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# Everyday Resistance to Racism in Maya Angelou's Testimonial Narrative *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

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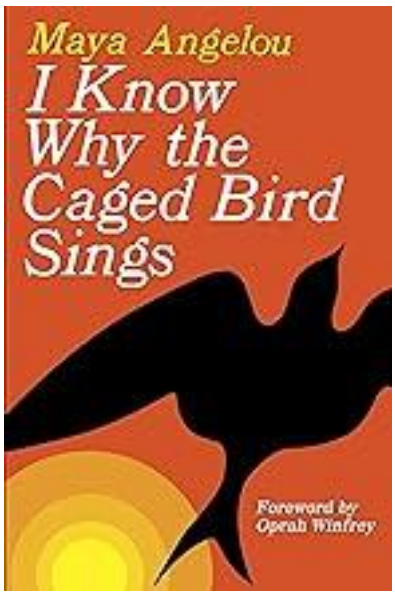


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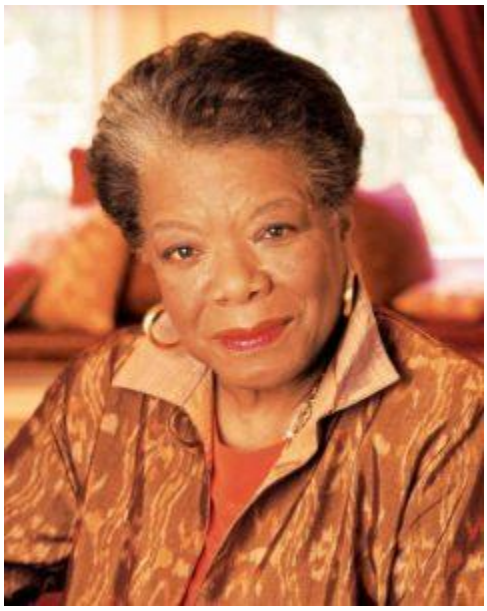
**Abstract**

***I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*** is the first volume of Maya Angelou's seven-volume autobiography which I argue, as a testimonial narrative—a victim testimony in the first-person narrative in this case—portrays everyday resistance to both everyday racism and institutionalized racial discrimination. Everyday resistance represented in the narrative can also be termed as 'resistance from below' which is not recognized easily by dominant power structures. This

testimony of trauma, resistance, and survival is both an individual and collective narrative, as it records poverty, rejection, discrimination, and violence experienced by Maya Angelou as an individual and by her people as a community.

**Keywords:** Maya Angelou***, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings***, autobiography, testimonial narrative, everyday racism, everyday resistance, survival.

The Spanish word *testimonio*, which roughly means testimonial narrative in English, refers to "a novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet (that is, printed as opposed to acoustic) form, told in the first-person by a narrator who is the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a 'life' or a significant life experience" (Beverley 12-13).



Maya Angelou (1928-2014)

Courtesy: https://nclhof.org/inductees/2012-2/maya-angelou/

Maya Angelou's narrative fits into this category because a testimonial narrative may include "autobiography, autobiographical novel, oral history, memoir, confession, diary, interview, eyewitness report, life history, *novela-testimonio*, nonfiction novel, or 'factographic literature'" (Beverley 13). To Oprah Winfrey, Maya's narrative is a form of 'revelation'

("Foreword"). Since Maya Angelou wrote about her lived experiences her narrative "connected her to the greater human truths—of longing, abandonment, security, hope, wonder, prejudice, mystery, and, finally, self-discovery: the realization of who you really are and the liberation that love brings. And each of those timeless truths unfolds in this first autobiographical account of her life" (Winfrey). A testimonial narrative is implicitly or explicitly a component of 'resistance literature' (Beverley 13).

Maya Angelou's narrative, a testimonial narrative, involves "an urgency to communicate, a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival, and so on, implicated in the act of narration itself" (Beverley 14). The narrator, Maya Angelou, is the "representative of a social class or group" (Beverley 15) who relates her marginalization experienced "as a personal destiny" (Beverley 16). A testimonial narrative like this engages "the sense of ethics and justice" (Beverley 19) of the readers "with a popular cause normally distant, not to say alien, from their immediate experience" (Beverley 19). A testimonial narrative can seek 'human rights through literature' by "maintaining and developing the practice of international human rights and solidarity movements" (Beverley 19).

Everyday resistance, a theoretical concept introduced in 1985 by James C. Scott, explores how people undermine power in their everyday life and studies how people act in their everyday lives in ways that might undermine power and this form of resistance is different from organized collective confrontational resistance (Johansson and Vinthagen 18-19). Everyday resistance, silent, disguised, invisible to elites, and unrecognized by the state, is termed as 'infrapolitics' by James C. Scott (Johansson and Vinthagen 19). *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* showcases instances of resistance which can be termed as 'everyday resistance' as they are not part of organized resistance but still talk back to power. Being lonely and doubly marginalised, "twice removed from the dominant power group and handicapped by a burden of racial and gender stereotypes" (Henke 23).

Maya resorts to everyday resistance because organized resistance is too risky for her. Her grandmother Annie Henderson and her mother Vivian Baxter also resist power in their own ways which are also instances of everyday resistance. Maya's everyday resistance results from her

perpetual struggle for recognition and acceptance while her grandmother "continually triumphs over white racism through wise-woman strategies of faith, patience, self-respect, dogged persistence, enduring courage, and a tenacious adherence to principles of social justice" (Henke 24).

Vivian's everyday resistance, on the other hand, can take a violent turn, as it is made evident in Angelou's narrative. Their everyday resistance can be termed as everyday anti-racism also which describes "how individuals respond to racism in their day-to-day lives" (Aquino 105). Kristine Aquino argues that conceptions of anti-racism "cannot only be about fighting the broad identifiable racisms at the structural and institutional level; it must take into account the small-scale and subtle racism occurring in people's lived experiences" (Aquino 118). Everyday anti-racism "is an important arena that illuminates how mundane, routine racism is negotiated across different temporal and spatial contexts and through varying identity struggles" (Aquino 118).

Maya Angelou's narrative represents 'anti-racism from below' and the instances of everyday resistance can be defined as an "oppositional act" (Johansson and Vinthagen 1). This form of resistance involves agency and is carried out in some kind of oppositional relation to power (Johansson and Vinthagen 1). It is "1) unorganized, unsystematic and individual; 2) opportunistic and self-indulgent; 3) have no revolutionary consequences and/or 4) imply in their intention or logic an accommodation with the structure of domination" (Scott 50-51).

Angelou talks about the severe racial segregation her people face in the southern part of the United States--Stamps, Arkansas where her grandmother Annie Henderson's owning a store is an anomaly; the anomaly makes a judge issue a subpoena addressing her as Ms. The address creates laughter among the whites present in the court session while Annie's own people consider it to be an acknowledgement of her elevated status; albeit mistakenly (Angelou 48).

To Maya Angelou, her uncle Willie is another anomaly, for while the able-bodied Black people can "eke out only the necessities of life, Uncle Willie, with his starched shirts, shined shoes and shelves full of food, was the whipping boy and butt of jokes of the underemployed and underpaid" (Angelou 11). According to Angelou, the segregation in Stamps is so pervading that the Black children do not even know how the white people look like but they know one thing

with considerable certainty that the white folks are to be dreaded (Angelou 25). White folks are unreal entities to Maya; to her, "People were those who lived on my side of town. I didn't like them all, or, in fact, any of them very much, but they were people. These others, the strange pale creatures that lived in their alien unlife, weren't considered folks. They were whitefolks" (Angelou 26).

Maya in her everyday resistance tends to negate the very existence of the white people as humans. Some white racist people consider the Black people rather exotic which is evident in the episode where "a strange man and woman" (Angelou 11), schoolteachers from Little Rock, "take a picture of a whole Mr. Johnson" (Angelou 13) which seems quite strange to young Maya. Maya's love for white authors is disapproved by her grandmother and it can be seen as an instance of resistance. Her grandmother wants her to read solely African-American writers.

Angelou shows in her autobiography how Black existence is in constant danger of bodily harm in the southern states. A former sheriff comes to the store to warn Maya's grandmother about something terrible that might happen. He tells Annie to tell Willie to lay low that night because "a crazy nigger messed with a white lady" (Angelou 17) that day and some boys would visit them (Angelou 17). This visit is definitely a terrible thing the Black people always dread. Maya Angelou writes: "Even after the slow drag of years, I remember the sense of fear which filled my mouth with hot, dry air, and made my body light" (Angelou 18). This incident represents some prevalent issues in the Black neighborhood—racist disrespect in the former sheriff's addressing Annie by her first name and calling the Blacks 'niggers' and the Blacks' constant fear of being lynched by the whites on petty pretexts.

Angelou writes about the humiliation her people faces and she voices her resistance also in her own ways: "If on Judgment Day I were summoned by St. Peter to give testimony to the used-to-be sheriff's act of kindness, I would be unable to say anything in his behalf. His confidence that my uncle and every other Black man who heard of the Klan's coming ride would scurry under their houses to hide in chicken droppings was too humiliating to hear" (Angelou 18). If her uncle did not hide, she is quite sure that they would lynch him (Angelou 18-19). What seems more terrible is to her is that her uncle "moaned [moans] the whole night through as if he

had [has], in fact, been guilty of some heinous crime" (Angelou 18-19). Thus, for a Black man's alleged misdeed, the whites could crash an entire Black community.

Angelou talks about the source of her lifelong paranoia which results from an incident occurred at the store one day. "A troop of the powhitetrash kids" (Angelou 30) visits their store and starts misbehaving with her grandmother. Her grandmother, in her fear, starts singing aloud to remove her fear (Angelou 31). One of the girls apes her grandmother which shows the all-pervading nature of racism; even the poor white kids are not devoid of it. This convinces Maya about the source of her grandmother's stoic attitude. Only to save their existence, she has to stand all the insults. Her grandmother wants to teach her and her brother Bailey the safe ways of life. She tells them that they cannot talk to the white people without risking their lives (Angelou 47).

White people in their town are so prejudiced against the Blacks that they do not allow them to buy vanilla ice-cream, except on July Fourth (Angelou 49). They have to buy the chocolate ones the other three hundred and sixty-four days. Angelou writes about the poverty of her people, and she does not understand where the whites have got "the right to spend money so lavishly" (Angelou 50).

Mr. McElroy is the only embodiment of resistance in their neighborhood being an independent Black man who wears matching pants and jackets which is, to young Angelou, "a near anachronism in Stamps" (Angelou 22). Another rebel, to Angelou, is her mother and she says, "to describe my mother would be to write about a hurricane in its perfect power: (Angelou 59). Mrs. Bertha Flowers, another anomaly, who is, Angelou writes, "our [their] side's answer to the richest white woman in town" (Angelou 93).

Angelou writes that perpetual poverty makes the Black people very generous, for it is "indulged on pain of sacrifice" (Angelou 49). The Black people give other Black people something they need desperately which makes "the giving or receiving a rich exchange" (Angelou 50). Thus, they save one another from being perished and this refusal to perish is an act of everyday resistance.

Maya exhibits her side of resistance probably for the first time when she refuses to be called anything other than her name Margaret in Mrs. Cullinan's home. Mrs. Cullinan declares that Margaret be called Mary but she resists this change. The white racist people even try to take away their right to their names offensively which Maya resists and her resistance takes a little violent turn. While Maya resists, Hallelujah does not resent her name being changed to Miss Glory, rather she consents to the change (Angelou 108-109).

Maya wants to quit the job but she cannot discuss it with her grandmother. She seeks Bailey's advice. Accordingly, she gets tardy and clumsy in her job but Mrs. Cullinan ignores all these. Finally, upon Bailey's advice, she breaks Mrs. Cullinan's favorite "casserole shaped like a fish and the green glass coffee cups" (Angelou 110) dropping them on the tiled floor. Mrs. Cullinan in her desperation declares that 'the clumsy nigger' has broken her Momma's china from Virginia and the nigger's name is Margaret. Thus, through her act of resistance, Maya restores her right to her name.

Angelou relates how the Black women in the south who have sons, nephews, and grandsons have their "heartstrings tied to a hanging noose" (Angelou 113). They fear that any minute they can have unbearable news of their dear one's lynching or murder. "For this reason, Southern Blacks until the present generation could be counted among America's arch conservatives" (Angelou 113).

Angelou writes about how the media caricatures Black life. Bailey goes to watch a cinema only to see the white actress Kay Francis who looks like his mother Vivian Baxter. The film presents a Negro chauffeur as a complete idiot. The white spectators laugh every few minutes at the spectacle. Maya laughs too "but not at the hateful jokes made on my [her] people" (Angelou 118). She says that except that the actress is white, she looks like her own mother. To her, it seems funny that the white folks do not know that the woman they adore could be her mother's twin except that the actress is white but her mother is more beautiful (Angelou 118-119).

The southern Blacks are very religious people because their very existence is always at stake. Only God can save them. After the day's hard labour, they do not go home and lay their

"tortured bones in a feather bed" (Angelou 121), rather they go to the church. To Angelou it seems that her people "may be a race of masochists and that not only was it our [their] fate to live the poorest, roughest life but that we [they] liked it like that" (Angelou 121). Her people expect a blessed home hereafter. They say, "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" (Angelou 131).

It is quite evident here that Maya Angelou does not approve of the way her people endure everything with stoic temperament. "They were needy and hungry and despised and dispossessed, and sinners the world over were in the driver's seat" (Angelou 132). She asks the merciful Father how long they will have to suffer (Angelou 132). Angelou questions this disparity. She writes, "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 135). Her young mind protests against the discrimination and stereotyping of her people.

Unlike the white high school, Lafayette County Training School, where Maya studies, does not have any lawn, tennis court, or climbing ivy. Only a small percentage of the students of the school are supposed to go to the South's agricultural and mechanical schools to be trained as carpenters, farmers, masons, maids, cooks, etc. They are not given the chance to be scientists or painters. Edward Donleavy, a white politician from Texarkana, stereotypes Maya's race in his speech delivered at her school premises. He tells them that the central school, where the white children study, will get a well-known artist to teach the students art and the newest microscopes and chemistry equipment for the laboratory while Maya's school will get nothing of that sort (Angelou 178-179). He tries to console the children at the Central School, the school where the Black children study, saying that he has "pointed out to people at a very high level that one of the first-line football tacklers at Arkansas Agricultural and Mechanical College had graduated from good old Lafayette County Training School" (Angelou 179). He keeps praising the Blacks as basketball players and athletes but the Black people are not happy seeing his stereotyping.

Angelou writes, “The white kids were going to have a chance to become Galileos and Madame Curies and Edisons and Gauguins, and our boys (the girls weren’t even in on it) would try to be Jesse Owenses and Joe Louises” (179).

A passive resistance is visible in the attitude of the audience: “The man’s dead words fell like bricks around the auditorium” (Angelou 179). “Some folded the tiny squares into love knots, some into triangles, but most were wadding them, then pressing them flat on their yellow laps” (Angelou 179-180). Angelou protests writing that they are seen as “maids and farmers, handymen and washerwomen, and anything higher that we [they] aspired to was farcical and presumptuous” (Angelou 180). She says, “Then I wished that Gabriel Prosser and Nat Turner had killed all whitefolks in their beds and that Abraham Lincoln had been assassinated before the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, and that Harriet Tubman had been killed by that blow on her head and Christopher Columbus had drowned in the Santa María” (Angelou 180). She understands her people’s position. She thinks that it is awful to be a Negro and to have no control over her life. Since they cannot resist the charges (stereotyping) brought against their race, she thinks that they should all be dead. Donleavy promises new equipment for the home economics building and the workshop as he is running for election but the people assembled are not happy. Their silence is their passive everyday resistance.

We see Grandmother Anderson’s first share of everyday resistance when she is forced to take Maya to a white dentist as “the nearest Negro dentist was [is] in Texarkana, twenty-five miles away” (Angelou 185-186). Maya is certain that she’d be dead long before they reached half the distance (Angelou 186). Mrs. Anderson thinks that she can take her granddaughter to Dr. Lincoln and she also thinks that the doctor will take care of her granddaughter since he owes her a favor (Angelou 186). Dentist Lincoln tells her that he does not “treat nigra, colored people” (Angelou 188). Maya’s grandmother requests him a lot but he does not relent. Dr. Lincoln tells her that he has returned the money he borrowed from her to save his building. Mrs. Anderson’s reply is an example of everyday resistance here. All her life she has been silent but now she talks back. She says, “I wouldn’t press on you like this for myself but I can’t take No. Not for my grandbaby. When you come to borrow my money you didn’t have to beg. You asked me, and I lent it. Now, it wasn't my policy. I ain’t no moneylender, but you stood to lose this building and I

tried to help you out" (Angelou 189). In reply what Dr. Lincoln says is something extremely racist. He says, "Annie, my policy is I'd rather stick my hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's" (Angelou 189).

Here, Maya imagines a very strong resistance by her grandmother. She imagines that her grandmother intimidates the dentist and forces him to leave the town. But that does not actually happen. Instead, her grandmother takes ten dollars as full payment from the dentist. Initially, she had no such plan but she does so as a display of her resistance. But Maya prefers her version of the resistance (Angelou 193). Maya's uncle Willie thinks that the white people do not hate them. He thinks the whites are mostly afraid of the Blacks. A question obviously arises here. Why are they scared? Are they scared because of their brutalization of the Blacks under slavery and afterwards? Maya comments that her grandmother's "African-bush secretiveness and suspiciousness had been compounded by slavery and confirmed by centuries of promises made and promises broken" (Angelou 194).

We see another instance of everyday resistance to racism in a "story went the rounds about a San Franciscan white matron who refused to sit beside a Negro civilian on the streetcar, even after he made room for her on the seat" (Angelou 214). She was not ready to "sit beside a draft dodger who was a Negro as well. She added that the least he could do was fight for his country the way her son was fighting on Iwo Jima. The story said that the man pulled his body away from the window to show an armless sleeve. He said quietly and with great dignity, 'Then ask your son to look around for my arm, which I left over there'" (Angelou 214).

As a Black kid in school, Maya has to undergo undue pressure. The white kids, even when they are wrong in their response to their teachers' questions, they are very aggressive. But Maya has to be certain about all her facts so that she does not call attention to herself (Angelou 216). She does not know why she is given a scholarship to the California Labor School. But she later finds out that the school, meant for the adults, for many years has been in the list of subversive organizations. Racial profiling is quite evident here. However, her mother's courage inspires her. Her mother is always ready to resist any injustice. She even shoots one of her partners for calling her a bitch twice.

Maya wants to be a streetcar conductress, but the San Francisco streetcar officials try to prevent her from getting the job. For three weeks, she visits the office and finally manages the job. She shows enormous perseverance to achieve her goal and her mother provides her unconditional support. But the Negro organizations do not help her; she has to fight her battle on her own. She faces other hurdles in her job. Since she is a Black woman, her subordination is intersectional here. Her shifts are so haphazardly split that she believes that they have been chosen maliciously by her superiors. Later, she quits the job to resume her commitment to formal education. She continues her education despite all odds. When she gets pregnant, she hides her pregnancy from her parents so that she can continue her education. Thus, the first volume of Maya Angelou's autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, is filled with instances of everyday resistance to racism.

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