Maya Angelou’s Afrocentric journalism
A contribution to Pan-Africanism and the African Renaissance

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Background and introduction
The year 2019 marked Maya Angelou’s fifth anniversary of her departure on May 28, 2014, to the Ancestors’ Abode. Born on April 4, 1928 in the United States of America (USA), she is famous as a singer, poet, dancer and actress. Little is known, though, about her revolutionary commitment to Pan-Africanism, an ideological framework advocating the unity and complete liberation of African people – in the continent and in the diaspora. She declared herself a “devout Nkrumaist” (Angelou 2008b, 93). Kwame Nkrumah was a Pan-Africanist and independent Ghana’s first head of state. In the 1950s, after a number of years in the entertainment field, Angelou decided to stop performing in clubs for unappreciating audiences, where the non-existence of dressing rooms compelled her to change in the women’s toilet, while people she admired were doing important things such as performing jazz concerts on liberation themes (Angelou 2008e, 54). Henceforth, she would “never again work to make people smile inanely and would take on the responsibility of making them think,” as a demonstration of her “own seriousness” (ibid). Her first act of seriousness was to organise a show with fellow artists, called “Cabaret for Freedom,” to raise funds for Martin Luther King, Jr’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) after attending King, Jr’s fundraising talk (Angelou 2008e, 66; 81). She was inspired to act after hearing King, Jr proclaiming that “black people, the most displaced, the poorest, the most maligned and scourged [ ... ] had the glorious task of reclaiming the soul” (Angelou 2008e, 69). Angelou’s commanding presence, her leadership skills during the organising of the Cabaret for Freedom, drew admiration from the SCLC’s officials and, consequently, she was offered a job as the SCLC’s coordinator, resulting in a meeting with Martin Luther King, Jr, in person (Angelou 2008e, 110; 115). In 1960, she was one of the few women who formed the Cultural Association for Women of African Heritage (CAWAH), whose “intention was to support all black civil rights groups” in the USA (Angelou 2008e, 181). CAWAH, whose membership constituted artists, aimed to offer its services to raise money in order to “promote and publicize any gathering sincerely engaged in developing a just society” (ibid).
CAWAH planned to host fashion shows featuring African themes and African designs (Angelou 2008e, 182). An objection was noted about the irony of “black folks [in Harlem] meeting in white hotels to talk about how rotten white folks are (emphasis added)” (ibid).

Angelou’s approach was informed by her observation that in the early years of the twentieth century, “[m]any black as well as white Americans were equally ignorant of both African history and African culture” (Angelou 1998, 13). This ignorance was a consequence of deliberate misrepresentation of history aimed at justifying dehumanising Africans the world over (Angelou 1998, 15). Knowing that as long as slaves continued speaking their African languages, they would retain memories of their greatness, Africans were “forced by the lash to speak another language,” so as to be “unable to convey the stories of their own people, their deeds, rituals, religions and beliefs” (Angelou 1998, 15). African slaves were “even exiled from drums, instruments of instruction, ceremony and entertainment of their homeland” (ibid). Consequently, the “slaves too began to believe what their masters believed: Africa was a continent of savages,” and, consequently, “African history and culture [became] shrouded in centuries of guilt and ignorance and shame” (Angelou 1998, 15). Except for a few who knew better, “the African at home (on the continent) was seen as a caricature of nature; so it followed that the Africans abroad (blacks everywhere) were better only because of their encounters with whites” (Angelou 1998, 15–16). The association of everything good with white people, and everything ugly with black people, inflicted a deep sense of an inferiority complex in black people’s minds to an extent that many, especially the educated black middle class, sought to dissociate themselves from everything African, and identified themselves with everything white. For instance, “in the Negro community of 1953” the phrase, “as uncouth as an African” was “used to describe a loud and uncaring person” (Angelou 2008d, 98). This self-contempt confronted Maya Angelou when she went to teach dance in a “progressive American Negro (the word was acceptable then) cultural center” (Angelou 1998, 14):

I was engaged as dance instructor, and lasted two weeks. The black middle-class families whose children were in my class protested in one voice, “Why is she teaching African dance to our children? We haven’t lost anything in Africa.” (ibid).

It was these experiences which inspired Angelou to make a conscious decision to rediscover her African cultural heritage and advance it as a basis to reclaim African people’s freedom and dignity wherever they are in the world. The reclamation of African cultural heritage for the purposes of African liberation is called the African Renaissance.

This chapter, by interrogating Maya Angelou’s series of seven biographical works, demonstrates that through her writings, she not only recorded the injustices visited by white supremacists on African people the world over, but also celebrated Africans’ resistance and resilience, particularly the struggle to hold on to their African cultural heritage against efforts to make them the white world’s cultural appendages in an effort to destroy African cultural identity. This journalistic approach on Angelou’s part was Afrocentric, Afrocentricity being defined as a cultural framework that promotes and celebrates Africans’ engagement with the world and other members of the human race on their own terms, employing perspectives informed by African history and culture, as experienced and defined by Africans (Asante 2003, 3). Firstly, I trace Angelou’s influences on the birth of her political consciousness.

In the belly of the beast: birth of a revolutionary consciousness

Angelou’s revolutionary consciousness was born in the USA where she had observed that being black meant “living inside a skin that was hated or feared by the majority of one’s
fellow citizens” (Angelou 2008d, 301). As a child she realised that even a social activity such as sport had huge implications for Black people’s dignity. She lived to witness and to document how the boxing match between Joe Louis and Primo Carnera, represented not only a contestation between two individuals, but a war between Blacks and Whites (Angelou 2007, 146). The prospect of Louis losing could, for Black humanity, represent “the end of the world” (ibid):

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 ugly and lazy and dirty and, unlucky and worst of all, that God Himself hated us and ordained us to be hewers of wood and drawers of water, forever and ever, world without end (ibid).

But Joe Louis’ fists hit so hard and landed Carnera on the boxing ring’s floor, his arms and legs being so weak, he could not get up to face Louis.

Angelou (2008d, 32) had heard tales of how, during slavery, “all whites, including the poor and ignorant, had the right to speak rudely to and even physically abuse any Negro they met.” She was stung by pain on seeing the grandmother she loved, respected and looked up to, disrespectfully referred to by her first name by little white girls while she, in return addressed them by honorifics (Angelou 2007, 34–35). She came face to face with the nakedness of white racism and felt the “heavy burden of Blackness” when she saw a white dentist telling her grandmother, that she would not relieve Maya from her excruciating tooth ache because his policy was against treating “nigra (sic), colored people,,” adding that he would “rather stick [his] hand in a dog’s mouth than in a nigger’s” (Angelou 2007, 202–203).

For asserting her dignity by demanding to be treated with respect by a white saleswoman in her shop, she was slapped several times by her grandmother, who received a call about the incident, consequently packing her clothes and sending Angelou from Arkansas to San Francisco, fearing that Arkansas’ racist whites would retaliate by attacking and violating her body, or even worse, killing her (Angelou 2008c, 97–98). If tables could be turned at that instant, she would “gladly have consigned every white person living and the millions dead to a hell where the devil was blacker than their fears of blackness and more cruel than forced starvation” (Angelou 2008c, 99). She had learnt from her great-grandmother, who had been a slave, that some white slave masters even forbade their slaves from holding prayer meetings, thus compelling them to communicate with the Supreme Being in secrecy “on pain of being lashed” (Angelou 2008d, 37).

Seeds of revolutionary consciousness were planted in her mind by her mother, Vivian Baxter, at the early age of 13. She inculcated in her a sense of an anti-exploitation, a pro-justice attitude and humility, by teaching her and his brother, Bailey, that the domestic helper in their house was a “worker, not a slave,” and that they would, therefore, clean their own rooms and respect him (Angelou 2013, 29). She drummed it in her mind to treat everyone right (Angelou 2008d, 165).

Angelou’s mother taught her daughter that human beings, like animals, could smell fear and exploited it to their advantage and that, therefore, she should never let another person know that she was afraid (Angelou 2008e, 31). She taught her to do what she thought was right, and be ready to back it up even with her life (Angelou 2013, 139). Angelou’s moment to concretise her Pan-Africanism came in January 1961 with the tragic assassination
of Patrice Lumumba, a Pan-Africanist and the Congo’s first democratically elected Prime Minister.

Angelou embraces and advocates Pan-Africanism

The CAWAH decided on a protest action at the United Nations’ offices in New York (Angelou 2008e, 186). Disagreements within the CAWAH gave a clear indication that some African-Americans who identified themselves with black people’s freedom struggles, did not necessarily identify their struggles within the context of Pan-Africanism (Angelou 2008e, 186). Some within the CAWAH expressed the view that they saw the CAWAH as being limited to supporting the black American civil rights’ struggles, and that taking on the African continent’s colonial struggles was swallowing too much (ibid). While one CAWAH member said that such a narrow approach was a “stupid attitude” and that “what happens in Africa affects every black American,” another CAWAH member said that the “only thing Africans had really done for us was to sell our ancestors into slavery” (Angelou 2008e, 186–187). The pro-Lumumba march prevailed and exceeded even the organisers’ expectations who were not expecting more than fifty people, when thousands turned up, carrying placards reading “Freedom Now,” “Back to Africa,” and “Africa for the Africans,” and marched not only to the UN’s office, but also to the Belgian Consulate, Belgium having been the Congo’s colonising country (Angelou 2008e, 194; 201; 211). The large turn-out of the African-American community was a clear reflection of their Pan-African solidarity with their sisters and brothers in the African continent (Angelou 2008e, 183).

After six months of working for the SCLC, Angelou resigned, preparing to go to Egypt where her husband, Vusi Make, the then Pan Africanist Congress’ (PAC) chairperson, a banned liberation movement in South Africa, represented his party (Angelou 2008e, 152). She overcame her agonising dilemma of leaving King, Jr, and her “own struggle,” by reasoning that “all the black struggles were one, with one enemy and one goal” – an expression of Pan-Africanism (Angelou 2008e, 144). Accepting Make’s marriage proposal was a political commitment, her future with him being a “realm of struggle and eternal victory” (Angelou 2008e, 151). Marriage to a freedom fighter meant getting her son, Guy, a “strong, black, politically aware father” (Angelou 2008e, 152). She was convinced that “it would be difficult if not impossible to raise a black boy in a racist society” that the USA was. To her discomfort, though, she soon discovered that while her revolutionary Pan-Africanist husband, was committed against racial inequality, he was not anti-gender inequality.

When Angelou told Make that she had been invited to participate in a play called The Blacks, without even finding out what she thought, Make told her that “[n]o wife of an African leader can go on the stage [ … ] being examined by the whites” (Angelou 2008e, 220). But after Make had been invited by Max Glanville, The Blacks’ stage manager, reading the manuscript, Make decided and told Angelou that if she was still wanted she “must do this play” (ibid). This was nothing other than what Angelou called an “attitude of total control” by her husband (ibid). Make saw nothing wrong with his attitude because his distorted version of African culture gave African men the right to control their women. As a “wife” of “an African,” Make expected Angelou to obey him under any circumstances (Angelou 2008e, 236). When Angelou, sought and found a job in Cairo as the Arab Observer’s associate editor, with the help of David DuBois, the son of William DuBois, the Pan-Africanist, Make was enraged by Angelous’s taking of the job “without consulting” him (read “asking for his permission”), and asked her if she was “a man” (read “having a right to make independent decisions”) (Angelou 2008e, 285; 287). After calling her names, Make told Angelou that
she “must call DuBois and explain” that she “acted as an American woman,” but that after returning home, he had “reminded” her that she was “now […] an African wife” (Angelou 2008e, 288), meaning that African women, unlike American women, were submissive creatures. Angelou would have none of Make’s distorted version of African culture. Giving Make her “body and loyalty,” had not “included all the rights to [her] life” (Angelou 2008e, 220). Moreover, Make’s notion of an “African woman” was not the same as that of the African women she had met in London, and “the legendary women in the African stories” she had read about (Angelou 2008e, 180). The African women Angelou met in London were African freedom fighters’ wives who were accompanying their husbands attending a conference (Angelou 2008e, 170). She heard one of the African women boldly asking:

What are we here for? Why are African women sitting eating, trying to act cute while African men are discussing serious questions and African children are starving? Have we come to London just to convenience our husbands? Have we been brought here only as a portable pussy? (emphasis added) (Angelou 2008e, 171)

In response to this rhetorical question, a woman from Kenya pointed out that in Kenya, women were not just “wombs,” and had demonstrated in the struggles waged by Mau-Mau guerillas that they had “ideas as well as babies” (ibid). A woman from Sierra Leone had pointed out that in “all of Africa, women have suffered,” and that she, herself, had been “jailed and beaten” and shot in the leg because she would not reveal the whereabouts of her friends (Angelou 2008e, 172–173):

They shot me and said my fighting days were over, but if I am paralyzed and can only lift my eyelids, I will stare the white oppressors out of Africa. (Angelou 2008e, 173)

While, during the liberation period some found it prestigious to dine and wine in European capital cities’ hotels, one African woman “found it ironic, if not downright stupid, to hold a meeting where people discussed how to get colonialism’s foot off the neck of Africa in the capital [London] of colonialism” (Angelou 2008e, 171). This irony reminded her of an African saying: Only a fool asks a leopard to look after a lamb (ibid).

After a year’s stay in Cairo with Make, in 1962 Angelou moved to Ghana, planning to stay for two weeks, place her son, Guy, at the University of Ghana, and then move on to Liberia where she had secured a job (Angelou 2008a, 1). But Guy’s involvement in a tragic accident, compelled her to settle in Ghana until her return to the USA in 1965. Efua Sutherland, a Ghanaian woman, she had met recently, sensing Angelou’s vulnerability, told her that her son was hers, too, affirming an African cultural teaching that a child belongs not just to the biological parents but to the entire village in which s/he resides (Angelou 2008a, 13).

Angelou reconnects to her African cultural roots

Angel’s relationship with Ghana was love at first sight. The “sight of so many black people stirred [her] deepest emotions” (Angelou 2008e, 327). During her stay in Cairo, she had “never felt that Egypt was really Africa” (Angelou 2008e, 326). On her first visit to Egypt, with her group of artists, she was horrified by Egyptian Arab racism against Egyptian Africans. She witnessed a well-to-do Arab, instructing men “black as the night,” to physically carry her and another visiting African-American – an offer they declined (Angelou 2008d, 268). It took
less than five minutes to discover that the bellhops, porters, doormen and busboys were black and brown and beige, and that the desk clerk, head waiters, bartenders and hotel manager were white. As far as we knew, they might have all been African, but the distribution of jobs by skin color was not lost on us (Angelou 2008d, 258).

In contrast to her Egyptian experience, the moment she stepped into the airport in Accra, three

black men walked past us wearing white uniforms, visored caps, white pants and jackets whose shoulders bristled with epaulettes. Black pilots? Black captains? It was in 1962. In our country [America], the cradle of democracy, whose anthem boasted ‘the land of the free, the home of the brave,’ the only black men in our airports fueled planes, cleaned cabins, loaded food or were skycaps, racing the pavements for tips ((Angelou 2008e, 327)

During her stay in the African continent, Angelou (1998, 321–328)

found that Africans in a group, whether related by blood or marriage, were called by familial names: uncle, bubba, brother, tuta, sister, mama, papa, and I knew that American blacks continued that practice.

In her interactions with Africans, Angelou “frequently encountered behavior” that she had known in the USA which she thought to be “black American in origin, at the very least southern American” only to realize that

Black Americans’ attitudes in churches, their call and response and funeral marches are African carryovers, and herbal therapies are still actively practiced that can be traced back to Africa, their place of origin (Angelou 1998, 16–17).

It was not only the culture of respect, as practised by Africans, that stood the test of time, and remained standing, amid the torture of slavery, but the culture of generosity, too, as understood by Africans, that was carried by, and carried Africans, defying the Atlantic Ocean. In the village of Dunkwa, where Angelou found herself stranded, with no hotel in sight, she was given accommodation (Angelou 2008a, 110). While watching her host, assigned to her by a member of the village council, preparing a meal, Angelou (2008a, 113) noticed children appearing from time to time, carrying covered plates of food. The plates were meant as a gesture to shoulder the responsibility of catering for the meals of their guest, a responsibility that was regarded as communal, not individual. This gesture brought back memories of practices similar, if not the same in the USA, among African-Americans (Angelou 2008a, 114). She remembered that in the USA,

during segregation, black American travelers, unable to stay in hotels restricted to white patrons, stopped at churches and told the black ministers or deacons of their predicaments (ibid).

Just as she observed a village council member selecting a host for her, she recalled that in the USA
Church officials would select a home and then inform the unexpecting hosts of the decision. There was never a protest, but the new hosts relied on the generosity of their neighbors to help feed and even entertain their guests (ibid).

Just as she would see, later, in the village of Dunkwa in Ghana, children, from time to time, bringing in plates of food, in the USA, Angelou had observed that after the guests were assigned their hosts by the church officials, and “the travelers were settled, surreptitious knocks would sound on the back door,” the one knocking bringing a pan of biscuits, half-a-cake, macaroni and cheese for the guests (Angelou 2008a, 114).

In a conversation between her, and Nana Nketsia, the University of Ghana’s first Vice-Chancellor, Angelou (2008a, 124) learnt that “Africans take motherhood as the most sacred condition human beings can achieve.” Angelou (2008a, 125) did not fail to rise to the occasion, to reciprocate. In affirming the cultural bonds between Africans, in the continent, and Africans, in the diaspora, that defied the ravages of slavery, Angelou (2008a, 125) told Nana Nketsia that his observation confirmed her belief that African-Americans had “retained more Africanisms” than they actually knew because “also among black Americans Motherhood is sacred […] We have strong mothers and we love them dearly.” In her own upbringing, it was her grandmother’s and mother’s “love [that] informed, educated, and liberated” her, and made her the woman she became (Angelou 2013: prologue). Her grandmother, Annie Henderson, paraded her before her friends and called her “little professor” because of her mathematical skills (ibid). Her mother, Vivian Baxter, told Angelou (2013, 78) that not only was she intelligent and kind — two elements not always found together — but also that Angelou was the greatest woman she had ever met.

In many ways, liberated Ghana, under the leadership of Kwame Nkrumah, restored Angelou’s humanity, which racist America had denied her:

We were black Americans in West Africa, where for the first time in our lives the color of our skin was correct and normal (Angelou 2008a, 1).

In response to Nkrumah’s call, Sutherland, who was a playwright, poet, teacher, and Ghana’s National Theatre’s head, had “written the old tales in new ways to teach the children that their history is rich and noble” (Angelou 2008a, 12).

For Angelou to get the firsthand experience of

Seeing Africans enter and leave the formal building [Flagstaff House, the seat of government] made me tremble with an awe I had never known. Their authority on the marble steps again proved that whites had been wrong all along. Black and brown skin did not herald debasement and a divinely created inferiority. We were capable of controlling our cities, our selves and our lives with elegance and success. Whites were not needed to explain the working of the world, nor the mysteries of the mind (Angelou 2008a, 16)

Angelou was not the only African-American in Ghana experiencing this great admiration for, and pride in the recently free-from-colonisation Ghana. There were a number of African-American professionals — teachers, journalists, plumbers, sociologists and plumbers — driven by the conviction, summed up by one African-American, Ted Pointiflet, that “Africa was the inevitable destination of all black Americans” (Angelou 2008a, 18). African-Americans, conscious that they “were mostly unwanted in the land of [their] birth [ … ]
saw promise on [their] ancestral continent” (Angelou 2008, 18). This view was not without encouragement from Ghana’s “progressive posture and [...] brilliant president, Kwame Nkrumah” (Angelou 2008a, 21). For Nkrumah “had let it be known that American Negroes would be welcome to Ghana” (ibid). Nkrumah’s gesture of extending Ghana as a home for Africans was not an act of instinct driven by a moment of euphoria. It was a concrete expression driven by his conviction in Pan-Africanism. On the very first day of Ghana’s independence he had declared openly his belief that Ghana’s independence was meaningless if it was not linked to the independence of the African continent. Angelou (2008a, 21) watched as Nkrumah put this theory into practice as he “offered havens for Southern and East African revolutionaries working to end colonialism in their countries.”

Inspired by Nkrumah’s vision, and sharing his vision with passionate intensity, Angelou (2008a, 19), with her fellow African-Americans in Ghana, “had little doubt about our likeability.” They were confident that “[a]fter Africans got to know us their liking would swiftly follow” (ibid). Their usefulness to Ghana was a question that did not arise – it was taken for granted, a given (ibid).

In this new environment, Angelou (2008a, 20) could not help but be “swept into an adoration for Ghana as a young girl falls in love, heedless and with slight chance of finding the emotion required.” But just like social romantic relationships, political romantic relationships are not without pain, and her political romantic relationship with Ghana was no different.

**Africans’ bitter reception, bitter rejection of African-Americans: Pan-Africanism on trial**

In explaining her “amorous feelings,” Angelou (2008a, 20) notes that for a very long time African-Americans had always longed for a place they could identify as their home, a place they had sung about for centuries, the kind that was not built with hands, whose streets were paved with gold, and washed with honey and milk (ibid). In that home, the African-Americans “would study war no more, and, more important, no one would wage war against us again” (ibid):

> And now, less than one hundred years after slavery was abolished, some descendants of those early slaves taken from Africa, returned, weighted with a heavy hope, to a continent which they could not remember, to a home which had shamefully little memory of them (emphasis added) (ibid).

The foregoing sentiment is unmistakably one filled with anguish, a clear contrast to the emotions of excitement earlier articulated. Contrary to the expectations that the long lost daughters and sons of Africa taken to the Americas would be welcomed at the airport with warm embraces and jubilations, the African-Americans felt that their arrival had little impact on anyone but them. They “ogled the Ghanaians and few of them even noticed. The new-comers hid disappointment in quick repartee, in jokes and clenched jaws.” (Angelou 2008a, 22). This absence of acknowledgment, the realisation that the Ghanaian “citizens were engaged in their own concerns” hurt the African-Americans deeply (Angelou 2008a, 22–23).

The perceived Ghanaians’ indifference to the African-Americans inflicted deep psychological and emotional scars on Angelou. Not only did she articulate this anguish in her book, *All God’s Children Need Travelling Shoes*, but revisited this issue in her book, *Even the Stars Look Lonesome*:
Although millions of Africans were taken from the continent from the sixteenth until the middle of the nineteenth century, many Africans on the continent display no concern over the descendants of their lost ancestors. Many have no knowledge that their culture has been spread around the world by those same hapless and sometimes hopeless descendants. African culture is alive and well. An African proverb spells out the truth: “The ax forgets. The tree remembers.” (Angelou 1998, 17)

On a particular lunch time, while Angelou and a friend were having a conversation in the dining hall, they suddenly heard a loud voice complaining about the absence of rice from apparently two meals in succession (Angelou 2008a, 26–27). When the woman went on ceaselessly, without anyone paying her attention, Angelou (2008a, 19) decided to take it upon herself to intervene by approaching the cook in the kitchen. Adamantly, the cook told Angelou that the woman should either wait for rice to be served in the evening or go somewhere else. In the hope of appealing to his national sentiment, Angelou pointed out to the cook that the protestor would go back to her country “thinking Ghanaians are mean” (ibid). Dismissively, the cook said the woman could go back to her country, and, disinterestedly asked where she was from “anyway” (ibid). Upon hearing that the protesting woman was from a next-door West African country, Sierra Leone, the cook “jumped off the stool”

‘Why didn’t you say that? You said “a woman.” I thought you meant a black American. Sierra Leone people can’t live without rice. They are like people from Liberia. They die for rice. I will bring her some.’ (ibid)

It had come out – some Ghanaian Africans were not only passive, indifferent to the African-Americans – they were openly hostile! This indifference, at best, and hostility, at worst, induced a feeling of being unappreciated on the part of African-Americans. They had justifications for feeling that way.

There was Vicki Garvin, Angelou’s friend, a union organiser back in the USA, and highly respected in labour circles in Europe and the USA (Angelou 2008a, 32). With a Bachelor’s degree in English, a Master’s degree in economics, and years of experience, Garvin, after having first gone to Nigeria, where she experienced “a bitter reception, or rather, a bitter rejection,” and having been “encouraged to believe that she would easily find creative work in the progressive country of Ghana,” ended up, with her qualifications, as a typist in a foreign embassy (Angelou 2008a, 32–33). But Garvin was not the only one in Angelou’s circle to swallow this bitter cup. There was Alice Windom, who, despite having degrees from an Ohio university and a Master’s from the University of Chicago, her field being sociology, and dreaming of belonging to a community of African social workers, ended up being a receptionist in a foreign embassy (Angelou 2008a, 33). Disappointments notwithstanding, without pretending that these experiences did not leave a bitter taste in the mouth, the rejected descendants of the African continent, made an effort to rationalise and contextualise some of their African sisters’ and brothers’ indifference and rejection.

Garvin expressed the appreciation that as a newly-independent country, “Ghana need[ed] its jobs for Ghanaians,” but still expressed hope that “someday,” things would improve (Angelou 2008a, 33). She understood and articulated the reality that the “continent is poor, and while Ghanaians have wonderful spirits, thanks to themselves and Kwame Nkrumah, they are desperate” (Angelou 2008a, 45). Though Windom vocalised her resentment at “these Africans in personnel [ … ] treating me like Charlie did down on the plantation,” she embraced Ghana, and, as Angelou (2008a, 33) points out, “[t]here was never a suggestion
that she might leave Ghana for greener pastures” (Angelou 2008a, 33). Angelou (2008a, 39) herself “turned [her] back to the niggling insecurities and opened [her] arms to Ghana.” She “would not admit that if [she] couldn’t be comfortable in Africa, [she] had no place else to go” (ibid). This rationalisation and contextualisation was possible because the African-Americans understood that some of them were not blameless for the Ghanaians’ unpleasant attitude. There were those African-Americans, who, having come under the aegis of the American government “[t]oo often [ … ] mimicked the manners of their former lords and ladies, trying to treat the Africans as whites had treated them” (Angelou 2008a, 24):

They socialized with Europeans and white Americans, fawning upon that company with ugly obsequiousness.

Throughout Angelou’s sweet and bitter experiences, the Ancestor Spirits were watching. When Angelou visited Keta, a town in the east of Ghana, the Ancestors asserted their presence.

In the warm embrace of mother Africa: Africa and Africans reclaim their African-American children

When the car she was travelling in approached Keta bridge, which until then Angelou knew nothing about, not even its name, she suddenly jerked alert, experienced a heart race, struggled to breathe and gasped for air, causing her to instruct the driver to stop the car (Angelou 2008a, 218). Except for feeling that the prospect of crossing the Keta bridge so terrified her, and that had the driver not stopped the car, she would have jumped out while it was still in motion, Angelou herself, did not understand her own behaviour, and, therefore could not explain it (Angelou 2008a, 219). But her feelings were intense enough to enable her to instruct her fellow travelers to get out of the car and cross over on feet (ibid).

After Angelou’s host enquired whether or not Angelou knew anything about the history of Keta bridges, and the latter pleading ignorance, her host, Adadevo, explained that the old Keta bridges were infamous for being so poorly constructed such that in any flood they would crumble and wash away (ibid). Adadevo explained that people in conveyances of any kind perished in the floods (ibid). As a result of such tragic experiences, passengers in palanquins elected to get out of them and walked across on feet because when such crises struck only people walking on foot stood a chance to cross the bridge and survive (ibid). Hearing this story, Angelou felt “a quick chill” (ibid). The world of the Ancestor Spirits had communicated with her in a dramatic way! But that was just the beginning, not the end of the drama.

As she was climbing a narrow dark passage, going to the Keta market, suddenly in front of her, a tall African woman appeared, and began to address her, interestingly, “in a voice somewhat similar to my own” (Angelou 2008a, 222). As Angelou tried to explain in Fanti, one of Ghana’s languages, that she could not speak Ewe, the pre-dominant language of Keta, the old lady “put her hands on her wide hips, reared back and let loose into the dim close air around us a tirade of angry words” (ibid). Her Fanti not working, Angelou tried French, a language spoken in the area. That, too, did not work. Instead the old lady became more aggressive, came closer, clapped her hands close to Angelou’s face for her to feel the rush of air. As she moved closer, Angelou was forced to retreat. She had to appeal to her host, Adadevo, to intervene. When he did, explaining to the old lady that Angelou was an American, the old lady shook her head in denial – it could not be! Her denial would soon make sense.

Angelou (2008a, 223) had to produce her American driver’s license to prove her statement. When the old lady lifted her head away from Angelou’s document, Angelou “nearly
fell back down the steps” (ibid). Out of the dark passage, in the light, Angelou saw that the old lady had the “wide face and slanted eyes” of her own grandmother (ibid). Angelou saw that the old lady’s “lips were large and beautifully shaped like my grandmother’s, and her cheek bones were high like those of my grandmother.” The resemblance was striking!

Now, convinced, the old lady went close to Angelou, patted her cheeks a few times, and after studying her, she “lifted both arms and lacing her fingers together clasped her hands and put them on the top of her head. She rocked a little from side to side and issued a pitiful moan.” (Angelou 2008a, 224). These gestures, this body language, reminded Angelou that back in the USA, if she, or her brother, put our hands over on our heads as the woman before me was doing, “my grandmother would stop in her work and come to remove our hands and warn us that the gesture brought bad luck. Mr. Adadevo spoke to me quietly, ‘That’s the way we mourn.’” (ibid)

When the old lady took Angelou to another woman in the market, she, too, repeated the old lady’s gestures. Adadevo explained to Angelou that the old lady thought Angelou was a daughter of her friend, but that “now you remind them of someone, but not anyone they knew personally” (Angelou 2008a, 225). This seemingly inexplicable behaviour had a perfect explanation if and when examined within an African historical and cultural context. Keta village had a history of being ravaged by violent slavery (Angelou 2008a, 225). Every adult, in one raid by enslavers, was either killed or captured and taken into slavery, the only survivors being children who escaped and hid in the bush (Angelou 2008a, 225–226). They watched as their parents were beaten up, and chained (Angelou 2008a, 226). But they also saw their parents fighting back bravely, setting fire to the village, mothers and fathers taking their infants by their feet and bashing their heads against tree trunks rather than seeing them sold into slavery (ibid). The surviving children were taken and brought up by nearby villagers (ibid). Angelou heard from Adadevo that the surviving children married, reproduced and “rebuilt Keta” (ibid). The story was kept alive by being passed on to offsprings. Adadevo (ibid) explained to Angelou that these women were the descendants of those orphaned children, and that Angelou looked so much like them, and that even the tone of her voice was like theirs. They are were confident that Angelou was descended from those stolen mothers and fathers. Their mourning was for their lost people (ibid).

In this way, the Ancestor Spirits, Africa, and Africans, had given a clear indication that both the spiritual and biological ties that bound Africa to her children, wherever they may be, were not broken (ibid). Angelou understood the significance of the Keta village drama as such (ibid):

And here in my last days in Africa, descendants of a pillaged past saw their history in my face and heard their ancestors speak through my voice.

The Keta village experience gave her reassurance, confidence in the knowledge that African-Americans had never been completely dislocated from Africa.

Four years after enjoying the fruits of Ghana’s independence, Angelou (2008b, 5) responded to the revolutionary Pan-Africanist, Malcolm X’s call, to help him establish the Organisation of African-American Unity (OAAU) when Malcolm X met Angelou on his visit to Ghana.

Malcolm X calls, Maya Angelou responds: taking the Pan-Africanist and the African Renaissance battle to the USA: concluding remarks

Revolutionary love and appreciation between Angelou and Malcolm X was mutual (Angelou 2008b, 6). In his letter to Angelou, Malcolm X expressed appreciation for Angelou’s “analysis of our people’s tendency to talk over the head of the masses in a language that is
too far above and beyond [as] certainly true” (Angelou 2008b, 6). In a further affirmation, Malcolm X told Angelou she could communicate because she had “plenty of (soul)” and that she always kept her “feet firmly rooted in the ground” (ibid).

Conscious that “Africans in South Africa often said they had been inspired by Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Montgomery bus boycott of 1958,” Angelou was determined to see to it that the OAAU was going to give them “something new, something visionary to look up to” in such a way that after African-Americans had cleansed themselves and their country, Africans in South Africa “would be able to study our methods, take heart from our example and let freedom ring in their country as it would ring in ours” (Angelou 2008b, 7). But in less than 48 hours of Angelou’s return from Ghana, a day after speaking to Malcolm X on the phone, and telling him that she was going to join him in New York in a month’s time, Malcolm X’s and Angelou’s dream about the OAAU was turned into a nightmare – Malcolm X was shot dead on February 21, 1965 (Angelou 2008b, 20; 22; 93). As if this was not enough, and as she was preparing to join Martin Luther King, Jr’s invitation to her to help him in a civil rights’ campaign, King Jr was assassinated on April 4, on Angelou’s birthday, as if to make sure that she should never forget white supremacists’ cruelty (Angelou 2008b, 143–144; 154–155).

Maya Angelou was a self-declared “proud member of the wonderful, beautiful Negro race” (Angelou 2007, 198). This self-consciousness made her commit to the struggle to reclaim the dignity of her people by identifying herself with the ideology of Pan-Africanism. Through her gift of journalism, she recorded African struggles against white supremacy throughout the world. These s/hercious and triumphant endeavours were recorded without romanticisation. She did not turn a blind eye to the narrow-mindedness of some African people in these struggles, both in the continent and in the diaspora, and exposed the absence of pan-African consciousness both among the Ghanaians and among the African-Americans. But amid these shortfalls and shortcomings, she recognised the resilience of African culture which celebrated the elevation of, and the notion of respect for, and preservation of human dignity and human interdependence. She saw in this African culture a potent instrument in restoring Africanness to Africans, and humanism to humans in the entire world where inhumanity reigns supreme. This restoration of African and human dignity is the African Renaissance, a uniquely African contribution to the human race. This unequivocal commitment, her conviction in African culture as a potent and potential force in African people’s liberation is eloquently articulated in her book, Even the Stars Look Lonesome:

We need to haunt the halls of history and listen anew to the ancestors’ wisdom. We must ask questions and find answers that will help us to avoid dissolving into the merciless maw of history. How were our forefathers able to support their weakest? How were they able to surround the errant leader and prevent him from being coopted by forces that would destroy him and them? How were they – lonely, bought separately, sold apart – able to conceive of the deep wisdom found in the advice “Walk together, children…don’t you get weary (Angelou 1998, 101–102).

Despite the inhumanity imposed on her African people, she did not lose faith in the possibility of the building of sister/brotherhood among all members of the human race. Her ancestors’ philosophy, African Humanism, inspired her to love not just Africans but all humanity. This comes out best in her book, Letter To My Daughter, in which she urges all the women she had “mothered” spiritually, since she never gave biological birth to a female child, to “[b]e certain that you do not die without having done something wonderful for humanity” (Angelou 2012, x). She, herself, made sure that before her spirit and flesh parted, she did
something wonderful for humanity through her Afrocentric journalistic contribution to Pan-
Africanism and the African Renaissance.

References

Angelou, M. *Singin’ & Swingin’ & Getting’ Merry Like Christmas*. London: Virago Press, 2008d.