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"You shaking, Sister": a Cultural Study of Fear in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*

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ABSTRACT
Fear is ingrained in women's experiences from an early age, particularly among Black girls, whose girlhood is significantly shaped by racialized gender bias. This contribution examines the role of socio-cultural norms affecting the expression of fear in Maya Angelou's first memoir, *I know why the caged bird sings* (1969). On the basis of a cultural model of analysis created for this purpose, which integrates the agents, circumstances and norms of fear, it is noted that children in 1930s Black Southern society are unable to verbally articulate most of their fears. Shame and silence surround the expression of this emotion in the memoir, as an indicator of the emotional repression of society. It is evidenced that, through the study of early emotional experience of marginal perspectives, a hitherto underappreciated world of construction of emotion may be unveiled.
KEYWORDS: fear, Maya Angelou, memoir, Black girlhood, cultural model

"Estás temblando, Hermana": un estudio cultural del miedo en *Yo sé por qué canta el pájaro enjaulado* de Maya Angelou

RESUMEN
El miedo parece estar arraigado en las experiencias de las mujeres desde una edad temprana, particularmente entre las jóvenes negras, cuya niñez está influenciada por un sesgo racializado de género. Esta contribución examina cómo las normas socioculturales afectan la expresión del miedo en la escritura de la niñez de Maya Angelou, a través de su primera memoria *Yo sé por qué canta el pájaro enjaulado* (1969). A partir de un modelo cultural de análisis, se observa que los niños en la sociedad negra del sur de los años 30 son incapaces de articular verbalmente la mayoría de sus miedos. La vergüenza y el silencio rodean la expresión de esta emoción, como un indicador de la represión emocional de la sociedad. Se evidencia que, a través del estudio de la experiencia emocional temprana de perspectivas marginales, puede revelarse un mundo de construcción de la emoción hasta ahora desestimado.
PALABRAS CLAVE: miedo, Maya Angelou, autobiografía, niñez negra, modelo cultural.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Hey Black Child
Do you know who you are
Who you really are
USENI PERKINS

Young girls are soon taught to be fearful, to be careful, to stay away from anything that might involve risk, even when these risks also include healthy challenges and adventures that help develop new skills as a child. Girls and young women are, and have historically been, thought to be weaker and more fragile than young boys, "both physically and emotionally" (Paul s.n.). Fear is expected of women. This phenomenon is exacerbated when it comes to Black girlhood:[1] racialized gender bias is a reality in schools and in society, and it is of great influence on the development and future of young and adolescent Black girls (Evan-Winter 16). As bell hooks defends in *All About Love*, Black kids are prepared for a harsh reality and enjoy a much less playful childhood,[2] being "trained to be good girls or dutiful daughters" (59). Young Black female identity seems to be embroidered in survival and fear. Nonetheless, still little is known about the experiences of fear of African American girls (see Neal *et al*.; Muroff *et al*.; Salerno & Peter-Hagene).

Undoubtedly, one of the most relevant autobiographical pieces dealing with Black girlhood is Maya Angelou's first memoir, *I know why the caged bird sings* (1969). To this day, Maya Angelou remains one of the most relevant authors in the twentieth century and the most visible Black woman autobiographer in the English language. Rising from the poverty, racism and violence of Stamps, Arkansas, Marguerite Annie Johnson became a worldwide acclaimed author, memoirist, poet, playwright, civil rights activist and teacher in the United States, Europe, Africa and the Middle East. Joanne M. Braxton described her cultural and literary significance as follows:

[1] Throughout this paper, the decision was made to capitalize the term "Black", as sociologist Du Bois urged in the 1920s and major media organizations, such as *The New York Times* and *The Associated Press*, followed in 2020, after Black Lives Matter protests. In short, this capitalization responds to the need to better refer to a shared cultural identity, community and history.

[2] Childhood is conceived here as "neither a natural nor universal feature of human groups", but rather "an interpretive frame for contextualising the early years of human life" (Evans 5). Since Medieval times, many conceptual systems around human lifespan development have been defended. By the late Middle Ages, three distinct terms established a division of seven-years segments for childhood: *infantia* (infancy) (1-7 yo), *pueritia* (childhood) (8-14 yo), and *adolescentia* (adolescence) (15-21 yo) (Kline). Childhood is also frequently defined in opposition to adulthood, as argued by Zhao *et al.* Besides, as a matter of international law, childhood is reported as including the years up to eighteen under the United Nations agreement of 1990 (UNICEF).

> In the eyes of the predominantly white and male culture, women, and particularly Black women, speak as "others", which is to say that, at least as far as the awareness of the dominant group is concerned, the Black woman speaks from a position of marginality. And yet, against all odds, she comes to self-awareness and finds herself at the center of her own experience. Veiled though she might be, the Black woman autobiographer […] sees herself and her community in relation to those who have described her as "other" and the very awareness of her enforced marginality becomes and additional catalyst for life writing, for testifying, for "telling it like it is". (*Maya Angelou's I Know why the Caged Bird Sings: A Casebook* 4)

As regards her autobiographical work, Angelou's seven pieces of autobiographies are considered not simply memoirs, but rather a reflection of her larger social and cultural context, chronicling the African American female experience in the 20th century. In Braxton's words, "her work speaks to the necessity of reflecting, remembering, opening, cleansing, healing and, at times, issuing a warning" (4). Published in 1969, the first memoir *I know why the caged bird sings* (*Caged bird*) starts with a shy, three-year-old Maya, covering until the birth of her first son at 17 years old in San Francisco.

In America, the 1960s witnessed the origins of a social convulsion, the so-called "memoir boom", which truly expanded during the 1980s and 1990s. This phenomenon was generated by a shift in the publishing industry, with bigger marketing budgets and a need for bestsellers (Hayes s.n.). Life-stories, by both known and unknown authors, spread in big numbers, stories about a wide range of topics: illnesses, wars, divergent sexual orientations or, particularly in Britain, the "misery memoir". Similarly, the "memoir boom" also translated into a growing interest in academia for self-narratives, especially from disciplines such as anthropology and history (Butterfield; Shea; Smith; Olney; Sayre). This phenomenon was driven by a number of factors, including a renewed more rigorous focus on the personal and subjective aspects of history and culture within academic circles, with particular interest in marginal life-writing from women's studies or postcolonial approaches (Blassingame; Jelinek). Some scholars, like hooks (*Talking back*, xi), argued that memoirs offered a unique window into the experiences of marginalized and underrepresented groups, such as women, minorities, and the queer community, and could therefore serve as valuable tools for understanding and challenging dominant cultural narratives.[3]

[3] More recently, a new wave of "memoir boom" can be seen as emerging alongside a new era of consumer capitalism, favoured by written and multimedia self-expression on social media platforms, ranging from 140-character tweets and personal blogs to Facebook posts and text messages (Hayes s.n.). Not much is needed anymore to write one's life, further expanding the notion of what the autobiographical covers. In Hayes's words, "life-writing is now a truly ubiquitous

Indeed, it comes as no surprise that childhood is a common theme in autobiography across cultures, for these stories are very frequently started from the beginning of life and recounted chronologically. As it is the case, many of these autobiographic pieces are written by adults narrating their childhood experiences and its consequences in their present identities from the perspective of time. While authors have been writing about their childhood over the centuries, as early as Augustine in his *Confessions* (397–400 CE), interest on this development period did not grow until the twentieth century, with works such as Kate Douglas & Anna Poletti's *Life Narratives and Youth Culture: Representation, Agency and Participation*. However, Douglas defends that much of the interest fixated originally on childhood as the foundation for a protagonist adult, and not as a period on its own and a means to understanding children's stories. As collections such as Cardell & Douglas's *Telling Tales: Autobiographies of Childhood and Youth* illustrate, the importance of children's participation in autobiographical narration is being increasingly considered for their recognition as social actors, whether as authors of their own or in retrospective. Thus, it is mandatory for scholarly research to regard childhood life-writing and the wide range of topics that surfaces on these pieces, such as education (Lorene Cary's *Black Ice* or Austen Channing Brown's *I'm Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness*), spirituality (Jarena Lee's *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee*), family (June Cross's *Secret Daughter: A Mixed-Race Daughter and the Mother Who Gave Her Away*), coming-of-age (Veronica Chambers's *Mama's Girl* or Anne Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi*), creativity (bell hooks's *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood*), class (Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones)*, child abuse (Harriet A. Jacobs 's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*), children's rights and activism (Angela Y. Davis's *An Autobiography*), and childhood memory (Elizabeth Keckley's *Behind the Scenes: or Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House,* Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road* and Era Bell Thompson's *American Daughter*). Among these varied voices, *Caged bird* remains a canonical work which deals with other significant issues in girlhood like racism, sexism and identity.

Particularly, this memoir offers us the opportunity of discerning the socio-political tension of the 1930s in America: a period when Black writers started to prosper on the faith and possibilities of "the American dream". The memoir takes place mostly during this decade,

phenomenon, part and parcel of the everyday formation of identity" (s.n.). Within this ever-growing complexity and trend, which also inspires this paper, poets such as Robert Lowell attempted to set the borders between art and personal confession, and scholars work on providing new terms to describe the new original forms of life-writing, such as "autofition", "biofiction" or the "non-fiction novel" (Gunther; Lackey; Saunders).

just before the toughest years of the Great Depression. It was slowly that the Black community in the Stamps started to experience the depression first-hand, when the white owners of the cotton fields dropped their payments. One of the poorest areas of the city, which was racially segregated by the Jim Crow laws, was the Black section, where Maya[4] and her family lived.

2. BLACK GIRLHOOD: A POSTCOLONIAL FEMINIST APPROACH

Despite women having written autobiographically for centuries -in diaries, journals, personal letters and memoirs- and publishing widely read accounts in the twentieth century, the genre of women's autobiography has only been subject to criticism for the past fifty years (see Kaplan; Benstock; Brodzki & Schenck; Smith & Watson; Kadar; Moody; Cardell; Mabugu). Before the 1970s such writing was not deemed complex enough for academic study or inclusion in the literary canon (omitted or undermined by critics such as Georg Misch, Wayne Shumaker, Georges Gusdorf, Georges Gusdorf and William Spengemann). However, over time, the status of autobiography has developed dramatically (within and outside academia), and women's autobiographical writing is currently considered a quite valuable site for exploring issues related to feminist, postcolonial, and postmodern theories, as canonized by Smith & Watson in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader* (6). As a result, women's life-writing has become a vital means of exploring issues of subject formation and agency, particularly in relation to feminist and literary theory (Smith; Heilbrun; Personal Narratives Group; Baisnée-Keay *et al*; Meyer Spacks). This development was driven by efforts to build archives of women's writing, claim models of heroic identity, and revise dominant theories of autobiography.[5]

The democracy of the autobiographical takes an even more significant role when it comes to the writing of Black women lives, for, as John Blassingame argued, Black history was conserved, rather than in history manuals, in autobiographies (2). Black authors entered literature through the autobiographical door. In particular, the so-called "slave narratives", all the autobiographical pieces written by slaves and published before 1865, constitute an

[4] Due to its memoiristic nature, two distinct voices are employed in *Caged Bird*, i.e., the voice of the mature narrator, Angelou herself recalling the events, and the young girl within the memoir. In order to differentiate these two voices throughout this paper, the name Maya will be used to refer to the latter and Angelou, to the former.

[5] In her book *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body* (1993), Sidonie Smith examined the connection between subjectivity and autobiographical writing, specifically focusing on how women, who were historically excluded from official discourse, used this genre to assert their subjectivity, inhabit multiple identities, and express their experiences through various perspectives. By drawing on feminist and postmodern theories, Smith's work and similar critiques have effectively broadened our understanding of women's autobiographical practices and their global significance.

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essential part of Afro-American autobiography, date after which slavery stopped existing *de jure*. Pérez Martín argued that the act itself of writing an autobiography was a rebellion act against the slave system since it meant believing on the supremacy of the «I»: it represented going spiritually further than the brutal experience of slavery.[6]

To the universal paradox of the autobiographical, an exclusive and essential paradox is added: that of feminine Black experience. Angelou herself would state: "I write because I am a Black woman" (1984). Feminist postcolonial contemporary critics present several approaches to reading Black women life-writing (Fox-Genovese; Braxton; Boyce-Davies; Harris; Griffin). Among these, Lillian S. Robinson defended the understanding of works which dealt with race, gender or class as an integration of all the elements (148). One of the most striking notions of this particular literature is the dichotomy between the expression of individual identity and the importance of the community. In the seminal work *Black Women Writing Autobiography*, Braxton suggested naming the female experience as "Afra American", expressing this specific realm as "a realm of shared language, reference and allusion within the veil of our Blackness and our femaleness" (1).

3. DELIMITING FEAR

"Fear" is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "the emotion of pain or uneasiness caused by the sense of impending danger, or by the prospect of some possible evil" ("fear, *n*., sense 2.a"). Significantly, it is pointed out that, in early uses, the term was applied to its more "violent extremes", which are currently denoted by other terms such as "alarm", "terror", "fright" or "dread", whereas nowadays it includes all degrees of the emotion. Fear is considered one of the most basic and primitive human emotions, arising from the need for safety and the instinct of self-preservation. However, as stated by Luknar, fear is also a "multidimensional phenomenon" (158) which implies biological, psychological, cultural and social components. It is the multidimensional facet of fear and its own complexity that makes it prone to be explored from a wide number of perspectives.

To begin with, fear can be examined in socio-cultural politics terms through affect theory, originally proposed by Silvan Tomkins (see Sedgwick & Frank). In this sense, there has been a recent affective turn towards the study of the so-called "negative" emotions - namely shame, anger, fear, contempt, distress, disgust and "dissmell" (Frank & Wilson 61).

[6] Significantly enough, many of these works started with the sentence "I was born", manifesting the most human necessity: stating their own existence. This recurrent use of personal pronouns, "I", "my", "me" and even "we", is also present in Angelou's work in the introductory poem of *Caged bird*: "What you looking at me for? / I didn't come to stay". This relationship of intertextuality bases many latter postcolonial literary forms of Afro-American production.

In the case of fear, it is characterized as subject to a range of "ideo-affective socializations" (65). Following this, theories and scripts are a product of the attempts by the individual to control their fear, i.e., when a child is scared and tries to minimize the affect, this can be done "through the activation of shame or self-contempt at being a coward" (65). There is a high price to pay for the control of affect. Besides, Tomkins states that, even though the innate programming of fear has remained "relatively invariant for some thousands of years" (502, as cited in Frank & Wilson, 36), the individual experience of it is highly variable. Similarly, in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* Sara Ahmed argues that it is the response of fear itself which depends on particular socio-cultural and political "narratives of what and who is fearsome that are already in place" (69).

As examined by Mykhalchuk & Bihunova, fear can be caused from external factors, which individuals cannot control, as it is the case of natural disasters or the presence of menacing animals (4). But causes may also be of an internal nature, resulting from one's own mind and thoughts, such as anxiety disorders or other mental health conditions, which can cause individuals to feel fearful even in situations that are not objectively dangerous; learned behaviours, such as learned helplessness or conditioned responses to certain stimuli; or inadequate coping skills, which can leave individuals feeling helpless and vulnerable in the face of stress or adversity, like fear of the dark, among others. Depending on the causes, different formulations of human responses have been proposed, such as the "fight or flight" response by Cannon, which supposes a physiological response that prepares the body to either fight off a threat or flee from it.[7]

Regarding fear in childhood, research, starting with Piaget's studies during the 70s, has shown that it is one of the most common emotions experienced by children during their early years, and it is closely tied to the cognitive abilities of the child. Infants as young as a few months old are capable of displaying fear responses to novel or potentially threatening stimuli: loud noises, unfamiliar faces, or separation from their parents. As their understanding of the world is expanded, so does their comprehension of fear become more complex, due to their developing ability to represent objects and events mentally, as well as their ability to communicate and self-regulate. For example, children may develop fear of imaginary creatures or monsters that they can mentally represent but cannot fully understand or control.

[7] In the last decades, an update for this formulation has been required, establishing at least four distinct fear responses, including freezing, fleeing, fighting and "playing dead". This was originally described by Jeffrey A. Gray and reviewed in Bracha *et al*. (448). These notions are also discussed in posttraumatic stress disorder literature, such as in Perry *et al*'s work.

At times children are afraid of situations or objects that adults do not find threatening or dangerous. The causes of this fear vary, for it may be taught to children for them to be cautious of social environments and situations, i.e., crossing the road or talking to strangers; or it may be caused by imaginary threats, such as fear of monsters under the bed. As the child grows up and learns about the world and its dangers, the list of fears usually increases. Depending on their age and temperament, common fears may include separation from their caregivers, loud noises, falling, the dark, strangers, supernatural beings (e.g., ghosts or monsters) and, as they grow older, burglary, violence, death or separation of their parents, as observed by Zolten & Long (1).

Furthermore, social and environmental factors are fundamental in shaping fear during childhood. Attachment theory, defended by Bowlby, sheds light on the importance of the quality and nature of interactions with caregivers, which allows the infant to express and develop a linguistic understanding of their own fears and emotions. Burkhart & Borelli argue that a secure attachment to caregivers can provide a sense of safety and security, which may buffer against the development of excessive fear or anxiety; whereas insecure attachment or traumatic experiences can heighten the child's fear responses and increase their vulnerability to anxiety disorders later in life (2).

Nonetheless, it is widely accepted that fears also vary in terms of gender and culture, and young girls are expected and taught earlier to be fearful (Clark; Morrongiello & Dawber; Paul). Adult women are twice as prone to developing anxiety as adult men, as observed by Manson *et al* (768) and as reported yearly by the American Psychological Association (the latest report on Stress in America being in 2024). While biological factors are still not evident enough to explain this, a cultural bias is certain to play a role in raising fearful women. Sons are thought to be more capable and pushed to face their fears to overcome them, whereas daughters are perceived weaker and led towards self-protection, which results on developing fewer effective coping strategies and a higher disposition to fear and anxiety (Boyd *et al*; O'Neal *et al*.; Li & Graham; Kiely *et al*.; Liu *et al*).

Lastly, as regards fear in Black childhood, recent studies such as Morsy & Rothstein's and Dumornay *et al*. evidence that African American children experience more often and more sustained threatening or frightening circumstances (1). Historically, these experiences have been less academically studied, understood and valued since they deviated from the norm (see Slopen *et al*.; Boyd *et al*.; McGee & Bentley). The frequency of experience of fear aggravates when it comes to Black children from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds, such as low-income contexts, segregated neighbourhoods, racial discrimination and dysfunctional families (Morsy & Rothstein). This kind of negative

environments boost an unsuccessful coping of threatening or frightening situations, hence, producing emotionally repressed or unstable adults.

4. ANALYSIS OF FEARS IN MAYA ANGELOU'S MEMOIR

a. Social acceptance of fears

Members of a culture have a prototype for the sorts of events that are acceptable to cause an emotion like fear. Indeed, the children pertaining to that culture are affected by its prototypical fears, since there are fears that are considered socio-culturally acceptable or others that are not so. For instance, young children can be scared of monsters or ogres, but they must outgrow them at a certain age, from which those fears may not be tolerated anymore. Precisely, pathological fear - opposed to normative fear - could be partly deemed a cultural, intersubjective fear, because it responds to these sociocultural prototypical or non-normative fears.

In *Caged bird*, two different groups could be distinguished when it comes to the sociocultural acceptance of fears: children[8] and adults. It is observed that more causes of fear were encountered in the case of children, since only the fears displayed by Maya and the people around her appear in the memoir. In this memoir, fears that are socio-culturally accepted for children (mainly Maya and Bailey, but others belonging to the same socio-cultural context too) include: travelling alone, the dark, violence (towards herself or other's getting hurt - Bailey), the white part of town and white people (indeed, this social perception of fear applies only to Southern Black people), mocking God (or God-representative), death, natural disasters (i.e., a storm), social rejection (for instance, in the school or by other children), authority (like Momma), death and being abandoned by her caregivers.

Due to the telling of tales and their more vivid minds, imaginary fears are also quite characteristic of children, both hypothetical but realistic fears (like never returning home to America), supernatural, metaphysical fears (such as ghosts), or absurd fears (generally non-accepted), e.g., rats eating Maya's nose while she sleeps. Because of Maya's circumstances of displacement, abandonment, racial violence, and sexual abuse, she seems to have forcefully grown up quicker than other children and does not show many fears

[8] As mentioned above, it must be noted that the degree of acceptance of certain fears depends too on the age of the child, since there are, for instance, fears that are not understood by very young children (e.g., death) and others that children are expected to grow out of when they grow older (e.g., monsters under the bed). Because it was not possible to measure this variable in this memoir, this element is not considered in the study. Nonetheless, this focus might also be enlightening in the future to understand more about childhood and fear.

considered natural to children, like monsters. Instead, her already turbulent young life plays a big role in the creation of nightmares (mental realizations of some fears), as she acknowledges in the following passage:

> Because of the lurid tales we read and our vivid imaginations and, probably, memories of our brief but hectic lives, Bailey and I were afflicted—he physically and I mentally. He stuttered, and I sweated through horrifying nightmares. He was constantly told to slow down and start again, and on my particularly bad nights my mother would take me in to sleep with her, in the large bed with Mr. Freeman. (72)

Nonetheless, there is an occurrence of fear considered normal and accepted for children: fear of the dark. In this instance, Maya is asked by her grandmother to go into the kitchen, which is in total darkness, to look for a fork. Although she thinks of the fear that the dark provokes in her ("Surely she didn't mean the long fork that hung on the wall behind the kitchen stove - a scary million miles away" (165)), this fear is not verbally and externally expressed, as she cannot make it explicit in her context and must, then, face it. After the experience of fear, which elicits a visible physiological response in her (i.e., shaking - physical agitation), she is mocked by her uncle for being scared - even though she is a child, and it is a common fear, it is socially thought of as weak and childish. However, she states that, even though it is not socially acceptable to be expressed, everyone -including adults- are ultimately a bit scared of stepping into the dark.

> Momma put her hand on my arm and said, «You shaking, Sister. What's the matter? » My skin still rippled from the experience of fear. Uncle Willie laughed and said, Maybe she was scared to go in the kitchen. His high little laugh didn't fool me. Everyone was uneasy at being beckoned into the unknown. (166)

Certain real causes have the ability to provoke fear in children despite not being understood by them, as it is the case of death ("At eleven years old, death is more unreal than frightening" (160)), racial issues, and sexual assault. The scene where Maya is sexually abused by Mr. Freeman at the age of eight is a scene of confusion, paralysis and silence. Mr. Freeman repeatedly relates fear with pain ("Now, I didn't hurt you. Don't get scared" (73)), as if the hurt he is causing to a child was only physical, and not psychological too. Meanwhile, Maya, who is unaware of what is really happening, feels startled and extremely confused by the situation ("Whatever it was, I hadn't encountered the sensation in all the years of sleeping with Momma. It didn't move, and I was too startled to" (72)). Her young mind attempts to comprehend the situation in her own

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terms, scared that Mr. Freeman might die, which would leave her forever trapped in his arms.

> Then he dragged me on top of his chest with his left arm, and his right hand was moving so fast and his heart was beating so hard that I was afraid that he would die. Ghost stories revealed how people who died wouldn't let go of whatever they were holding. I wondered if Mr. Freeman died holding me how I would ever get free. Would they have to break his arms to get me loose?
> Finally he was quiet, and then came the nice part. He held me so softly that I wished he wouldn't ever let me go. I felt at home. (73)

After this confusing scene for Maya, she is threatened by Mr. Freeman to keep quiet ("If you ever tell anybody what we did, I'll have to kill Bailey" (74)). She is confounded about what must or must not be told (as she had also peed on the bed out of fear) and afraid of the consequences of her voice, decides to fight the confusion and fear with silence ("Having lived in Southern strictness, I knew when to keep quiet around adults" (73)). This abuse is repeated on many occasions and worsens for Maya, until it is discovered by her family, and Mr. Freeman is legally accused of rape, sentenced and later murdered by Maya's uncles. Influenced by this atrocious situation at such a young age, as well as the passive emotional reactions by her environment, she learns to keep quiet in front of fear while growing up, which will also be discussed further on. The shrinking and paralysis of the child's body in the face of fear, occurring consistently throughout the memoir, aligns with Ahmed's argument that fear "works to restrict some bodies through the movement or expansion of others" (69) -in this case, it is Mr. Freeman's body which controls the situation and restricts the emotions of young Maya.

When it comes to fears which were not accepted in 1960s Black Southern society, individuals in the memoir tend to express shame or do not express the fear once they feel it. In this case, the causes of fear which are not well-regarded to be expressed include: not being accepted by her mother (as this should be implicit in their mother-children relationship), people from other ethnicities (i.e., Mexicans, Japanese), homosexuality and motherhood. The constant struggle and the sociocultural pressure make these two last causes especially conflictive for Maya throughout her childhood. Getting pregnant at the end of this memoir "proves" to her that she is not a lesbian, thus avoiding the implicit social rejection and discrimination that a queer sexuality carried in this context, though guilt and self-hatred are also involved in this confession:

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> The little pleasure I was able to take from the fact that if I could have a baby I obviously wasn't a lesbian was crowded into my mind's tiniest corner by the massive pushing in of fear, guilt, and self-revulsion. (285)

On the other hand, motherhood is expected to be natural in women, regardless of their age - Maya is only sixteen when she gets pregnant. In fact, Maya finds herself being regarded as a woman for the first time by her mother, once she finds out she is pregnant. But once the baby is born and motherhood becomes real, Maya's acquired emotional suppression emerges as confusion and fear over what motherhood really is: "Just as gratefulness was confused in my mind with love, so possession became mixed up with motherhood. […] Totally my possession, and I was afraid to touch him" (289). As her own mother shows her, she is aware that she cannot show her fear, but face it and become a mother, perhaps leaving her childhood behind, or attempting to transition into adulthood with her mother's help.

> I begged in vain. I was sure to roll over and crush out his life or break those fragile bones. She wouldn't hear of it, and within minutes the pretty golden baby was lying on his back in the center of my bed, laughing at me. (289)

Finally, the case of fear of white people and "the white things" is particularly significant to understand fear in this context. In this memoir, Angelou acknowledges on several occasions that there is an extended, cultural fear in Black Southern society of white people:

> In Stamps the segregation was so complete that most Black children didn't really absolutely know what whites looked like. Other than that they were different, to be dreaded, and in that dread was included the hostility of the powerless against the powerful, the poor against the rich, the worker against the worked for and the ragged against the well dressed.
> I remember never believing that whites were really real. (25)

Fear of "the white things" seems to be embroidered in 1960s Black identity, since the segregation in the South and the lynchings towards Black people inevitably forged an "us vs them" identity in close association to power dynamics and violence, as can be observed in the previous passage. Both children and adults in this memoir are visibly scared of white people, regardless of their knowledge of them, and attempt to maintain a cold, impassible stance to face with dignity their violence and discrimination. For young Maya, this fear is confusing because it has been taught to her by her community and history ("The Black ex-farmers had not left their distrust and fear of whites which history had

taught them in distressful lessons" (213)), as well as from observing and admiring them and their possessions, in opposition to the poorer Black neighbourhood,

> A light shade had been pulled down between the Black community and all things white, but one could see through it enough to develop a fear-admiration-contempt for the white "things"—white folks' cars and white glistening houses and their children and their women. (49)

but it takes her some time to understand while growing up the reason behind this cultural fear ("Uncle Willie muttered, They don't really hate us. They don't know us. How can they hate us? They mostly scared" (197)). In this case, fear goes beyond individuality. Although it is self-perceived by each of them individually and subjectively, it is embedded in 1960s Black Southern identity, taught, shared and normalised, to ensure survival and avoid harm.

Furthermore, socio-cultural norms influence emotional expression. For instance, these norms constrain who can express emotions, which emotions can be expressed, how they can be expressed and how intense the expressions can be. In this memoir, it seems that individuals are pretty much restricted by society in their expression of fear, both children and adults, and avoid externally expressing their emotional state. Educated by Momma and her environment, particularly considering Bailey's influence on her, Maya learns this practice quickly and most of her fears turn into paralysis, an acquired inability to move, react, flee or speak. The fear is hidden in order to avoid greater damage or consequences, like physical hurt or social rejection. There is barely any passage in the memoir where a character (including adults) expresses fear externally, as it is mostly considered a sign of weakness and socially not well-regarded. One of the best examples of this emotional containment comes from eight-year-old Bailey in the following passage, in which he feels extreme fear, but does not express it externally. It is reflected -and perceived by Maya- in the tightness of his body:

> But Bailey was quiet for the first time since we left Stamps. I guess he was thinking too about seeing Mother. How could an eight-year-old contain that much fear? He swallows and holds it behind his tonsils, he tightens his feet and closes the fear between his toes, he contracts his buttock and pushes it up behind the prostate gland. (58)

Bailey himself is also a good example of what is expected of (young) men in 1960s Black Southern society when it comes to emotion. If a patriarchal society already impedes young women from externalising their emotions and reacting to them, these constraints are at

times tighter when it comes to masculine figures, since men are expected to "man up", be strong and face their fears. Bailey endures very similar life experiences to Maya, and sometimes even displays similar emotional responses. Nonetheless, as he grows older, it can be observed through Maya's perception how he grows more emotionally restrained ("Bailey cried at the side of my bed until I started to cry too. Almost fifteen years passed before I saw my brother cry again" (83)). One of the most significant instances of this circumstance is the scene where he is punished by Uncle Willie for coming home late. About to get a whipping, Bailey does not display fear or any emotion, and his age (he is approximately eleven years old at this point) is used as justification for the violent punishment. He is old enough to come home late, hence he is old enough to keep his fear inside and not show it in society. Meanwhile, Maya is also warned and reprimanded for displaying her fear for his brother's well-being.

> Uncle Willie said, "Getting too big for your britches, huh? You can't come home. You want to worry your grandmother to death?" Bailey was so far away he was beyond fear. Uncle Willie had a leather belt in his good hand but Bailey didn't notice or didn't care. "I'm going to whip you this time". […]
> I screamed and grabbed for the belt, but Momma caught me. "Now, don't get uppity, miss, 'less you want some of the same thing. He got a lesson coming to him. You come on and get your bath". (116)

Throughout these passages, a paradox is made evident which permeates the memoir: that of the consistent presence of fear and the individuals' inability for its articulation. Fear shapes Maya's experience of childhood but it is consistently silenced by the norms of her environment. It is ubiquitous, yet its expression is pathologized, infantilized, or gendered as weakness. It becomes relevant to relate this contradiction with Du Bois's concept of "double-consciousness", "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (38) through which the Black girl experiences (and learns) the internal conflict to constantly view herself through the lens of a dominant white society. Maya, like many around her, is doubly aware: she feels her fear intimately and physically, yet must also monitor how that fear will be interpreted, policed, or dismissed by others. This generational trauma is also visible in similar works by Black women, such as Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, where young girls feel completely constrained and devalued by the internalized societal norms. The result is an emotional bifurcation—an inward collapse into silence, paralysis, or nightmares—because to express fear openly is to risk further harm, ridicule, or social rejection by her own community too. In this way, fear operates as

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both a personal emotion and a social mechanism of control, internalized in the body and passed through cultural scripts.

b. FEAR coded themes

Finally, some FEAR coded themes could be observed which define as well the subjective socio-cultural experience of fear. To start with, there is the locus of control, which covers the degree to which one believes to have control over the circumstances that affect their life. An external locus of control (in opposition to internal locus of control) characterizes the individuals in this memoir's society, for they blame outside forces for their circumstances, like Fate, God or other people ("Excitement, apprehension, release and anger had drained me of mobility. I waited for Fate, the string puller, to dictate my movements" (248)). When it comes to fearful situations, these individuals feel powerless, defenceless, or hopeless, together with an idea of unpredictability or lack of clarity for what is unknown. Particularly in the case of children, which later extends into adulthood, Maya and Bailey seem to be more prone to experience learned helplessness and, as analysed, acquired paralysis. This is also aggravated by the constant feeling of loss of self-control, which is repeatedly mentioned in the instances of FEAR, in which individuals continually feel that they cannot (nearly) control their reactions and emotions -fighting society's urge to keep their emotions contained and hidden- ("I dreaded laughing in church. If I lost control, two things were certain to happen. I would surely pee, and just as surely get a whipping" (43)).

Next, many of the instances of fear, including high intensity fear, arise from situations in which there is a real threat of harm or physical danger-either for Maya or her surroundings- such as the whipping, the sexual abuse scenes, the danger of bombing in San Francisco or the panic Maya experiences when left alone in Mexico. In some of these situations, absence of physical pain directly means absence of fear: "Again, strangely enough, fear was absent from my sensations. I wondered in this order: was I hurt, was anyone else hurt, would I go to jail, what were the Mexicans saying, and finally, had Dad awakened?" (240).

Then, the theme of phobias comprises an extreme, overwhelming, uncontrollable fear of a specific object, situation, event, animal or person, which is not rational or reasonable. Phobias are generally caused by situations or objects that pose little or no danger but generate real high intensity fear. Considering previous definitions, phobias might be considered anxiety disorders or pathological fear, for they impede the individual to function normally. It is not considered in this case that Maya or any other individual in the

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memoir suffers any phobia, for their fears, as has been noted, respond to natural or socio-culturally normative causes -both real and imaginary fears-.

To conclude this section of socio-cultural norms and patterns affecting the representation of fear in Maya Angelou's writing, it is evidenced that: a) not many fears considered natural to children are verbalized in the context, except for fear of the dark; b) externalizing fear is generally socially deemed childish and a sign of weakness; c) individuals in the memoir feel often defenceless or powerless over their fears, as well as restricted by society to express these fears. Besides not being understood on occasion by young Maya, certain real causes provoke intense fear in her and greatly influence her psychological development, such as death, racial discrimination and sexual assault.

5. A CULTURAL MODEL OF FEAR

To close the analytical section of this paper, a cultural model of fear as experienced by a Black girl in 1950 USA is constructed. Cultural models are "cognitive representations of our coherent experiences in a culture" (Kovecses 2) and display emotion as mini-narratives. This prototypical emotional script (similar to Wierzbicka's semantic theory) generally start with a cause for the emotion and result in a certain action (or non-action, as we have observed in some instances). These models act as reference points or prototypes, via which people can recognize diversity from the cultural norm. But cultural models are idealized representations of reality, rather than actual, particular instances (also referred as "idealized cognitive models" by Lakoff).

When it comes to this memoir and its socio-cultural context, the cultural model of FEAR could be described as follows (adapted from Kovecses). It should be noted that the flight stage has been removed from Kovecses's folk model of fear, since no individual in this memoir manages to flee from the fear and its stimuli.

Stage 1: Danger or threat

There is a dangerous situation.

The situation is most frequently real and triggered by white people, violence, authority or social rejection.

Imaginary and hypothetical situations are minimized as provoking fear.

The situation involves physical or psychological pain for me or others. I am aware of the danger or consequences.

The danger produces fear in me.

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Stage 2: Fear exists

I am passive in relation to the experience of fear.

Fear exists as a natural force or enemy towards which I am powerless. Fear exists as a (liquid) entity inside me. I leave my body from the experience of fear.

I experience certain physiological effects: physical tightness, physical agitation, sweating, skin shrinking, dryness in the mouth, and drop in body temperature.

I exhibit certain behavioural reactions: inability to move, speak or breath, ways of looking, crying, and facial expressions.

The feeling is unpleasant.

The feeling dominates my behaviour.

Stage 3: Attempt at control

I attempt to control my fear: I make an effort not to display fear and/or not to flee.

Stage 4: Loss of control / Recovery

I lose control over high-intensity fear.

The feeling is constrained until it ceases to exist.

I am calmed by someone else until fear ceases to exist.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Fear is shown to play a significant and paradoxical role in the development of a girl and her understanding of society. In this context, young Black female identity seems to be embroidered in pain, survival and fear, yet generally kept inside or shared on occasion with fellow women, such as Maya's grandmother. For Angelou as an adult, her autobiography may be said to contribute to the interpersonal aspect of fear, that is, it is emotion sharing: communicating the circumstances, thoughts, and feelings surrounding an emotional event.

As regards socio-cultural aspects, it was shown that Maya does not display at her young age many fears natural to children (imaginary fears, such as monsters) -only fear of the dark-, but she acknowledges that she has had a turbulent life that affects her experience and expression of fear, for instance, in the creation of nightmares. This is reinforced by the social perception of fear as a sign of weakness or as a shameful emotion, which prevents individuals from properly reacting to fearful situations (e.g., not fleeing from Mr. Freeman sexual abuse) and forces them to hide the fear from society, thus, not fully understanding many confusing situations and tending towards verbal and physical paralysis.

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Furthermore, young Maya feels regularly ashamed, for instance, of fearing homosexuality, because she knows the socio-cultural discrimination she would suffer, and motherhood, which is expected to come natural to women, even at a young age. As a girl, she is seen as a victim of her environment, which teaches her to feel on many occasions helpless and powerless towards her context and life experiences, unable to express herself and take action. In her case, fear does not fulfil a defensive function. Besides, fear of white people is consistent throughout the memoir for most Black individuals in 1960s society, in close relation to violence and power dynamics, forging an "us vs them" identity in the children of the text, who learn to accept the harm and cope with fear.

Regarding previous proposed cultural models of FEAR, it is noteworthy that the last stage of the prototypical scenario does not apply in this case, since none of the individuals in the memoir are shown to flee from fear and its stimuli. Another stage is here added, *Recovery*, which displays the coping and constraint of the emotion until it disappears and the scenario ends.

To conclude, this analysis contributes to our understanding of life narration of childhood and the experience of fear with a focus on the understudied area of Black girlhood. A focus on marginal life experiences and different perceptions of emotion may help us develop our understanding of the human experience as a whole, and not only consider a few normative experiences on which academic discourse has historically focused on. Still today, young Black girls and women seem to be expected to fear their surroundings, negatively encouraged by a racialized gender bias that tells them to fear the world and fear itself. Hence, academic study on their life experiences, which must be acknowledged in future cultural models, folk and prototypical scenarios, may get us closer to attain a world of equality in which girls can grow up to be just children.

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