



Research Paper

Rising Dust: Afrofuturist Temporalities in Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise"

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Abstract: Maya Angelou's poem "Still I Rise" emerges as a potent articulation of Black female subjectivity and political defiance. This paper explores how Angelou constructs a narrative of selfhood that counters racialised and gendered oppression, situating her poem within African American literary traditions, Black feminist thought, postcolonial resistance, and Afrofuturist temporality. The analysis foregrounds the interplay of poetic form, embodied voice, ancestral memory, and linguistic resistance, arguing that "Still I Rise" exemplifies how poetry functions as both a mode of healing and a radical political act that envisions future liberation rooted in historical consciousness and speculative imagination.

Keywords: defiance, black poetry, feminism, afrofuturism, metaphors

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Maya Angelou (1928–2014) stands as one of the most powerful voices in American literature, known for her autobiographies, essays and poems that explore race, gender and personal identity. Her poem "Still I Rise", first published in her 1978 collection *And Still I Rise*, reverberates as a bold assertion of dignity in the face of historical and ongoing oppression. Angelou uses poetic language, cultural memory and erotic imagery to articulate a distinctly black female subjectivity that resists both racist and patriarchal discourse. Situated within the frameworks of Black feminist theory and Afrofuturist imagination, the poem makes a significant contribution to the discourse on liberation and identity.

Afrofuturism, as articulated by scholars such as Kodwo Eshun, Alondra Nelson, and Ytasha Womack, envisions futures grounded in the reconfiguration of Black experiences and aesthetics. It marries the past and the future to create new Black identities freed from the shackles of colonial memory and white supremacy. Angelou's poetic voice in "Still I Rise" resonates with Afrofuturist strategies by collapsing linear time, fusing ancestral memory with a visionary futurity. Her imagery transcends the immediate socio-political context and gestures toward speculative horizons where Black bodies and voices rise uncontained by oppression. The speaker in Angelou's poem, announcing herself as "the dream and the hope of the slave," effects a radical temporal compression. It represents a shift in how time and knowledge are perceived. By bringing together the past, present, and future in ways that support Black survival and identity, it challenges the Western notion of time as a linear progression. In this context, Angelou's repeated use of the phrase "I rise" is more than just a statement of strength; it is a break in time. Each time it happens, it brings ancestral pain closer to a freedom that has not happened yet. The rising "dust" represents the unseen and often ignored aspects of black life that emerge with power and visibility when disturbed. It takes back presence and power from being invisible.

The poem, when understood in the context of African American history, particularly the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement, highlights Angelou's commitment to representing the collective memory of Black struggle. It evokes the historical trauma of enslavement and the lasting impact of structural racism that persisted well into the twentieth century. "Still I Rise" functions as a site of historical reflection, where individual narratives and collective histories intersect. Viewed through an Afrofuturist lens, this intersection does not solely engage with the past; it also anticipates and actively contributes to the formation of a liberated future. The elemental imagery of rising "dust" and the "black ocean" becomes metaphors that express Afrofuturist symbols of temporal disruption and the potential inherent in the diaspora. By integrating ancestral trauma with a vision of upliftment, Angelou establishes her speaker as both a chronicler of history and a proponent of future autonomy.

This Afrofuturist reading opens a conceptual bridge between historical critique and dialogic confrontation. By asserting control over narrative time and reclaiming voice, Angelou confronts the past and opens discursive pathways to speculative futures. This act of re-narrating the self echoes Afrofuturism's

investment in the imaginative reconstruction of Black identity. Where Afrofuturism posits alternative timelines and spaces for Black agency, her use of voice performs that speculative move within poetic form. The shift from declarative strength to confrontation marks a key transition: the poem moves from memory and prophecy into dialogic disruption. This allows the speaker to actively reshape the terms of engagement with the oppressor. At this point, Angelou's poem aligns with Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, as a resistance to narrative fixity and ideological closure. Drawing on Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, Angelou's poem stages a conversation between the oppressed and the oppressor. The frequent rhetorical questions, such as "Does my haughtiness offend you?" destabilise the authority of the assumed white interlocutor. Angelou invites the reader into a confrontation, turning the gaze back upon those who wield power. This dialogic strategy enacts what Homi Bhabha calls "the moment of enunciation", where colonial discourse is subverted by the colonised subject's act of speaking. This performative moment marks a rupture in the discourse of dominance, opening space for new articulations of subjectivity.

The phrase "You may write me down in history / With your bitter, twisted lies" alludes to the erasure and distortion of Black experience in dominant historical narratives. In reclaiming that narrative, Angelou affirms the political agency of the Black subject. This reclamation transcends a mere personal act; it becomes a literary intervention into the dominant epistemologies of American identity. The speaker asserts her presence within a canon and history that has often denied her, becoming both subject and historian. This assertion also becomes an act of re-inscribing Black female subjectivity into imagined futures, refusing confinement to the traumas of the past and insisting on visibility in yet-unwritten worlds.

Angelou structures the poem with nine quatrains followed by a climactic five-line stanza. The repeated refrain "I rise" functions as a structural anchor and, more importantly, as an incantatory declaration of survival and defiance. Repetition here becomes a form of what Judith Butler terms "performative act" ("Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" 526), wherein language enacts the reality it names. Each instance of "I rise" constitutes a ritualistic pronouncement of survival and insurgency, rendering the poem itself an act of becoming. This oral quality situates the poem within Black cultural tradition of 'call-and-response' (Foster), rooted in African storytelling and music. It creates a dialogic space that both addresses the experiences of the oppressed and challenges or confronts the oppressor. In this context, Angelou's repetitive phrasing conjures what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o calls the 'orature' of the oppressed, vis-à-vis a mode of verbal artistry that preserves collective memory and counters hegemonic erasure.

The poem's assertive rhythm may be seen as a deliberate poetic strategy that mimics the resilience of the speaker. Through the repeated affirmation of "I rise", Angelou enacts a performative resistance: a poetic uprising against the silencing forces of racism and sexism. The assertive and rhythmic insistence of "I rise" evokes the auditory qualities of African American spirituals, liberation songs, and sermon traditions, where the power of repetition lies beyond stylistic ornamentation but also relies in its capacity to cultivate a shared sense of awareness and collective consciousness. Angelou's poetics can thus be read through the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism: the refrain opens a polyphonic space where multiple historical, cultural and personal voices reverberate. The phrase "I rise" does not speak in a vacuum; rather, it responds to centuries of racial subjugation and historical silencing. By doing so, it enacts a counter-narrative, an insurgent historiography in which the Black female subject reclaims narrative authority.

Moreover, this repetition may be seen as an act of what is called "critical fabulation" (Hartman 11), which is a speculative filling-in of silenced histories that challenges dominant archival discourses. Angelou's use of rhythm and incantation embodies a temporality that is at once ancestral and anticipatory: each "I rise" is haunted by past violence while gesturing toward future liberation. In this way, the poem's oral qualities do more than link it to cultural tradition; they position the act of speaking as a revolutionary gesture. Angelou's voice does not merely narrate resistance—it performs it. Through this cumulative repetition, the poem becomes an act of insurgent memory and radical futurity, which further challenges both historical amnesia and ongoing systems of oppression.

One of the most striking features of "Still I Rise" is its celebration of the Black female body as a site of power rather than subjugation. Angelou deploys metaphors that link the body to wealth and elemental forces: "I walk like I've got oil wells / Pumping in my living room"; "I dance like I've got diamonds / At the meeting of my thighs". These lines challenge the historical objectification of Black women's bodies by repositioning them as sources of wealth and agency. As feminist theorist Audre Lorde posits in "Uses of the Erotic", the erotic is a source of deep power and self-awareness. Lorde insists that the erotic must not be confused with the pornographic, but as one that should be recognised as a spiritual and empowering force that women can draw upon to resist oppression. By referencing wealth and abundance through sensual imagery, Angelou positions the Black female body as a symbol of plenitude. Her language aligns with Lorde's vision of the erotic as a source of resilience and radical potential. The speaker's confident assertion of her bodily presence, such as her walk, her dance, and the positioning of her thighs, all demonstrate an unflinching embrace of vitality and strength. This framing challenges the social conditioning that demands Black women mute their desires or feel shame about

their bodies. Angelou's portrayal of the erotic intersects with what Lorde describes as the erotic's role in depicting shared community and deeper political solidarity. In Lorde's formulation, when women are in touch with their erotic selves, they are less willing to accept powerlessness or domination. Angelou's speaker embodies this principle: her self-assured presence and unapologetic sensuality reject the internalisation of inferiority. Instead, she offers a model of self-affirmation grounded in bodily awareness and expressive freedom.

The poem also critiques the white patriarchal gaze: "Does my sassiness upset you? / Why are you beset with gloom?" Here, the speaker confronts the discomfort that empowered black womanhood evokes within dominant culture. Angelou refuses to diminish her voice or presence, instead embracing what could be seen as "sassiness" or "haughtiness" as forms of self-assertion. This confrontation with the gaze, as theorised by Frantz Fanon and later by bell hooks in "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators", is a radical act of agency. Rather than internalising the dominant perception, the speaker weaponises her visibility.

Angelou frequently invokes natural imagery to universalise the speaker's resilience. Lines such as "Just like moons and like suns / With the certainty of tides" draw on natural phenomena to suggest that rising is both inevitable and cyclical. The metaphor of rising becomes multivalent—it is both emotional and spiritual, as well as historical and political. The simile "But still, like dust, I'll rise" evokes both degradation and transcendence, as dust is walked upon yet also rises when disturbed. Later, the speaker identifies herself as a "black ocean, leaping and wide", drawing on elemental imagery that illuminates the inextricable link between the self and the environment. This is also suggestive of an ecofeminist reading wherein the resilience of black womanhood is aligned with the generative cycles of the earth.

The poem's concluding stanzas mark a shift from the individual to the collective. "Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave, / I am the dream and the hope of the slave" reclaims historical trauma as a source of strength. Angelou positions herself as both an individual subject and the embodiment of a communal legacy. This intergenerational voice aligns with Toni Morrison's notion of 'rememory' and the importance of ancestral presence in African American literature. By invoking the past, Angelou does not remain bound to it; rather, she transforms it into a launching ground for future possibility.

Angelou's voice in "Still I Rise" exemplifies the concerns of Black feminist theorists like bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins, who emphasise the need to understand race, gender, and class as interconnected systems of oppression. The poem refuses to separate the speaker's identity into neat categories. Instead, it celebrates a complex subjectivity that is at once vulnerable and indomitable, erotic and political, individual and communal. The repeated rising becomes an intersectional gesture: a refusal to be defined or contained by any single narrative. Bringing in Kimberlé Crenshaw's articulation of intersectionality would further ground the analysis in legal and sociological terms, reinforcing the poem's structural critique of power and marginalisation.

Finally, "Still I Rise" should be situated in a broader literary and political context. It shares thematic kinship with works of anti-colonial resistance across the globe—including the writings of Nawal El Saadawi, Mahasweta Devi, and Esther Syiem—who similarly invoke voice, body, and ancestral memory to challenge silencing. The poem can also be understood about Afro-futurism, as it projects a future self that is bold and uncontained. Her vision of survival is not static; it is expansive, sensual, embodied, and full of possibility. Through rhythmic repetition, embodied imagery, and intergenerational memory, Angelou constructs a voice that is both personal and political, individual and collective. The poem confronts historical erasure and cultural silencing, presenting a vision of resilience that is grounded in ancestral strength and bodily sovereignty. In doing so, Angelou emphasises that poetry is not just a form of artistic expression; it is also a powerful act of survival, testimony, and liberation.

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