pay!
Of owning everything for one's own greed!

I am the farmer, bondsman to the soil.
I am the worker sold to the machine.
I am the Negro, servant to you all.
I am the people, humble, hungry, mean-
Hungry yet today despite the dream.
Beaten yet today-O, Pioneers!
I am the man who never got ahead,
The poorest worker bartered through the
years.

Yet I'm the one who dreamt our basic dream
In the Old World while still a serf of kings,
Who dreamt a dream so strong, so brave, so
true,
That even yet its mighty daring sings
In every brick and stone, in every furrow
turned
That's made America the land it has become.
O, I'm the man who sailed those early seas
In search of what I meant to be my home-
For I'm the one who left dark Ireland's shore,
And Poland's plain, and England's grassy lea,
And torn from Black Africa's strand I came
To build a "homeland of the free."

The free?

Who said the free? Not me?
Surely not me? The millions on relief today?
The millions shot down when we strike?
The millions who have nothing for our pay?
For all the dreams we've dreamed
And all the songs we've sung
And all the hopes we've held
And all the flags we've hung,
The millions who have nothing for our pay-
Except the dream that's almost dead today.

O, let America be America again-
The land that never has been yet-
And yet must be--the land where every man
is free.
The land that's mine--the poor man's,
Indian's, Negro's, ME-
Who made America,
Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and
pain,
Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in
the rain,
Must bring back our mighty dream again.

Sure, call me any ugly name you choose-
The steel of freedom does not stain.
From those who live like leeches on the
people's lives,
We must take back our land again,
America!

O, yes,
I say it plain,
America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath-
America will be!

Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster
death,
The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and
lies,
We, the people, must redeem
The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.
The mountains and the endless plain-
All, all the stretch of these great green states-
And make America again!

(Hughes 189-91)

Appendix B

The Negro Mother By Langston Hughes

Children, I come back today
To tell you a story of the long dark way
That I had to climb, that I had to know
In order that the race might live and grow.
Look at my face – dark as the night –
Yet shining like sun with love's true light.
I am the dark girl who crossed the red sea
Carrying in my body the seed of the free.
I am the woman who worked in the field
Bringing the cotton and the corn to yield.
I am the one who labored as a slave,
Beaten and mistreated for the work that I
gave –
Children sold away from me, I'm husband
sold, too.
No safety, no love, no respect was I due.

Three hundred years in the deepest South:
But God put a song and a prayer in my
mouth.
God put a dream like steel in my soul.
Now, through my children, I'm reaching my
goal.

Now, through my children, young and free,
I realized the blessing deed to me.
I couldn't read then. I couldn't write.
I had nothing back there in the night.
Sometimes, the valley was filled with tears,
But I kept trudging on through the lonely
years.
Sometimes, the road was hot with the sun,
But I had to keep on till my work was done:
I had to keep on! No stopping for me –
I was the seed of the coming Free.
I nourished the dream that nothing could
smother
Deep in my breast – the Negro mother.
I had only hope then, but now through you,
Dark ones of today, my dreams must come
true:
All you dark children in the world out there,
Remember my sweat, my pain, my despair.

Remember my years, heavy with sorrow –
And make of those years a torch for
tomorrow.
Make of my pass a road to the light
Out of the darkness, the ignorance, the night.
Lift high my banner out of the dust.
Stand like free men supporting my trust.
Believe in the right, let none push you back.
Remember the whip and the slaver's track.

Remember how the strong in struggle and
strife
Still bar you the way, and deny you life –
But march ever forward, breaking down bars.
Look ever upward at the sun and the stars.
Oh, my dark children, may my dreams and
my prayers
Impel you forever up the great stairs –
For I will be with you till no white brother
Dares keep down the children of the Negro
Mother.

(Hughes 155-56)

Appendix C

Million Man March Poem
By Maya Angelou

The night has been long,
The wound has been deep,
The pit has been dark,
And the walls have been steep.

Under a dead blue sky on a distant beach,
I was dragged by my braids just beyond your reach.
Your hands were tied, your mouth was bound,
You couldn't even call out my name.
You were helpless and so was I,
But unfortunately throughout history
You've worn a badge of shame.

I say, the night has been long,
The wound has been deep,
The pit has been dark
And the walls have been steep.

But today, voices of old spirit sound
Speak to us in words profound,
Across the years, across the centuries,
Across the oceans, and across the seas.
They say, draw near to one another,
Save your race.
You have been paid for in a distant place,
The old ones remind us that slavery's chains
Have paid for our freedom again and again.

The night has been long,
The pit has been deep,
The night has been dark,
And the walls have been steep.

The hells we have lived through and live through still,
Have sharpened our senses and toughened our will.

The night has been long.
This morning I look through your anguish
Right down to your soul.
I know that with each other we can make ourselves whole.
I look through the posture and past your disguise,
And see your love for family in your big brown eyes.

I say, clap hands and let's come together in this meeting ground,
I say, clap hands and let's deal with each other with love,
I say, clap hands and let us get from the low road of indifference,

Clap hands, let us come together and reveal our hearts,
Let us come together and revise our spirits,
Let us come together and cleanse our souls,
Clap hands, let's leave the preening
And stop imposterism of our own history.
Clap hands, call the spirits back from the ledge,
Clap hands, let us invite joy into our conversation,
Courtesy into our bedrooms,
Gentleness into our kitchen,
Care into our nursery.

The ancestors remind us, despite the history of pain
We are a going-on people who will rise again.

And still we rise.
(Maya Angelou)

Appendix D

Caged Bird By Maya Angelou

The free bird leaps
on the back of the wind
and floats downstream
till the current ends
and dips his wings
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 fearful trill
of the things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill for the caged bird
sings of freedom

The free bird thinks of another breeze
and the trade winds soft through 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 the 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 34)