

## Voices of History: Slavery, Freedom, and Identity in American Poetry

Asma Belazouz<sup>1\*</sup>, Haneen Naimi<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Algiers 2 (Algeria), E-mail address: [asma.belazouz@univ-alger2.dz](mailto:asma.belazouz@univ-alger2.dz)

<sup>2</sup> University of Algiers 2 (Algeria), E-mail address: [naimihano0@gmail.com](mailto:naimihano0@gmail.com)

Submission date : 01/08/2024    Acceptance date: 17/04/2025    Published date : 30/04/2025

### Abstract:

This research traces the evolution of African American identity from slavery to freedom in American poetry. It explores images of displacement, slavery, and racism to portray the extent to which African American identity evolved throughout six main periods. It employs the concept of poetry as a witness in the reading of selected poems that served as a powerful vehicle for expressing Black Americans' journey towards equality and social justice. The paper shows that aesthetic and historical dimensions cross thematically to convey the continuous debate on slavery and the ongoing social struggle to achieve gender and racial equality. Poetry stands as a witness to the challenges and transformations that occurred in the struggle to realize a dream of passing, current, and coming generations. The paper concludes that through poetry individual narratives and personal perspectives are an archive witnessing a generationally endured past and a collectively celebrated heritage.

**Keywords:** African American identity, Freedom, Poetry of the Witness, Racism, Slave Poetry.

---

\* Asma Belazouz.

## 1- Introduction

Slavery, or forced labour on African Americans in the United States of America, left a profound mark on the nation's history, culture, and social life. From the early 17<sup>th</sup> century to its abolition in 1865, slavery shaped the identity of millions who endured dehumanization to achieve equality. African American poetry emerged as a form of expression against hardships powerfully denouncing the brutal oppression that the black community endured. Individuals, their families, and their descendants, who were enslaved for generations, used poetry to convey the meaning of resilience in the face of pain. Poets such as Phillis Wheatley, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Julia Ward Howe, Langston Hughes, Maya Angelou, Terrance Hayes, Amanda Gorman and others documented in verses their experience to assert their humanity, fight for emancipation, and address the ongoing struggles for equality and social justice.

Poetry became the genre through which not only the horrors of slavery were exposed but also a genre through which today's poets express an ongoing struggle for freedom. This research looks at this poetry as a testament of an affirmation of justice in the face of a profound injustice. The genre served African Americans during the slavery era and beyond when every white man's goal was to own a slave as dictated by Southern ideology, which enabled slave holders to gain absolute physical and psychological power over enslaved Africans (Mitchell, 2008, p79-80). Due to constant fear and beating, the enslaved became passive and accepting, but those with a rebellious personality inspired the pursuit of freedom.

The first arrival of enslaved Africans occurred early in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and expanded rapidly the following centuries throughout all the colonies, especially in the South. Slavery was then codified, with the Virginia Slave Codes of 1705, making it hereditary and lifelong. Throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and with the revolutionary developments in the cotton industry, demand for slave labour increased making the United States the largest slave-holding country. Abolitionists, including figures like Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and William Lloyd Garrison, played a significant role in raising voices in support for the abolition of slavery. The abolition of this racial institution divided the North and the South and led to a bloody civil war that lasted from 1861 to 1865. It was not until December 1865 that slavery was abolished throughout the United States after President Abraham Lincoln ratified the Thirteenth Amendment.

In an attempt to understand the aesthetic and literary significance of the narratives of the freedom-seeking African American poets, research has been conducted investigating the experimental ways with which poets sought emancipation. In "Self-emancipation and slavery: an examination of the African American's quest for literacy and freedom" (2008), A. B. Mitchell outlines how literacy is a form of self-emancipation for African Americans. He identifies the great role literature played to maintain the struggle for literacy, highlighting the role of education as both a tool and a symbol of freedom. In *Word by word: Emancipation and the Act of Writing* (2012), author Christopher Hager rewrites the history of emancipation through a reading of forgotten slave writings such as letters and diaries. Like Mitchell, Hager identifies the role of learning to read and write and then the struggle of inexperienced writers to experiment with narrative forms. He reveals a relationship between words and freedom, rethinking thus the liberating power writing had on enslaved individuals. Similarly, Anthony Reed demonstrates in *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing* (2014) how black experimental writing is a form of cultural resistance. He investigates the interplay between poetics and politics introducing visions of how poetry liberated the future of slavery.

The above-mentioned works show much about the role of writing in general, and poetry in particular, in expressing the struggle of slavery and the pursuit of freedom.

Together, they provide a multifaceted understanding of the ways African Americans used literacy and literary forms as tools for emancipation and resistance. Additionally, the studies argue that literacy and artistic expression were not only practical means of resistance but also potent symbols of liberation, reshaping the cultural and political landscapes of African American life.

Other scholarly writings also delve into dual identity of a racist society (Gravelly, 1982), the role of imagination in envisioning freedom (Kelley, 2002), and American political discourse and ideologies in the context of slavery and freedom narratives (Furstenberg, 2003). Collectively, these works offer a comprehensive understanding of African American struggle with slavery, the pursuit of freedom, and the vehicles they used as a form of resistance. From personal and limited perspective narratives to complex and multidimensional ones, slavery literature connects all Africans to a social and cultural movement that continues to shape modern art.

Although some light has been shed on poetry as a genre central to African resistance, a genealogical study of its evolution in relation to historical context proves challenging but necessary. This research traces the evolution of (African) American poetry from slavery to freedom. By employing Carolyn Forché's concept *poetry of the witness*, this paper suggests that the aesthetic and historical scopes of the selected poems uncover an ongoing dialogue on slavery, racial injustices, and the enduring struggle for equality. This research, hence, attempts to answer the question: how has American poetry, through its aesthetic and historical dimensions, served as a transformative medium for expressing the African American journey from slavery to freedom, advocating for social justice across significant historical periods?

One of the objectives of this research is to contribute to a deeper understanding of African American literary heritage by tracing the genealogy of themes related to slavery and freedom situates poets and poetry within a narrative landscape of individually endured but collectively felt struggles. The impact of these personal accounts reveals how poetry asserts American identity. The genealogical approach allows to understand the discontinuities of separate historical periods and how together they created an interconnected form of expression with similar themes regardless of the time or period in which they were written. Therefore, examining the evolution of this form shows the continuities of themes and their interconnectedness.

In the context of this historically contextualized literary analysis, this paper draws on historical and aesthetic theories to analyse the selected poems within their respective contexts. First, poetry, for one way of expressing ideas, is not isolated in history but shaped by its political, economic, and social forces. In "Towards a Poetics of Culture", Stephen Greenblatt argues that texts both reflect and influence the cultural and historical contexts in which they are produced (Greenblatt, 1989). He asserts that "the work of art is the product of a negotiation between a creator or class of creators, equipped with a complex, communally shared repertoire of conventions, and the institutions and practices of society" (Greenblatt, 1989, p12). That is, literature as a form of art in general, and poetry in particular, can act as both a product and an agent of cultural and historical change.

Accordingly, the process that reflects on how poetry portrays and shapes socio-historical realities allows for a better understanding of art. In Greenblatt's words: "the process involves not simply appropriation but exchange, since the existence of art always implies a return, a return normally measured in pleasure and interest" (Greenblatt, 1989, p12). While return might imply reward or recognition for the poet's work, it could also be understood as an exchange not only between the poem and its context but also between the poem and its audience. This reinforces the dynamic interaction between poets and readers of all times and generations. That is, historically, culturally, and artistically, one's "existence is involved with another" (Forché, 2011, p174). In "Reading the Living Archives: The Witness of Literary

Art”, Carolyn Forché states that “the past has a way of coming back, and producing what will happen in the future” (Forché, 2011, p173) confirming the interactive and reciprocal nature of poetry. Poems speak of realities that continue to happen. They bear witness to many atrocities and painful memories and must be read as such.

Poems become voices of unclaimed experiences to readers today. Forché calls this act of reading poetry that transcends “protest poetry” or “poetry of resistance” (Forché, 2011, p173) *poetry of the witness*. She explains that poems are written not after experiences but in their *aftermath*. She locates this aftermath in a historical landscape “where that-which-happened remains present” (Forché, 2011, p161) calling upon the reader to witness what occurred as evidence rather than mere representations (Forché, 2011, p163) so “the text we read becomes a living archive” (Forché, 2011, p168). In a sense, reading poetry of slavery uncovers testimonies archived as poems. They voice a language that passed through sufferings of generations of African Americans who found through poetry a way of expressing their wounds. Forché indicates how to locate these wounds stating that a language that continues to bear them shows that “in line breaks, in constellation of imagery, in ruptures of utterances, in silences and in fissures of written speech” (Forché, 2011, p161). This informs the aesthetic reading of the selected poems to illustrate the suffering of poets in relation to their social, historical, economic, and political contexts. Poetry read as a witness with consideration to historicist perspectives confronts realities provoking further discussions about slavery, freedom, and racial justice.

The paper first studies three poems from the colonial period to the Civil War and then the Reconstruction era. Divided accordingly to three sections, each analyses the selected poem in relation to its historical context. Phillis Wheatley’s poem “On Being Brought from Africa to America” (1773) stands as a powerful voice of how Africans were displaced from their own homeland into accepting imposed labour, a new identity, and an unknown religion. Watkins Harper’s poem “The Freedom Bell” (1871) emphasizes how the road towards freedom was full of atrocities and dehumanizing acts. Although freedom of all slaves was gained, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s “The Tide Rises, the Tide Falls” (1880) explains through a white poet’s perspective the resistance of Southerners and the reluctance of Northerners in fully granting newly freed African Americans equality, justice, and a unified status with all Americans. He continues to suggest that the ideology of slavery is inherent to the American society. All three poets recognize the separatist doctrine of white Americans and attempt to poetically subvert it contrasting it to ethical and religious beliefs.

The paper then investigates the search for African heritage, the exploration of African American identity, the rebellion against prejudicial violence, and the rising of Black voices in four poems. While Langston Hughes’ poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” (1921) captures African American heritage at the age of a cultural segregation, Maya Angelou’s “Still I Rise” (1978) focuses on the challenges of a double discrimination, that of gender and race, which women endured during the Civil Rights Movement. The latter draws images of confident women and womanhood raising a voice not only for them but also for all men and manhood. Finally, Terrance Hayes’ “American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin [I lock you in an American sonnet that is part prison]” (2018) looks into the atrocities of violence inflicted upon African Americans raising the question to whether this racist doctrine will even come to an end. But because an answer to such a question seems impossible to predict, the paper concludes by recontextualizing the poetic landscape reading one of the most impactful poems of the last few years. Amanda Gorman’s “The Hill We Climb” (2021) is read as a response to the tradition of slavery poetry and past cultural heritage. It carries a message of hope and draws a path towards unity of all Americans.

## 2- Colonial America and Slavery: Displacing Africans to the New World

Economic necessity in the New World justified the enslavement of African individuals captured in and brought from Africa to be sold in European and American markets. Puritans found no harm or wrong in purchasing slaves. In fact, “the Anglicans of the plantation colonies accepted slavery, and among the Puritans justification for it was found in the doctrine of election, in which there was no implication of the equality of all men” (Tyler, 1962, p463). This led to Americans legalizing slavery in 1641 in Massachusetts first and all the other colonies later. With the recognition of Africans as a property, American slave owners could even pass on slaves to their lineages while newly born Africans inherited the status of their mother ensuring the inherent status of slavery. But in a land that was inhabited for freedom, legitimizing any form of unrightful enslavement in it calls for resistance. Poetry became the place where self-conscious individuals expressed and nurtured the need for liberty and equality.

Named after the ship that carried her to America (Phillis) and after the family that bought her as a slave to their household in 1761 (Wheatley), Phillis Wheatley (approximately 1753 - 1784) is a name remembered today as that of the first African American poet to be published (Perkins and Perkins, 1994). Her 1773 collection, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, included the poem “On Being Brought from Africa to America” which is a testimony of the complex feelings she endured relevant to her enslavement and faith. Although her work gained her significant recognition, she lived in and died of poverty at the age of 31 leaving behind a poetry that voices her struggle. Her legacy remains alive long after her death. She is recognised as one of the most discussed yet the least understood poets (Gates, 1988, pxi). Her poetry is fresh, well ordered, and clear. With an elegant and precise diction, rich imagery, and varied symbolism, Wheatley, asserts her literary knowledge and acknowledgement of a long-lasting poetic tradition. When read as poetry of the witness, Wheatley’s poems stand as a powerful testament to the genesis of slavery and a mimesis of justice.

“On Being Brought from Africa to America” is charged with cultural, social, and historical properties. As a work of art occurring within historical events, this poem’s symbolization (Greenblatt, 1989) and constellation of imagery (Forché, 2011) reveal four poignant aspects about slavery and faith. Through a four heroic couplet structure consisting of two rhyming lines each, AA BB CC DD, the poem respectively addresses in each, displacement, religion, racial prejudice, and injustice. Each couplet offers a distinct yet interconnected reflection on the primary issues related to African slavery in America during the colonial period. Through her words, Wheatley critiques the injustices of her time asserting the undisputable right for a spiritual and moral equality between Africans and Americans. Her concise and powerful style delivers an aesthetic discourse that brings the whole institution of slavery into question. In fact, she questions American Christian faith and liberal ideology all in four couplets.

The first couplet, “’Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land, Taught my benighted soul to understand,” (Wheatley, 1988, p18) describes the poet’s own forced removal from her land in Africa towards a continent unknown to her, America. As the title suggests, Wheatley was “brought” rather than willingly relocated to this new world to where many chose to travel and start a new life. She then restates in her first verse that she was brought confirming displacement. She further stresses the dual experience of being displaced and her religious conversion using the words such as “mercy,” “Pagan land,” “soul,” and “benighted.” She ironically portrays the initiation of slavery as merciful to suggest it had been a benevolent act from the white enslavers. By describing her land as “Pagan,” Wheatley depicts how her captors viewed Africa as uncivilized, non-Christian, and unenlightened subverting their merciful act. Not only was she displaced into a new land, but her

displacement also extended to her own status, identity, language, and religion. She finds herself forced into the unknown that she ironically had been rescued from.

Although Wheatley is grateful and acknowledges her new belief, she remains distrustful about the white men's perception of dark-skinned human beings. In the second couplet, "That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too: / Once I redemption neither sought nor knew," (Wheatley, 1988, p18) she testifies to her transformation and spiritual awakening. She neither sought that nor knew of its possibility, yet here she is accepting a new faith and religious identity. In juxtaposition, Wheatley follows this couplet with another that stands as a witness of the white man's unacceptance of what was unknown to them, another race. "Some view our sable race with scornful eye, / 'Their colour is a diabolic die'," (Wheatley, 1988, p18) reflects on the association of darker skin colours to evil. These verses symbolize the racial prejudice and unacceptance of the other. Africans were dehumanized and subjugated in a society that was fighting for its own freedom while also spreading faith and conserving individuality. In fact, Africans are not only dehumanized but rendered diabolic. With religious and moral implications, Americans see Africans morally and religiously inferior. Wheatley strongly voices this inherent racism in American beliefs pointing to the flawed logic in both their faith in redemption and ideology of freedom.

Wheatley ends her poem with a reminder to recognize all Christians equal despite their differences in appearance: "Remember, Christians, Negros, black as Cain, / May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train" (Wheatley, 1988, p18). The constellation of religious imagery in this couplet bears witness to the inherent racial injustices. She highlights white prejudice and stereotype by ironically comparing black colour to "Cain," a biblical figure whose sin might be thought of as the darkest of all. In doing so, the poet identifies the extent to which slaves are perceived as sinners by enslavers and tries to subvert the image by joining the "angelic train." But given the historical, economic, and religious contexts, with the institution of slavery justified by the inherent belief of the inferiority of African peoples, this poem alone could unlikely provoke any significant shift in perspectives. However, the power and impact of Wheatley's poems could be recognized over time as part of a larger body of abolitionist literature.

### **3- The American Civil War: The Road to Freedom**

One of the reasons leading to the clash between the American South and North was slavery. Abolitionism, described as a conflict between slavery and freedom, marked the era, its politics, and its art. In fact, "abolitionists faced a daunting challenge. Deeply entrenched interests and values, as well as American federalism, stood in the way of national action against slavery. Overcoming these obstacles would require a fundamental social and political transformation" (Rothman, 2011, p79). The South institutionalised slavery to meet economic, cultural, and social needs. In contrast, the North viewed slavery as an abomination to its liberal ideologies, so it had to be ended. The separation was geographical as well as moral culminating in the Civil War from 1861 to 1865. Consequently, "the war left behind a bottomless archive of public records, private reflections, art, and literature" (Rothman, 2011, p81). Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825-1911) was one of the African American poets who archived her experience aesthetically. Her poems vividly capture what enslaved individuals endured for the fight for emancipation.

Watkins Harper pledged herself to the anti-slavery cause assuming an active abolitionist role that stimulated her literary productivity (Foster, 1993, p10). She was a prominent member of the African American intelligentsia and a successful writer leaving a legacy of fiction, nonfiction, essays, and poems. Her poetry was a vehicle for strong political, moral and humanitarian messages. She addressed the horrors of slavery accounting for the many deaths and terrors enslaved individuals endured calling for abolition and emancipation

(Foster, 1993). Like Wheatley, Watkins Harper believed in the interconnectedness of social justice and equality with faith and morality. Her traditional verses remain a voice articulating testaments of all that was endured before and during the Civil War. This voice resonates till today with verses such as “there is hope . . .,” “There is light beyond the darkness,” “bury me not in a land of slaves,” and “’T is well that, to his latest breath, He plead for liberty.” Watkins Harper’s moral convictions of equality in the frame of a Christian faith and an American ideology appear in her poetry that calls for justice and humanity.

Watkins Harper’s poem “The Freedom Bell” written during the Civil War period highlights key historical events in the struggle for freedom. With a religious tone, it captures a sense of divine justice echoing Wheatley’s closing couplet in “On Being Brought from Africa to America.” The ringing of the bell of freedom is also a reminder of the Christian recognition of equality and justice that American enslavers seem to overlook. The pattern of the poem reinforces the call for freedom with repeated lines such as “ring the freedom bell” and rhythmic regularity reflecting the ringing of the bell itself: “Ring, aye, ring the freedom bell, / Then ring, aye, ring the freedom bell” (Watkins Harper, 1993, p178). Consisting of 7 stanzas, each containing an ABAB quatrain, the poem’s musicality is achieved with an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one (da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM). Each of the seven stanzas that compose the poem stands as a witness to a universal call for freedom showcased in ruptures of utterances and silences and fissures of written speech. Ruptures and silences in speech are both introduced by Forché to show how language bears wounds of what happened in the aftermath of violence and remains present. The poem holds open the recognition of the amount of suffering enslaved individuals endured before celebrating freedom. The irrevocable utterances in rupture and silence witness the unspeakably trauma of a bloody war.

The poem shifts abruptly between the depiction of suffering and the hopeful imagery of freedom. This sudden rupture of speech that occurs between the consistent three verses portraying war and the fourth depicting peace exemplifies the breaking down of language in the face of extreme suffering. It demonstrates the inexpressibility of trauma that captures the failure of communication in front of such experience. This rupture not only indicates trauma but also the unwillingness of the Confederate American Southerners to end the war on an agreement with the North to end slavery. Antagonists challenged the very reason for this war, to define all Americans and determine equality for all. But Watkins Harper, though abruptly, shows the moment when freedom could be gained. It is amidst great pain that justice breaks all barriers.

Similarly to ruptures of utterances, implied meanings of unspoken suffering are expressed through silences and fissures of written speech. In such instances, the limitations of language make the poet employ that failure to convey aspects of trauma beyond verbal articulation. Silences and fissures mirror the disruption in recollecting memories about the war locating the poet in the aftermath of the trauma. The gap preceding every second verse in a couplet is a silence the poet takes to attempt to remember details about the narrated events:

Where waters, blush’d with human gore, Unsullied streams shall purl along;  
Where crashed the battle’s awful roar

Shall rise the Freeman’s joyful song (Watkins Harper, 1993, p178)

It also indicates a fragmented and disjointed remembering disrupting the continuity of thoughts the readers can be aware of from seeing the poem before even reading it. The gaps or silences authentically represent fissures in the speech of the poet that reflects fissures in their own testimonies. This aligns with the divisive and horrific nature of the Civil War and its implications. Though freedom was gained for the enslaved individuals, equality and justice were never attained. There is a gap between what defines freedom and how it is practiced that shows in Watkins Harper’s poetry.

#### **4- The Reconstruction Era: An Unfinished Road to Freedom**

Post Civil War Reconstruction era failed to grant African Americans real freedom. Eric Foner described this period as “America’s unfinished revolution” (Foner, 1983). It indeed unfulfilled former slaves’ dreams of freedom, justice, and equality. The Civil War led to a birth of a new slavery rather than a “new birth of freedom” as Lincoln put it. Although it offered legal, political, and social advantages to the newly freed, it was met with resistance from antagonists eventually diminishing all gained advantages. This confirms the deep-rooted racial division between Americans of different origins and skin colours. So, struggle for equality and justice continued during this era that saw a retreat of the Northern reconstructive tendency “as class conflict intensified in the centers of American industry, northern Republicans lost faith in former slaves’ ability to live up to the ideal of free labor, and so they rejected government intervention on their behalf” (Rothman, 2011, p90). Fears of disenchantment with democracy, immigration, corruption, and higher taxes led liberal reformers to withdraw their support but not their beliefs in a dream of freedom coming true.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882) allegorized this standoff in a poem entitled “The Tide Rises, the Tide Falls.” Though white American, he pleaded for “national unity in the face of the mounting crises before the Civil War” (Perkins and Perkins, 1994, p889) and after it. Like his predecessors, his works deeply reflect his religious and spiritual feelings inspiring the sentimentality and romanticism of many of his poems. He familiarized balladry, popularized the national epic, and naturalized foreign themes while maintaining an anti-slavery sentiment (Perkins and Perkins, 1994, p890). His poem “The Witness” explores themes of justice, truth, and moral responsibility of individuals to bear witness to injustice (Longfellow, 1902). He also expressed his opposition to slavery in “The Slave’s Dream” and “The Slave in the Dismal Swamp” focusing on the resilience of enslaved individuals in seeking freedom. Longfellow’s white American perspective would offer a strengthening perception on slavery to this genealogical investigation (Longfellow, 1884). His quest for a more just and humane society resonates with other poets’ aspiration for justice rendering it a universal rather than a racial plight.

“The Tide Rises, the Tide Falls” reflects on the passage of time, the cycle of life and death, and the passing nature of human existence. It allegorizes through the passing of time the passing of morality representing how reconstructionist politicians are unable to maintain a position but go back and forth in a path that neither grants total freedom nor condemns injustices. Longfellow’s lyrical style prompts introspection to question a morality that oscillates between religious righteousness and a racist American ideology. Contrarily to previous poems, the narrator is absent in “The Tide Rises, the Tide Falls” to universalize this human experience. By avoiding identifying one specific character, the traveller resonates with the insignificance of a one voice decision and rather invites to a broader impersonal one. As time passes, the traveller also passes and only leaves behind what is naturally in place. Accordingly, equality and justice for all is a human condition and a natural process that should not depend on the passing of one man or institution.

Longfellow’s “The Tide Rises, the Tide Falls” is a constellation of imagery that while it does not explicitly address historical events, it is located within an era that is allegorized and symbolized in the poem’s three stanzas. The rising and falling of the tide is an allegory of the wavering progression and recession characterizing Reconstruction. In the first stanza, the rising of the tide represents the progress in this era with the passing of the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup> amendments which abolished slavery throughout all the American land and granted citizenship to all free slaves. However, the falling of the tide, with which all three stanzas end, implies the reluctance of Northern politicians to fully commit to racial justice. For instance, “when white Unionists formed a “free state” government for Louisiana in 1864, for example, they refused to extend the suffrage to New Orleans’s wealthy and educated men of color”

(Rothman, 2011, p81) failing to ensure equality for all elevating all individuals, regardless of their skin colour, to the same position and status.

The transition from slavery to freedom is present in the stanza symbolized as the transition between darkness and light. The Reconstruction era is a “twilight” that instead of announcing a new dawn “darkens” in front of continued calls for justice. The passing towards a darker rather than lighter situation suggests uncertainty following change. But because there are moments of aspiration for a more just society in announcing a “twilight,” social activists for emancipation “hastened” towards change. The traveller represents progress and reflects urgency in achieving justice. Longfellow crafts his poem to aesthetically capture the social aspects of the Reconstruction era emphasizing on its cyclic feature. He conveys through his poetry the necessity for such cause to align with nature.

Wheatley, Watkins Harper, and Longfellow have all left a poetic legacy of slavery narratives emphasizing on identifying progression towards justice as both a natural process and a religious doctrine. However, the socially divisive ideology of white Americans disregards its own founding beliefs for cultural, political, and economic institutions benefiting from forced labour. Archived poetry bears witness not only to the experienced atrocities and aspirations in relation to this journey towards freedom, but also authenticates the willingness of both parties to attain equality and justice. White Americans failed to keep a promise African Americans dreamt of for long. The unethical and immoral decisions of stalling to grant full rights to African Americans widened the gap of racial injustice and deepened its divisive doctrine between citizens of the same free land.

## 5- Segregation and Harlem Renaissance: Reviving the African Identity

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, African American culture rose to its golden age, an epoch where African American writers devised novel ways of expressing Black identity through art, poetry, and music in a period known as the Harlem Renaissance. But while voices of freedom were singing their liberty louder in the North, the South had implemented Jim Crow Laws to enforce racial segregation in public facilities, schools, transportation, and other aspects of daily life. The “separate but equal” doctrine led to a massive migration between 1916 and 1970 from the rural south to the urban north to escape oppression and the ghost of a continued slavery. Not only did African Americans travel northward but with them travelled a discrimination over housing, employment, and education (Massy and Denton, 1993). White organized violence and crimes increased (Rothman, 2011) confirming that “the effect of segregation on black well-being is structural, not individual” (Massy and Denton, 1993, p2). This apartheid concentrated Black residence into neighbourhood called ‘ghettos’ characterized by poverty and isolation. But despite the social situation and its challenging implications on the livelihood of African Americans, this era witnessed an overflow of cultural expression.

Protesting hardships became associated with art. Consequently, “much of the art of the Harlem Renaissance was a response to the oppression of blacks in America. As such, it had the voice of alienation, anger, and rage” (Huggins, 1995, p11). Langston Hughes (1901 – 1967) expressed in his poetry these sentiments with a hopeful melodic tone to confirm the continued resilience of African Americans to get justice. His “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” overflows with imagery rooting Africans deep within the struggle to redeem what is naturally inherent; a freedom that flows like rivers. Similarly to Wheatley, Watkins Harper, and Longfellow, Hughes employs imagery and nature to witness historical realities of his time. His voice, one of the most celebrated, reconnects Africans with their heritage. In doing so, his poems contribute to the rise of African civilization to restore pride and foster a sense of dignity segregation tries to deprive individuals of. By showing his kins how to pride themselves culturally, Hughes responds to racial injustices and social inequalities challenging all discriminatory doctrines.

“The Negro Speaks of Rivers” uses the metaphor of the river to allude to a flowing and unbroken African presence throughout history. Rivers, contributing greatly to the rise of human civilizations, symbolize the movement of African Americans towards a better future. Resonating with Longfellow’s rising tide, the symbol of water restructures social inequality as it follows its well-determined path. The poet reminds in his poem that he is familiar with this repeating “I’ve known rivers” three times before confirming his soul has grown into one itself. With the inclusion of faith by referring to his “soul,” Langston alludes to the spiritual depth of equality. His views align with the other poets, Wheatley, Watkins Harper, and Longfellow, implying justice is no longer a matter of religious struggle but a social one. Following the Harlem Renaissance spirit, he poetically revives a culture and a heritage that celebrate an asserted Black identity.

While Hughes’ passionate style does not reflect anger or rage, a sentiment of alienation prevails in the poem. The narrator distances himself temporally and spatially visiting different locations and times. In his detachment, the traveller always finds himself bathing in the African heritage. He moves from the ancient foundational Euphrates to reach the modern African American land evoking a sense of evolution and transformation. His identity was never lost in between the transitions. Unlike Wheatley, Hughes does not feel displaced but recognizes where he “built” a hut to live “near the Congo” and where he “looked upon” the ongoing history of the Egyptian people and how they spectacularly “raised the pyramids.” In his alienation and detachment, the poet witnessed evolutions and transformations across times and places reflecting on an identity deeply rooted in humanity.

Langston Hughes’ poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” not only connects to the past to his African identity, but also foreshadows a future of timeless struggles and resilience. By referring to the rivers of Euphrates, Congo, Nile, and Mississippi, the poet suggests how unbroken his relation to the past is. He could have referenced lands, tribes, or mountains, but by choosing rivers, he establishes that continuity and forward movement. That is, the same heritage and identity will continue to run in his “blood.” Hughes also sees a future brighter than his past and present with the Mississippi’s “muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset” (Hughes, 1945, p51). He highlights in this verse the resilience of the Black people and their movement towards advocating for their civil rights, including equal opportunities in education, employment, housing, and the right to vote for Black women. His “sunset” is brighter than Longfellow’s “twilight” suggesting equality and justice would be achieved during the Civil Rights Movement than the Reconstruction era. While the latter was led by Unionists to grant slaves their freedom, African Americans such as, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Ella Baker, and Fannie Lou Hamer, took matters into their own hands to advocate for their right for emancipation. Poetry stands again as an empowering vehicle expressing resilience inspired by a past cultural heritage while advocating for a better civil future.

## **6- Civil Rights Movement: Rising with Black Women**

The ongoing struggle for equality and justice remained active even after the 1960s acts outlawing segregation and discrimination. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Fair Housing Act of 1968 outwardly improved racial situation for African Americans. But inwardly, “many urban areas displayed a pattern of intense racial isolation that could only be described as hypersegregation” (Massy and Denton, 1993, p83). Racism became a devil of the White American nation and “It would require an epic civil rights movement to begin exorcizing the nation’s original sin—racism” (Dierenfield, 2021, p8). Many of Post WWII veterans became fervent advocates of the Civil Rights Movements. Black men and Black women gathered and marched to denounce injustice. But women were as twice discriminated, fighting for racial and gender equality. Although they were crucial in organizing and leading mass movements,

they “were not typically quoted in the media or consulted by white politicians” (Glasrud and Pitre, 2013, p1). In fact, they were neglected or little recognized even by Black men. In poetry, voices rose high to condemn racial struggle that was further amplified by gender inequality.

Maya Angelou’s “Still I Rise” bears witness to personal and collective struggles. The poem serves as a testimony because it embodies the injustices faced by Black women and the resilience required to overcome them. The poet challenges the oppressor by addressing her piece to any American discriminating her for her race and gender. She “taunts a “You” who appears to be white” (Lupton, 2016, p19) confirming in contrast her strongly risen voice and the renaissance of her cultural identity. Angelou employs the word ‘rise’ ten times to repeatedly reinforce resilience as a central concern to the Civil Rights Movement and a main theme in the poem. Her repeated words create an uplifting cadence symbolizing the increased acts and marches of activists. Unlike Hughes who travels through his poetry back and forth in time, Angelou’s movement is upward. She locates African culture in her own place and time resurrecting her identity from a heritage that finds its genesis two centuries ago in Wheatley’s “On Being Brought from Africa to America” (1773).

Accordingly, “Still I Rise” challenges history to authentically rewrite African American identity and empower Black women. Ruptures of silence are present in the poem that imposes silence and writes lies about the segregated and discriminated. Angelou, first, breaks the silence and creates a space for her own voice to emancipate words. After confronting the ‘You’ about the distortion of written history and the twisted lies and questioning what is upsetting about her, she fills the spaces with her ‘I rise’ instead of allowing rupturing silences or further lies. Angelou employs ‘I rise’ to draw an authentic image about her personal identity along with that of Black women collectively. Her poetic witnessing of who these individuals are rewrites even archived testimonies. She removes the fissures of speech from Watkins Harper’s poetry initiating a healing process from the traumatic memories of the Civil War. With her ‘I rise’ punctuating these gaps, she renders poetry not only a powerful vehicle but a retrospectively transformative one.

The poem employs a constellation of imagery to symbolize resilience and rise above gender oppression. Like Wheatley, Watkins Harper, Longfellow, and Hughes, Angelou continues using natural imagery with religious connotations to describe the persistence and resilience of African Americans. In “You may trod me in the very dirt / But still, like dust, I’ll rise” (Angelou, 1978, p42), the poet subverts White American self-proclaimed superiority that derives from their Christian faith. In Genesis, God tells Adam, “For dust you are, and to dust you shall return” informing him he is born from dirt and would eventually die and return to it. God breathed life into Adam to live freely on earth. Although Adam sinned and descended from haven to earth, he lived under no oppression or discrimination. Angelou portrays how her oppressors “trod” her in dirt from which she rises. She resurrects as dust each time her truth is buried in “dirt” asserting Longfellow’s natural cycle until justice is attained for all. The repetition of the cyclic pattern reflects the strength and enduring spirit of African Americans in the face of racism, and the empowered Black women under racial and gender inequalities.

Angelou also addresses womanhood through provocative images of sexuality. She portrays confidence and independence in reclaiming her own body image. She challenges stereotypes about her womanhood rising above societal expectations oppressing her gender. She questions if her sexuality is upsetting, “Does my sexiness upset you?” to juxtapose the degrading image attributed to Black women with that of a shining diamond; “That I dance like I’ve got diamonds” (Angelou, 1978, p42). Beside rising with her sexuality to something valuable and precious, she expresses freedom and joy by associating it to dancing. Angelou defies lies about her identity and unapologetically addresses the most discomforting and

disapproved issues. She rewrites in her poetry of the African American is both reclaiming and celebrating her authenticity. Her defiance reflects acts of persistence and resistance to attain the centuries long struggle of social equality and justice.

### **7- A Racist Doctrine: Will it All End?**

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's aspiration to live in a society where "people are judged by the content of their character, not by the color of their skin" (King, 2001, p85) might never come true. The racial situation in the United States in the last two decades has been complex, to say the least, for all coloured minorities and ethnicities. Although it is characterized by significant progress, ongoing activism of groups such as, Black Lives Matter and Dream Defenders, proves the persisting struggle for equality. African prejudice over criminality and social inferiority are imbedded in the social fabric of the American society. Americans' unfulfilled dreams is met with a White supremacist ideology that threatens the lives of Black individuals. They "are the targets of racial profiling by the police, which, combined with the highly racialized criminal court system, guarantees their over representation among those arrested, prosecuted, incarcerated, and if charged for a capital crime, executed" (Bonilla-Silva, 2014, p2). So Black discrimination became a dominant racist doctrine that runs in the very veins of the United States of America.

Art has been responding to the ongoing challenges and injustices faced by African Americans addressing the issues through various forms. Poetry still reflects on the history of slavery, segregation, and the Civil Rights Movement, connecting past struggles to present-day issues and future aspirations. In "American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin," Terrance Hayes revives the sonnet form to engage with contemporary concerns of race, politics, and personal identity. By redefining the sonnet, he sets a space of dialogue with the past to interrogate racial violence and the system of justice. He comments on the past to allude to a present and foretells a future concerned over discriminatory practices. In the sonnet that begins with "I lock you in an American sonnet that is part prison" (Hayes, 2018, p19), Hayes expresses a sense of entrapment between a racial justice and a racist injustice confronting his assassin with an imagery that oscillates between violent captivity and freedom.

The poem opens with the lines that establish a sense of dangerous confinement that symbolizes contemporary realities of racial oppression. The "house set a flame" suggests lack of breathable air evoking the chokehold death of Eric Garner (2014) and George Floyd (2020), only two examples to count of many unaccounted for, at the hand of the police. African Americans are often incarcerated and subjected to police brutality driven by social racist prejudices. Hayes employs more gruesome metaphors to denounce the dehumanizing violence inflicted upon his kins. He draws the image of the stripping away of humanity in "part meat / Grinder" to further intensify the inherent racism and the brutality it is met with. Hayes' testimonies about violence articulate how the innocence of African Americans is lost annihilating along with it American ideals of equality and justice.

Hayes returns to the past in this sonnet, not looking for Hughes' rivers and soul, but for assassins who murdered the dream of an African identity and heritage. He explores Longfellow's cyclic patterns to understand racial oppression. Similarly to how Angelou expressed in her "Still I Rise," this sonnet finds hope and empowering voices of liberation. Repetition of images of entrapment juxtaposed with ideas of freedom suggest the continuity of past discrimination that reached a present of violence and would perpetuate brutality in the future. However, the juxtaposition indicates that the legacy of resilience is as powerful as it has always been. The phrase "my past and future assassin" captures the duality of racism and struggle. While it hints at the possibility of confronting these challenges, it acts as a witness of a long and rich African American history. Through poetry, Hayes senses the imminent danger

that hovers around the future and attempts to transport his concerns and hopes across time. His “work feels like a powerful culmination, even a synthesis, of many of the trends, warring traditions, and aesthetic divisions and developments, that have made post-1945 American poetry such a vital and necessary art form” (Epstein, 2023, p230). With a revived form, he envisions a transformative future where resilience and resistance can lead to “catharsis” and change. He blends tradition, the past, with contemporary themes, violence and racism, to navigate future possibilities for art and African Americans.

But is it even possible to put an end to a social racist doctrine? What is more resistant than African American’s about their own fight for justice, is the indoctrinated prejudice resisting change. Black American voices need to be heard at larger scales and on every occasion. All efforts combined, words uttered, and activism sustained might significantly shift cultural and social supremacist views towards equal right for all. On January 20, 2021, twentytwo-year-old Black Amanda Gorman stood in front of millions as one of the youngest poets in an inauguration of a president, President Joe Biden. Her “The Hill We Climb” is a message of hope and unity for a resilient community. She recognizes the “never-ending shade” (Gorman, 2021, p2) of racism and calls all Americans to ask where they can “find light” (Gorman, 2021, p2).

Gorman reflects on the past addressing achievements and shortcomings borrowing from poets what constitutes African American poetic heritage. She reassures Wheatley that what she “feared at its inception” is a just “redemption” because this new generation of the descendants of displaced Africans “found the power, / To author a new chapter.” With faith and trust, she asserts to Watkins Harper that African Americans would never let “catastrophe possibly prevail over [them].” They have their “eyes on the future, [because] / History has its own eyes on [them].” Gorman borrows Longfellow’s contemplation and internal reflection, Hughes knowledge of the past cultural heritage, Angelou’s repeated “[we] will rise”, and Hayes juxtaposition and “aflame” state. She rewrites to each one of them a message of hope and unity coming from of a future voice with a profound poetic heritage of resistance.

Gorman closes her poetic response confirming that even in flames, African Americans are no longer afraid of what is coming. She ends with a hopeful note that “there is always light” and it only takes bravery “to see it,” “to be it.” Gorman not only rewrite history, but also poetry of resistance. She redefines the ongoing journey towards equality and justice. “The Hill We Climb” stand as a collective, rather than a personal, testaments to challenge oppression and advocate for change. By infusing tradition with a recontextualization of history and the poetic voice, she bridges gaps between generations addressing the entire nation, Whites and Blacks of all colours, with a tone of unity and togetherness.

## 8- Conclusion

This paper explored the evolution of poetry’s portrayal of African American focusing on the movement from slavery to freedom and then from political segregation to social discrimination. It suggested the studied selected poems uncover a persistent discourse on slavery, racial injustices, and the enduring struggle for equality. American poetry serves indeed as a significant medium in expressing the racial related issues in the United States of America. By tracing the genealogy of themes related to slavery and freedom, it is perceived that individual narratives and personal perspectives are an archive witnessing a collectively endured past and celebrated heritage. Poems from different historical periods demonstrate the interconnectedness of this form of expression. Regardless of the time or period in which they were written, these poems show the continuity of a discussion on racial discrimination and social injustices.

Pre-modern era poetry adopted an abolitionist tone reminding both enslaved and enslavers about the religious right to freedom. This theme reoccurred throughout the different periods till reaching contemporary voices. Read as poetry of the witness, unarticulated

concerns were also symbolized through constellations of imagery. Poets contemplated on nature, another theme central to poetry of slavery and racism. The cyclic pattern of balancing justice and injustice is juxtaposed in many poems to confirm the undeniable right for equality. By focusing on African heritage, the identity of the Black individual is set to denounce any superiority of race over another. Modern era focused on confirming and asserting Black identity to relocate it in a country divided by an apartheid system, a prejudicial society, and a racist doctrine. But resilience to overturn segregation and gender discrimination raised African American poetic voices higher with a Harlem Renaissance celebrating a profound cultural identity. Therefore, poets today are responding to this heritage with an unwavering resilience and uniting voices that continue to counter racist doctrines.

## Bibliography

- Angelou, M. (1978). *And Still I Rise*. New York: Random House.
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (2014). *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Brinkley, A. (2012). *American History: Connecting with the Past*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Christian, S. (2016). *The Harlem Renaissance and the Idea of a New Negro Reader*. Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Collier-Thomas, B., & Franklin, V. (2001). *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights–Black Power Movement*. New York: New York University Press .
- Dierenfield, B. (2021). *The Civil Rights Movement The Black Freedom Struggle in America*. New York: Routledge.
- Epstein, A. (2023). *The Cambridge Introduction to American Poetry since 1945*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Foner, E. (1983). *Nothing but Freedom: Emancipation and Its Legacy*. Louisiana: Louisiana State University.
- Forché, C. (2011). Reading the Living Archives: The Witness of Literary Art. *Poetry Foundation*, 198(2), 159-174.
- Foster, F. S. (1993). Introduction. In F. Watkins Harper , *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader* (pp. 3-40). New York: The Feminist Press.
- Furstenberg, F. (2003). Beyond Freedom and Slavery: Autonomy, Virtue, and Resistance in Early American Political Discourse. *Journal of American History*, 89(4), 1295–1330.
- Gates, H. L. (1988). Foreword: In Her Own Write. In J. C. Shields, *The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley* (pp. vii-xxii). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Glasrud, B., & Pitre, M. (2013). *Southern Black Women in the Modern Civil Rights Movement*. Texas: Texas University Press.
- Gorman, A. (2021). *The Hill We Climb: An Inaugural Poem for the Country*. New York: Penguin Random House.
- Gravely, W. B. (1982). The Dialectic of Double-Consciousness in Black American Freedom Celebrations, 1808-1863. *Journal of Negro History*, 67(4), 302-317.
- Greenblatt, S. (1989). Towards a Poetics of Culture. In H. Veesser, *The New Historicism* (pp. 1-14). New York: Routledge.
- Hayes, T. (2018). *American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Hohle, R. (2013). *Black Citizenship and Authenticity in the Civil Rights Movement*. NEW YORK: Routledge.
- Huggins, N. (1995). *Voices from the Harlem Renaissance*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Hughes, L. (1945). *The Weary Blues*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Kelley, R. D. (2002). *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. Massachusetts: Beacon Press.
- King, M. (2001). *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* (C. Carson, & K. Shephard, Eds.) New York: Intellectual Properties Management, in association with Warner Books.
- Krysan, M., & Crowder, K. (2017). *Cycle of Segregation: Social Processes and Residential Stratification*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Longfellow, H. (1884). *Twenty Poems from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*. Houghton: Mifflin and Company.
- Longfellow, H. (1902). *The Complete Poetical Works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Lupton, M. (2016). *Maya Angelou: The Iconic Self*. California: ABC-CLIO, LLC.
- Massy, D., & Denton, N. (1993). *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Mitchell, A. B. (2008). Self-Emancipation and Slavery: An Examination of the African American's Quest for Literacy and Freedom. *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 2(5), 78-98.
- Perkins, G., & Perkins, B. (1994). *The American Tradition in Literature*. United States: McGraw-Hill.
- Rothman, A. (2011). slavery, the Civil War, and reconstruction. In E. Foner, & L. McGirr, *American History Now* (pp. 75-95). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Smethurst, J. (2011). *The African American Roots of Modernism: From Reconstruction to the Harlem Renaissance*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Tyler, A. (1962). *Freedom's Ferment: Phases of American Social History from the Colonial period to the Outbreak of the Civil War*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Watkins, F. (1993). *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper Reader*. New York: The Feminist Press.
- Wheatley, P. (1988). *The Collected Works of Phillis Wheatley*. (J. Shields, Ed.) New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wood, M. (2003). *The Poetry of Slavery: An Anglo-American Anthology 1764-1865*. New York: Oxford University Press