

**UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE SANTA CATARINA
PROGRAMA DE PÓS GRADUAÇÃO EM INGLÊS**

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**VOICES OF RESISTANCE: INTERSECTIONALITY AND
AGENCY
IN MAYA ANGELOU'S *I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS***

Dissertação submetida ao Programa de Pós Graduação em Inglês: Estudos Linguísticos e Literários da Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina para a obtenção do Grau de Mestre em Letras.

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Florianópolis

2016

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Voices of Resistance : Intersectionality and Agency in
Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings / Dayane
Evellin de Souza Francisco ; orientador, Susana Bornéo
Funck - Florianópolis, SC, 2016.

98 p.

Dissertação (mestrado) - Universidade Federal de Santa
Catarina, Centro de Comunicação e Expressão. Programa de Pós
Graduação em Inglês: Estudos Linguísticos e Literários.

Inclui referências

1. Inglês: Estudos Linguísticos e Literários. 2.
Resistance. 3. Intersectionality. 4. Agency. 5.
Creativity. I. Funck, Susana Bornéo. II. Universidade
Federal de Santa Catarina. Programa de Pós-Graduação em
Inglês: Estudos Linguísticos e Literários. III. Título.

To all the “phenomenal women” in my life!

To my mother, Selma, who always dreamed of a better life and encouraged her daughters to search for happiness regardless of what society expected from them.

To my grandmother, whose amazing stories will never be forgotten even when her own memories are long gone.

To my sisters, in the hope they keep believing in their ability to reinvent themselves.

To my father, Wagner, for being a wonderful friend to all the creative women around him.

PREFACE

The invention that circumstances of racism in Brazil are traces of a forgotten past contributes to the feeling of awkwardness and discomfort that arises when one dares to speak of race. Nevertheless, there is a need for discussing race and also gender issues. There are too many black girls believing that they are ugly and incapable of accomplishing great things. There are too many women buying into the tale they are not worthy of respect. This master's thesis is dedicated to all those people who suffer discrimination because of their race, gender, class or sexuality. In this research, I endeavored in the mission of finding instances of resistance in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and before I lead you to that, I would like to share with you how one can find instances of resistance in one's life, if one cares to look into it.

My grandmother used to tell my sisters and me how the most disappointing moment of her childhood was her first day of school. On this day, she realized that she was black, poor, and a (chubby) woman. Because many of us have learned, from the first years of our lives, that to be "black is beautiful", we cannot really comprehend what it meant to be a black woman at her time. Powerless, property of an abusing husband, the flames that danced over her body were not set in vain. From the flames that still mark her skin, she did rise as a sinner, and how much fun she had then: the freedom of choosing who she wanted to be from that moment on according to her possibilities; the power to share the silent stories of her past.

The fire incident sparked my mother's spirit of rebellion. She promised herself that no man would dictate her life, and she taught her daughters not to let themselves be intimidated or diminished. She found in my father the friend she needed. An orphan child, exploited by those who were supposed to love him, he seemed not to have learned well the "art" of oppressing women. On the contrary, he seems to have been born to demonstrate his love to all the women of the family they built

together. Despite dreams deferred by the emergency of working class life, they worked hard to give the best they could to their daughters. My mother used to tell us that because we were black women we would be compelled to work twice as hard as men, and as (white) women. I never forgot that.

From these generations of strong women, I rise as the dream of a generation who wanted more for their lives, but needed to struggle to survive even hunger. I have learned that when you grow up a poor black woman some people will doubt you, others will try to put you down, but this does not come as a surprise to me because I have drunk from the same well of knowledge that all the black women before me have drunk from. My academic life helped me to look at myself from the perspective of the intersection of different social factors that constitute my experience. Now, standing from a somewhat privileged point of view – acquired thanks to my academic studies – I offer a literary criticism on the forces of oppression and on the voices of resistance found in Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, in the hope that it inspires people to find spaces for exercising agency in their own lives. I offer you my “song”, placing myself as one of the “caged birds” of history that manage to sing of freedom.

Some people contributed to the development of this thesis, and to them I am eternally thankful:

My advisor, Prof. Susana Bornéo Funck, who introduced me to the wonderful field of Feminist Studies, inspiring me to study literature by women. Her patience and spontaneity made it easier to work on this thesis; and I certainly would not be able to finish this if it were not for her practical way of facing problems.

Prof. Eliana Ávila, who always encouraged me to keep expanding my critical thinking, and who read the first chapters of this thesis first and helped me with great insights. Prof. Maria Lúcia Milléo Martins, who introduced me to the world of poetry, and taught me the values of close reading.

My friend Anna Barbara, who encouraged me to write this thesis and believed that I could finish it despite my constant disbelief in myself. My dearest friends Dudley and Mari, who were with me since the beginning of my academic life, and helped me through the sharing of ideas and theoretical discussions. My friend Felipe Leandro, that despite

our initial differences, in his friendship I found company to my loneliness. My friends Rafael and Tanise, who inspired me not to take myself so seriously, and re-introduced laughter and music in my life. My friend Dani Alves, with whom I shared fun times and had deep conversations.

My mother, whose infinite faith in me and in happiness gives me strength to keep believing things will get better. My father, whose kindness is a constant reminder of goodness in people. My grandmother, Severina, whose life inspires me to keep fighting for black women's rights. My sisters, Nayara and Thaís, for literally singing with me in sickness and health. My friend Flaviane, wherever she is, who helped me a lot in my under graduate program, challenging me to be better, always believing in me. I love you all so much!

CNPQ, that helped me with the financial support throughout these two years.

Finally, I would like to extend my thanks to the committee members who evaluated this thesis by carefully reading and offering suggestions. I thank Dr. Maria Lucia Milléo Martins, Dr. Raphael Albuquerque de Boer and Dr. Renata Lucena Dalmaso for their valuable insights and, for, together with my advisor Dr. Susana Funck Bornéo, being part of a beautiful and unforgettable moment in my academic life.

To all my friends and family members, not mentioned here, but whose constant presence in my life helps me to feel loved and inspired, I offer my thanks. "We flawless!"

Dayane Evellin

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

(...)

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries?

(...)

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

(...)

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise

(Maya Angelou, "Still I Rise", 1978)

ABSTRACT
VOICES OF RESISTANCE: INTERSECTIONALITY AND
AGENCY IN MAYA ANGELOU'S *I KNOW WHY THE CAGED*
BIRD SINGS

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2016

This research addresses the issues of intersectionality and agency in Maya Angelou's autobiographical work *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The specific objective of this investigation is to analyze the metaphor of the "caged bird". In order to conduct such analysis, this research draws on the concept of "intersectionality" coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw to investigate how different stratifying factors—such as race, gender and class – intersect in creating the experience of black women. In addition, this work focuses on Judith Butler's concept of "agency" in order to investigate whether signs of resistance can be perceived in the narrative regardless of the social structures the characters are part of. This research indicates that, although the characters in *Caged Bird* are constrained by different modes of oppression, they find within these social structures spaces for exercising agency. The protagonist and the different characters the narrator describes are caged by race, poverty, gender, just to mention a few. Nevertheless, in the same way that "caged birds" sing, they are also able to express some form of creative resistance.

Keywords: Resistance. Intersectionality. Agency.

Number of pages: 119
Number of words: 34.288

RESUMO

VOZES DE RESISTÊNCIA: INTERSECCIONALIDADE E AGÊNCIA EM “EU SEI POR QUE O PÁSSARO CANTA NA GAIOLA”, DE MAYA ANGELOU

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2016

Esta pesquisa aborda as questões de interseccionalidade e agência na narrativa autobiográfica da escritora Afro-Americana Maya Angelou, intitulado *Eu Sei Porque o Pássaro Canta na Gaiola*. O objetivo específico dessa investigação é analisar a metáfora do “pássaro engaiolado”. Para a realização de tal análise, esta pesquisa baseia-se no conceito de “interseccionalidade”, cunhado pela primeira vez por Kimberlé Crenshaw com o intuito de investigar como diferentes fatores – como, por exemplo, raça, gênero e classe – intersectam na criação da mulher negra. Além disso, o trabalho utiliza-se do conceito de “agência”, tal como entendido por Judith Butler, a fim de investigar se sinais de resistência podem ser encontrados no romance independentemente das estruturas sociais em que os personagens estão inseridos. Esta pesquisa indica que, embora as personagens sejam restringidas por diferentes formas de opressão, elas encontram dentro das estruturas sociais espaço para exercer sua agência. A protagonista, bem como as diferentes personagens descritas por ela, são engaioladas por sua raça, gênero e class, etc. No entanto, assim como o “pássaro engaiolado” canta, elas também são capazes de expressar algumas formas de resistência criativa.

Palavras-chave: Resistência. Interseccionalidade. Agência.

Número de páginas: 119

Número de palavras: 34.288

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INTRODUCTION: telling untold stories

Zora Neale Hurston's statement that "there is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you" has been mistakenly credited to Maya Angelou, author of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969),¹ a mistake that makes perfect sense considering the importance of storytelling. From this statement one can understand *why* the caged bird sings. The bird sings its agony; it relieves itself from pain through song, by telling untold stories. This statement also justifies the importance of the literature of resistance: to share experiences. And by sharing personal stories through literature one is also contributing to the creation of a collective history. For African American writers, whose history still needs to be told, this is politically important, for by sharing common experiences authors are joining a choir of voices of resistance.

The general context of this investigation addresses oppression, agency, creativity and the representation of black women's experience in literature. Literature for many centuries has helped white men to maintain their hegemony over society and keep women and black people submissive. One of the forms of this submission is the restriction of creativity. Patriarchal and racist oppression have kept women and black people undermined and powerless for a long time, with little chance to resist openly these oppressive ideologies. In spite of such oppression, according to Alice Walker, black women's creativity has been kept alive throughout history. In *In Search Of Our Mother's Gardens* (1972), Walker argues that black women's creativity is in fact a tool in favor of

¹ From now on referred to as *Caged Bird* (CB).

resistance. This notion indicates that even under extreme circumstances of oppression signs of agency may be perceived. Resistance can take many forms, creativity being one of them.

The specific context of this research concerns Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, the first of a series of autobiographical works by Angelou, published in 1969. In *Caged Bird*, Angelou shares with the reader her experience as a displaced, Southern Black little girl. The narrative depicts different representations of black womanhood, but all these women have something in common: they all had to face the difficulties of being a black woman in a racist, sexist, and oppressive society.

Often in literature the interface between individual and collective history is present. In *Caged Bird*, Maya Angelou narrates her personal experience as a black woman in the beginning of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, through Angelou's personal narrative one can understand more about the society in which she has been inserted. Angelou depicts a society where black people did not have much voice to express their thoughts and fight for a better life, and where black women were even more silenced than black men. In *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Alice Walker questions "how was the creativity of the black woman kept alive, year after year, and century after century [. . .]?" (403). Describing her personal search for her mother's garden (a source of strength and resistance), Walker asserts that all black women have an inner source of creativity, which just needs to be found. According to Walker, this garden is a tool for resistance, and identifying "our mothers' gardens", one may find one's own. These beliefs on creativity and resistance, as we shall see, may be linked with the concept of "agency". From this perspective, this research problematizes how Angelou's narrative deals with black women's creativity and how other signs of resistance may be perceived in *Caged Bird*.

The significance of this research encompasses three main aspects. Firstly, although Angelou's *Caged Bird* was set in the 1930s and 1940s, many issues portrayed there (as social inequalities, rape, sexuality, and race) are still relevant nowadays. In this light, this research contributes to theoretical studies on black women's creativity and agency. Moreover, it adds to research related to the "metaphor of the caged bird". Finally, this research helped enhancing my knowledge on gender and race issues, as well as contributing to my personal academic growth and understanding of Angelou's work. My final undergraduate monograph dealt with representations of black womanhood in Toni Morrison's *Sula*, and there I expressed my desire to study literature written by women and African American literature. This research gave me the opportunity to continue analyzing black women's literature.

Taking into account theories on gender and race, the overall objective was to analyze how black women's agency is represented in *Caged Bird*, specifically in terms of the metaphor of "the caged bird". Moreover, this study aimed at analyzing how gender intersects with race in shaping black women's experience and whether the black female characters and other characters in *Caged Bird* express creativity and agency under circumstances of sexist and racist oppression, focusing on voices of resistance.

Since the metaphor of "the caged bird" is the focus of the investigation, some questions need to be raised: what does this bird refer to? Does the caged bird refer to Marguerite (Maya Angelou)? Why is she (this bird) singing? Why is she caged? Why not let her free?, and, finally, What is her song trying to express? Nevertheless, although many other questions may be raised, three were specifically chosen to be the focus of this investigation:

- 1) What does *Caged Bird* reveal about the metaphor of “the caged bird that sings”?
- 2) How does *Caged Bird* reveal the ways in which sexist and racist thought intersect and constitute black women’s experience?
- 3) Is it possible to find signs of agency in the narrative?

Theoretical framework

Taking into consideration that this research deals with black women’s experience and representation, and with the theme of resistance, this review of literature encompasses four main theoretical discussions. Firstly, it provides a discussion of the effects of sexist ideology and the construction of gender. Secondly, I will discuss aspects related to (black) women’s experience, as well as to their representation in literature. After that, a discussion of “intersectionality”, as first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, is given in order to understand better the intersection of race and gender in black women’s experience. Finally, this review discusses the concept of “agency” as defined by Judith Butler.

One important concept, crucial for a deeper understanding of our society and of women’s experience is “patriarchy”. According to bell hooks (2004: 17), patriarchy is a social and political system—and one of the most spread out “life-threatening disease”—that promotes the belief that males are born superior to women and to everyone who might be considered weak. Hooks’s definition of patriarchy indicates that patriarchal social structure privileges (heterosexual, white) men over women. More than that, her view on patriarchy indicates that those who are considered weak—not necessarily only in terms of gender—are also oppressed by patriarchal thinking. Hooks argues that patriarchy is imposed on both men and women even if we are unaware of its damaging

effects (17). In other words, patriarchy is an oppressive ideology that passes itself as a transparent representation of reality when, in fact, this ideology is socially constructed to privilege men. Notwithstanding, both men and women suffer the consequences of such oppression, and they are all affected by patriarchy in different ways.

One of the ways in which patriarchal thinking influences most societies is by the construction of “gender”. Since we are children, patriarchy assigns gender roles and dictates the best ways we can fulfill them, and the distribution of power in society is based on these roles. In *Speaking of Gender*, Elaine Showalter (1989: 2) refers to gender as the “social, cultural and psychological meaning imposed upon biological sexual identity”. Her statement indicates that what most people believe to be part of our essence as women and men is in fact a socially constructed idea. In *Gender*, Jack Halberstam² states that gender “names a primary mode of oppression that sorts human bodies into binary categories in order to assign labor, responsibilities, moral attributes, and emotional styles” (2007: 118). Thus, the implications of gender roles are many, since they are related to social inequalities and male domination [since, traditionally, men were privileged in the “distribution” of gender roles]. However, as Simone de Beauvoir asserted by saying that “one is not born a woman, one becomes one” (1949: 9), the meaning of what it means to be a woman or a man is socially constructed. Therefore, it is not timeless and universal.

Proceeding to the second part of this review of literature, women’s treatment in society and, consequently, their representation need to be discussed. An important aspect of the effects of gender concerns (black) women’s experience in a society mostly ruled by sexist beliefs. In *Ain’t I a Woman* (1981), bell hooks discusses the shifts

² Following Jack Halberstam’s decision, I am here referring to him as “Jack”, though in the References I am maintaining the name as published, “Judith Halberstam”.

throughout history in the treatment women have received in the United States. If with white colonizers and the fear of God's punishment men institutionalized sexist prejudice to express their fear and hatred for women, in the nineteenth century there was a shift in the male perception and the white woman began to be "depicted as goddess rather than sinner; she was virtuous, pure, innocent, not sexual" (31). While white women were elevated to this standard, black women became the symbol of pure evil, and they were depicted as sexual temptresses inducing white men to sin (33). Then, in a way, some of the characteristics traditionally used to describe female gender roles [weakness, purity, chastity, passivity...] are in fact (more) traditional white female characteristics. And those characteristics are somewhat different when referring to black women.

Bearing this in mind, it becomes relevant to consider some of the stereotypes related to black women. For hooks (1981), there are two major stereotypes: that of the sexual temptresses, and the one which emphasizes black women's strength in adversities. However, according to hooks, this can also be a destructive role: "Usually, when people talk about 'strength' of black women they are referring to the way in which they perceive black women coping with oppression" (6). In other words, to live in a sexist and racist society is not the same as being strong, and the appreciation of black women's "strength" in these conditions might cover up the true damaging effect of racism and sexism in their lives. Hooks argues that many people "ignore the reality that to be strong in the face of oppression is not the same as overcoming oppression, that endurance is not to be confused with transformation" (6). Related to this second stereotype, there is the image of black women as mothers. For hooks, the stereotype of the "strong black woman" can be destructive because while many white women were struggling to reject "the role of breeder, burden carrier and sex objects", black women

were being celebrated for their devotion to mothering (6). As one can see, these stereotypes associated with black women are problematic because they help to spread inaccurate representations of black women and to maintain ideologies that keep black women undervalued.

In addition to these discussions, it is important to consider the intersection of race and gender in shaping black women's experience. Hooks (1981: 13) states that "the struggle to end racism and the struggle to end sexism were naturally intertwined, that to make them separate was to deny a basic truth of our existence, that race and sex are both immutable facets of human identity". Needless to say, when hooks affirms the "immutability" of race and sex as part of human identity, she is referring to the eternal influence race and gender exercise. In no way is she upholding an essentialist view of these two concepts. On the contrary, in *Ain't I a Woman* hooks is exposing how the notions of gender, race and sex are socially invented. That is, both the experience of being black and the experience of being a woman constitute the identity of a black woman and are inseparable, as already voiced by Sojourner Truth in her famous speech "Ain't I a Woman?" (1851). In line with hooks' views, Kimberlé Crenshaw affirms that "experiences of women of color are frequently the product of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism". Crenshaw adds that to ignore the intersection of these two experiences has contributed to the double marginalization of black women (1993: 1243). Therefore, it becomes important to investigate whether Maya Angelou's *Caged Bird* reflects this intersection.

Crenshaw's definition of "intersectionality" is important here. According to her, intersectionality "denote(s) the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's employment and experiences" (1244). Crenshaw understands black women's experience as constituted by all the factors that permeate their life and create their

experience. Drawing this very concept, Maria Lugones states that “intersectionality reveals what is not seen when categories such as gender and race are separate from each other” (2007: 192). Thus, intersectionality deals with subtraction, with what has been invisible in the homogenous categories of gender and race. From this perspective, one would not completely understand the complexities of a black woman’s experience focusing only on gender issues, for instance, because race and gender come together.

Concerning the importance of being aware of intersectionality in creating black women’s experience, Crenshaw approaches the issues of racism and sexism in dominant conceptualizations of rape. She points out that, although black women benefited from both antiracist and feminist critiques on contemporary conceptualizations of rape, in some aspects black women have not really been taken into consideration (1266). According to her, especially in terms of the legal and judicial spheres, for a long time black men (black offenders) were treated as potential threats to white womanhood (white victims). In addition, Crenshaw defends that rape has been used as means of “legitimize efforts to control and discipline the Black Community” (1266). Though antiracist efforts have been conducted in order to legally protect black people (men) from overt racist treatments (1266) and discriminatory laws, this legal protection does not necessarily extend to black women when they are victims of rape. This is attributed to the double discrimination that comes from being both black and women, which points out the importance of an intersectional approach to rape as well.

Another aspect discussed by Crenshaw that historically privileges men over women in the conceptualization of rape is the emphasis on women’s chastity and sexual behavior. The law would legitimize the binary thinking that places women into two categories—

good woman/bad woman—according to their sexual behavior (1266-7), leading to flagrant cases of sexism towards women in relation to rape. Crenshaw stresses that, because women's chastity was treated as a commodity in the early laws related to rape, it was common for women to be put on trial after denouncing rape. They had to prove to the jury that they were not "asking for it" and convince the jury of their innocence. This victim blaming rationalization would validate the belief in the good/bad woman dichotomy through law and worked as a way of disciplining women who lived an independent sexual life (1266).

Crenshaw emphasizes that although antidiscriminatory laws have been created to avoid such unfavorable treatment of both (black) men and women, contemporary conceptualizations of rape continue to be influenced by these popular racist and sexist perspectives (1267). All things considered, too little attention has been given to the rape of black women. As black and as women, they suffer from both racist and sexist prejudice. According to Crenshaw, there is a "devaluation of Black women" and there is also a "marginalization of their sexual victimization" (1268). This lack of attention to the particular interests and struggles of black women reflects racist and sexist hierarchies in society.

In addition, if one establishes a dialogue between Crenshaw's discussion and hook's, it is possible to understand that this marginalization of black women's sexual victimization is due to their unique experience as black women. That is, it is not only because they are black and women, but because *black women* experience a different treatment in regard to their sexuality. If women in general suffer discrimination, black women, who were even more sexualized by white society, are not usually seen as "pure" or "innocent". Historically, black women were seen as "sexual temptresses", as bell hooks points out, which would implicate them already. Therefore the

importance of having an intersectional approach to rape, so the particular interests and needs of those who experience the intersection of different identity categories may be taken into account. It is important to note, however, that intersectionality does not have to do with victimization, but with exposing what happens in the intersection of categories such as gender and race, an aspect which is directly relevant to the analysis of the rape scene in *Caged Bird* and of the overall construction of the metaphor of “the caged bird”.

Sexist and racist ideologies, which operate together in society, are perpetuated through discourses and representations held by those who are in power. Such oppressive ideologies constrain the space allowed to people considered as minorities. Therefore, it is important to see whether, in *Caged Bird*, the metaphor of “the caged bird” is indeed linked with the idea of sexist and racist ideologies, which justify the importance of understanding concepts such as patriarchy, gender and intersectionality. Although sexism and racism are institutionalized practices that make more difficult for people suffering from them to fight for freedom, still “the caged bird sings”, indicating that even in a hostile environment of oppression there is possibility for resistance. Based on this idea, the final part of this review of literature provides a brief discussion of Judith Butler’s concept of “agency”.

Because Butler draws on Stuart Hall’s concept of “identity” in order to develop the concept of “agency”, firstly, it is necessary to understand the meaning of “identity”. From a Cultural Studies perspective, identities are never fixed as they are always subjected to change, “formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us” (1997: 277). According to Hall, people should see identity as “(...) a ‘production’, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (1997:

222). The implication of such concept of identity is the definition of the (modern) subject as historically constructed, and not biologically determined. Besides, identity is never a finished product: “the subject assumes different identities at different times” (1997: 277).

Based on this notion of “identity” as something always open and unfinished, Butler developed the concept of “performativity”, defined as both “the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (1993: 2) and “not the act by which a subject brings into being what she/he names, but, rather, [the] reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains” (2). In this line of thought, everything that discourse produces is a result of performativity. For Butler, both gender and identity are constructed by discourse through a constant process of repetition and reiteration, which does not mean that people can decide whether they want to assume an identity or a gender, but presupposes that what we understand by gender and identity is “always already” a result of performativity. In order to maintain itself, a discourse needs to be repeated, which opens the possibility for re-signification. From this perspective, one can understand better the notion of gender performativity since the repetition of discourses on gender and the reiteration of socially constructed ideas on gender are responsible for the creation of gender itself. Nevertheless, performativity suggests that it is only within the discourse that produces the effects we are fighting against (such as sexist and racist discourses) that one can produce new discourses.

Following this notion of performativity, Butler draws on the concept of “agency”. According to her, “agency” is located as “a reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power” (1993: 15) because, for Butler, there is no outside to discourse, the subject is always already inside discourse and its productions. In other words, one

can never challenge power from outside the structures one is trying to undermine. Nevertheless, through performativity, the possibility of agency is always open: “if the subject is culturally constructed, it is nevertheless vested with an agency, usually figured as the capacity for reflexive meditation, that remains intact regardless of its cultural embeddedness” (1990: 142-3).

In *Figures of Resistance: Essays in Feminist Theory* (2007), Teresa de Lauretis discusses resistance in literature written by women. According to her: “(w)e thought of our speech as symptomatic and unauthorized and took our writing, as its best, to express the silence of women in the language of men” (2007: 168). Lauretis’s affirmation seems to be related to the fact that historically women have been devalued and silenced by patriarchal society and, therefore, learned to see themselves from a male perspective. Feminist writers, however, started to use strategies of resistance in their writing, which according to Lauretis followed two main directions. The first one strove for equality, accepting the definition of women as constitutively different but demanding the same status and the same rights. The second direction manifested resistance by claiming a radical separatism and trying to build a counter hegemonic discourse in order to be subversive (168). For Lauretis, these two different directions were forms of resistance to hegemonic discourses.

Still concerning resistance in writing, in *Alice Doesn’t: Feminism, Semiotics and Cinema* (1984), Lauretis affirms that

strategies of writing and of reading are forms of cultural resistance. Not only can they work to turn dominant discourse inside out (and show that it can be done) [. . .], but in affirming historical existence of irreducible contradictions for

women in discourse, they also challenge theory on its own term, the terms of a semiotic space constructed in language, its power based on social validation and well established modes of enunciation and address. (7)

This idea that one can defy and resist dominant discourses by using writing strategies is useful to my analysis of *Caged Bird*, once my analysis investigates whether it is possible to perceive literary devices used by Angelou to expose the power of racist and sexist ideologies.

Altogether, the aforementioned discussions of oppressive ideologies and gender issues, black women's representation, and intersectionality constitute the theoretical bases on which my analysis of the narrative rests.

Autobiographical narratives in African American Literature

In "Though Their Voice She Found Her Voice", Claudia M. F. Correa (2001) examines the origins of African American autobiographical works. Correa points out that, although during slavery many African-American people—mostly men—had to become literate in order to administrate their master's plantations, they soon began to use language as a tool against slavery. Besides, because during the Enlightenment it was believed that reason could only be achieved through literacy, black men began to associate education with freedom (Correa 72). In this period, autobiographical writing, generally known as slave narratives, was devoted to exposing the hardships of slavery and to claim for freedom. After the Emancipation, many black people began to constitute families and women were once more relegated to the domestic sphere. In fact, women's access to formal education was still scarce, and for black women it was even worse. After slavery, blacks

were fighting for the right to education, but even with the building of schools and institutions destined for black people, education was basically a male privilege. Therefore, although there were women who had access to education and produced written work, the voice of African-American literature was still predominantly male. According to Correa, only in the second half of the twentieth century autobiographical works written by black women would gain strength influenced by the Feminist Movement and the Civil Rights Movement (Correa 73-74). Written in the period of convergence of the two movements, Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) reflected the demand for counter hegemonic stories about black experience, and about the experience of women in general.

The Feminist Movement and the Civil Rights Movement succeeded in raising black women's awareness of their condition as women *and* black; nevertheless, both movements initially failed in apprehending the complexities of black women's positioning in the intersection of race and gender. According to Correa, black women felt the need "to (re)define the terms *woman* and *black* for society" (Correa 75). In order to reconstruct the past and to re-inform society Correa affirms that,

It would be necessary to dig into the past, reclaim and restore it, that is, for the stories of black women writers to be retrieved, it would be necessary to bring back the words of their predecessor and then establish a continuity. As a result, female African-American autobiography presents the experience of the individual as an emblem of the collective situation; [. . .] (75)

Correa's statements point to the need of creating a female African American literary tradition, and Angelou's work is certainly a great example of this.

Furthermore, Correa defends the idea that personal history is connected to collective history, which can be understood not only in the sense that literary narratives are set in a specific social context, but also that they are contributing to the creation, maintenance or reevaluation of a society's values. From this perspective, the act of resistance is embedded in the process of remembering and recovering the past. More than that, the very act of rewriting one's own life story endows the black female narrator with agency. By engaging in this reconstruction of the self, Angelou contributes to deconstructing misconceptions about what it means to be a black woman in the United States in the beginning of the twentieth century.

In *Breaking out of the cage* (1991), James Robert Saunders also explores the bases of African American autobiographical tradition. Saunders discusses Stephen Butterfield's affirmation that the origins of such genre are linked to slave narratives, a genre that, as stated by Butterfield, is "so powerful, so convincing a testimony of human resource, intelligence, endurance, and love in the face of tyranny, that, in a sense, it sets the tone for most subsequent black American writing" (Saunders 1), influencing future autobiographical works and investing them with the potential for resistance in their own creation.

Similarly, in "Hurston's and Angelou's Visual Art" (1998), Marion and Smelstor argue that because the bases for African American autobiographical works are centered in the black community and the creativity used in these kinds of works is a result of the encounter of several African American traditions, an African American autobiographical work has its own unique motive. As a consequence, the boundaries of African American

autobiography are often blurred, contributing to their subversive nature.³

The idea of African American autobiography as subversive in its essence can be associated with a variety of factors, such as: the political strength of African American works due to their outspread popularity; the questioning of the dominant ideologies of power (re)presented in the visibility created by the narrative produced by the so-called “minorities” and the authority assigned to the autobiographer (who is able to speak for her/himself instead of being spoken for); and the questioning of predominant notions about the genre “autobiography”, a genre that has been often linked to the canonical works of self-representation produced by “white-male authors”. Moreover, as discussed previously, African American literature as a whole is influenced by varied African American traditions, such as story-telling, (Negro) spirituality and its rituals, to mention but a few. Those traditions also play a role in African American autobiographies, adding in collective terms a source of strength and resistance. *Caged Bird* descends from this tradition of African American autobiographical narratives that subvert established notions of literature.

Before ending this Introduction, it is relevant to discuss, though briefly, the term “autobiography” as a literary genre. The terminology is usually controversial and the conflicts on the technologies of autobiography are many. In *Reading Autobiography* (2010: 01-05), a widely recognized guide for the study of life narratives, for instance, Sidone Smith and Julia Watson offer a review of autobiographical texts. The authors provide some of the different conceptualizations regarding the terms “autobiography”, “memoir”, “life narrative” and “life

³ For a more detailed elaboration of this idea, see “Hurston’s and Angelou’s Visual Art”, by Marion and Smelstor; *Black Women Writing Autobiography: a tradition within a tradition* by Joanne Braxton; and *Black Autobiography in America* by Stephen Butterfield.

writing". Briefly, they argue that because the most common term, "autobiography", was widely used to privilege the autonomy of the author—usually white, class-privileged, and male—and to spread what would be seen as "universal stories", many postmodern and postcolonial theorists, as a critique to this canonization of autobiographical literature, criticized the exclusionary aspect of the concept since it implied that other kinds of self-referential narratives—such as slave narratives, travel narratives, women's autobiographies—had less value.

As a consequence, the term "memoir" began to be used by some authors and critics for being more inclusive than the term "autobiography". According to them, this term was sometimes used to highlight the linguistic complexity of some autobiographical texts or to distinguish them as "memoir" (remembering), thus inviting the reader to reflect about the choice of the term. Finally, the authors suggest the term "life-narrative" to refer to self-referential works and "life-writing" for the written form of these narratives. For Smith and Watson, this term works best because it is more inclusive of the different types of autobiographical works (4). From their discussion, one could say that *Caged Bird* would enter under the name of "self life writing", more precise term they suggest to the "autobiographical mode of life writing".

In *Memoir* (2012), G. Thomas Couser, when discussing the genre "memoir", refers to Maya Angelou as the grandmother of memoirists (51), which implies that Couser defines *Caged Bird* as one of a series of memoirs written by Angelou. From his perspective, novels and memoirs resemble each other like "siblings who grew up together" (8), but are essentially different nonetheless. According to Couser, memoir has become the favorite term used to refer to self-life writing and it differs from the novel for being the narration of one's life events from one's terms, including personal emotions, needs and habits (9). Couser also points out the importance of recognizing

the differences among the two literary genres because, according to him, readers have different expectations as regards to them. When reading a novel, for instance, readers engage in the suspension of disbelief in a way that they might not while reading a memoir (17). Couser also presents different notions on the terms “memoir” and “autobiography”⁴ throughout the years and how nowadays memoir has become a prestigious term used to refer to self life writing narratives.

This discussion on terminology provides an insight into the controversies about genre in Autobiography studies. For instance, while some authors refuse to use the term “autobiography” because of its history of exclusion – which could be seen as autobiographical literature of resistance, some might argue, for instance, that, by choosing another term, one is accepting the canonic view of what is considered “great autobiography” and reinforcing the genre hierarchy that places memoirs or other forms of self-life writings as subgenres or minor genres. They may argue that by appropriating the term “autobiography” one might be subverting dominant conceptions assigned to it and embedding the author with agency.

This work does not intend to further the investigations conducted in the area of Autobiography Studies or even to impose any fixed categorization to *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Nevertheless, different categorizations as regards self-life narratives do exist, not only influencing the texts themselves but also the conceptualizations connected to literary genres, the subjects represented through discourse, the interaction of the reader with the narrative, and others. Although this research is concerned with the metaphor of “the caged bird

⁴ For a more detailed discussion on the terminology related to the terms “autobiography”, “memoir” and “novel”, see *Memoir* by G. Thomas Couser (2012); and Sidonie Smith’s and Julia Watson’s *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2001).

that sings”, the very act of the writing of self-life narrative as an act of resistance is pertinent to my analysis. By claiming the word “autobiography” to her narrative, Angelou is questioning the hegemonic discourses that ignore and silence the autobiographical writings produced by black women and other writers who stay in the margins of the autobiographical Canon. In terms of Autobiography Studies, the subversive potential embedded in the construction of *Caged Bird* is what matters the most to my investigation – more than the discussion on terminology in itself, however important that is.

In *Caged Bird*, Maya Angelou challenges the very notion of “autobiography” by incorporating in the narrative a variety of literary devices such as the use of metaphors, poetic language, alternative versions of past events⁵, a non-chronological narration of the other of events, and so on. She has declared in interviews that one of the initial reasons that led her to write her first autobiography was a challenge made by her future editor Robert Loomis. Loomis, who already wanted her to write her story, teased her by affirming the impossibility of writing an autobiography “as literature” (Pierre Walker 91). Loomis’s affirmation points out the common belief that distances “literature” and “autobiography”, when in fact these two are not separable entities. Angelou achieved her objective, anyways, by writing an autobiographical literary narrative that presents many literary techniques used in novels while re-telling her own narrative and recollecting and representing the history of her community. Angelou resists and defies the rigid notions about Truth, and History and “autobiography”, and, as an artist, exercises agency by creating her own narrative of resistance.

The boundaries on what constitutes fiction and non-fiction is not always fixed; thus, by positioning herself

⁵ To be further addressed in Chapter II, in the analysis of the incident with a white dentist.

as an autobiographer, Angelou is in control of her own narrative, what is already a sign of resistance in itself. Nevertheless, as Couser points out (more specifically related to the idea of classes on creative non-fiction), sometimes “the creative impulse may compromise, or even negate, a narrative’s nonfiction status” (16). From my perspective, however, autobiographies might benefit from these different influences, and, as mentioned before, African American literature has been highly influenced by the creative spark of African American tradition. The reader of *Caged Bird* is invited to read an autobiography, and in the interaction is surprised by a flexible narrative that is rich in its inventiveness and narrative style. Interruptions, metaphors, and even the organization principle in *Caged Bird* question established notions of autobiography and show how the boundaries among genres are often blurred, which just adds to their richness. By critically reflecting and representing the past, and playing with her own self-representation, Angelou is exposing how memory and history are not fixed categories, but produced by discourse. At the same time, her narrative is opening space so that other discourses of resistance may be created as well.

In addition, it is also relevant to the analysis of *Caged Bird* to stress the relation between autobiographies and gender construction. In *Autobiographics* (1994), Leigh Gilmore discusses the role of the female autobiographer as an “agent in autobiographical production” (25). For Gilmore, “(a)utobiography is positioned within discourses that construct truth, identity, and power, and these discourses produce a gendered subject” (xiv). From this perspective, gender is seen as constructed by discourse and also within autobiographies, which already deconstructs the idea of “Truth” as fixed, since it is also created within discourses of power. In this production, the autobiographer is engaging in performative agency by representing herself through the narrative: “the autobiographical subject is a

representation and its representation *is* its construction” (25). Therefore, the political and ideological aspect of the construction of autobiography is due to the fact that the shifting from the positioning of object to that of an autobiographical subject offers women possibilities of agency through self-representation. As Gilmore points out,

(...) the ways in which an autobiographer variously acknowledges, resists, embraces, rejects objectification, the ways s/he learns, that is, to interpret objectification as something less than simply subjectivity itself marks a place of agency. It is in this act of interpretation, of consciousness, that we can say a woman may exceed representation within dominant ideology (12).

The analytical chapters of this research present the ways in which Angelou negotiates the hegemonic discourses of her experience with her own interpretation of her life narrative, and how by rethinking the past and retelling it, she consciously resists objectification and becomes the agent of her own story.

As Pierre A. Walker points out, *Caged Bird* attends to the formal aesthetic values of New Criticism regarding the organic unity (1995: 93) while at the same time displaying the political force that is part of the tradition of African American literature (result of the clash of the social movements taking place in the United States in the sixties). He argues that the structural organization of *Caged Bird* progresses in revealing “a sequence of lessons about resisting racist oppression, a sequence that leads Maya progressively from helpless rage to forms of subtle resistance, and finally to outright and active protest” (93).

With that in mind, it is important to present the general organization of this research.

The next three chapters provide an in-depth analysis of *Caged Bird*, investigating what the narrative reveals about the metaphor of “the caged bird”. In Chapter I, entitled “HIS WINGS ARE CLIPPED AND HIS FEET ARE TIED”, a discussion on gender and race issues, and especially on the concept of “intersectionality”, is provided in order to understand how sexist and racist oppression intersect and create black women’s experience and the experience of other characters as well. This chapter deals with the first part of the metaphor of the “caged bird”, aiming at understanding what the “caged bird” and the “birdcage” represent. Chapter II, entitled “THE FEARFUL TRILL OF THINGS UNKOWN”, focuses on the complete metaphor of “the caged bird that sings” and on the concept of “agency”, examining instances of resistance in *Caged Bird* as regards its different characters. Chapter III, entitled “THE CAGED BIRD SINGS OF FREEDOM”, continues to analyze the complete metaphor of the “caged bird that sings”, this time focusing on the protagonist of the story. In the “Final Remarks”, entitled “LIFT EVERY VOICE AND SING”, the most important points of the analysis will be brought together.

CHAPTER I

“HIS WINGS ARE CLIPPED AND HIS FEET ARE TIED”: racist and sexist oppression

*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.
- Angelou, “Caged Bird”⁶*

While studying at the University of Northern Iowa for a semester, I took a course on *Blues and Jazz in African American Literature and Film* that contributed to the future of my academic life. In one of the classes, the trope of the caged bird in African American culture was brought into discussion. As a foreign student I was not quite aware of the issue. The professor asked me if I had read *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou, and my answer was negative. He asked me then if I liked Alicia Keys and told me to listen to a song called “Caged Bird”. When I got home I listened to the song and some issues caught my attention. In fact, Alicia Keys wrote the song in reference to Maya Angelou’s *Caged Bird*. Keys implies that the imprisonment affects her (as the bird) not only physically, but also psychologically. Keys suggests that “the caged bird” sings to achieve some happiness through music, and to express the desire for freedom.

⁶ The lines used in the title and epigraph of this chapter are part of the poem entitled “Caged Bird”, published by Maya Angelou in her fourth book of poetry, *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?* (1983). In this poem, Angelou explores the “caged bird” metaphor introduced in *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*. The emphasis in the epigraph is mine.

This song, released in 2001, referred to a literary work written decades before, which made me aware of the importance of this “caged bird” for African American culture and aroused my curiosity about the narrative. Thus, I decided to read Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* in order to understand better the concept of the “caged bird”. However, surprisingly, there were no “real” birds in the story. The “caged bird” that “sings” seems to be a metaphor for Maya Angelou herself as a child and a teenager, a metaphor for the book itself.

As stated in the previous chapter, this research focuses on the metaphor of “the caged bird that sings”. As a literary device, Angelou’s metaphor extends throughout the story and encourages the reader to create her/his own interpretation of the many symbolic significances of the caged bird in the story. Hoping to provide an in-depth analysis of the metaphor, this chapter attempts to unravel what *Caged Bird* reveals about the “bird” and the “birdcage” specifically. In order to do so, I discuss notions such as gender oppression, racial oppression and “intersectionality”, while analyzing some excerpts from the narrative.

Literary uses of bird imagery

In *Birds in Literature* (1994), Leonard Lutwack analyzes some depictions of birds from Greek and Roman writers to American and British writers in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Lutwack discusses how birds have been observed by humans and how “flight and song make birds exceptionally noticeable in every sort of environment” (Lutwack x). The ability to fly, the freedom of movement, the vivacity, their song, and the autonomy birds have are just a few among a range of characteristics suggested by Lutwack as reasons for why humankind is attracted to birds. Besides, for him birds are endowed with

an air of mystery (Lutwack xi), which confers to them a spirituality that intrigues the human observer.

This discussion of some of the attributes associated to birds may provide an understanding of the use of birds as a symbolic figure in literature. Lutwack postulates that

Familiarity and transcendence have given birds a wider range of meaning and symbol in literature than any other animal. The resemblance of their activities to common patterns of human family behavior -- "the feathered parallel," in Robert Browning's phrase -- makes them exceptionally suitable for anthropomorphic imagery that links man to the common forms of nature. The element of mystery in their behavior, on the other hand, furnishes material for symbolical meanings of a supernatural order. (Lutwack xi-xii)

Thus, birds work as a rich source of inspiration, and consequently, they have been widely used in literature.

As previously explained, the symbolic significance of birds in literature may vary. Many literary works use birds to convey different meanings: freedom, creativity, strength, persistence, beauty and victory, to mention but a few. In the literature written by women, as some critics have remarked,⁷ images of birds acquire an even greater importance. It is probably not by chance that in the opening scene of *Jane Eyre* (1847) Charlotte Brontë decides to depict Jane sitting alone in a drawing-room by

⁷ See, for example, one of the earliest books on feminist criticism: Ellen Moers' *Literary Women: The Great Writers* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), especially pages 245-249.

the window, reading Bewick's *History of British Birds*. It is certainly not by chance either that Jane is observing a sea-fowl, the only inhabitant of "the solitary rocks and promontories" (Brontë 2). Just like the sea-fowl, Jane is lonely and isolated. The bird may be a reflection of Jane's internal feeling and desire for freedom. Similarly, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1889) is also filled with bird imagery. It is possible to understand that when Mademoiselle Reisz tells Edna that "the bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings" (Chopin 83), she is literally telling Edna that she needs courage and strength in order to defy established norms and conventions imposed to women. Also, when Edna walks into the ocean in the final scene, she observes "a bird with a broken wing" falling into the water. Once more, one can interpret the bird as a representation of Edna herself and of her failure in the search for independence and freedom.

Although the use of birds in literature by women is quite frequent, the symbolic meanings attached to them may be quite different. More than often, they are associated with themes such as the desire for freedom, for creative expression, and independence. Nevertheless, dead birds, caged birds, and injured birds are also used to depict female oppression and suffering. In Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" (1894), the "countless sparrows" "twittering in the eaves" in the "new spring life" can be understood as a reflection of Mrs. Mallard's joy with the possibility of freedom and new life experiences her husband's death allows her. In Susan Glaspell's "A Jury of Her Peers" (1917), the reader is presented with the image of a dead bird with a broken neck found in a birdcage with a broken door. In this short-story, the bird can be seen as Minnie Wright herself, a thing that used to sing and have life until it was silenced by the harsh treatment of her husband. The birdcage can be understood as a metaphor of Minnie's feelings of imprisonment, her husband's violence and

oppression, and also of the institution of marriage that perpetuates patriarchal notions and imposes restrictive roles on both women and men.

In Harper Lee's famous novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), the mockingbird is used as metaphor for innocence and purity. To kill a mockingbird is considered by the narrator as a sin because "(m)ockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy . . . but sing their hearts out for us" (Lee 119). Thus, the act of killing a mockingbird seems an act of unjustified hatred and violence, capable of causing destruction and pain.

In African American literature the presence of bird imagery is also common. One can find these representations in the poetry of authors such as Langston Hughes, when the poet compares a life without dreams to a "broken-winged bird that cannot fly",⁸ or in the narrative of Toni Morrison, where bird imagery achieves diverse symbolic meanings. In Morrison's novels, however, powerful images are created by using subversive and unconventional bird metaphors: "(i)nsanity, hatred, terror, slavery, selfishness, and evil are all conveyed through images of birds like the hawk, the dove, the cardinal, the peacock, the rooster, the humming bird, and the robin" (González 76). In *The Bluest Eye* (1970), for instance, the bird comes to represent not freedom, but the lack of freedom and the impossibility of ever achieving it. Rape, abusive relationships, and racist notions of beauty have damaged Pecola beyond repair, and that's one of the reasons why the narrator describes Pecola as an injured bird: "Elbows bent, hands on shoulders, she flailed her arms like a bird in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly. Beating the air, a winged but grounded bird [. . .]." (*The Bluest Eye* 204). In *Sula* (1973), a plague of robins announces the return of Sula to Medallion. And at the

⁸ Line from the poem "Dream", by Langston Hughes.

same time that the invasion of birds can be seen as Sula's independence and liberal mind, just like Sula, they also cause a lot of distress in the community and affect their routine negatively. Although their ability to fly may represent the possibility of freedom, they begin to die around the place. Once again, Morrison uses birds to represent not freedom, but death. Moreover, who can forget Mister, the rooster, in *Beloved* (1987)? The rooster that looked so free, the rooster that "was allowed to be and stay what he was" (*Beloved* 72), the rooster that was not changed completely by the experience of slavery as Paul D was. This rooster works not as a reminder of freedom. On the contrary, the smiling rooster reminds the reader of the pain and psychological damage slavery has caused.

The previous examples are only a few compared to the wide range of depictions of birds in the narrative of Toni Morrison. Nevertheless, it is important to mention some of them because they indicate a new direction in what refers to the literary use of bird imagery. In African American literature, birds are often used as more than a symbol for freedom; they are usually used to portray racial inequality and the struggle for freedom as well.

"I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings": the title

The title of Maya Angelou's *Caged Bird* refers to a line from the poem "Sympathy",⁹ written by the African American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar. The poem evokes the image of a bird struggling to escape from a birdcage, beating his wings against the bars, bleeding out but fighting until it has to stop and wait for its scars to heal so it can beat its wings again. In the final stanza, which provided the title for Angelou's book, the bird starts to sing.

⁹ "Sympathy" was first published in *Lyrics of the Hearthside* by Dodd, Mead and Company in 1899. The title for the narrative was a suggestion given to Angelou by her friend Abbey Lincoln Roach.

I know why the caged bird sings,
 ah me,
 When his wing is bruised and his
 bosom sore,—
 When he beats his bars and he
 would be free;
 It is not a carol of joy or glee,
 But a prayer that he sends from
 his heart's deep core,
 But a plea, that upward to Heaven
 he flings—
 I know why the caged bird sings!

The caged bird, thus, symbolizes all African descendents who were captured and held as captives during slavery. More than that, the caged bird symbolizes all people who have been oppressed in one way or another. The poem reflects the physical and psychological effects of this oppression and isolation. Nevertheless, the caged bird sings a prayer in a final act of rebellion and defiance. The caged bird here is not a symbol of freedom and independence but of its denial: violence and suffering, and the strength of the oppressed.

By entitling her autobiographical work *I Know Why the Caged Bird* sings, Angelou extends the metaphor of the caged bird to her entire narrative. The questions that follow are simple: what or who is the caged bird, what is its birdcage representative of, and why does the bird still sing or, better yet, how can this caged bird sing?

The birdcage: racism, segregation, and female subjugation

“What are you looking at me for? I didn’t come to stay”. The first lines of *Caged Bird* already point to two issues related to Marguerite’s¹⁰ self-perception. The first

¹⁰ I am using Marguerite (Maya) when referring to the character in *Caged Bird* and Angelou when referring to the author. Being an acknowledgedly

one: Marguerite's feeling of awkwardness. She sees herself as an ugly and awkward black girl, and while she is there, in front of the church, trying to remember the lines she has to deliver, she feels exposed and vulnerable. Marguerite's conceptualization of beauty, though, is a reflection of her internalization of white notions of beauty. She imagines herself as a light-blue-eyed blond girl trapped in the body of a black girl by a cruel fairy stepmother:

Wouldn't they be surprised when one day I woke out of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn't let me straighten? My light-blue eyes were going to hypnotize them [...].
(Angelou 4)

As a child, Marguerite has already internalized the racist notions that her black features are not beautiful. More than that, she seems to believe that she is too big and her body too broad for a girl. As a girl, she also seems to have internalized the idea that she has to be delicate, careful and tidy, and she considers herself the opposite of all that. Therefore, Marguerite is presented by the narrator as a little black girl with an inferiority complex. In a way, her skin color is a cage she cannot escape from. Therefore, unless she learns how to see herself with new eyes, she will always feel inferior and insecure.

In addition to the issue of beauty and inadequacy, the second issue present in the initial lines of the narrative is the theme of displacement. Through the narrator's adult

autobiographical work, Angelou will also be used when referring to the narrator.

voice, the reader gets to know how Marguerite felt as a young child: “(i)f growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat” (Angelou 6). Marguerite’s feeling of displacement is what she calls an “unnecessary insult” to a girl who also experiences the combined forces of social factors such as extreme racial segregation and prejudice, sexism, and poverty. This displacement comes from the feeling of abandonment Marguerite carries because she and her brother, Bailey Johnson Jr., had been sent away to Stamps, in Arkansas, after their parents’ divorce when they were 3 and 4 years old, respectively, to live with their paternal grandmother, Mrs. Annie Henderson (Momma). Moreover, Marguerite also feels displaced in the black community because she looks different, speaks and behaves differently. Finally, as a black person in the South of the United States in the 1930s, Marguerite also experiences what I would call racial displacement, because although she lives in a black community, the environment is one of extreme southern racism: the white neighbors would not accept any progress from black people, and the fear of any small incident causing a lynch-mob is like “the razor that threatens the throat”, a real threat. Black people were treated as if they did not have the right to be there, as if they did not belong there. Thus, Marguerite’s feeling of displacement comes from different sources, personal and social factors that intersect and alter her experience. Furthermore, Marguerite’s frequent displacement in the narrative contributes to her characterization as a bird in terms of physical mobility.

“Death, Disillusionment and Despair in Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*” (2013) discusses Angelou’s white dream as a metaphor of Marguerite’s path towards becoming a strong black woman. According to Jacob, although Marguerite initially wishes to become a white girl, later she learns to

appreciate her racial identity. Because the dress has not the effect of turning her into a white girl, she is forced to live with her blackness and with the impacts her race has on her life and on the way society treats her. The author affirms: "If she acknowledges this Blackness, Angelou must also acknowledge the existence of an arbitrary and malevolent force beyond her control, which dictates her personal and racial identity" (Jacob 554). In other words, the fairy stepmother ceases to be only a cruel witch who had imprisoned Marguerite and becomes a representative for institutionalized racism, and the vicissitudes produced under the precepts of white culture. Marguerite is concealed by the cage that her race, her sex, her age and her environment represents to her, and she is aware that this cage is nothing but a restriction, a disguise, that hides her true nature, that one day finally will be revealed and the "curse" will be broken. Marguerite lives under "the spell" that might be a metaphor to the different modes of oppression.

In the story, the reader is introduced to the city of Stamps, a place where racial segregation is so intense that many children do not believe white people really exist. Being black in the South during the 1930s meant to be constantly subjected to unequal treatment in a harsh environment which affected profoundly its inhabitants. As a child, Marguerite observes the movement of the cotton pickers during the harvest season. They usually pass by the Store in the morning before work, hopeful and full of energy, wishing that that day they would pick more cotton than before. However, in the late afternoon they would barely drag themselves home, returning with their sacks almost empty, drained strength and no enthusiasm. It is never enough, the only certainty is the "heavy knowledge that they were going to end the season as they started" (Angelou 11). And the hope that that harvest season would help them to provide for their families for an entire year vanishes as the sun goes down: "In cotton-picking time the

late afternoons revealed the harshness of Black Southern life [...]” (11). The low wage, added to suspicion of fraud by weighted scales, plus the hard work under poor work conditions are a reflection of the unequal treatment black people received in that community. In those circumstances black people were practically powerless.

This powerlessness is increased by the intersection of different social factors. For instance, “race” and “class” intersect to create a social positioning as “the working class”. Thus, the “children of slavery” were officially emancipated—in the legal sense of the term emancipation—; but they were nonetheless limited and imprisoned by their social location. The white owners of the plantations would use their class privileges to sustain their economic power and to keep exercising racial discrimination. The cotton-pickers would be exploited by the white farmers and because of their financial needs they would subject themselves to class oppression. In agreement with Brah’s argument, “Ain’t I A Woman? Revisiting Intersectionality” (2004), one can understand the ways in which the major systems of oppression intersect amongst themselves (78) and how “they come into coexistence in and through contradictory and conflictual relations to each other” (80).

White prejudice and black powerlessness mark the first chapters of *Caged Bird*. Another episode that exposes how segregated and racist was the city of Stamps happens when Momma is warned by the former sheriff that “a crazy nigga messed with a white lady” and that “the boys” would come later to Stamps (19-20). Thus, Willie (Marguerite’s uncle) should hide that night. Marguerite is filled with terror by the threat of an encounter with the Ku Klux Klan. She has heard about them before and considers them as abominations. That night, Marguerite hears Willie moaning all night among the potatoes and onions he has to hide under as if he himself was guilty of something. His only “crime”, however, is to be a black man in an

extremely racist society (and Uncle Willie has also a disability, which increases his oppression). As a child, Marguerite learns very early that life is not fair to black people. They might be lynched simply for walking on the main street downtown, for staring at the wrong person, or only for “being black” inside their own houses. They are imprisoned by their color and restricted by the harsh social environment surrounding them.

Marguerite and Bailey are raised by Grandmother Henderson, who soon they begin to call Momma. Momma is a well-respected black woman. She has a store in the heart of the black community, the only black store in Stamps, and therefore the center of many social encounters. Momma is a religious person with strict rules about proper behavior and moral values. She has taught their grandchildren that all adults should be addressed with respect and with a title (like Mister, Miss, Sister...) that would indicate the familiarity and the nature of their relationship. Momma’s rules are respected by most people. However, some poor white children that live in her farmland do not extend the courtesy of being polite or showing any respect to the woman who owns their houses. When they come to the Store they call Momma “Annie” and order around. Momma, who considers herself a realist for thinking that “the less you say to white folks the better”, just anticipates their needs and helps them so they leave the store as soon as possible. Here is one more lesson about the place of blacks in that community: even though Momma is economically speaking in a better position than those poor whites—Marguerite refers to as powhitetrash—, she is treated with disrespect by them because of her color.

For Marguerite, one of the most painful experiences she had with her grandmother happened when she was ten years old. A group of white girls comes to the Store and decides to provoke Momma by impersonating her by mimicking a monkey. The girls are giggling around, dancing and one of them even shows her pubic hairs to

Momma while Momma stands there impenetrable, as a stone, humming a prayer. The shock of the scene—seeing her grandmother, her heroine, so disrespected—makes Marguerite burst into tears. She is enraged and indignant with those white girls' behavior. She even thinks of using a rifle they have behind the door. From a young age, Marguerite learns that even the most deserving black people would not be treated with equal justice and respect there. Although that incident is an overt expression of racism, in that social context, there is not really much that can be done. Marguerite's tears are a consequence of her feeling of impotence and anger in having to stay there and see her grandmother enduring that awful behavior. Still, when Momma returns to the Store, Marguerite notices that her grandmother has won that battle, even though she cannot really comprehend what has happened before. Those expressions of racism are part of Marguerite's everyday life as a child. They shape her vision of the world and also her and her entire family's experience.

When Marguerite is eight years old, her father (Big Bailey Johnson), whom she does not remember anymore, arrives in Stamps and takes her and Bailey Jr. to live with their mother in St. Louis, Missouri. Although Momma was never a person to show a lot of affection, Marguerite feels her love through her actions and is not content in having to leave her to live with unfamiliar people. Nevertheless, in St. Louis Marguerite gets to know more about her maternal family and about her life before they were sent to Stamps. Grandmother Baxter is white, and Grandfather Baxter is black, and their six children are known by their meanness. Also, her maternal family seems to be involved in all kinds of illegal activities. After living for some months with their grandparents, Marguerite and Bailey begin to live with their mother, Vivian Baxter, and her boyfriend Mr. Freeman.

In St. Louis, Marguerite continues to feel displaced and homeless even when she starts to live with

Vivian. Nevertheless, she finds refuge in the books she reads. Because Marguerite is afflicted with terrible nightmares, her mother takes her to her bed and Marguerite sleeps there with Vivian and Mr. Freeman. Unfortunately, one day Mr. Freeman sexually molests her, who is still too innocent to comprehend the gravity of what has just happened to her. In fact, probably because Marguerite had never really recovered from her feeling of abandonment, and because she had longed for a demonstration of physical affection, she enjoys being held close to him. In his arms she does not feel displaced or rejected; the first time Mr. Freeman holds her, she feels protected and cared for:

He held me so softly that I wished he wouldn't ever let me go. I felt at home. From the way he was holding me I knew he'd never let me go or let anything bad ever happen to me. This was probably my real father and we had found each other at last. (Angelou 79)

Later, however, Mr. Freeman threatens to kill Bailey if Marguerite tells anyone about what has happened there. After that, Mr. Freeman begins to ignore her completely and Marguerite feels lonely and cannot comprehend what *she* has done wrong to cause such a threat.

Before the threat, however, Mr. Freeman had masturbated while holding her close to him. After ejaculating, Mr. Freeman tells Marguerite that she has peed on the bed. Marguerite does not understand why he is telling her that, but he prohibits her of ever speaking about that incident again. Mary Vermillion discusses how “with his lie, he denies her knowledge about her own body and confounds her ability to make a coherent story out of his actions” (252). Vermillion’s argument is valid because throughout the narrative Marguerite becomes more aware

about who she is and tries to negotiate external and internal notions about her own body. At that moment of the story, nevertheless, she does not have total control about her body yet,—which is something present since the initial scenes of *Caged Bird*¹¹—and when he tells that she has urinated she gets confused. In addition, because she is only a little girl she is not allowed to speak for herself. His authority not only silences her but creates a narrative *for* her. She cannot negotiate her own representation of the experience with the dominant narrative Mr. Freeman has produced.

Feeling rejected, one night Marguerite looks for Mr. Freeman and sits on his lap. Mr. Freeman molests her one more time and then stops talking to her for months again, increasing Marguerite's feeling of abandonment. Marguerite was just a child who felt inferior to others because of her physical appearance. A child who felt she did not belong anywhere since she was sent away by her parents when she was only three years old. A child who was raised by a very religious grandmother who—although she is a charitable and loving woman—is more concerned with spiritual guidance and with providing the means for her grandchildren's well being than with giving affectionate displays of love. In a way, Marguerite's displacement and her need for physical connection makes her vulnerable to Mr. Freeman's sexual molestation. After some time, Marguerite forgets about Mr. Freeman as she plunges into books, reading more than ever and wishing she had been born a boy, so she could develop the virtues of a hero – to be good, and to win.

¹¹ In the opening scene of *Caged Bird*, Marguerite is trying to remember the words from a text she has to deliver to celebrate Easter, and trying to control her bodily functions. After delivering the lines, she runs out of the church and relieves herself by urinating. Although she fears Momma's scold, she enjoys the sensation of "sweet release" and the freedom of not being stared at by people in church anymore. She laughs, although she knows she will have to suffer the consequences for her actions.

After months avoiding her, Mr. Freeman calls Marguerite with his penis exposed and she refuses to stand near him because she does not need him to hold her anymore. However, he grabs her and rapes her this time, threatening to kill her if she screams:

Then there was the pain. A breaking and entering when even the senses are torn apart. The act of rape on an eight-year-old body is a matter of the needle giving because the camel can't. The child gives, because the body can, and the mind of the violator cannot. (Angelou 84).

This passage creates a powerful image of female subjugation by the use of sexual violence. Nevertheless, at the same time that this metaphor evokes the disparity between the abused child and the adult male oppressor, it also alludes to the biblical parable of “The Camel and the Eye of the Needle”¹² about simplicity and the difficulties wealthy people might find when trying to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

Vermillion discusses this specific passage, arguing that Angelou associates Mr. Freeman with the wealthy man in the metaphor. Nevertheless, although I do not agree that Mr. Freeman stands for the wealthy man—it seems the needle stands for Marguerite while the camel stands for the rapist—, it is certainly meaningful that she chooses to use this metaphor related with poverty, humility, wealth and heavenly positioning to describe her rape experience. As Vermillion affirms, Angelou seems to

¹² In reference to Jesus quote that declares that “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God” (Mathew 19:24). By quoting this specific passage, Angelou is not only recalling the absurdity of sizes involved in the rape of a man in a child, but also conceptualizing the rape by the use of a metaphor through the adult voice of the narrator.

use her rape “to connect with the suffering of the poor” (250). One could go further and say that, because Angelou uses this metaphor later in the narrative to talk about the congregation’s beliefs that they (black people) would be rewarded in heaven for the abuse of the oppressors (white people) they endured on earth, Angelou uses her rape as a symbol for the struggle of not only the poor, but other people who are subjugated by the oppressor and are powerless with respect to social structures. Although Marguerite does not share the congregation’s belief, at both times the narrator brings the same metaphor to describe the experience of oppression and subjugation, which opens space for such interpretation.

After the rape, Marguerite tries to cover what had happened because she fears for Bailey’s life—Mr. Freeman had told her that if she screamed he would kill her, and if she told anyone about it he would kill Bailey. However, Bailey finds her drawers under the mattress and realizes what had happened. Bailey begs her to tell him who did that to her in order to punish the rapist and prevent this person from hurting another girl. Marguerite finally tells him that it was Mr. Freeman, and he is arrested.

Mr. Freeman silences Marguerite by using his power as the adult male and by his threat against Bailey Jr. His psychological abuse prevents Marguerite from speaking to anyone about the first time he holds her close. As a consequence, she feels she is partially to blame for the rape. In court, Marguerite feels trapped by the lawyer’s questioning. And when the lawyer tries to implicate Marguerite’s culpability, his questioning makes her feel guilty. When the lawyer asks if Mr. Freeman had touched her before the rape, she feels compelled to say “no” because she fears her family would not understand her if she tells them the truth. For Froula, “She knows the cultural script and its hermeneutic traditions, which hold all female pleasure guilty, all too well, and so she betrays her actual experience with a lie” (1986). Froula’s statement

makes sense because Marguerite lies in court not because she fears any threat by Mr. Freeman—she does not fear him anymore—; she lies because she fears rejection, she fears the judgment of those men and women in court.

Therefore, she feels compelled to say “no” when the lawyer asks her if Mr. Freeman had touched her before:

I couldn't say yes and tell them how he had loved me once for a few minutes and how he had held me close before he thought I had peed in the bed. My uncles would kill me and Grandmother Baxter would stop speaking, as she often did when she was angry. And all those people in court would stone me as they had stoned the harlot in the Bible. And Mother, who thought I was such a good girl, would be so disappointed. (Angelou 91).

The fear of not fulfilling the social expectation for her leads Marguerite to omit the truth in court. Nevertheless, she feels that she is not a good girl only because she has experienced the closeness of physical contact and the feeling of being loved Mr. Freeman's embrace had aroused in her. Had she internalized the sexist notion of women as sexual temptress? Probably yes, because the shame she feels with this pleasure and the fear of punishment and of disappointing her mother compel Marguerite's response.

Mr. Freeman is given a one-year sentence, but his lawyer manages to release him that same afternoon. Later, Marguerite is trying to think about a way of telling Bailey about her lie in court when the doorbell rings. She and Bailey listen to a white policeman telling Grandmother Baxter that Mr. Freeman was found dead, some people said he had been kicked to death. Their grandmother

forbids them to speak of that incident in that house ever again. Marguerite, feeling guilty and responsible for that man's death, retreats to mutism:

I had sold myself to the Devil and there could be no escape. The only thing I could do was to stop talking to people other than Bailey. Instinctively, or somehow, I knew that because I loved him so much I'd never hurt him, but if I talked to anyone else that person might die too. Just my breath, carrying my words out, might poison people and they'd curl up and die like the black fat slugs that only pretended. I had to stop talking. (Angelou 93)

In a way, the damage caused by her omission in court seems to have an impact as great as the rape, emotionally speaking. Marguerite feels responsible for a man's death, and the result of such psychological trauma is her silence. Froula argues that Marguerite's silence "expresses guilty and anguish at her own aggression against the father and voluntarily sacrifices the cure of truthful words" (635). The importance of voice here is also relevant because, as a child, Marguerite has to negotiate the implications of words in her life. And although after the rape she is afraid of the negative damages caused by her words, it is also important that she understands the power of representation and of finding one's voice.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Kimberlé Crenshaw points out that identity politics fails to consider the intersection of racist and sexist practices. She argues that there should be politics to contemplate both women's and African American's experiences of violence. She believes the concerns of feminist and of antiracist politics should intersect because sexist and racist practices

intersect. Crenshaw focuses on male violence against women of color (namely, battering and rape), and her discussion is relevant to understand the implications of intersectionality in Marguerite's experience with rape.

The rape trial episode resonates with both race and gender inequality. Although Marguerite is just an eight-year-old child, she still has to testify in court and be even more exposed by the lawyer's questioning. She is the victim, but she is the one being interrogated as a criminal. This procedure is an example of how even the justice system—that should guarantee justice for all—privileges men. Now, both Marguerite and Mr. Freeman were black, which in a way shows how all people are capable of inflicting harm to others regardless of their color. Furthermore, the way Mr. Freeman's lawyer manages to release him from jail also highlights how the safety of a black little girl is neglected. Had Marguerite been a white lady raped by a black man, things could be completely different, but Marguerite is black so she is not seen as a pure and innocent girl, but as a black woman – therefore sensual and erotic. Crenshaw explores the intersection of racial and gender issues within the structures and politics related with violence against women of color. For her, the location of women of color makes the experience of rape and domestic violence different from the experience of white women (Crenshaw 1245). In *Caged Bird*, Marguerite suffers the disadvantages of being a black girl living under the combined forces of racism and sexism.

In addition, Mr. Freeman's death is probably caused by one of Marguerite's uncles or criminal associates, which illustrates how people may take justice into their hands when feeling frustrated and angry with the justice system. As a consequence of Marguerite's lie in court, she believes she is responsible for a man's death and after that she does not speak again for a long time. In the first weeks her family understands she is mute because of the traumatic experience of rape—although this is an

unspoken subject–, but later they take her refusal to speak with anyone but Bailey as a sign of disrespect and many begin to be violent with her when feeling offended. After some time, Marguerite and Bailey are sent back to Stamps to live with Momma, and she never finds out if Momma had sent for them or if her maternal family just got sick of her silence. Anyways, Marguerite feels comfortable in being again in a familiar environment. In Stamps, she is already known for being “tender-hearted” and people can understand her silence even if they do not know the real causes of it.

Jacob also discusses Marguerite’s rape. For Jacob, the rape is more than a consequence of a vicious man and her family’s neglect; it is also influenced by “Angelou’s own need for attention and physical closeness” (Jacob 558). Marguerite’s abandonment by her parents was something that she as a child could not easily overcome; she thought that she was too ugly and different to be loved by anyone. Therefore, when Mr. Freeman holds Marguerite in his arms, her world passes to include physical contact, and she craves for more of that. Jacob also observes how by threatening her life, and by manipulating her feelings for her brother, and also her need for closeness, he manages to achieve his awful purposes as well. After discussing the way Marguerite retreats into silence after learning about Mr. Freeman’s death. Jacob affirms that Marguerite sees herself as instrument of violence and death, and “(t)his conviction is part of the pattern of self-rejection and inferiority, well established in Angelou’s psyche” (558). For the author, it is a result of her view of herself as repulsive, and her silence reflects her inner struggle to control herself. This interpretation is certainly adequate when one considers how Mr. Freeman managed to manipulate Marguerite’s emotions and her innocence, and how she refused to speak again for fear of hurting others, for fear of being evil, which shows her constant insecurity.

Back in Stamps, Marguerite begins to experience overt instances of racism in a more personal way. When she is 10 years old she begins to work in a white woman's house as a way of finishing her "education", according to what Marguerite considers Victorian's values. While white girls were learning how to dance and to seat properly for tea, black girls were learning how to cook, how to sew, how to wash and iron, basically how to serve. The different roles white girls and black girls had to learn in order to be initiated in the adult life already demonstrate the relation between social positions and racial issues. On the one hand, black young women were trained to serve white people, to learn how to keep in order a house they could never afford, in refined ways not consistent with their current social environment, and on the other hand white women were learning how to behave in a society that did not expect greatness from them— did not expect them to be great lawyers, scientists, doctors, writers—, and how to be served. Thus, Marguerite begins to work for Mrs. Viola Cullinan.

Mrs. Cullinan treats Marguerite with a gentle tone that seems to hide a disguised prejudice. She keeps mispronouncing Marguerite's name and calling her Margaret instead. One day, one of Mrs. Cullinan's friends suggests that Mrs. Cullinan should start calling her Mary because "Margaret" is just too long, telling her that she should not bother remembering it. Soon Marguerite discovers that Miss Glory—a descendant of the Cullinan's slaves, who also works for Mrs. Cullinan—used to be Hallelujah. After that day, Mrs. Cullinan starts to address Marguerite as Mary, which infuriates the girl. Mrs. Cullinan perpetuates a type of veiled racism. Her language is gentle but patronizing. She also separates the items used by Marguerite and Miss Glory from the ones used by her. And although she does not mistreat Marguerite, she refuses to recognize her identity as a human being, deciding to rename her for her convenience. Mrs. Cullinan's renaming

is as offensive as the racist slurs she uses to insult Marguerite, when Marguerite breaks her favorite china dishes.

Another circumstance that exposes the inequality between black people and white people in Stamps is present in the condescending speech given by a white speaker in Marguerite's eight-grade graduation ceremony. In Stamps, the eight-grade and high school ceremony was a really important event for the black community. In this ceremony, however, the excitement is spoiled by two events. First, students are not allowed to sing the Negro National Anthem¹³ after the pledge of allegiance. Secondly, in Mr. Edward Donleavy's speech, he highlights the improvements in the labs of the Central School (white school), and the new renowned art teacher hired there. After that, Mr. Donleavy describes how he had spoken with people in high positions about the athletes who had graduated from the Lafayette County Training School (black school). Although he believes to be benevolent for praising black people for their performance in sports, to Marguerite, his speech serves only to put black people in their "proper place": "the white kids were going to have a chance to become Galileos and Madame Curies and Edisons and Gauguins, and our boys (the girl weren't even in on it) would try to be Jesse Owensens and Joe Louises" (Angelou 192-193). Although the black community was proud of their heroes, Marguerite is frustrated that in their graduation day a white man comes to remind them that most of them would not succeed as doctors or intellectuals. Thus, his speech exposes institutional racism because it is clear that blacks do *not* have the same opportunities of a higher education in Stamps as white people. If they were male and good at sports, they *might* have a chance of

¹³ In *Caged Bird*, Angelou makes reference to the song "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing", also known as the Black American National Anthem. The song was written as a poem by James Weldon Johnson in 1899, being a powerful expression of freedom.

becoming athletes. Otherwise, boys like Bailey—who were too small to be athletes—, if they want to be lawyers, they would have to “first play penance for (their) skin by picking cotton and hoeing corn and studying correspondence books at night for twenty years” (Angelou 193). Mr. Donleavy’s speech works as a reminder that the degree they are receiving does not mean a lot in a society that privileges whites over blacks, a reminder of white dominance and power, a reminder of black people’s powerlessness.

Marguerite one day is afflicted with an excruciating toothache. Usually, Momma would treat toothaches by pulling the teeth out or by using pain killers since there were no black dentists or doctors in Stamps. However, Marguerite is still in pain and Momma decides to take her to Dr. Lincoln, a white dentist in the whites’ part of town because he owes her a favor for having lent money to help him save his practice during the Great Depression. Regardless of the help given by Momma before, the doctor refuses to treat Marguerite because of her color. In fact, Dr. Lincoln says “he’d rather stick his hand in a dog’s mouth than in a nigger’s”. The doctor’s refusal reveals his ingratitude towards a person who has helped him before. More than that, because Momma is black, he does not seem to believe he should return any favors to her, even if it was her money that helped him to keep his business going.

One event would change Marguerite and Bailey’s life forever and lead her grandmother to take them to California to live with their mother. Although Momma told them she was taking them because they were growing up and she was too old to take care of them, Marguerite suspects that the real reason was an incident related with Bailey. One day, Bailey encounters a dead black body being pulled out of a pond. A white man is looking at the corpse and smiling with pleasure, and Bailey is shocked. He asks Uncle Willie why white people hate black people

so much. Uncle Willie says: “They don’t really hate us. They don’t know us. How can they hate us? They mostly scared” (Angelou 211). Bailey’s question brings into light the theme of white illogical hatred, and Uncle Willie’s answer in a way shows he does not really have an answer to this concept of racial superiority. The encounter with death affects Bailey greatly:

He was away in a mystery, locked in the enigma that young Southern Black boys start to unravel, start to *try* to unravel, from seven years old to death. The humorless puzzle of inequality and hate. His experience raised the question of worth and values, of aggressive inferiority and aggressive arrogance. (Angelou 212-213)

According to the narrator, Bailey’s life depended on never understanding the enigma. Momma probably feared that Bailey would try to solve this enigma, and since there is no good explanation for such prejudice and hatred, Bailey could enter a circle of hatred, rebellion and violence. Such manifestations of hatred could only cause more hatred. After this incident, Momma begins to plan their trip to California, where Marguerite and Bailey would live with their mother again.

The caged bird: the works of intersectionality

Because extended to the entire work, the metaphor of “the caged bird” portrays the predicament of Marguerite as a child and teenager, she *is* the caged bird, caged by sexism, racism, and poverty (not to mention other forces). Throughout *Caged Bird*, Angelou illustrates how sexism and racism operate together and criticizes the way women have been treated and relegated. The birdcage can refer to many different social and personal factors. The social

context in which Marguerite is inserted plays a very important role in her experience as a black woman. As a southern girl, she learns very early the damaging effects of racism in the psyche of black people. By observing people around her in the Store, in church, or her paternal family, Marguerite can comprehend more about the restrictions put upon them by white people. She also feels the effect of white discrimination and prejudice. Many white people seem to believe that, being a black woman, she can only work by serving people or in the cotton plantations. More than that, because she is black she cannot enjoy the same privileges allowed to whites: the right to a proper education, and even to health treatment. Such racial discrimination and restrictions also help to undermine black people and keep them isolated and oppressed, without access to economic power. Thus, economic status and racial values are strictly intersected.

As discussed previously, Marguerite's displacement is a result of the intersection of different sources, different axes of social and economic instances; and this displacement impacts on Marguerite's experiences and personal growth. As pointed out by Yolanda Manora,

This Black woman, positioned at the *interstices* of race and gender, being non-white and non-male, becomes for the purpose of the hegemonic order, the Other of the Other. This positionality, along with the socioeconomic conditions that are its material manifestations, serves as the source of Angelou's displacement. (Manora 363-4, emphasis mine)

Manora points out that Angelou's positioning disrupts hegemonic narratives about women and about African

Americans, providing a better understanding of black female subjectivity.

Furthermore, as a girl, Marguerite was even more restricted, because the prejudice was not only about her color and her social position, but also about her sex: “(t)he Black female is assaulted in her tender years by all those common forces of nature at the same time that she is caught in the tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and Black lack of power” (Angelou 291). As a woman, she was even more powerless and subjugated. As Angelou states, “(i)t was awful to be Negro and have no control over [her] life...” (194).

One of the most striking instances of female subjugation happens when Marguerite is raped by Mr. Freeman. This traumatic event has a caging effect as well, preventing Marguerite from trusting people again for a long time. The rape and the guilt she feels for being vulnerable to it silence her for years. Mutism can be interpreted as another “iron bar” in this birdcage. The trauma led Marguerite to mutism (inability to “sing”), which at the same time that was a form of protection was also a way of restricting her ability to communicate as well. Only by finding her voice again Marguerite would be able to stand for herself and start to become a strong black woman.

When revisiting the concept of intersectionality, Avtar Brah regards intersectionality as “signifying the complex, irreducible, varied, and variable effects which ensue when multiple axis of differentiation – economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential – intersect in historically specific contexts” (Brah 76). From this perspective, the notion of intersectionality implies the clashing of different social categories, which cannot be understood in all their complexities if one focuses on only one or even two axes of differentiation. In line with this idea, this chapter aimed at analyzing the different categories that intersected and created Marguerite’s

experience in *Caged Bird*. Nevertheless, it is necessary to say that, as stated by Brah, the effects of what happens in the intersection are “variable”, which implies that they are likely to change. The implication of such “variability” is that they alter people’s experience. That is to say, the concept of intersectionality is not fixed and neither are identities. In the case of *Caged Bird*, that means that the social context that influences and permeates the lives of the characters is always changing, which means that their “identities” are in a constant process of transformation, so that intersectionality (and the power relations embedded in this notion) also enables the possibility of agency.

In this chapter, I have tried to provide an analysis of the metaphor of the “caged bird”, focusing on the symbolic meanings of the “birdcage” metaphor present in the narrative. In order to conduct such analysis I have tried to demonstrate how the combined forces of social and personal factors worked as a cage preventing Marguerite and other people who can also be seen as “caged birds” from achieving freedom and independence. The next two chapters focus on the metaphor of the “caged bird” that “sings”, dealing specifically with the idea of voice. Then, in order to discuss in which ways “the caged bird sings”, the following chapter draws on the concept of “agency”.

CHAPTER II
“THE FEARFUL TRILL OF THINGS UNKOWN”:
creativity as resistance

*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*

In the poem “Caged Bird”¹⁴ there are two contrasting bird images, the first one of a free bird floating and enjoying its freedom in nature, the second of a caged bird, its wings and feet tied; yet the caged bird finds in its heart the strength to sing for freedom. This poem works almost as an illustration to the metaphor Angelou had already used in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

In the previous chapter I tried to explore the importance of analyzing literature from a wider and more sensitive perspective. My attempt was to claim an understanding of social experiences that contemplates the multiplicity of spaces in which gender, racial and other

¹⁴ “Caged Bird” was used in the title of this chapter and in the epigraph. Published in 1983 in *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing, a poetry collection by Angelou*. The poem depicts two different birds. While the free bird is able to fly, do whatever it wants, and live in abundance, using its privilege to “dare(s) to claim the sky” and to “name the sky his own”, the caged bird “can seldom see through his bars of rage”, standing “on the grave of dreams”. The caged bird is not only caged but also mistreated and restricted even *in* the birdcage. Still, it opens its throat to sing of freedom and its “tune is heard on the distance hills”. The poem can be seen as an extended metaphor to racial oppression, being the free bird representative of white people and their privileges whereas the caged bird may refer to black people and their frustration with the limitations caused by racism and racial inequality. Nevertheless, the caged bird sings of freedom, something longed for a long time, which indicates the possibility of creativity resistance.

forms of oppression take form, an understanding that only intersectionality can bring. I hope it is clear that, although I explored the many ways that sexism and racism operate together in the process of victimization, it is not my objective to place Marguerite and her community as mere victims of their environment—thereby contributing to claims of self-victimization women and black people have been accused of [by those who maintain power and fear that identity politics might prevent them from keeping their privileges]. On the contrary, although I have presented some power structures that work as a cage preventing some characters in the story from receiving equal treatment in society and achieving independence, it is possible to observe some instances in which those who occupy the least privileged position in their environment find space to produce new narratives for their lives.

While “Chapter I” explored the metaphor of the “caged bird”, attempting to unravel possible significances of “the (caged) bird” and “the birdcage”, “Chapter II” (and “Chapter III”, as will be seen) broadens the analysis and extends the metaphor to “the caged bird that sings”. That is, this chapter aims at analyzing the (complete) metaphor of “the caged bird that sings”. In order to better understand to what this “singing” may refer to, this chapter deals with themes such as voice, creativity and resistance.

In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, resistance takes different forms, such as the representation of strong female characters, the different uses of creativity in *Caged Bird*, the portrayal of non-traditional power connections, and also the church as a channel for subversion. To resist sexism and racism in an environment so overtly oppressive is not so simple because many times discrimination is institutionalized and prejudice is so deep inside culture that it is internalized by the oppressed people as well. Thus, under these circumstances, resistance may occur in more subtle ways sometimes and more explicit ways at others, which will be discussed hereafter.

An important aspect of Angelou's narrative is her depiction of strong female characters. Most of the women in the narrative can be seen as strong, independent, creative and brave, no matter whether they are performing small house-tasks, singing at church, making business, arranging meals or organizing the house, dealing with criminal associates, dancing or working in gamblers' parlors. They all show some degree of creativity and strength of character that give them a heroic aura. Angelou narrates the important women in her life, and by retelling their stories she reconstructs their identities, at the same time that she reflects on their influence on her life and on what she has become.

According to Angelou, when discussing the construction of black women in society, black women's strength results from the intersection of different factors—such as racial discrimination and sexism, not to mention others. She states:

The fact that the adult American Negro female emerges a formidable character is often met with amazement, distaste and even belligerence. It is seldom accepted as an inevitable outcome of the struggle won by survivors and deserves respect if not enthusiastic acceptance. (292)

From this perspective, to survive such oppressive world, black women inevitably (need to) become strong, formidable.

In “‘Ain't I A Woman’: Exploring Femininities in Diaspora in Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*” (2013), Choudhry and Asif analyze the representations of black women in the narrative, focusing on how the notions of femininities of women living in the *diaspora* are created by the multiplicity of stratifying factors that are in constant

state of change. From this perspective, one could infer that modes of oppression are also fluid, because the social factors are not fixed; and they are a result of the power relations existing in different social locations. The authors argue that *Caged Bird* deconstructs fixed notions such as “blackness” and “femininity” by showing how the subject and the object positions are fluid. This fluidity is enabled by intersectionality. In the intersection of varied socially stratifying factors there is the possibility of moving from the object position to the subject position and vice versa. Thus, women’s positionality defines their ability to exercise agency at the same time that it restricts them.

A strong female character who contributes to the discussion of the theme of resistance in *Caged Bird* is Annie Henderson (Momma). Momma is Marguerite’s paternal grandmother and she raises Marguerite and her brother in Stamps for most part of their childhood. Momma’s status in the community is high, partly because she has owned for 25 years the only store in the black part of town, placed in the heart of the black community, partly because of her dignity and loyalty to her Christian faith and her community. Momma also owns houses and land, and according to the narrator she owns more money than all poor white people in the community. Nevertheless, she teaches her family to be cautious with money and not to spend it as freely as white people were known to do.

When the black community is finally hit by The Depression, her capacity to find options and new possibilities helps her to find a solution to keep her business open and to help her community as well. Because her clients had no money and the small amount of food given by the government was scarce, Momma decides to create a trading system in the store, managing, thus, to keep her business going. Momma’s creativity kept her financial situation in control even when both white and black people were suffering with the crisis.

Momma had taught her grandchildren that the least black people say to white people the better. She believed that an open confrontation leads nowhere, and she had a more practical way of looking at life, which was confusing to Marguerite, who many times felt frustrated with the social status that their color assigned to black people and the mistreatment they had to endure quietly because of that. In *Caged Bird*, Marguerite describes how some poor white children would appear in the Store and order around. Marguerite is ashamed of the way they have to attend these white people's needs even when they were acting disrespectfully. Still, Marguerite points out that although her grandmother also followed their orders "she didn't seem to be servile because she anticipated their needs" (Angelou 31). In other words, instead of just serving the girls, *she* would tell the girls what they needed to take home. Her attitude is not of passivity: Momma takes an active role in the interaction. And although she does not dare to openly defy the conventions or to question the spaces allowed to her as a black woman, she finds her own way of subtle resistance.

In the previous chapter I discussed one incident between Momma and the poor white girls who lived on Momma's farmland in Stamps. I pointed out the intersection of racial and class issues in that incident, and how race places whites as superior to blacks regardless of their financial situation. Nevertheless, although racial prejudice is an important aspect to be discussed, Momma's attitude towards the white girls deserves attention as well. When the girls appear, Momma refuses to go inside at their approach and starts to hum a prayer instead—knowing that the encounter would probably not be a good experience. And Momma does not stop humming during the entire time the white girls are bullying her. Marguerite describes her grandmother standing as a stone and not seeming to be affected by the girls' awful behavior. Momma holds out and when the girls finally stop their attack, they say

goodbye to Momma, who replies politely—much to Marguerite’s outrage. Marguerite could not understand what her grandmother had proved, but when she sees her grandmother’s face she describes: “She was beautiful. Something had happened out there, which I couldn’t completely understand, but I could see that she was happy” (Angelou 35). So, what happened was that her grandmother simply refused to be diminished by the poor white girls.

Knowing that doing anything to reprimand the white girls in that extremely racist context of prejudice and segregation would be pointless—and even dangerous—she keeps her dignity and maintains her calm and faith in God. She stands strong in face of an overtly racist confrontation and acts as the most dignified person. Ironically, the girls who mime to offend Momma are the ones acting as animals. The girls’ behavior in face of Momma’s unaltered posture seems infantile and embarrassing, and the way Momma replies respectfully to the girls’ final goodbye is ironic because they were simply undeserving of such treatment. However, Momma is aware of her social status and the implications of being black in that community, so she finds her own way of not losing her identity without being ridiculed. Momma’s posture puts the embarrassment *on the girls*. This passage is also important in terms of resistance if one considers spirituality as a source of strength in the African American tradition.

After the girls leave, Momma hums “‘Glory, glory, hallelujah, when I lay my burden down’”. Marguerite soon understands that her grandmother had not been defeated: “Whatever the contest had been out front, I knew Momma had won” (35). Instead of seeing Momma’s silence as a sign of passivity, her calm reveals her strength, and her posed behavior can be considered as a sign of subtle resistance as well. She refuses to be the object of mocking and becomes the subject of her own identity. In line with this idea, Pierre A. Walker (1995) argues that:

By demonstrating their own cleanliness and politeness, Maya and her grandmother establish their family's respectability in the face of racism and *subtly throw the attempt to degrade them back on their oppressor*. Furthermore, there is a more effective strategy for reacting to racism and segregation than rage and indignation, a strategy of *subtle resistance*, what Dolly McPherson calls "the dignified course of silent endurance" (33). Later episodes demonstrate the limitations of subtle resistance, but *one should not underestimate its powers*: without risking harm to life, liberty, or property, Momma is able to preserve her human dignity in the face of the white girls' attempts to belittle her. It may be all that she can do in the segregated South at the time, but it is something. What is more, as Angelou subsequently shows, it serves as a basis from which Maya can later move to actively protesting and combating racism. (Pierre Walker 96) (emphasis mine)

Momma's behavior is a sign of the strength and resistance to racial discrimination, something that years later Angelou would rethink and come to a better understanding of. While the child Marguerite was confused and devastated, the narration seems to capture the true image of Momma as the winner in the situation.

In keeping with this idea that Momma's behavior cannot be seen as (only) passive, Claudia Correa (2001) argues that Momma has created some strategies for

survival since open confrontation could endanger herself and her family. For Correa, “[w]isdom is an artifice she relies on to live in the segregated city. In a sense and in her terms, Momma beat the whites and gained the respect she deserved” (82). Momma guides her own behavior according to her religious faith, *aware* that it will provide her the calm and control she needs for the situation. Thus, by praying she is *actively* resisting racial oppression. She makes a choice of not leaving. Her form of exercising agency is subtle but, nevertheless, present. While the social context impacts and creates the situation, it also gives Momma the space to be the “superior” one and achieve her personal victory.

Another passage from *Caged Bird* that shows Momma’s strength of character happens when Momma and Marguerite go see the white doctor who refuses to treat Marguerite. Because the dentist had needed a loan from Momma and it helped saving his business, she thinks that he owns her a favor. The dentist refuses to treat Marguerite, though. Even so, Momma enters his office and, when he refuses to treat her granddaughter again, asks him to pay all her money back, arguing that he had not paid any interests on the loan. Even though Momma believes that by rights he had paid her already, she refuses to be treated so disrespectfully and puts her sense of right and wrong aside to help Marguerite and “punish” the dentist’s bad behavior:

He tole that little snippy nurse of his’n to give me ten dollars and make me sign a “paid in full” receipt. She gave it to me and I signed the papers. Even though by rights he was paid up before, I figger, he gonna be that kind of nasty, he gonna have to pay for it’.

Momma and her son laughed and laughed over the white

man's evilness and her retributive sin. (Angelou 207)

This passage indicates how a person might change her ethical values in face of necessity. Moreover, it shows Momma's bravery, not only for going to the white part of town and looking for an "equal" treatment from a white doctor, but also for not accepting being treated as a dirty and sick animal.

Marguerite sees her grandmother as a hero, seeing her in terms of her strength and power (51). This heroic view is explicit in the narrator's description of the dentist incident. When Momma enters the dentist office, the narrator describes Momma walking the room "as if she owned it". The description is in *italics* and after some lines it is clear it is an invented story, replacing what had actually happened. In this story, Momma catches the dentist by the collar of his jacket, setting "his head and arms to shaking loose of the ends of his body" with the "tiniest of shakes" (she is ten feet tall). Momma shifts her language to sophisticated English because "she had an eloquent command of English". She reprimands the dentist for being disrespectful to her, forbids him to ever practice dentistry again, commands him to leave the town forever, and to treat animals with plague diseases. Crying from fear of the powerful Mrs. Henderson, the dentist respectfully thanks her for not killing him. Before she leaves, she turns the nurse into "a crocus sack of chicken feed". The story narrated by the (child) narrator is indicative of Angelou's belief in changing experience through literature. Furthermore, the creative Marguerite invents a story in which her grandmother is able to exercise agency and openly confront a racist white. Her "magical" powers allow her to punish the white male oppressor. This is the only time the author uses this technique and plays with reality so openly in *Caged Bird*. The passage works as one

more evidence of creative resistance present in the narrative.

Nevertheless, there are moments in which the young Marguerite is conflicted by her grandmother's actions or even embarrassed by her grandmother's lack of formal knowledge. By writing *Caged Bird*, Angelou conceptualizes her experience and rethinks her views on her grandmother as well. This might be one of the reasons why Angelou's description of Grandmother Henderson seems so positive regardless of their different beliefs and attitudes in life. The narrator seems to have understood that there are different kinds of knowledge, and that the knowledge her grandmother had was not usually appreciated or valued by many (the knowledge that comes from experience, from African American tradition, from suffering, from surviving and resisting defeat). Notwithstanding, with the powers invested in her as the owner of "the truth", the agent of the autobiographical discourse, the narrator recreates her own past and reinvents the narrative of her people.

As one can see in the following excerpt, the narrator offers explanations for Momma's life perspective:

Momma intended to teach Bailey and me to use the paths of life that she and her generation and all the Negroes gone before had found, and found to be safe ones. She didn't cotton to the idea that whitefolks could be talked to at all without risking one's life. And certainly they couldn't be spoken to insolently. In fact, even in their absence they could not be spoken of too harshly unless we used the sobriquet "They." If she had been asked and had chosen to answer the question of whether she was cowardly or not, she would have

said that she was a realist. Didn't she stand up to "them" year after year? Wasn't she the only Negro woman in Stamps referred to once as Mrs.? (Angelou 51-2)

In addition to all these instances in which Momma's character has been represented as subversive in its own way, it is also clear that she engages in subtler forms of resistance as well. In the rural area of the South, racism and segregation could lead to physical harms to those who got caught in situations or places they were not supposed to be, or with people they were not supposed to be with. Nevertheless, Momma gives shelter to a man fleeing from a possible lynch mob regardless of the dangers she could be putting herself into. When the man gets arrested and goes to court, he tells the judge he took refuge in Mrs. Annie Henderson's house and the judge summons her to the audience. When the judge realizes that Mrs. Henderson is a black woman—he could not have imagined a black woman could own a store in the village—the white men laugh. For the black people, this incident serves to confirm the importance of Marguerite's grandmother. After all, most black people were not treated with titles that indicate any status or respect; worse than that, many of them were not even called by their own names (as Angelou herself indicates when she discusses Mrs. Cullinan's attempt to rename Marguerite). Therefore, to be referred to as "Mrs." by the white people was taken by the black community as a sign of respect and a symbol of Grandmother's Henderson power.

Although some might argue that "Momma's realism" was only conformity, one cannot deny how much she accomplished as a black woman in her time and in her social context. She provides for her family, manages her own store, and helps her church and community. She cannot be considered a conformist because to conform to the norms in her context means to let life drain the strength

out of you until you are old and hopeless. Momma swings through life and finds space for asserting who she is even under extreme circumstances of poverty, racism, and sexism. Momma raises her grandchildren without the need of a man. On the contrary, she helps people around her, including men. She was married three times, which probably was not so common in her time —, and she does not need a man to assert her identity or guide her life. In other words, she really stands up to them year after year by not allowing herself to become a mere victim of racism, sexism and poverty. Therefore, Annie Henderson's representation as a strong female character can be seen as one form of resistance present in *Caged Bird*.

In addition, Momma is an important role model for Marguerite's development as a black woman, because it is through Momma's oral narratives that Marguerite gets in touch with the culture of African-American people, and with her African roots as well. When asked what black people had done to white people,

Momma, said little except that "colored people hadn't even bothered a hair on whitefolks' heads." Momma added that some people said that whitefolks had come over to Africa (she made it sound like a hidden valley on the moon) and stole the colored people and made them slaves, but nobody really believed it was true. No way to explain what happened "blows and scores" ago, but right now they had the upper hand. Their time wasn't long, though. Didn't Moses lead the children of Israel out of the bloody hands of Pharaoh and into the Promised Land? Didn't the Lord protect the Hebrew children in the fiery furnace and didn't my

Lord deliver Daniel? We only had
to wait on the Lord. (Angelou 196)

Through Momma's unsophisticated language she succeeds in retelling with creativity the collective history of her people. And by recollecting those stories she reinvents them according to her own experience, and nevertheless keeps them alive. Marguerite would learn to appreciate this kind of knowledge as well. Momma is a storyteller, and she shares stories with her grandchildren, her talent, a heritage from African-American tradition of storytelling passed from generation to generation, which might have had an influence in Angelou as a storyteller too.

Another important (strong) female character in *Caged Bird* is Mrs. Bertha Flowers. Marguerite describes her as "the aristocrat of Stamps" (Angelou 101). Marguerite admired Mrs. Flowers for her resemblance to the ladies described in English novels. And some time after Marguerite returns to Stamps after the rape, Mrs. Flowers appears at the Store and Marguerite is invited for coffee in her house. Mrs. Flowers tells Marguerite that she has heard that although Marguerite is doing well in school as regards her written productions, she is not engaging in oral forms of participation. Mrs. Flowers then talks to Marguerite about the importance of speaking: "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 that separates him from the lower animals" (Angelou 106). Her words intrigue and inspire Marguerite. Mrs. Flowers is one of the first people to encourage Marguerite to speak in a way that was not judgmental or aggressive: "[y]our 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 shades of deeper meaning" (Angelou 106). According to

her, words acquire deeper significances by the use of the human voice.

Thenceforth, Marguerite and Mrs. Flowers have what the narrator calls “her lessons in living”. In these lessons, Mrs. Flowers gives Marguerite literary works to be read aloud at home, and Marguerite has to pronounce the sentences in as many different ways as possible. On the next day, Marguerite has to share the readings with Mrs. Flowers and discuss them. With these lessons, Mrs. Flowers is not only encouraging Marguerite to speak again, but finding in something that Marguerite likes (books) the inspiration to do it. Moreover, Mrs. Flowers is also implicitly encouraging Marguerite to be creative and to find new meanings to the words on paper, helping her to develop her intellectual knowledge and ability for critical thinking. A woman who inspires others to overcome their traumas, and more particularly, a woman who encourages young (black) women to expand their knowledge in order to assert their identity and to voice their concerns, a woman who knows the importance of language and knowledge and shares these ideas can certainly be considered subversive. Her own existence questions patriarchal notions of women as irrational and concerned with unimportant matters. In addition, by engaging in this intellectual world, Mrs. Flowers deconstructs the racist belief, common at that period, that black people were lower-animals. Angelou says that Mrs. Flowers made her proud of being black “just by being herself” (103).

Angelou presents different forms of resistance throughout the narrative, being the cultivation of toughness and violence, and the maintenance of connections with underground criminal organizations some of them. This resistance to racism (and also to sexism) is present in the depiction of the Baxter family, starting with Grandmother Baxter. Grandmother Baxter, a nearly-white woman married to Grandfather Baxter, a black man, lived in the

black part of St. Louis, Missouri, with her family and was respected by many:

Her white skin and the pince-nez that she dramatically took from her nose and let hang free on a chain pinned to her dress were facts that brought her a great deal of respect. Moreover, the reputation of her six mean children and the fact that she was a precinct captain compounded her power and gave her leverage to deal with even the lowest crook without fear. She had pull with the police department, so the men in their flashy suits and fleshy scars sat with churchlike decorum and waited to ask favors from her. (Angelou 67)

Grandmother Baxter spends her time entertaining gamblers, whiskey salesmen, runners and other illegal figures and she is respected in this male-world, since the connections she has give her influence and power. She is depicted as a strong and fearless woman, who decides to follow a non-traditional path for a white woman by marrying a black man. She was also a precinct captain, which can be considered a huge achievement for a woman in her time, even for a white one. Although a lot different from Momma, Grandmother Baxter is also portrayed as a strong and independent woman.

The cultivation of toughness in the family helps them to protect themselves from abuse and discrimination. In their context, to be tough is almost a necessity; and however bad it may seem, their connections with outlaws and the family's reputation for meanness give the Baxter family the chance to not be exploited and to achieve success in a way that other blacks trapped in the system could not achieve.

Mother's brothers, Uncles Tutti, Tom and Ira, were well-known young men about St. Louis. They all had city jobs, which I now understand to have been no mean feat for Negro men. Their jobs and their family set them apart, but they were best known for their unrelenting meanness. Grandfather had told them, 'Bah Jesus, if you ever get in jail for stealing or some such foolishness, I'll let you rot. But if you're arrested for fighting, I'll sell the house, lock, stock, and barrel for get you out!' With that kind of encouragement, backed by explosive tempers, it was no wonder they became fearsome characters. (Angelou 71)

Marguerite's uncles are feared. Therefore, they do not have to face the effects of gendered racism so much as less tough and less influent black men might have to. Marguerite's uncles would "beat up whites and Blacks with the same abandon, and loved each other so much they never needed to learn the art of making outside friends" (Angelou 72). They were encouraged to be strong and tough, and for black men especially, being tough is also a way of asserting their masculinity usually "threatened" by gendered racial oppression.

In their racist and sexist society, to be seen as "tough" help black men to feel less reduced by the oppression caused by the racialized notions about masculinity. As stated by Butler,

[...] gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic,

sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out "gender" from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained. (1990: 3)

Because gender oppression is not universal, it affects black men differently from (white and black) women and also from white men. Their toughness works as an expression of their strength and shields them from potential danger.

Furthermore, the family's illegal activities and Grandmother Baxter's influence with the police give them power and protection. When Mr. Freeman is arrested after raping Marguerite, she describes: "Mr. Freeman was arrested and was spared the awful wrath of my pistol-whipping uncles". In other words, Marguerite's family had its own way of achieving "justice". Thus, after the trial, when Grandmother Baxter receives the news that Mr. Freeman was found dead behind a slaughterhouse apparently kicked to death—"Grandmother's color only rose a little" after this news—, although it is not explicit in the narrative, it is likely that Mr. Freeman's murder was caused by someone related to the family. Although justice and vengeance are different concepts, Mr. Freeman's murder makes room for discussing ways to achieve personal "justice" when the system denies people the chance to achieve it.

This toughness was also inherited by Vivian Baxter (Marguerite's mother). One day, a man curses Vivian and she tells her brothers about the incident. They send someone to chase the man and, when they find him, Vivian "crashed the man's head with a policeman's billy enough to leave him just this side of death" (Angelou 73), for their father had ordered them not to kill the man. One could say that Vivian is a woman who does not need a man to protect her —, even though she uses her brother's

influence to her advantage—, and she is surely not fragile. She is depicted as strong, somewhat independent, proud and adventurous.

A black living in St. Louis during the Prohibition period suffered different difficulties from a black person in the southern United States. Still, they had to deal daily with the oppression and the restrictions that racial discrimination and the lack of better opportunities imposed upon them. In this context, to be able to use their strength and their reputation as a shield is nonetheless a way of not being victimized, a way to create their own life alternatives. Their color would be the cage they would have to carry with them, but they nevertheless manage to react. In a way, by the cultivation of toughness and violence in the family and by the underground criminal connections, the Baxter family found their own way of resistance and therefore managed to beat the system.

Proceeding in the discussion of how connections with the underground world helped to provide a source of resistance for black people in *Caged Bird*, it is also relevant here to discuss Daddy Clidell's¹⁵ friends and how they use white people's prejudice against white people in intelligent and well elaborated cons as a form of resistance.

When Marguerite moves to San Francisco to live with her mother, she meets Daddy Clidell. He teaches Marguerite how to play games such as poker, blackjack and others. One day he introduces Marguerite to what she calls "the most colorful characters in the Black underground" (Angelou 236). Daddy Clidell tells her "they were the most successful con men in the world" and that she was going to learn from them so that she was never "anybody's mark". These men show Marguerite their tricks and tell her how, usually, "they chose their victims from the wealthy bigoted whites and in every case how they used the victims' prejudice against them" (236).

¹⁵ The narrator refers to him as an honest business man, who becomes the only father figure Marguerite would know.

Based on the racist view that black people are stupid, uninformed and unable to produce great things, Clidell's friends create schemes to deceive arrogant and wealthy whites, earning large amounts of money with these scams. If one considers that, later, whites would learn that they have been cheated by black men but were unable to do anything about it, one can consider the audacity and creativity of these con men as an open form of resistance.

When searching for signs of resistance in *Caged Bird*, I questioned myself about the meanings of "resistance" and how to find space for agency. The scams performed by Daddy Clidell's friends can shed a light on the ways social structures of power creates opportunity for exercising agency. As stated by Butler, "if there is *agency*, it is to be found, paradoxically, in the possibilities opened up in and by that constrained appropriation of the regulatory law" (1993: 12). In order to exercise agency, therefore, one needs to find it in the system of repression that creates it; that is, not in the sense that it is acting according to society's norms or even to the law, but because it was, as Butler could say, "mobilized by the law, the citational accumulation and dissimulation of the law that produces material effects, the lived necessity of those effects as well as the lived contestation of that necessity" (12). In keeping with such affirmation, one could say, for instance, that the dissimulation of discriminatory practices of institutionalized racism produces social inequalities; and with these inequalities the desire for justice and equality arises, which contributes to the awakening of feelings of dissatisfaction and revolt, which leads to people looking for other ways of achieving justice, sometimes illegal ways, which, in turn, leads to more prejudice and discrimination, and so it goes.

Another sign of resistance present in this passage linked to the con men is the notion of storytelling and voice. Marguerite appreciates the stories that she hears: "Some of the tales were funny, a few were pathetic, but all

were amusing to me, for the Black men, the con man who could act the most stupid, won out every time over the powerful, arrogant white” (Angelou 236). Their creativity in narrating the stories to the laughing crowd is linked with black people’s tradition of oral storytelling. They pass along stories of resistance, stories of hope to those who need to believe that it is possible to resist racial discrimination, or at least use white prejudice in their favor.

Angelou shows that she can be proud of the achievements of these intelligent and creative con men:

By all accounts those storytellers, born Black and male before the turn of the twentieth century, should have been ground into useless dust. Instead they use their intelligence to pry open the door of rejection and not only become wealthy but got some revenge in the bargain. (Angelou 240).

One can see that, although society tried to prevent black people from having a future, they use their intelligence to resist discrimination and create better opportunities for themselves.

Angelou discusses how ethics is created from necessity, and how it differs from society to society:

The needs of a society determine its ethics, and in the Black American ghettos the hero is the man who is offered only the crumbs from his country’s table but by ingenuity and courage is able to take for himself a Lucullan feast. Hence the janitor who lives in one room but sports a robin’s egg blue Cadillac is not laughed at but admired, and the domestic who buys a forty-dollar shoes is not criticized but is

appreciated. We know that they have put to use their full mental and physical powers. *Each single gain feeds into the gains of the body collective.* (Angelou 240). (emphasis mine)

According to this idea, what can be seen as shameful and wrong by white (class-privileged) society's values, can be seen as fair and admirable by the black (poor) society.

Society has privileged white people for centuries, relegating black people to the lower spheres. Their sense of ethics is influenced by their needs, and their needs are shaped by their history:

Stories of law violations are weighed on a different set of scales in the Black mind than in the white. [. . .] 'We are the victims of the world's most comprehensive robbery, Life demands a balance. It's all right if we do a little robbing now.' *This belief appeals particularly to one who is unable to compete legally with his fellow citizens.* (Angelou 240) (emphasis mine)

Angelou's statements point to racism as an institutionalized practice that prevent black people from competing in equal terms with white people. These inequalities create a need for "balance", which leads to illegal actions. Nevertheless, according to the narrator, these violations are considered acceptable in the black community because they have been robbed of so many things – such as a place to call home, a past, their language, and the opportunity to define themselves in their own terms... Such illegal activities are nothing but ways of escaping the imprisonment of racism as an institutionalized practice. Although these con men are oppressed (caged),

they manage to gain something even in this harsh environment, and they share their stories with the community (sing), contributing to the creation of new narratives for black people.

Forms of resistance differ in the rural southern United States and in larger cities like St. Louis and San Francisco. While in St. Louis and San Francisco white people and black people were forced to occupy some common spaces, in the rural South, racial segregation was still extremely intense. In Stamps, for instance, to openly challenge the authorities or to question the power structures could lead to lynching, prison and death. In St. Louis and San Francisco, some black people found in non-conventional underground associations the means to achieve some power and to resist. In Stamps, however, there were more subtle ways of resistance, being the use of the church as a venue for subversive resistance one of them. Bosnicová (2005) examines the role played by religion in *Caged Bird*. She states that “religion plays an important role as a psychological weapon against the unfairness and racism of white society”. More than that, she argues that in the case of Grandmother Henderson it is a form of survival (Bosnicová 112).

Another example of subtle forms of resistance appears in the preacher’s speech at the annual revival meeting, a Christian event attended by members of all churches in the black community. In a sermon about charity, he criticizes those who give goods expecting servitude and eternal gratitude in return, in a clear reference to white Christian’s hypocrisy. Though not explicitly, he denounces the ambitions of white farmers who exploit and humiliate black people in the plantations, treating them worse than animals, defeating them day by day. The congregation listens and voices their agreements with the minister’s words, their Amens echoing in the church, their tired bodies and souls rejoicing in having their problems acknowledged:

‘Charity don’t say, “Because I give you a job, you got to bend your knee to me.” The church was rocking with each phrase, ‘It don’t say, “Because I pays you what you due, you got to call me master.” It don’t ask me to humble myself and belittle myself. That ain’t what charity is.’ (Angelou 137)

The fact that the church is awoken and trembles with contentment by the ministers words reveals the powerful value of discourse.

The sermon in the annual revival meeting is subversive not only in the sense that it criticizes white people’s dominance and questions the established social structures, but also because it contradicts the values of (white) Christianity. Moreover, the hierarchy present in their every-day reality is reversed:

America’s historic bowers and scrapers shifted easily and happily in the makeshift church. Reassured that although they might be the lowest of the low they were at least not uncharitable, and ‘in that great Getting’ Up Morning, Jesus was going to separate the sheep (them) from the goats (the whitefolks).’

‘Charity is simple.’ The church agreed, vocally.

‘Charity is poor.’ That was us he was talking about.

‘Charity is plain.’ I thought, that’s about right. Plain and simple. (Angelou 138)

With these words, those black workers who had worked to exhaustion in that same day now “had been refreshed with the hope of revenge and the promise of justice” (Angelou

138). Although the Christian doctrine preaches heavenly compensation (which could be considered a bit passive, to wait for life to be over to hope for a better “life”), the pastor's sermon shows agency as it is successful in raising people's awareness about abuse of power, and racial and class oppression.

Bearing in mind that members from the entire black community were present, the minister's sermon is a channel for voicing ideologies of resistance to an oppressed community by denouncing prejudice:

The minister's voice was a pendulum. Swinging left and down and right and down and left and – ‘How can you claim to be my brother, and hate me? Is that Charity? How can you claim to be my sister and despise me? Is that supposed to be Charity? How can you claim to be my friend and misuse and wrongfully abuse me? (Angelou 139)

In keeping with the minister's words, the narrator lists some of the privileges given to white people, reflecting the community's collective thoughts.

They basked in the righteousness of the poor and the exclusiveness of the downtrodden. Let the whitefolks have their money and power and segregation and sarcasm and big houses and schools and lawns like carpets, and books, and mostly – mostly – let them have their whiteness. It was better to be meek and lowly, spat upon and abused for this little time than to spend eternity frying in the fires of hell. No one would have admitted that the Christian and charitable people were happy to think of their

oppressors' turning forever on the devil's spit over the flames of fire and brimstone. (Angelou 142)

The tone of the narrator, however, seems ironic, which indicates that although the black community wants to be indifferent to all these white privileges, they still have this “fear-admiration-contempt for the white things” (54), desiring *some* equality and benefits at least. Angelou’s sarcasm reveals her criticism of the Christian’s faith as well, a criticism she had already expressed in other moments of the narrative. Before the annual revival meeting, for instance, she had seen those cotton pickers exhausted and hopeless in the Store, and when they said they were going to get ready to the revival meeting, Marguerite thinks:

Go to church in that cloud of weariness? Not go home and lay those torture bones in a feather bed? The idea came to me that my people may be a race of masochists and that not only was it our fate to live the poorest, roughest life but that we like d it like that. (Angelou 132)

Nevertheless, after the annual meeting’s over Angelou’s sarcastic adult voice shows that it is not only about liking to be explored: Christian’s faith allowed them to survive, gave them strength to carry on with their lives; it was a necessity. In addition, as the narrator clearly remarks, the desire for and the certainty of heavenly revenge to earthly mistreatment and racial injustice provided some joy that lightened the burden of their harsh realities.

When the black community comes together to express their concerns and to claim for justice, they are being subversive for using church as a venue for resistance to racism, work exploitation, and racial and class

oppression. Though, by the end of the meeting, they have become more aware of the social inequalities surrounding them, the effects of such meetings seem to be only palliative. After all, not much after the meeting, people are reminded that sin is present in the black community as well¹⁶.

Indeed, some other instances of resistance in *Caged Bird* seem to be rather ambiguous and temporary, as when some people get together around the store to watch the box match with Joe Louis.¹⁷ In that moment, Louis represented the entire black community; they were cheering for him as if their lives depended on his victory. In fact, their hopes were on Joe Louis, and every fall he took was a fall on the spirit of those blacks there:

My race groaned. It was our people falling. It was another lynching, yet another Black man hanging on a tree. One more woman ambushed and raped. A Black boy whipped and maimed. It was hounds on the trail of a man running through slimy swamps. It was a white woman slapping her maid for being forgetful. (Angelou 146)

Angelou's description details different forms of oppression and they are representative of the need for understanding

¹⁶ After church, people pass by a honk-tonk house where a "good-time woman" entertains her clients while blues is playing loud. The narrator compares their enjoyment with the pleasure the "godly people" found in church. She says that "[t]he people inside had forsaken their own distress for a little while" (142). The realization of their own sins, hunger and dispossession taking form, they return home in silence and bowed heads. The narrator ends the chapter by quoting a song sung in church "How long Merciful Father? How long?" (142). This passage indicates how palliative subtle forms of resistance can be. Nevertheless, it also points to the importance of religion and blues music as a channel for resistance and way of survival for the African American community.

¹⁷ A professional box player considered as the world heavyweight champion from 1937 to 1949. He is considered one of the best heavyweight boxers of all times.

experience from an intersectional perspective. From this perspective one can notice how fearsome it was to be a black person in that time. How many blacks were lynched, hanged, maimed by white people? And how many women have been abused and raped by man of all colors? Still, how many white women have been oppressive to other women who have worked for them? Different social categories intersect to create the experience of the oppressed and of the privileged, and in that match Joe Louis represented all those people. For there were other narratives, narratives about black people, created by white people to justify their privileges and to keep black people powerless.

By gathering together to cheer for Louis, those blacks were expressing their belief in themselves and in the members of their community. They needed his victory as if it were their own.

This might be the end of the world. If Joe lost we were back in slavery and beyond help. It would all be true, the accusations that we were lower types of human beings. Only a little higher than the apes. True that we were stupid and lazy and dirty and, unlucky and worst of all, that God Himself hated us and ordained us to be the hewers of wood and drawers, forever and ever, world without end. (Angelou 146)

They wanted to be able to question the narratives created for them by showing white people that black people could also be strong, hard-working and developed. When Joe Louis wins the match and keeps his title of the strongest man in the world, the group celebrates the victory of a fellow person: “Champion of the world. A Black boy. Some Black’s mother’s son.” (147).

Nevertheless, after their celebration, “(t)hose who lived too far had made arrangements to stay in town. It wouldn’t do for a black man and his family to be caught on a lonely country road on a night when Joe Louis had proved that we were the strongest people in the world” (Angelou 148). Although they try to escape from oppression and to prove themselves worthy of admiration and respect, their environment is still too dangerous for them. The narrative seems to expose how resistance is a delicate matter.

Another important moment of resistance happens in Maya’s eight-grade graduation. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the eight-grade graduation was truly important for the black community of Stamps. Coming from a line of abused hard-workers, this generation manages to finish that part of their education (which for many students would be the only part). Therefore, it was a great achievement for them to be there and earn their diplomas. The value the community gives to the graduation ceremony reflects the importance the community gives to education. Thus, although many parents have not had the opportunity to finish their studies, the fact that they encourage their children to study and the way they celebrate their achievements reveal the strength of the black community and its faith in a better future. However, Donleavy’s speech shames the students and their families by reminding them of how little that achievement meant in the social context they were inserted in. Many efforts had been made for that ceremony to happen—not only by the people present there, but by all those black activists who had fought for the right to an education—, and, suddenly, it appears worthless.

When valedictorian student Henry Reed rises to give his speech (“To Be or Not to Be”), Marguerite feels frustrated because she has internalized the pessimistic discourse that tells her that as a member of the black community she has no choice: “Hadn’t he heard the

whitefolks? We couldn't be, so the question was a waste of time" (195). Feeling limited by the restriction imposed upon black people because of their color, she cynically listens to Henry's speech inspired in Hamlet's soliloquy until a hush spreads in the audience and Henry faces his classmates and sings "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing". Henry's act can be considered as one of the most powerful and beautiful moments of resistance in *Caged Bird*. The students had been stopped from performing the song in the beginning of the ceremony. Still, he delivers his speech in a powerful tone and then breaks the protocol and sings the hymn that so clearly claims for liberty and equality for African Americans.

Encouraged by Henry Reed's act of defiance, the students join in singing, the families join them too while teachers lead the small children onto the stage where they start to dance (dressed as flowers and little bunnies). Most of them had learned that hymn in their first years of life and at that moment many of them had tears falling from their eyes. The song encourages African Americans to continue "singing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught them", a song "full of the hope that the present has brought them" until better times come. This moment reveals the strength of the black race. In spite of centuries of abuse, physical oppression, and psychological violence, they find the strength to sing their lives out, to share their pains and it keeps them going. They resist. It might not be the end of the battle, but the song encourages them to keep singing their songs loud and in a resonant way until an effective change is made.

Singing this hymn in this ceremony becomes an act of resistance and of defiance to the (white) authorities present there. These authorities had tried to silence them not only by preventing the execution of the hymn before but also by being condescending while spreading oppressive ideologies and reminding them of the unbalanced structures of power of a racist society. The

lyrics of the song works as reminder of the rough path African Americans have had to thread until that moment, and in a sense, it might have reminded them that *it was* indeed a great achievement for them to be graduating. They had no reason to be ashamed because their efforts meant something to them. It was a victory to stand there singing too.

[...] The tears that slipped down many faces were not wiped away in shame.

We were on top again. As always, again. We survived. The depths had been icy and dark, but now a bright sun spoke to our souls.” (Angelou 198)

In that context, all black people in that ceremony can be seen as black birds, imprisoned by their skin color, by poverty, and by the social inequalities imposed upon black people (especially upon women). Nevertheless, although they are caged in many ways, they find the strength to sing for liberty and rejoice in the possibility of a better future, available to them if they are strong enough to resist.

The graduation scene offers a positive example of resistance in *Caged Bird*. This time, the resistance is no longer so subtle and, by specifically taking the form of poetry, it values the African-American literary tradition as a source for resisting white racist oppression (Pierre Walker 101). According to Walker, the ceremony becomes a place for active protest. By singing together the community engages in a communal act of resistance.

In “Breaking the Silence”. Martin A. Danahay examines recent criticism related to the notions of resistance and accommodation to hegemony in several fields of study. For Danahay, discussions about these themes have been controversial. From his investigation he realizes that “taken as a whole, these works suggest that resistance and accommodation are mutually

affirming categories, and that what looks from one perspective like resistance may in a larger context appear simply as an adjustment to hegemony” (Danahay 64). In my search for answers, I questioned myself about the boundaries between what can be considered a sign of resistance in *Caged Bird* and what should be taken more as some sort of conformity. After a while, I wondered if these two categories necessarily had to be seen as opposites or if I were not falling into the old behavior of dichotomizing experiences.

My analysis indicates the ambiguity of life. After all, as Butler postulates, “there is no possibility of agency or reality outside of the discursive practices that give those terms the intelligibility that they have” (1990: 148). To resist social oppression one might be conforming to its values as well. Nevertheless, regardless of the social structures found in *Caged Bird*, many characters do find possibilities of agency. This resistance refers back to the extended metaphor of the “caged bird that sings”.

In this chapter I have tried to discuss some of the ways in which *Caged Bird* presents some resistance to racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination. These signs can be seen as “the tunes heard on the distant hills” sung by the caged bird that sings of “things unknown”. The deeper meanings of unknown things that “are longed for still” can be interpreted in different ways, such as a real emancipation for the abused cotton-pickers, access to proper health care, the right to walk around all parts of town, the right to compete equally for a job’s position, and so forth. These are some of the things long desired by the black people in *Caged Bird*. The signs of resistance may differ in their degree of effectiveness on ending oppression or discrimination, but they, nevertheless, contribute to the creation of narratives of better possibilities. As for Marguerite, by seeing all these people struggling to resist the oppressing cage surrounding her, she is learning how to rethink her own possibilities of exercising agency in her

own life. The following chapter focuses on Marguerite as the “caged bird that sings”, aiming at analyzing her development towards agency.

CHAPTER III

“THE CAGED BIRD SINGS OF FREEDOM”: Literature and voice

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is a narrative about overcoming. Angelou narrates her story as a black little girl living in the Southern United States (for the most part of her childhood), and having to deal daily with white illogical hatred and prejudice, racial segregation, gender inequalities, and poverty, not to mention other social and personal conflicts. In discussing the construction of the protagonist as the “caged bird that sings”, which is the focus of this chapter, we could say that Marguerite is the caged bird, caged by the intersection of all these social forces of her historical context. Nevertheless, although restricted by the caging effect such forces exercise on her life, Marguerite still finds the strength to “sing her song”, to resist in some way. *Caged Bird* illustrates Maya Angelou’s process of becoming a “formidable female character”. After struggling with oppression, she manages to find new possibilities and assumes an agent role in her own life, creating new narratives for herself and for the reader. This chapter discusses some instances in which signs of resistance may be perceived in Angelou’s narrative as regards Marguerite’s actions and choices. In order to do so, it focuses on Marguerite’s mutism, the concept of voice, and the use of literature and access to knowledge as means of resistance.

Before discussing some moments that show Marguerite’s development (and aging), it is important to remember the beginning of her story. *Caged Bird* begins with Marguerite standing in front of the church, feeling scared and displaced, and aware of her own displacement in the black community. She is introduced to the reader as an insecure girl who has internalized racist notions of

beauty, thus feeling inferior and inadequate. This low self-esteem and insecurity have as much influence in Marguerite's life as her experience with gender and race, for instance. Her feeling of displacement and her constant desire of being loved also have an impact on her. All of these factors have made her more vulnerable to other people's dominance and interference. Therefore, analyzing the moments in which Marguerite begins to gain more confidence about herself and to conceptualize her experience in her own way is important for recognizing moments in which she refuses to be subjected to oppression and resists it.

In the first years of her life, Marguerite experiences more suffering than most children at her age. If racism and sexism were not enough, Marguerite is also raped by her step-father in one of the most explicit forms of female subjugation. After being raped by Mr. Freeman, she loses her remaining innocence and retreats into silence. In addition, she feels she has been responsible for Mr. Freeman's death because of what she said in the court—about not having been touched by him before. In a way, she had understood the power of words and was aware of the damaging effects of “language”. Although Marguerite believes that her muteness will protect her loved ones, it merely shields her from the world, but does not necessarily protect her from danger. On the contrary, metaphorically speaking, her muteness can be associated with her inability to voice her concerns and establish some independence.

Therefore, it was necessary for Marguerite to find the more positive potential power of words. It was necessary for her to find her own voice. One of the ways in which Marguerite deals with her muteness and begins to find her voice again is through her relation with literature and the literary world. Marguerite and her brother were always interested in books. It was a way of spending time in Stamps. Since little children they would perform small plays, and memorize words from books and act them. This

interest for books was crucial for Marguerite's recovering after the rape. When she returns to Stamps, she barely speaks to anybody, which leads to Mrs. Flowers' invitation to her house. As we have seen in the previous chapter, Mrs. Flowers encourages Marguerite to keep reading, and reading aloud. More than that, Mrs. Flowers invites Marguerite to find in the written words something that transcends them. And by reproducing the words with different intonations and trying to convey different meanings on them, Marguerite is not only experimenting with creativity and performativity, but also dealing with language in a more abstract and positive way. If previously she had apprehended the negative power of words, the potential damaging effects of discourse, now she was dealing with words as the fundamental core of a world that she appreciated and felt safe in it: the world of literature.

Bearing this in mind, it seems possible to say that Marguerite's relation with literature and her love for it can be seen as a form of resistance in *I Know Why the Caged Sings*. By reading, Marguerite becomes less fragile since she detaches herself from her harsh environment and inhabits spaces not allowed to her. Angelou narrates Marguerite's enchantment with literature as something almost indescribable:

I have tried often to search behind the sophistication of years for the enchantment I so easily found in those gifts. The essence escapes but its aura remains. To be allowed, no, invited, into the private lives of strangers, and to share their joys and fears, was a chance to exchange the Southern bitter wormwood for a cup of mead with Beowulf or a hot cup of tea and milk with Oliver Twist. When I said aloud, 'It's a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever

done...’ tears of love filled my eyes at my selflessness. (Angelou 109)

Marguerite finds her safe place in literature, which gives her the strength to keep living. When Marguerite pronounces Dickens’s words, she feels filled with love for them. Her tears can also be a reflection of all that she has lived until that moment. After being raped and losing her ability to speak, she finds in literature the desire to speak again.

In *Caged Bird*, Mrs. Flowers encourage Marguerite to “infuse words with shades of deeper meaning” (Angelou 106). For Correa, this “infusion” “is also a strategy of resistance and identity construction, and once such a voice makes itself present the oppressed begins his/her healing process”. According to her, Marguerite is learning with Mrs. Flowers how to liberate herself (from silence) through language (Correa 83). Indeed, one can observe this healing process taking hold of Marguerite from the first encounter she has with Mrs. Flowers. Marguerite begins to reflect more about the words on paper, and to be excited about their encounter; through literature she begins to recover from her trauma and to rediscover pleasures in life. Marguerite’s avid interest for literature offers her a site for expressing her ideas and using language as tool of resistance.

Correa stresses the importance of Mrs. Flowers to Marguerite’s growth towards agency by stating that

[t]he lessons Maya receives from Mrs. Flowers were given through books of poetry and philosophical conversations. These lessons reinforce the values and wisdom transmitted from generation to generation. Remembering the poems, repeating them aloud, and reflecting upon their meaning gives

Maya a certain sense of power and makes her transcend her immediate environment. On a second level, these lessons offer young Maya a closer observation of the relations of black and whites. (Correa 84)

In addition, Marguerite's experience with literature also expanded her knowledge about the world, literary narratives and memory. Because of her muteness, Marguerite had already begun to apprehend the most she could around her – the narrator says that in order to achieve a personal silence, it was necessary for her to apprehend all the sounds around her–, and through literature she enhances her knowledge even more. That contact with other people's lives is also a way of reflecting about one's own life. From a slightly different perspective, Marguerite's relation with literature can be seen as a sign of resistance also because knowledge is a way of acquiring power. That is, by acquiring more knowledge about the world or by having an outstanding performance in school, she could have a better chance of achieving success in life or occupying spaces not allowed to people in her conditions.

Later, when Marguerite has to move to San Francisco, she expresses her gratitude for Mrs. Flowers by saying that she was the one who had given her “a djinn who was to serve all her life: books” (Angelou 214). Such comparison indicates how important books were for her: they would guide her life, and through them, she could achieve her dreams and life goals. When she graduated, her “academic work was among the best of the year” (186), and for her merely to be graduating was an incredible achievement: “As a member of the winning team (the graduating class of 1940) I had outdistanced unpleasant sensations by miles. I was headed for the freedom of open fields” (Angelou 185). The narrator reveals Marguerite's feelings of pride and amazement with

her achievement. She reflects: “Somewhere in my fatalism I had expected to die, accidentally, and never have the chance to walk up the stairs in the auditorium and gracefully receive my hard-earned diploma. Out of God’s merciful bosom I had won reprieve” (185). Her graduation was the culmination of her efforts and dedication, something that she actively worked towards.

In Marguerite’s context, her graduation and dedication to the intellectual world can be seen as a form of resistance also because it can be seen as a defiance to the common belief that black people were less intelligent, that they were fit only for manual work and sports; or that because she was a woman she was not fit even to these types of work. Literature was the first door opened that led to many different possibilities in her life.

After some time, Marguerite would have her initial experiences with writing literature. For instance, feeling sorry for Mrs. Cullinan’s inability to have children, Marguerite decides to write a poem about being white, fat and childless, focusing on Mrs. Cullinan’s loneliness and pain (Angelou 117). Considering the argument that Marguerite is one of the “caged birds” in the story, one could say that she “sings” through literature, initially by reading out loud, but later by writing.

As Johannes Kieding argues,

Ms. Angelou became aware of the single-story dominant discourses that sought to create her social identity because she had enough support from others and from literature that she came across to begin to nourish the subjugated discourses, which in turn gave her access to *agency* (Kieding 4).

For Kieding, then, to have access to external influences— influences that question dominant ideologies—contributes

to the process of acquiring agency over one's life. Kieding assigns to discourses produced by those who have been oppressed or subjugated the importance of creating new discourses. One can understand his point if one revisits Marguerite's story. Because she had strong female women around her during her life, for instance, she could escape the sexist invention of women as the opposite of men – weak, irrational, passive, and so forth. I am not trying to say that she was completely free from these narratives—since I have tried to expose how these oppressive ideologies shaped her experience as a black woman—; however, by observing the complexities and differences in character of the women around her, she could rethink those dominant discourses about (black) women and create her own narrative about who she was and who she wanted to be. The relevance of autobiographical work lies on the fact that the narrator is the subject that creates her/his own representation, at the same time that the subject is created within discourses already. Marguerite's experience is constituted in and through discourse, but not determined by it since, as stated in Butler, “‘culture’ and ‘discourse’ *mire* the subject, but do not constitute that subject” (1990: 143). In other words, Marguerite's social context influences who she is, but it does not determine her; instead, it gives her the possibility for agency.

In addition, Kieding argues that Angelou's love for literature was crucial to her ability to overcome oppression and question hegemonic discourses. As he implies, by reading and expanding her world knowledge, she could also get in contact with different narratives, different fictional possibilities. As a result, Angelou could develop more her own agency and reinvent herself. Through literature she could find her own voice.

The incident with Mrs. Cullinan's china patterns illustrates how Marguerite is already changing and becoming more resistant to power structures and subtle forms of domination. Marguerite's resistance to social

orders is perceived when, for instance, she feels angry at the friend's suggestion that Mrs. Cullinan should shorten her name to Mary because "Margaret" is too long (they mispronounce Marguerite): "I fumed to the kitchen. That horrible woman would never have the chance to call me Mary because if I was starving I'd never work for her. I decided I wouldn't pee on her if her heart was on fire" (Angelou 117). This description shows not only Marguerite's anger towards the suggestive renaming – which implies her own awareness of her racial and social oppression –, but also reveals Marguerite's reflexive thinking and awareness that she has some control in her life and the right to decide who she works for. On the next day, Mrs. Cullinan's calls Marguerite by the shortened name, a highly offensive attitude, as can be seen in the passage below:

Every person I knew had a hellish horror of being 'called out of his name.' It was a dangerous practice to call a Negro anything that could be loosely construed as insulting because of the centuries of their having been called niggers, jigs, dinges, blackbirds, crows, boots and spooks. (Angelou 118)

Enraged by this misnaming, Marguerite wants to quit the job. However, since her grandmother would not easily accept her resignation, she decides to get herself fired: for a week she does not follow her schedules and does not perform her chores properly. At Bailey's suggestion, she decides to destroy something that Mrs. Cullinan's really likes (118). On the next day, when Marguerite hears Mrs. Cullinan screaming "Mary", she does exactly that by dropping her mistress's favorite heirloom on the floor. Infuriated by the loss of her china dishes, she loses her veiled racism and swears: "That clumsy nigger. Clumsy little black nigger" (Angelou 120).

This incident reveals how Marguerite has become more confident. She decides not to work for Mrs. Cullinan and chooses to act upon that choice.

Everything was happening so fast I can't remember whether her action preceded her words, but I know that Mrs. Cullinan said, 'Her name's Margaret, goddamn it, her name's Margaret!' And she threw a wedge of the broken plate at me. It could have been the hysteria which put her aim off, but the flying crockery caught Miss Glory right over her ear and she started screaming.

I left the front door wide opened so all the neighbors could hear.

Mrs. Cullinan was right about one thing. My name wasn't Mary. (Angelou 120)

Triumphant because she had achieved her objectives of not being misnamed and not working for this abusive woman anymore, she leaves the house. The fact that Miss Glory is hit by the flying object and starts screaming while Marguerite leaves the door opened so the neighbors can hear could also be seen as some sort of defiance to Mrs. Cullinan. Until that moment Mrs. Cullinan had not been explicitly racist, but at the first sign of trouble she loses her calm and reveals her abusive behavior. By letting the door opened Marguerite is almost forcing her to show her "true privileged and racist self". Moreover, the open door can also be seen as an invitation for the neighbors (probably white privileged people) to witness this black girl's triumph and agency.

Correa argues that the incident with Mrs. Cullinan's china has a positive effect on Marguerite and contributes to her process of self-discovering. For Correa,

even if Marguerite is not completely certain about who she is, she knows what she is not and learns what she does not want to be or do. As a consequence, she can begin to redefine herself into a new “being” (Correa 85); that is, by refusing to accept the assigned “master’s narrative” and definition of her identity, she begins to develop her own sense of self.

Marguerite moves to San Francisco some months before the United States declared war on Japan. The city was going through a lot of changes, and Marguerite feels welcomed by the inconsistency surrounding her: “The air of collective displacement, the impermanence of life in wartime and the gauche personalities of the more recent arrivals tended to dissipate my own sense of not belonging. In San Francisco, for the first time, I perceived myself as part of something” (Angelou 226). As one can see, Marguerite begins to accept better the displacement she feels inside her. In San Francisco, she is given a scholarship to the California Labor School, and she begins to take drama and dance classes. Later she finds out that this school was listed as a subversive organization,¹⁸ but for Marguerite it meant that she had the opportunity to study different forms of arts. She is only fourteen years old, but she is invited to study there among (white and black) adults (232).

One day, Marguerite goes on vacation to her father’s house in southern San Francisco. While staying with him, he takes her to Mexico where he parties with different women in a Mexican bar. After drinking a lot, her father sleeps heavily, and afraid of spending the night in a car in Mexico, she drives the car back to the United States (in fact, she crashes into another car just after leaving the border police). The description of this incident reveals her need to prove that she is able to take action into her own

¹⁸ It was on the House Un-American Activities list of subversive organizations.

hands instead of waiting for people to decide what is best for her:

The challenge was exhilarating. It was me, Marguerite, against the elemental opposition. As I twisted the steering wheel and forced the accelerator to the floor *I was controlling Mexico*, and might and aloneness and inexperienced youth and Bailey Johnson, Sr., and death and insecurity, and even gravity. (Angelou 255) (Emphasis mine)

For Marguerite, driving that car was a personal victory: she was the agent of her own life and did not have to fear external dangers. She is thrilled by the sensation of power the decision has given her. When her father wakes up and asks her who caused the accident, she thinks to herself that “she does not need or even expects his approbation”. Nevertheless, she later admits that she was disappointed that he did not seem to recognize “the greatness of her achievement”.

When they return to her father’s house, Marguerite gets into an argument with Dolores, her father’s young girlfriend, which leads to a fight. Big Bailey, who had been complacent about the girls’ quarrel, decides to leave Marguerite in a couple of friend’s house. Feeling embarrassed, abandoned and confused, she decides to leave their house. Her behavior is at the same time brave and childish: she refuses to be abandoned by her father once more and does not wait for him to return this time; she takes the matter into her own hands and leaves, putting herself in a dangerous situation. Nevertheless, she feels free and decides to think about her future (267). Marguerite seems afraid of what her mother can do after learning that she was hit by Dolores and, still filled with guilt for Mr. Freeman’s death, she decides that to return to her mother’s home is not a good idea at the moment. After

spending some time reading in a library, she walks by a junkyard where she spends the next month, living on the streets and sleeping in old cars.

In the junkyard Marguerite meets many other young kids; she learns how to drive, to dance and to curse. She follows the rules and schedules created by the kids. She adapts well to the group routine since diversity and displacement were comfortable to her. During the period that she lives on the streets, Marguerite learns not to see the world in terms of black and white anymore, and by “putting some color” in the world she begins to apprehend experience differently:

After a month my thinking processes had so changed that I was hardly recognizable to myself. The unquestionable acceptance by my peers had dislodged the familiar insecurity. Odd that the homeless children, the silt of war frenzy, could initiate me into the brotherhood of man. After hunting down unbroken bottles and selling them with a white girl from Missouri, a Mexican from Los Angeles and a Black girl from Oklahoma, I was never again to sense myself so solidly outside the pale of human race. (Angelou 272)

From Marguerite’s experience in the junkyard she begins to understand better the different people affected by social inequalities and the different categories of identity. This month in the junkyard represents a period of personal growth for Marguerite. She acquires a different type of knowledge, a knowledge that comes from experience: “I reason that I had given up some youth for knowledge, but my gain was more valuable than the loss” (Angelou 257).

While in the junkyard, she entered some dance contests with the other children and even received second

place in one of them. When she returns to San Francisco, she feels more certain about herself:

In one area my brother and I found ourselves closer. I had gotten the knack of public dancing. All the lessons with Mother, who danced so effortlessly, had not born immediate fruit. But with my newly so effortlessly and dearly bought assurance I could give myself up to the rhythms and let them propel me where they willed. (Angelou 275)

This experience with dance also influences Marguerite's life in the sense that she begins to gain more confidence about her own body.¹⁹

Some months after Marguerite returns to San Francisco, Bailey is forced to leave his mother's house. And although Bailey and Marguerite were growing apart—because of their age difference and different interests—, she had never lived without him and she feels deeply his departure. When her brother leaves the house, she feels the need to change her life as well. This uneasiness is seen in the following sentences: “Running away from home would be anticlimactic after Mexico, and a dull story after my month in the car lot. But the need for change bulldozed a road down the center of my mind” (283). Marguerite seems to be living a constant and crescent process of change. As part of this change, she decides that she wants to work as a streetcar conductor in San Francisco.

Marguerite appreciates the idea of driving around San Francisco in a uniform, a money changer at her waist. However, she learns that black streetcar conductors are not accepted. The narrator confesses that although she wanted

¹⁹ In *The Heart of a Woman* Angelou's relation with dance is further explored. Later, dancing would be one more professional activity Angelou would engage in.

to say that her first feeling was “an immediate fury which was followed by the noble determination to break the restricting tradition”, her first reaction to the restriction was disappointment. Nevertheless, she had convinced herself that she would get the job as a conductor and soon she “ascended the emotional ladder to haughty indignation, and finally to that state of stubbornness where the mind is locked like the jaws of an enraged bulldog” (Angelou 284). For the next three weeks Marguerite would use all her determination to get the job she wanted.

Marguerite is daily rejected or avoided by receptionists, officers of the streetcars office, and even by the black organizations she appeals to for support—they could not understand her interest in that particular position when other jobs, better jobs, were open to black people. The narrator describes how exhaustive this process was:

Downtown San Francisco became alien and cold, and the streets I had loved in a personal familiarity were unknown lanes that twisted with malicious intent. Old buildings [...] were then *imposing structures viciously joined to keep me out*. My trips to the streetcar office were of the frequency of a person on salary. The struggle expanded. I was no longer in conflict only with the Market Street Railway but with the marble lobby of the building which housed its offices, and elevators and their operators. (Angelou 287)
(Emphasis added)

Marguerite’s internal conflict is a result of racism as an institutional practice that keeps black people excluded and powerless. All the discrimination Marguerite encounters to fill in a simple position such as streetcar conductor is the reflection of years of prejudice against black people and white people’s need to control the spaces allowed to them.

One of the problems with institutionalized racism is that it might be ignored or not even perceived by the people involved in the process, especially those who are privileged by racial discrimination. For instance, in Marguerite's first visit to the offices of the Railway company, the receptionist dismisses her by saying that the manager is out, and that she is not sure that he will be back the next day. However, Marguerite's description reveals how astonished the receptionist seemed to be with Marguerite's interest in that job, and how surprised she was when Marguerite asked for the manager's name. The receptionist had already internalized as natural such forms of discrimination, and although she is not explicitly racist with Marguerite, she perpetuates racism by agreeing with discriminatory practices in a form of covert racism.

The narrator describes their interaction and one can understand better the complexities behind these covert forms of racism:

In the street I saw the receptionist and myself going faithfully through *paces that were stale with familiarity*, although I had never encountered that kind of situation before and, probably, neither had she. We were like actors who, *knowing the play by heart*, were still able to cry afresh over the old tragedies and laugh spontaneously at the comic situations.

The miserable little encounter had nothing to do with me, the me of me, any more than it had to do with that silly clerk. The incident was a recurring dream, *concocted years before by stupid whites and it eternally came back to haunt us all*. The secretary and I were like Hamlet and Laertes in the final scene, where, because of harm

done by one ancestor to another,
 we were bound to duel to the death.
 Also because *the play must end
 somewhere.* (Angelou 286)
 (Emphasis mine)

In this (passive-aggressive) encounter, Marguerite and the receptionist are cordial to each other because they are part of this play (of power). Nevertheless, to a black person this kind of “incident” is part of their every-day-life, and they learn strategies to deal with these forms of everyday racism. As Marguerite’s narration implies, the receptionist might not even be aware that she is discriminating Marguerite based on her color, but she nonetheless denies Marguerite’s rights as a citizen. In addition, by giving an acceptable excuse for not properly receiving Marguerite’s application to the job, she refuses to give her the chance to compete for it.

From this passage in *Caged Bird* one can establish a dialogue with Butler’s discussion on performativity. According to Butler (1993: 12-13),

Performativity is thus not a singular "act," for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition. Moreover, this act is not primarily theatrical; indeed, its apparent theatricality is produced to the extent that its historicity remains dissimulated (and, conversely, its theatricality gains certain inevitability given the impossibility of a full disclosure of its historicity).

In line with this notion of performativity, one can understand the ways in which the receptionist dissimulates her discriminatory practices. Based on Derrida's reformulation of the power of performance, Butler calls our attention to the figure of "dissimulated citation", which consists in practices that are so constantly repeated in history that they pass as natural. The narrator compares the encounter with the final scene of *Hamlet*, where Hamlet and Laerte are fighting to death because of damage done by one ancestors to another, a fight they had not started themselves, but carried on. Similarly, the receptionist and Marguerite were engaged in this struggle caused by gendered racism. The receptionist continues carrying the prejudices and the hatred that her ancestor had, and Marguerite continues to experience the resentment and dissatisfaction caused by such racist ideologies historically perpetuated in society. Nevertheless, Marguerite, who has a double consciousness, reads into the "act", thus revealing its dissimulation.²⁰

In consonance with this notion of performativity, one can understand the play of powers involved in Marguerite's attempts to get the job. Her constant dismissal by the receptionist at the Railroad's office can be seen as the "dissimulated citation" repeated throughout history as a way of denying black people the opportunity to compete in the job market. However, it was not only because the performative utterance happened by the use of a "dissimulated citacionality" that it failed, but because the reiterative practice of the "citation" also created Marguerite's opportunity for agency. She plays the game of

²⁰ Derrida's text, quoted in Butler, is: "Could a performative utterance succeed if its formulation did not repeat a "coded" or iterable utterance, or in other words if the formula I pronounce in order to open a meeting, launch a ship or a marriage was not identifiable as conforming with an iterable model, if it were not then identifiable in some ways as a "citation"?... in such a typology the category of intention will not disappear: *it will have its place, but from that place it will no longer be able to govern the entire scene and system of utterance.*" [l'enonciation] (Derrida in Butler 1993: 12-13).

power and "pretends" not to be informed by the performative utterance (she pretends not to identify the citation as an iterable model), and thus the discourse is no longer able to constrain her.

After Marguerite's first encounter, she initially forgives the receptionist in her mind, considering her "as a fellow victim of the same puppeteer" (286). Nevertheless, with time, she rethinks the situation and comes to understand the powers of intersectionality taking place in their interaction. She reflects:

Her Southern nasal accent sliced my meditation and I looked deep into my thoughts. All lies, all comfortable lies. The receptionist was not innocent and neither was I. The whole charade we had played out in that crummy waiting room had directly to do with me, Black, and her, white. (287)

After all, even though the receptionist is a woman (and probably a poor one), she is powerful enough to oppress Marguerite for being black. They occupy different points of a line of intersecting factors, which changes their perspective of experience. Marguerite also implicates the blame on herself for playing the game of charades.

As already mentioned, oppressive ideologies and discriminatory practices and beliefs need to repeat themselves to maintain their power in society. However, society is constantly changing. The historical moment in San Francisco was different from other moments in the past and in other places. For instance, blacks had already achieved some rights and open displays of racism in the work place were no longer accepted. Therefore, the receptionist (and also the other people Marguerite speaks to) tries to disguise their prejudice when Marguerite refuses to accept her dismissal. And after weeks of persistence, Marguerite is hired as the first black person on

the San Francisco streetcars²¹. Her determination is the ultimate example of how she developed and grew throughout the narrative. From a little child with an inferiority complex, she develops into a strong and independent adolescent. “Attaining the streetcar conductor's job becomes not only a victory for civil rights, as a result, but also a personal victory for Maya's sense of self” (Pierre A. Walker 97) .

In *Breaking out of the cage* (1991), Saunders discusses the autobiographical writings of Maya Angelou. In his articles, he affirms that it is only several autobiographies later that Marguerite's sense of self-confidence will be “evolved into its fullest dimensions”. Nevertheless, although I strongly agree with Saunders that Marguerite's sense confidence is not complete by the end of *Caged Bird*—after all, the book narrates only the initial years of her life—, one cannot ignore the achievements she has been able to accomplish in her path to self-discovery. Therefore, I have to agree with Butterfield's statement that Marguerite “does not submit tamely to the cage”, and value her progress throughout the narrative in her responses to racial, sexist and other forms of discrimination. Moreover, the assertion that “(s)o much of Angelou's first volume shows her to be the tossed-about victim of circumstance” (Saunders 01) seems to be a bit reductive of the different forms of resistance that occur in *Caged Bird*. That is, yes, she suffers a lot and the narrative reveals the ways race, gender and class oppress her and her community. Nevertheless, she *is* learning and exercising her agency as well. Furthermore, Saunders' views imply a natural and linear sequence of events that is hard to accept. From my perspective, life is filled with “high and low” moments, and they influence one' sense of self and one's

²¹ Nevertheless, it is relevant to say that although she got the job, things were not easy for her because she was given the worse working-hours schedules; which contributed for her abandoning school later.

understanding of the world, as well as one's possibility for agency.

Correa's final argument in "Through Their Voices She Found Her Voice" is that Marguerite sings her song with the voices of her ancestors and with the voices of all the women in her life, who helped her to find her own voice and sing her song to freedom. I strongly agree with her. The wisdom of Grandmother Henderson, her creativity, the powerful aura she had, the love who emanated from her every gesture, and her endless hope in a better time for black people; the strength and courage of Grandmother Baxter, who was not easily intimidated or constrained by society's imposition on her as a white woman; Mrs. Flowers' love for literature and her awareness of the importance of literacy; not to mention Vivian Baxter (Marguerite's mother)'s grace and detachment from society's conventions – all these women influenced Marguerite's construction of her self.

To be left alone on the tightrope of youthful unknowing is to experience the excruciating beauty of a full freedom and the threat of eternal indecision. Few, if any, survive their teens. Most surrender to the vague but murderous pressure of adult conformity. It becomes easier to die and avoid conflicts than to maintain a constant battle with the superior forces of maturity. (Angelou 291)

She had already acknowledged that black women are a product of the intersection of different forces—such as racism, sexism and black people's powerlessness—, and she also mentioned how inevitable it is for an adult black woman to become "a formidable" character. Marguerite can be seen in this light by the end of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. She is a black woman struggling to

survive, and in this struggle she is becoming more and more formidable. It is not a simple transformation, but resistance is certainly present. Life is unpredictable, and the end of *Caged Bird* reflects this unpredictability.

FINAL REMARKS

“LIFT EVERY VOICE AND SING”: Spaces for agency “on the grave of dreams²²”

If we were a people much given to revealing secrets, we might raise monuments and sacrifice to the memories of our poets, but slavery cured us of that weakness. It may be enough, however, to have said that we survive in exact relationship to the dedication of our poets (include preachers, musicians and blue singers). (Angelou 198)

From inside the oppressing birdcage of gendered racial discrimination, where dreams are buried in oblivion, the dedication of their poets (include all those “formidable female character”, con men, preachers, class valedictorian speakers... include all those who by the expression of their creativity and infinity ability to reinvent themselves) keeps the strength of the African American community alive and helps them to survive. Since slavery tried to prevent African Americans from keeping their historical past and tried to erase their knowledge about their culture, they could not honor their history in “traditional manners” (such as raising monuments to keep their memory alive). Nevertheless, coming from “a way that with tears has been watered”, “treading [their] path through the blood of the slaughtered”,²³ those artists have found more creative ways

²² This title makes reference to the poem “Caged Bird” published by Angelou in the poem collection *Shaker Why Don't You Sing* (1983). The lines read: “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.”

²³ These two lines (and the title of this chapter) are a reference to the poem/song “Lift Every Voice and Sing” (already mentioned in this research),

to pass on their memories: through poetry, music or even in the way they dealt with daily oppression and looked for ways of resisting in their own terms.

In a sense, many characters in *Caged Bird* can be seen as artists. They reappropriate their circumstances and create something new with them, a new interpretation of life that is more tolerable and gives them strength. One can see the artistic spiritual in Momma (Grandmother Henderson), who put “a deep-brooding love” in everything she touched, and that, with her inventiveness and strength, transformed disadvantages into her favor and to her victory, supported her family and helped those around her; in Grandmother Baxter, with her strength of character and courage to not let herself be dictated to and intimidated by the impositions assigned to her as a white woman; in Mrs. Flowers, who would instigate critical and creative thinking and who, by teaching the lovely lessons of appreciation of literature, shared her knowledge and spread the word about the importance of keeping alive the memory of a people; in Marguerite’s uncles (the whole Baxter family, in fact), with their strength of character, who used their toughness and fearsome reputation as a way of protecting themselves from the combined forces of racial, class, and gender discrimination, and as a tool for achieving justice (even if in their own terms); and one can also see the expression of art and creativity in the con men, who would invent highly creative scams in order to gain some money and punish racist oppressors by using the prejudice and misconceptions racist society had about black people against them, and who would use storytelling as a way of transmitting new narratives. With great imagination, like artists, they create new things and reinvent their own experiences.

This analysis corroborates Myra K. McMurry’s claim that the restrictions symbolically represented by the

also known as the Black American National Anthem, written as a poem by James Weldon Johnson in 1899.

cage are transformed by the oppressed in a vehicle for self-realization through art. McMurry defends that, although the restrictions (try to) impose restrictive roles and (try to) erase the true identity of its inhabitants, the triumph of the “metaphorical birds” can only be considered as such because of these restrictions. McMurry exemplifies her ideas by discussing, to mention a few examples, how because Momma had learned that she had to respect white people, she uses this imposed behavior as a way of channeling her true emotions through her religious’ faith and having her victory in her own terms. Similarly, Daddy’ Clidell’s con men friends use white prejudice in their favor. According to McMurry, they resist not in spite of their restrictions, but because of them. They transform the cage and use them creatively to transcend it (McMurry 108). Therefore, from her perspective, all these black people in *Caged Bird* who are constantly expressing their infinite creativity and capacity to overcome their restrictions are true artists.

This “artistic vein” perceived in *Caged Bird* reminds me of Alice Walker’s affirmation that “these grandmothers and mothers of ours were not Saints, but Artists; driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release” (Walker 402). In fact, as Walker would affirm later, these artists spread their creativity into their every-day-life. Her invitation to search for “our mother’s gardens” was the initial sparkle that led me to this research. Attempting to find this garden (women’s source of creativity) in *Caged Bird*, I decided to look for other signs of resistance as well. The result is present throughout the two last chapters.²⁴ The creativity of the aforementioned characters and their ability to resist

²⁴ My initial idea was to have only one chapter examining the signs of resistance in *Caged Bird*. Nevertheless, there were so many textual evidences of spaces for agency in the narrative that I was compelled to divide the chapter into two.

oppression can be seen as a heritage from past generations to the generations to come. They would leave their stories and the memories of their existence alive.

This research indicates that Maya Angelou's voice is created in the multiplicity of voices that she is constantly dialoguing with; her voice is found among the different discourses which meanings she has to negotiate. Her work reflects the multiple voices of the collective African Americans and it is also the personal history of Angelou. The experience of race is a part of Angelou's sense of self that can never be erased. And, as a member of black society, she descends from a line of "caged birds" who tried to convey their meanings through art. *Caged Bird* is only one of artistic works that Angelou created in order to channel her hopefulness about the future and her criticism on the way institutionalized discriminatory practices intersect in order to exclude and oppress. Angelou is the ultimate "caged bird" that sings through literature her story, and the story of her people.

Nevertheless, what *Caged Bird* reveals about the metaphor of the "caged bird" is that being able to find spaces for open resistance is not always easy, and that coping with oppression is also a step towards more active forms of resistance. In "Death, Disillusionment and Despair in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*", Nidhiya Annie Jacob discusses death as metaphor of Marguerite's search for a "positive, life-affirming identity". Throughout her life she had to struggle to overcome her dead-black-and-ugly dream, and to put herself back together after the rape, and to find her voice metaphorically (and also physically) speaking, and to assert her identity. Jacobs believes that Marguerite's struggles are shared by many members of the African American community, who constantly suffers the effects of living as outcasts in their own country. For Jacob, "the ultimate challenge to death is Angelou's own active assertion and her willingness to her annihilation and

overcome it" (Jacob 559). In the last chapters of *Caged Bird*, Marguerite is becoming more self-assured and more aware of the intersecting forms of oppression that affect her experience. Fortunately, she begins to refuse to accept all the narratives created about her or for her.

This research also suggests that some of the forms of resistance present in *Caged Bird* seem to have a palliative effect, in the sense that they alleviate the hardships of the character's daily struggle, but they do not really change their situation. Nevertheless, when reflecting on what she considers Marguerite's victory—, McMurry adds that "the significance of which [victory] largely depends on the sense of limitation overcome". This statement is suitable for most instances of resistance analyzed in *Caged Bird*. The social context of the story defines the significance of the achievements of the characters, and, in this case, the simple fact that they are achieving small victories and resistance in some way is highly significant and positive. As for Marguerite, with her aging she could understand better her community and appreciate more their efforts.

By re-writing the first years of her life, Angelou would recreate her experiences and give a new interpretation to the common and familiar people she had contact with and to the experiences she had. That might be the reason that the reader of *Caged Bird* might sense her deep appreciation of the "formidable" women in her life. By-retelling the stories she could read the heroic figure in them. This investigation points out the ways in which the culmination of racism, sexism, and classism operates together in the oppression not only of black women, but of other characters in *Caged Bird*, such as Grandmother Baxter and the rest of the Baxter family. In fact, this research revealed the ways in which even people that are oppressed are capable of inflicting harm and of oppressing. Kimberlé Crenshaw (2015) has recently affirmed that "[a]cknowledging privilege is hard — particularly for

those who also experience discrimination and exclusion”. Nevertheless, intersectionality reveals what is happening at the meeting point of varied forms of discrimination, being one of its objectives to bring visibility to *all* those groups who have been excluded and discriminated. *Caged Bird* presents some of these groups and how to find spaces for exercising agency. By observing all these “artists” around her, it is no surprise that Angelou herself has become a great artist. By expressing their arts and singing their songs, these “caged birds”, or black artists, helped Marguerite in the path to finding her own voice.

In “Daughter’s Seduction”, Froula discusses the silencing of women’s speech. According to her, “(t)his silencing ensures that the cultural daughter remains a daughter, her power suppressed and muted; while the father, his power protected, makes culture and history in his own image”. Froula argues that in *Caged Bird*, Angelou breaks with this silencing by retelling the suppressed stories. Like the mythical Philomela²⁵, Angelou conveys through art forbidden stories. As a consequence, Angelou is creating new narratives about our cultural past; and by doing so she is also opening space for new future possibilities for all these “cultural daughters” (Froula 623). From this perspective, one can understand the subversive value of *Caged Bird*. If, metaphorically speaking, the literary canon had been used to protect the father’s voice and cultural values, by telling their own stories women are exercising agency and giving voice to women. In consonance with Froula’s analysis of the “metaphysical violence against women inscribed in the literary tradition”, it is possible to extend this affirmation to African

²⁵ In the myth of Philomela, she is raped by her brother-in-law Tereus. He cuts her tongue in order to prevent her from telling other people of what has happened. Still, she weaves a tapestry and tells her story. Philomena and her sister Procne take revenge and in order to escape being caught by the enraged Tereus, they pray to the gods that turn them into *birds*. Marguerite’s self-imposed silence after the rape recalls Philomena’s inability to speak. Nevertheless, both find through art the means to share their stories.

American literature to the degree that even black men are gendered by racism. In this way, Angelou's narrative is at least doubly subversive because it gives voice to black women, encouraging them to take charge and create their own images of their life experiences. As discussed in the previous chapters, the notion of performativity is achieved through reiteration and repetition, which is also appropriate for an understanding of the creation of new narratives. Since both the self and society constantly constitute themselves in order to reaffirm oppressive ideologies, by rethinking the past one might help to deconstruct the discourses of power that regulate society and try to constrain it.

Until Marguerite's Eight Grade Graduation, she had not truly recognized the importance of black writers. Therefore, when she finally understands the powerful words of "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing", she feels touched by them. For the first time Marguerite feels pride for being a member of the black community. Angelou uses this passage to thank the contribution of black authors: "Oh, Black known and unknown poets, how often have your auctioned pains sustained us? Who will compute the lonely nights made less lonely by your songs, or the empty pots made less tragic by your tales" (Angelou 198). It is possible to sense the voice of the awarded adult author giving credit where credit is due. Angelou thanks the black poets—those who could tell their stories and those who were silenced, as well—for helping black people to survive by sharing the stories of their pain. It seems that Angelou believes that the sharing of common experience (even the experience of suffering) helps to reduce the loneliness and gives some comfort. Maybe it makes it easier to keep fighting because it spreads the word that there are other people fighting and surviving out there, and these narratives have the power to sustain the community. In other words, as a literary critic, Angelou is also stressing the importance of the literature written by black authors.

These productions help to give voice to the black community, to make their needs heard, to keep them creating and being active, to tell the world their own side of history—many times unheard. One could certainly say that Angelou's works can be seen in this light; and Angelou can be included in the list of these known poets who share their experience, contributing therefore to keep black people strong. From this perspective, Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* in itself can be seen as one of these songs—sung by the many caged birds of African American literature—mentioned in her acknowledgment.

As discussed throughout this thesis, the image of a “caged bird” is associated with the idea of restriction. This restriction may be physical but may also refer to imprisonment in a more psychological sphere as well. The activity of singing present in the metaphor of “the caged bird that sings” involves the idea of creativity and voice. Taking into consideration Angelou's discussion on the importance of black poets, one could extend the metaphor of “the caged bird that sings” to the entire work, being *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* one of the songs produced by one of the many literary caged birds. From this perspective, the author Maya Angelou could be seen as the “caged bird”. One might ask in which sense Angelou as an author could be considered a “caged bird”? But history has silenced black people and women for so long that the answer is simple. Black people and women were not only denied for centuries the right to read or write, but also silenced when they managed to tell their stories. The restrictions for some time were also physical since they were forbidden to occupy the spaces destined to white men. The implications of such restrictions imposed on black people and on women still affect society; and the struggle to find a voice in a (white) male heterosexual environment continues until today. Still, there are people such as Angelou who share their experience and contribute

to creating new narratives, opening space for more possibilities for women and for black people.

Nevertheless, until nowadays, Angelou has been considered by many as one the most banned authors in the United States (or *the* most banned one), constantly having *Caged Bird* removed from school lists – for its strong “sexual content”, “indecent”, “representation of torture”, “incitation of hatred against whites”, “use of language”, just to mention a few accusations. *Caged Bird* is often on the ten top lists of banned books in the United States²⁶. Despite all this censorship and attacks, she has received great recognition. Nowadays, Maya Angelou is known as a bestselling author [but also as actress, director, dancer, singer, Civil Rights activist...] who has won prizes such as the National Book Award, the Pulitzer Prize, an Emmy, some Grammys, to mention but a few. She has also received greater honors by universities, governmental institutions, and invitations and medals from American presidents. And although many places still ban *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, her story [her song, her tunes] still reaches “the distant hill”. After all, the caged bird sings of freedom.

²⁶ Information retrieved from New African Magazine published in August 4th 2014 as “Maya Angelou – the most banned book in the U.S. Available in: <<http://newafricanmagazine.com/maya-angelou-banned-author-us/>>. Web. 02 Feb. 2016.

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