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ENGL 105-002

July 16, 2020

Still Inspiring Anti-Racism: Maya Angelou’s “Still I Rise”

Maya Angelou was a famous American poet, autobiographer, and civil rights activist who lived from 1928-2014. For more than 30 years, she made her home in Winston-Salem, NC, the same city in which I grew up. Ever since I can remember, I felt a sense of wonder when I heard her name, and was absolutely mesmerized by her deep, resonating voice. My childhood friend lived next door to her, and as we played in the adjoining woods, I imagined Ms. Angelou sitting at her desk writing poetry. When my grandfather visited us from Lusaka, Zambia, he was invited to have tea at Maya Angelou’s home along with her guest, Zambian President Kenneth Kuanda. I loved hearing Papa share tales of their visit.

Maya Angelou grew up in the southern United States in the 1930s and 40s and experienced a double dose of racism and discrimination as an African-American female. She turned to the spoken word and poetry as a way to promote hope and reform in a prejudiced society (Poetry Foundation). “Still I Rise” highlights the fortitude of the human spirit and the perseverance found in African-Americans, who have fought for justice and equality throughout our nation’s history. This poem, written in 1978, is relevant and poignant today as African-Americans continue to “rise up,” and as more white and brown people stand in solidarity with their black brothers and sisters, joining protests against racial injustices.

In her conversation with Claudia Tate in 1989, Maya Angelou notes, “The title poem of “Still I Rise” refers to the indomitable spirit of black people" (Angelou & Tate). One can hear the utter commitment to survive and even thrive in the face of murderous violence in this stanza:

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. (Angelou 21-24)

The speaker directly confronts and calls into question the intentions of oppressors who seek to dominate and humiliate black bodies:

Did you want to see me broken?  
 Bowed head and lowered eyes?  
 Shoulders falling down like teardrops,  
 Weakened by my soulful cries? (Angelou 13-16)

Despite what others may do to her as a black woman, she will not be undone:

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. (Angelou 1-4)

“Like air” (Angelou 24) and “like dust” (Angelou 4), the voice of this poet cannot be contained. Angelou took seriously her responsibility to write and to speak out for her people. She explains “Learning the craft, understanding what language can do, gaining control of the language, enables one to make people weep, make them laugh, even make them go to war. You can do this by learning how to harness the power of the word so studying my craft is one of my responsibilities” (Angelou & Tate). Angelou exhibits this artful control by repeating variations of the phrase “Still I Rise” at the end of multiple stanzas. Angelou also uses repetition in the word “you,” speaking directly to and calling out her oppressors: “Did you want to see me broken? (13), “You may kill me with your hatefulness” (23) and “Does my sexiness upset you? (25). The poet skillfully employs similes that paint pictures for the listener: “Just like moons and like suns, / With the certainty of tides, / Just like hopes springing high….” (Angelou 8-11)Two other examples of this poetic device of simile include “Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines, / Diggin’ in my own backyard,” (Angelou 19-20) and “I dance like I've got diamonds, / At the meeting of my thighs?” (Angelou 27-28) These similes allow the reader to visualize her “sassy” spirit lifting above and beyond all forces, attempting to stomp her into oblivion.

Instead of being downtrodden by racism and oppression, Maya Angelou exhibits compelling joie de vivre in her rich “laughter” and exuberant “dancing”, that is part of her identity as an African-American woman and poet. “Still I Rise” still lives on as one of Ms. Angelou’s most inspiring legacies, encouraging every reader to rise up, confront and eradicate systemic racism that is still rampant in our country.

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