’Master of My Faith, Captain of My Soul’

Identity and Community in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

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Abstract

This essay is a close reading of the novels *Beloved* by Toni Morrison and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou with the purpose of analyzing the impact and role of the African American community in two characters’ formation of self. The aim is to contrast and compare the two chosen characters’ experiences with their respective African American communities and discuss common ground, similarities and differences. A postcolonial approach is applied to the analysis by using concepts and theory from Fanon’s arguments on the psychological effects on the oppressed, Cohen’s description of diaspora communities and Bhabha’s notion of hybridization and culture.

Keywords: community, identity, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, diaspora, otherness
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1. Introduction

The history of the African American novel, beginning with the first known works of the fugitive slave William Wells Brown, is a history of narratives sculptured out of a position of otherness and difference. The world, or narrative, may it be real or imagined, continues to haunt the present and the stories persist to confront the reader with shared history from which no one can escape. Maryemma Graham writes, in connection to the portrayal of African American history, that the act of writing for many African American authors is an act of redefining history and memory along with challenging the common past (5). The common past in America lies in the experience of slavery and in the establishment which created and formed a segregated social order that shaped a sense of otherness for the people who experienced its exclusion. By putting attention to forced migration, exile, consequences of slavery and otherness the African American novel gives voice to both ideological and social means deepening the sense of what it means to be black in a postcolonial world.

Graham highlights the importance of viewing novels written by people of African descent in America as truly American (1). In spite of African cultural visibility, many contemporary African American authors write on transculturalism and transnationalism, exploring the meaning of partaking in a creolized and diasporic world. The notion of being part of two cultures, the African and the American, and how the one influences and perhaps also intrudes or judges the other, is described and actualized in the African American novel.

African American authors, who write against the same establishment from which they call for sanction, remind the readers of the weight of telling a free story. The power of the African American novel may hence lie in the need to reflect lived reality. Its strength, may it be fictional or autobiographical, is in its ability to account for human experience of otherness and at the same time demand the status of art. Both social and aesthetic means are claimed.

Selwyn R. Cudjoe describes and captures the essence of the power of the African American autobiographical statement by writing

The Afro-American autobiographical statement is the most Afro-American of all Afro-American literary pursuits […] The practice of the autobiographical statement, up until the contemporary era, remains
the quintessential literary genre for capturing the cadence of the Afro-American being, revealing its deepest aspirations and tracing the evolution of the Afro-American psyche under the impact of slavery. (6)

Autobiography and fiction are both two means in African American literature that arrive at constructing and delineating African American life. Each has the capacity to speak honestly about the individual African American experience as well as to give voice to common or communal experiences of segregation, alienation and otherness. The notion of community and the boundaries that make up, enclose and create segregation are hence present and of crucial importance in the African American novel indicating and giving life to the notion of difference and distance.

The strength that lies in the depiction of slave narratives and the portrayal of the consequences of the African diaspora is in the works of female African American authors enriched by the perspective of gender. Andrew Bennett and Nicolas Royle point to this position of double otherness, due to both gender and race, and claim that it is this exact position that moves literature beyond essentialism and beyond the repressive politics of identity to an understanding of the plurality of self (240). By taking literature beyond essentialist views of individuals Stephen E. Henderson writes that black women have brought into the literature a special knowledge of their lives and experiences that freed themselves from stereotypical roles assigned to them by males (xxiv). As black women have liberated themselves from the images of queens, princesses, earth mothers or Big Mommas, they have enriched the corpus of African American literature by describing African American female life and how it has appeared and been experienced in history. The sometimes brutal honesty of the life of African American women is highly present in the two literary works that make up the studied material for this essay. Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison write not only as African Americans but as African American women portraying lived reality out of the position of women.

The aim of this essay is a close-reading of Toni Morrison’s novel Beloved (1987) and Maya Angelou’s autobiographical novel I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1969) with a focus on the impact and role of the African American community in the lives of two chosen female characters. The purpose of this essay is hence to highlight the formation of self in connection to life in an alienated and segregated community. The chosen characters for the study are Denver, from Beloved and Maya from I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings. A further review and description of the authors and the
novels will be included below. A postcolonial approach will be applied for the analysis using relevant terms and theoretical concepts in the close-reading of the novels. The postcolonial perspective enables a close reading of marginality, plurality and otherness, and foreground questions of cultural difference and diversity as well as highlights awareness of representations of the non-European as others which accords with the aim of this essay.

The explicit research questions for the essay are; what role, and impact, does the African American community have in the lives of the two characters Maya and Denver and their construction of self? And do their experiences of the African American community differ, if so; how and why?

The method used for the analysis is primarily close reading of the novels. The research questions will be approached and answered by looking at segments from the novels and analyzing those using concepts from postcolonial theory. The purpose of the essay, made explicit in the research questions, is a comparative analysis where the aim is to contrast the two chosen characters' experiences with their respective African American communities and discuss common grounds and similarities.

2. Background

2.1 Toni Morrison and Beloved

Toni Morrison, born 1931 in Lorain, Ohio, is a Nobel and Pulitzer Prize winning author whose writings and work have been described as a cultural memory and a testimony to historical trauma (Matus 1). As a graduate from Howard University and Cornell and a prominent literary critic and theorist she has been an influential lecturer at many American universities as well as Senior Editor at Random House, New York where she has nurtured many African American authors.

Her growing awareness of black culture as a significant subject resonates in the context of the civil rights movement in the 1950’ and 1960’. Jill Matus points to Morrison’s involvement in politics as an important factor in her authorship and accounts for her view of the power of art (14). For Morrison art and politics are intervened. Morrison describes her involvement in politics, not as a member of any organization but as “active in terms of where I speak, and the things I write about” (Matus 12). In her writings and works Morrison draws attention to the special nature of literary testimony and its ability to explore the taboo, the psychical, as well the historical. Her slave
narratives and their cruel depiction of lived reality is a testimony to her view of art as political and the power she claims lies within literature to account for and question predominant hegemonic politics. When facing the difficulties and emotions writing on the tragedy of slavery and its consequences Morrison has uttered that “When I have problems, I thought: If they can live it, I can write about it. I refuse to believe that that period, or that thing [slavery] is beyond art” (Matus 14).

Morrison’s work as a literary critic centers on how “literary whiteness” and “literary blackness” are constructed and the consequences of such constructions. In her critical work Playing in the Dark – Whiteness and the Literary Imagination she writes on the assumption conventionally acknowledged by literary historians and critics that holds that canonical American literature is free and unshaped by the presence of African Americans (5). She argues that even though American literature has the preserve of white male views, those views are not without relationship to the presence of black people. Morrison uses the term ‘Africanism’ to describe “the denotative and connotative blackness that African people have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreading that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people” (7). Morrison hence questions how literary utterances arrange themselves when aiming to create the African other and how the Africanist personae, narrative and idiom moved the text in self-conscious ways (16). Morrison argues that this Africanist presence in American literature is dark and abiding and hovers in implication, signs and in line of demarcation (46-47). She argues that Africanism, and its role in the American canon, has served the purpose of being “a vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny” (52). By stressing this mirroring effect of Africanism Morrison points to the racial subject, rather than the racial object, and the construction of Americaness and the freedom it stands for. Morrison writes that “the concept of freedom did not emerge in a vacuum. Nothing highlighted freedom - if it did not in fact create it - like slavery” (38).

Beloved (1987) is perhaps one of Morrison’s novels that most strongly and conspicuously pictures the cruel consequences of slavery and the importance of memory for the individual. Morrison has written on the notion of the novel in general that it should have “something in it that suggest what the conflicts are, what the problems are. But it need not solve those problems because it is not a case study, it is not a recipe”
This description of a novel accords with what is achieved in *Beloved* as Morrison outlines the tragic effects of slavery without claiming its solution or answer.

The novel is based on a newspaper clipping Morrison found that summarized the story of Margaret Garner, a young mother who escaped slavery and was arrested for killing one of her children rather than allowing them to return to her former plantation. The woman’s perceived sanity, intellect, ferocity and willingness to risk everything for what was to her the necessity of freedom caught the attention of newspapers and also Toni Morrison.

*Beloved*, set in 1873, delineates a runaway slave’s struggles with motherhood and guilt in connection to murdering her daughter in order to spare her from slavery. The protagonist Sethe escapes successfully, but not without difficulty, from her old residence Sweet Home where she and her husband had been slaves. Pregnant and with three children already free and living with her mother-in-law, she gives birth to her fourth child while running away. Living with her children and mother-in-law in house 124 at Bluestone Road the plot takes a tragic turn as her former slave owner appears to claim his property and return her and her children to Sweet Home. Sethe takes to extreme measures and tries to murder her children to spare them from slavery and in her efforts she murders her daughter. As the narrative progresses this murdered daughter haunts the present as a ghost. As a consequence of the haunting and out of fear of their mother, Sethe’s two oldest sons depart from their home leaving Sethe, her mother-in-law Baby Suggs and the youngest daughter Denver behind. Baby Suggs, who is described as a wise town elderly, later dies making the house the residence of only Sethe and Denver. A character from Sethe’s past at Sweet Home, Paul D, appears and moves into their home after seemingly driving the ghost out of the house. However, the ghost returns incarnated in a young mysterious girl called Beloved. This ghost from the past haunts life in the present and as the narrative progresses makes life unbearable for the characters driving Paul D out of the house and makes Sethe’s guilt force her to exhaustion. Denver, who is the focus of the analysis, breaks the isolation of the house by going out of the house to find employment and help which results in the community’s concern for Sethe. Beloved disappears, as mysteriously as she arrived, as the isolation of the house is broken by the people of the town.

The novel captures and portrays the idea of the past taking possession of the present and the consequences of history for individuals. One of the major themes in the novel is hence the notion of a haunting past. The haunting voice of the past lingers in
the novel as a reminder of the history of colonization along with slavery and its devastating costs for the characters. The character Beloved has been analyzed and interpreted as not only the memory of the characters but as a representation of a common memory of slavery as a whole. Linda Krumholz argues in her article that Beloved is “a spirit from the past taken on a personality” and calls it “a resurrection of ancestral spirits” (396). This accords with Morrison’s claim on portraying memory not just as individual but as something common and drawn out of shared history. Beloved is perhaps the novel that demonstrates most obviously Morrison’s concern to bear witness to the forgotten past of African Americans.

2.2 Maya Angelou and I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings
Maya Angelou, born in St. Louis, Missouri in 1928 as Marguerite Ann Johnson, was a multifaceted artist. Labeled African American autobiographer, feminist writer, historian, lecturer, activist, filmmaker, poet, actor and singer she fits no single description. Her life, depicted in her autobiographical narratives, testifies to a rough and difficult upbringing and early life which lead her in the direction of prostitution and drug addiction. Sondra O’Neale writes that Angelou, instead of hiding her uneven path in life, made her life her message and “whose message to all aspiring Black women is the reconstruction of her experiential ‘self’“ (26).

In 1969 Angelou wrote the first of her seven autobiographical narratives I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings and scored her first literary success as the book became an immediate bestseller and a flagship of a multi-part autobiographical armada. The importance of this work is expressed by O’Neale as she claims that Angelou “bridged the gap between life and art, a step that is essential if Black women are to be deservedly credited with the mammoth and creative feat of noneffacing survival” (26). Angelou has since received many honorary degrees from academic institutions, perhaps the most significantly the University of Arkansas in the backyard of land tilled by her great-grandmother.

The storyline in I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, set in the 1930s and 1940s, follows the author’s memories as she describes her life from the age of three to sixteen. In the rural village Stamps, Maya has been put under the care of her paternal grandmother along with her brother Bailey. In this community Maya grows up experiencing racial segregation and racism as well as meeting empowering African American female role models and encounters religious fundamentalism. Maya nurtures
an interest in literature, which at times becomes her way of escaping the cruel reality of her circumstances. One of the themes of the novel is hence literacy and it’s empowering and liberating effect on the character.

The narrative however first and foremost describes Maya’s journey and path into selfhood as she faces the dominant hegemonic concepts of race. Maya internalizes, as a consequence of those hegemonic concepts, blackness as something she equates with ugliness and nurtures a negative self-image that clouds her childhood. This portrayal of the formation of self in the position of difference and otherness becomes a strong historical and sociological study of black feminine images (O’Neale 26).

The southern rural village Stamps comes in the novel to represent racial segregation as well as belonging and familiarity. Even though Stamps is a place where people fear the Ku Klux Klan, the wanton murder of black people and the innumerable incidents of denigration, it is the space in which one could argue Maya experiences a sense of home and ‘normality’.

Maya and her brother move twice in the narrative to live with their mother. The first move tragically ends with Maya, eight-years-old at the time, being raped by the man living with their mother Vivian. Vivian’s incapability to deal with Maya’s physiological effects of this event results in their move back to Stamps. Back in Stamps Maya is physically silenced due to this tragedy and rarely speaks. However, as the novel progresses Maya finds normality in her interest in literature, school and new found friendships. At the age of fourteen Maya and Bailey again move to their mother in San Francisco and adapt to a life in the city and to the vivid life of their mother. The novel, being the first of seven autobiographical narratives, end in California with Maya living with her mother and stepfather giving birth to a son at the age of sixteen.

As the story is full of interpretations and repetitions of past events it is of importance to remember that conversations are fictionalized and that the young Maya, who sometimes may appear more sophisticated than appropriate for her age, is a blend of memory and the adult author’s retrospection. However, the strong claim of the autobiographical narrative still remains as Angelou in her autobiographical mission pictures and tells the story of the development of the black female individual by the tale of one Southern black girl. Angelou gives voice to many African American voices by using her own story as a way of conveying and explaining African American experiences. She writes on her own authorship that: “I write for the Black voice and any ear which can hear it. As a composer writes for musical instruments and a
choreographer creates for the body, I search for sound, tempos, and rhythms to ride through the vocal cord over the tongue, and out of the lips of Black people” (Angelou 3-4).

3. Theory

3.1 Postcolonialism

Recent developments in literary criticism and theory have been associated with what is known as the critique of the subject and with the deconstruction of a stable and autonomous “self”. The critique against essentialist views of individuals explored the idea that there exists nothing essential and fixed about any individual or about the human generally. Postcolonial literary criticism has emerged from this idea of the deconstruction of “self” and from critique of the universalist claims made by liberal humanist critics. The claim once made by liberal humanists was that there exist within grand literature a time-less and universal importance and significance. However, the grand literature in question, referred to what might be called the Western canon. The consequences of claiming such ideas are that cultural, social and national differences are ignored or demoted as insignificant. The universalist claim has been rejected by postcolonial criticism by seeking to highlight the limitations of canonical Western literature and its inability to empathize across cultural and ethnic boundaries. This account gave birth to new theory that questioned the way in which Western humanism has defined itself on many occasions in terms of race by constructing and creating a racial other which stands as the contrary to the racial homogeneous (Bennett and Royle 238).

John McLeod defines very basically in his book Beginning Postcolonialism, and in a literary context, what is covered under the umbrella-term postcolonialism. One of his claims is that postcolonialism concerns itself with reading texts produced by those who have migrated from countries with a history of colonialism, or those descended from migrant families, which deal in the main with diaspora experience and its many consequences. The aim of this essay clearly falls under this claim and task of a postcolonial reading of literature.

One of the pronouncements of postcolonial literary criticism is hence that even though it is possible to talk about “after” colonization, the consequences of colonization still remain although the world has changed through decolonization. Colonial principles and norms are not removed automatically when the colonizers disappear.
Postcolonialism is hence concerned with what continue to haunt the colony or the colonized since it “recognizes both historical continuity and change” (McLeod 33).

### 3.2 Psychological effects on the oppressed - Frantz Fanon

Postcolonial criticism emerged only in the 1990’s as a separate category and field even though its ancestry can be traced to Frantz Fanon and his work *The Wretched of the Earth* from 1961 and *Black Skin, White Masks* from 1952, along with Edward Said’s book *Orientalism* from 1978 (Barry 186). Together they are perhaps the most influential, and early, works in postcolonial criticism. While Said demonstrated the legitimation of the Empire by examining how the knowledge the Western imperial powers formed about their colonies justified their continuing rule and subjugation of the colonized, Fanon focused on the psychological effects on the oppressed. This aspect of colonialism as its psychological consequences for the individual will be an important aspect in the analysis made in this essay. Fanon voiced a cultural resistance to France’s African empire and dealt with the mechanics of colonialism and its tragic effects on those it trapped and ensnared. In *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon draws on his knowledge as a psychoanalyst and on his experience as an Antillean man in France as he explains the consequences of identity formation for the colonized subject as he or she is forced to internalize a sense of “other”. In his work Fanon outlines the cost for the individual who experiences, due to the color of his or her skin, objectification and aberration.

The core of Fanon’s argument lies in the idea that “the black soul is a white man’s artifact” (Fanon 16). He argues that the black man’s sense of identity is an ongoing comparison with the characteristics and sense of self he is denied by those, the whites, who possess the power to define. Fanon articulates this notion by writing that “for the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white. Long ago the black man admitted the unarguable superiority of the white man, and all his efforts are aimed at achieving a white existence” (228).

Fanon writes with the purpose of liberation for the black man from “the arsenal of complexes that has been developed by the colonial environment” (Fanon 30). The consequences of colonialism were not just physical or geographical it also formed a hierarchy of culture and race that affected and constrained the black man’s sense of self. Fanon writes
Overnight the Negro has been given two frames of reference within which he has had to place himself. His metaphysics, or, less pretentiously, his customs and the sources on which they were based, were wiped out because they were in conflict with a civilization that he did not know and that imposed itself on him.

(110)

Colonialism, in other words, created conflicts that made it impossible for the black man to be just black; “he must be black in relation to the white man” (Fanon 110). The consequences of this notion are that the black man unquestionably remains the ‘other’ and the colonizers the civilized, intellectual and rational. Identity for the black subject is thus what is created for him by a group that identifies him as inferior and has placed him at the mercy of their definitions and representation (McLeod 20). The position of power inhabited by the white people forces, according to Fanon, the black individual to internalize a sense of self as ‘other’.

Fanon also showed how language functions as a way of creating difference by saying that “every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality -finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation” (18). When facing the language of the civilized nation the colonized are again required to see shortcomings and difference in their own use of language and are forced to deny the value of local culture. By acquiring the language of the colonizer the colonized, or the black, is seen as whiter, or more human (18).

3.3 Diaspora and Hybridization

Two further postcolonial terms and concepts that will be of importance for the analysis made in this essay are diaspora and hybridization. In his book Global Diasporas: An Introduction, Robin Cohen describes diaspora as “communities settled outside their natal (or imagined natal) territories, acknowledge that “the old country” –a notion often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore- always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions” (ix). Cohen continues by defining a member’s adherence to a diasporic community as “demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable link with their past migration history and a sense of co-ethnicity with others of a similar background” (ix). As Cohen claims, diaspora communities have created a sense of belonging and shared history for its members. The claim he makes in the cited paragraph above points to these characteristics of loyalty that derive from shared culture
and customs.

To belong or identify with a diaspora community is not free from problems. Diaspora communities have often been excluded from belonging to the new nation and have been subjects of mockery and discrimination. Dominant discourses of race, ethnicity and gender have functioned to prohibit individuals, or whole communities, from being recognized as parts of the nation in question (McLeod 212).

The concern of this essay is the African diaspora, a term not used until the mid 1950s, which aim to describe the dispersed people exiled from Africa who settled outside of their old nations (Cohen 31). The full history of the African diaspora in America, the focus of this essay, is too extensive to be completely outlined in this limited essay. However, the African diaspora in America is very much linked to the ideas and principles of imperialism that justified colonialism. The African diaspora in America is hence a consequence of slavery and imperialistic values such as bringing wealth to Western nations through the economic exploitation of others.

New and dynamic ways of thinking about identity, especially migrant identities, have been created and formed out of theories that challenge older static models of identity, such as fixed national identities and rootedness. These ideas particularly deal with the position of the migrant as in a position of ‘in-between’ (McLeod 216). One promoter of this line of thought is Homi K. Bhabha. In his book *The Location of Culture* he challenges, by taking on the contrary logic of borders, the dominant ways of representing history, community and identity. By refusing the idea of an essentialist subject Bhabha writes

> What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These ‘in-between’ spaces provide a terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood-singular or communal- that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself. (1)

Bhabha addresses what he calls ‘border lives”, a term that refers to those who live, and have been placed, in the margins of nations. The consequence for those who have been placed and live their lives in these ‘in-between’ spaces is to become the subject of
hybridization. The term hybridization goes beyond the notion of multiculturalism and claims that subjectivity is composed by much more variable sources, different materials and locations. Hybridization by this definition goes beyond the idea of fixed notions of identity based on cultural, racial and national purity (McLeod 219). A crucial train of thought is the refusal to view culture as something pure or holistic and handed down from generation to generation (McLeod 218). Culture is rather seen as intermingled and diverse. In the ‘in-between’ space, described and defined by Bhabha in the quotation above, monolithic fixed categories of race, nation or culture are challenged and it questions notions of home and belonging. McLeod writes that the concept of hybridization has “proved very important for diaspora peoples […] as a way of thinking beyond exclusionary, binary notions of identity” (219). In connection to hybrid identities and history Bhabha writes

The representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in a fixed tablet of tradition. The social articulation of difference, from a minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation.

(2)

Bhabha conveys the need to see hybrid identities, and its connection to moments of historical transformation, as a way of articulating difference that goes beyond fixed and pure notions of nation, culture or race. This concept is highly connected to the concept of diaspora as a way of describing lives lived, and identities formed, in the ‘in-between’ space. When analyzing the formation of self in diaspora experience the concept of hybridization, by this definition, offers a way of talking about diverse and mixed notions of culture in and for individuals. By this notion an individual’s culture is not pure or holistic but rather a combination of what is experienced in the in-between space.

4. Analysis

To be able to describe and outline the impact and role of the African American community in the lives of the chosen characters and its role for their formation of self, a description of the two communities in the novels are necessary.
Maya and her brother settle in the rural village Stamps. As a southern village in the 1930’s it is highly segregated with a white and a black neighborhood. Maya, who is throughout the narrative sole narrator, describes this segregation as a light shade which “had been pulled down between the Black community and all things white” (Angelou 53). This light shade is however not dark or impenetrable so that the one does not see or experience the other. Maya rather describes it as “one could see through it enough to develop a fear-admiration-contempt for the white ‘things’” (Angelou 53).

The depiction of the village accords with Cohen’s description of diaspora communities as victims of hegemonic discourses of race and ethnicity that have functioned to prohibit individuals, or whole communities, from being recognized as parts of the nation in question. Upon walking into the white neighborhood Maya describes Bailey and herself as “explorers walking without weapons into man-eating animal’s territory” (Angelou 27). In this ‘territory’ there were people to fear and to dread “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” (Angelou 27). The symbolic lack of ‘weapons’ Maya includes points to the defenselessness they experience when facing the white community. This experience of powerlessness and subjection that prevailed in the encounter with the white community is present throughout Maya’s entire stay in Stamps.

The black community in Stamps, the object of racial segregation and on many occasions struck with fear by the Ku Klux Klan, had as perhaps a consequence of those matters the quality and ability to close in around its members and care for its inhabitants. Angelou writes upon the arrival of her and Bailey that “the town reacted to us as its inhabitants had reacted to all things new before our coming. It regarded us a while without curiosity but with caution, and after we were seen to be harmless (and children) it closed in around us, as a real mother embraces a stranger’s child” (8).

Other features which are of significance to mention that characterize the black community in Stamps are its closeness to religion and the bond of hard work performed by the members of the community in the cotton fields. The regular visits to the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, or any other church in the area, by the members of the black community functions as a strong inclusive and crucial system to convey belonging and a sense of association. The shared experiences of hard work in the cotton fields or in the household of white women are also aspects that tie the members of the community together and create a sense of collective knowledge and belonging.
Upon moving to her mother in St. Louis and San Francisco Maya comes across a more urban black community that separates itself from Stamps rural setting by its more vivid life and city rhythm. What Maya encounters in St. Louis and San Francisco is a ghetto community with crime and violence. Angelou points to this aspect of the Black ghetto community by explaining the roots and foundation of this phenomenon by cleverly writing that “the needs of a society determine its ethics, and in the Black American ghettos the hero is that man who is offered only the crumbs from his country’s table but by ingenuity and courage is able to take for himself Lucullan feast” (240).

Denver, the daughter of a runaway slave and the innocent victim of her mother’s maternal grief, lives with her mother in isolation. The haunting of house 124 on Bluestone Road keeps it in seclusion from the black community in Cincinnati, Ohio. The people of the black community had developed a suspicious and fearful attitude towards the house and reacted on this notion by whipping their horses “into the gallop local people felt necessary when passing 124” (5). One of the reasons for its isolation is the fear that characterizes Sethe and Denver’s existence. That fear derived from the horror of white people’s power and the recurrence of past events. Denver expresses this terror upon considering breaking the isolation uttering “out there where there were places in which things so bad had happened that when you went near them it would happen again” (Morrison 287).

The black community outside 124 emerges as a close-knit neighborhood that cared for its members. Sethe describes her loss of this community, after experiencing its exclusion, by unfolding what she had lost. Morrison writes that “being part of a neighborhood; of in fact, having neighbors at all to call her own- all that was long gone […] No more dancing in the Clearing or happy feeds. No more discussions, stormy or quiet, about the true meaning of the Fugitive Bill, the Settlement Fee, God’s Ways and Negro pews” (204).

In accordance with the black community in Stamps in I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, the black community in Cincinnati is characterized by religion and spiritualism. African spiritualism is mixed with Western Christianity. The importance of the Clearing and Baby Suggs’ preaching are two examples of this notion.

The aim of the analysis lies in the task of exploring how society and community shape the individual in its circumstance and time. What emerges from the narratives concerning Denver and Maya’s familiarity with the African American community
accords with what has been described by Cohen concerning the experiences of the individual in the diaspora experience. The two novels clearly depict how the understanding of being other and denied access to the ‘new’ nation shapes the community and the individual as well as the loyalty of its members. What also characterizes the depiction of black community and the individual in the two studied novels are close and in reach of what Fanon has voiced on otherness and what lies in the meaning of definer and defined as both Maya and Denver are put under the power of those who possess the authority to define.

Yolanda M. Manora states clearly in her article that Angelou’s experience and depiction of community, family and individuality are clearly shaped by the experience of difference (362). The narrative that unfolds in Beloved is in the same manner colored by the white people’s claimed right to the definition of what is different and other. This is done in part by arguing the righteousness of racial hierarchy.

Fanon has argued that the black identity is an ongoing comparison with the characteristics and the sense of self he or she perceives to be white and thus also superior. The argument put forward by Fanon hence points to colonialism and the diaspora experience as an attempt of the oppressed to legitimize and manifest the self in comparison to all that is white. In a short passage in Angelou’s novel the notion of whiteness in connection to the thought patterns of Maya become clear. The perceived highest authority in Maya’s life, God, is according to her understanding white. Angelou writes that “of course I knew God was white too, but no one could have made me believe he was prejudice” (54). This short passage testifies to Maya’s sincere assurance that it was to her inconceivable that God, the greatest of authorities, was anything other than white. It hence becomes clear that Maya has internalized a strong sense of blackness as crucially other and secondary. On other occasions Maya compares her looks to white girls, or to girls who are mixed race, and concludes that anything about her appearance that was typically or naturally black was ugly and to her unwanted.

An event that clearly displays what Maya has internalized when it comes to difference and otherness in connection to her community is what she conveys in connection to her graduation ceremony in Stamps. Cutting through the joy and festivities that characterized the event is the visit and the speech held by the white school official Edward Donleavy. In his speech he uses praise to limit the black students’ prospects for the future. By pointing to the success of black athletes he clearly conveys essentialist views of blacks and their limited self. Angelou writes on this notion
that “what school official in the white-goddom of Little Rock had the right to decide that those men must be our only heroes? […] it was awful to be Negro and have no control over my life. It was brutal to sit quietly and listen to the charges brought against my color” (194-195). The following speech of the valedictorian, and Maya’s classmate, contained Shakespeare’s quote ‘To Be, or Not to Be’ and Maya is caught in its conflicting message; “hadn’t he heard the whitefolks? We couldn’t be, so the question was a waste of time” (194).

This accords with what Fanon has voiced on the images of the colonizers as the civilized, intellectual and rational. What is left for the colonized becomes the unquestionably other such as the physical, sexual and uncivilized. Fanon’s claim that the black soul is a white man’s artifact is also visible here. Angelou writes that during the graduation “the daughter of the Baptist minister, recited ‘Invictus’, and” I could have cried at the impertinence of ‘I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul” (195). There was no freedom for the black individual to be its own master and captain and no prospects to be anything other than what was designed for him or her by white people.

When internalizing a sense of other, the characteristics that define what is looked upon as different is not only associated with physical appearance, being black or white by the color of skin, it might also be performative and achieved through action. Blackness for Maya is not solely rooted in looks but also in accomplishment and action. Blackness for Maya is hence performed. In her several meetings with Mrs. Flowers, an educated black woman, she reveals this notion. Mrs. Flowers is depicted as removed or uninvolved in the black community; she is not familiar with many of its members and does not belong to any of the churches. Manora writes in her article that Mrs. Flowers “while valorized by the black community, is too aligned with whiteness to be a part of that community” (371). Mrs. Flowers is to Maya an almost mythical being that has by being aligned with what is perceived and seen as performed whiteness been placed at the outskirts of the black community. Her performed whiteness which manifests itself in her knowledge in literature, her manners and education has distanced her from blackness.

The notion of performed blackness and whiteness is described by Fanon by drawing attention to language when explaining parts of this notion. By acquiring the language and ways of the colonizers, the colonized is seen as more white and more human. Manora writes on this notion that Mrs. Flowers “does not seem to embody
“Negro-ness” as the dominant culture would define it” (370). As knowledge in literature, manners and education is defined as white traits and culture, Mrs. Flowers is hence seen as distant from blackness. When Maya internalizes otherness she is hence not solely concerned with blackness, or race, as appearance but as something that can or is obtained by culture, traits or characteristics. Maya does not exclude physical appearance as crucial for distinguishing race but she observes the difference between what is performed as white or black and how it contributes to the distinction between what is other and what is not.

Mrs. Flowers is not only an image of performed whiteness and blackness but also a character that lifts Maya from her self-imposed silence by acknowledging her individuality and promise. She is a strong female role model in the narrative who by her dignity and grace makes Maya proud to be black. By not embodying what was perceived as black by the hegemonic view of race and by breaking the patterns of her community she strengthens Maya to think that a black self could be something other than what was designed for her by the white people. Angelou writes on this notion that “she was one of the few gentlewoman I have ever known, and has remained throughout my life the measure of what a human being can be like” (102).

Race as something that is performed and attained through action and culture is also visible as Maya and her brother nurture their interest in literature. Many of Maya’s favorite authors, such as Shakespeare and Jane Austen, are white. However, Maya is on occasion denied identification with their works, not least by her grandmother. Angelou writes that “Bailey and I decided to memorize a scene from The Merchant of Venice, but we realized that Momma would question us about the author and that we’d have to tell her that Shakespeare was white, and it wouldn’t matter to her whether he was dead or not” (16). One could argue that the perception of what is suitable for the formation and identification as black by this notion was not only obtained by the white community but also by the black one. In Momma’s opinion it was not suitable for Maya and her brother to care about or engage in something that lay outside what could be connected to their race and community. This action could be interpreted as a sign of Black Nationalism and resistance to white community and white culture. The phenomenon could also be understood by Fanon’s description of black identity as something that is created for him or her by the superior whites. In Fanon’s argument lies the description of the illusion and created importance of keeping blackness and whiteness apart, by the construction of such borders by the whites. By distinguishing and forming clear
boundaries between black and white cultures and lives the upholding of racial hierarchy remains possible.

A crucial thought in Bhabha’s arguments on hybridization that accords with the events described above is the refusal to view culture as something unchangeable that is handed down from generation to generation. Bhabha argues on this notion that culture is rather diverse and intermingled instead of holistic or pure. Maya can hence be seen as the subject of hybridization. She is not solely concerned with the culture of her grandmother or by the culture connected to the diaspora community but embraces diverse and different expressions of culture.

Cudjoe has described the narrative in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* as Maya’s “movement from innocence to awareness” (12). One example and event which drives Maya to formulate ways and thought patterns of awareness on the roots and foundation of her difference by race is when she applies for a job in San Francisco. After she has been turned down by a white secretary Angelou writes

> The miserable little encounter had nothing to do with me, the me of me, any more than it had to do with that silly clerk. The incident was a recurring dream, concocted years before by stupid whites and it eternally came back to haunt us all. The secretary and I were like Hamlet and Laertes in the final scene, where, because of harm done by one ancestor to the other, we were bound to duel to the death [...] I accepted her as a fellow victim of the same puppeteer. (286)

Maya recognizes, without excusing its consequences, the patterns of the recurring persecution of the black community and the black subject. She describes it as a returning show or performance performed by a puppeteer who manages to uphold the illusion of racial hierarchy. This continues to be Maya’s stance on segregation but also becomes her battle to fight. Maya refuses to accept this pattern and fights with great determination to get employment as a train conductor.

There is one crucial moment in the narrative that most clearly conveys and describes Maya and the other members of her community’s strong loyalty and familiarity with the black community. The event in question is the boxing match that takes place between the white Primo Carnera and the black Joe Louise. The entire black community gathers at Maya’s grandmother’s shop to listen to the radio with great
attention. Cudjoe has described this event as “a re-creation of the real drama of American life” pointing to the tension that exists in the face to face encounter of the nation and the diaspora community (12). The event functions as a display of togetherness as a black community and Angelou writes that “My race groaned. It was our people falling […] if Joe lost we were back in slavery and beyond help. It would be true, the accusations that we were lower types of human beings” (146). In this particular event in the narrative Maya perhaps most strongly shows her attachment and identification with the black community. Just as Cohen argues, the diaspora community is often associated with loyalty that comes out of the shared experience of exclusion from the ‘new’ nation. The dominant discourse of race that functioned to prohibit individuals from being part of the nation in question functioned as a mark of loyalty for the diaspora community.

A significant aspect and part of the black community in I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is its closeness to Western Christianity. Maya does not in any considerable way internalize a strong Christian faith but is however remarkably aware of its influence on her community. The regular visits to church meetings seemed to Maya sometimes ridiculous with the eccentric characters from the community and its almost theatrical form. Even though Maya’s interpretation and understanding of the meetings might be valid, Cudjoe has described the role of religion for the black community in the novel as “while religion is designed to keep the Afro- American in an oppressed condition, here Black people subverted that institution and used it to assist them to withstand the cruelty of the American experience” (13). What Cudjoe argues is that Christianity, that was considered and designed to keep the African American in a suppressed position, assisted the members of the black community to endure their oppression. Christianity offered a glorious future for the poor and the exploited and Angelou writes that “even if we were society’s parish, they were going to be angles in a marble white heaven and sit on the right hand of Jesus, the son of God. The Lord loved the poor and hated those cast high in the world” (139). Christianity offered a pacifist resistance to racism by believing in justice that would be provided by God and not by man. This apprehension is however not shared by Maya. She stands devastated at her grandmother’s refusal to fight back when a couple of white girls horribly offend her. Maya describes this event as the “most painful and confusing experience I had ever had with my grandmother” (31). This event could have been the beginning of what sparked Maya’s urge to want to fight back and to not take part in the resistance of peace and rising above.
Denver who is born free is remarkably isolated and secluded. From the moment she was born she has solely belonged to house 124 on Bluestone Road. The past of her mother, Paul D and Baby Suggs at Sweet Home is distant to her and she believes herself left out and lonely at the mention of their shared memories. Nancy Jesser writes on this notion that Sweet Home is for Denver “a site of exclusion” (329). As Denver is disconnected from anything outside house 124 she does not seem to belong to anything. She has no history except from the story of her extraordinary birth and is denied access to the shared memories of her mother and Paul D. Jesser continues to write on this notion that “Denver is locked out, forced to see herself as an outsider. Without reference point, she knows only her own worse place as the one she is in now” (330).

The exclusion from the black community in Cincinnati, the loss of her brothers and the loss of her mother to Paul D leaves Beloved as Denver’s only companion. Her strong attachment to Beloved does not start at the incarnation of the ghost but is rooted in the moment of her death. Morrison marks this close connection between the sisters when she writes that “Denver took her mother’s milk right along with the blood of her sister” (179). After murdering her daughter Sethe gives Denver milk from her breast that is mixed with the blood of the murdered daughter that has stuck to her chest. Almost like an image of communion she marks this strong connection between Denver and Beloved.

Beloved is not just the resurrection of one individual, she is as cited earlier the “resurrection of ancestral spirits” (Krumholtz 396). Beloved is hence not just Sethe’s memory and past but the memory of slavery and its consequences for the whole African American community. Beloved and house 124 are therefore described by Dara Byrne as “the manifestation of their collective fears, a landmark that, although visible, they would rather avoid or forget” (49). Denver’s strong connection to Beloved can thus be argued implicitly connects her to the African American community. Even though Denver is denied access to the community she lives in the reality of its shared memories of hurt, slavery and denial of parenthood incarnated in one body.

One could also argue that Denver is connected to the community through her paternal grandmother Baby Suggs. Baby can be described as a town elderly that with a mixture of African spiritualism and Christianity functions as a preacher. Morrison writes on 124 that “before it had become the plaything of spirits and the home of the chafed, 124 had been a cheerful, buzzing house where Baby Suggs, holy, loved, cautioned, fed, chastised and soothed” (102). 124 had gone from being a place where
Baby Suggs brought the people of the black community together to becoming out of touch with the outside world. At Baby’s meetings in the Clearing she preaches her found wisdom. She preaches love for her race and community. Morrison writes that Baby Suggs preached “this is flesh I’m talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and to dance; backs that need support; shoulders that need arms, strong arms I’m telling you. And O my people, out yonder, hear me, they do not love your neck” (105). Byrne writes that Baby’s services in the Clearing “makes evident that although aspects of language, religion, and rituals were lost, blacks had not completely forgotten their African culture” (35). The mixture of African spiritualism and Christianity in the black community displays the needlessness in viewing culture as holistic and pure. Bhabha’s claim that culture should be seen as intermingled and diverse could hence be supported in this narrative. The expression of religion in the narrative is a mixture of ‘the old nation’ and what has been made important in the new. Baby’s close connection to the black community is undeniable as she functions as a healer of her people, someone who encourages its members to love themselves and their flesh and to laugh and to cry. After the murder Baby Suggs leaves her community and her preaching devastated and defeated and “124 shut down and put up with the venom of its ghost” (105).

It is Baby Suggs, since past but in spirit, who encourages Denver to break her isolation. At the porch Denver hears the voice of Baby calling her to reconnect with her community and find help and deliverance from the hurt of 124. In the midst of Denver’s fears of the world outside the yard Baby’s message is to be aware of her defenselessness but to go out anyway. Jesser describes this notion by writing that “the other abiding spirit, that of Baby Suggs, reaches Denver with her final prophecy. The solution to the dilemma was no solution at all. It is to know that there is no absolute defense against the claims of a competing and brutal narrative that may cast you in the role of victim” (340). Baby Suggs, who left her community because of grief and defenselessness, hence reconciles herself and her granddaughter with the black community by urging Denver to break the isolation. Morrison describes the people Denver encounters as she goes into the black community to look for help as “all of them knew her grandmother and some of them had even danced with her in the clearing” (293). The importance and memory of the clearing is present with Denver through the reminiscence of Baby Suggs and ultimately becomes her strength as she breaks the isolation. By listening to the voice of her dead relative Denver embraces the strength of her past. Byrne hence writes that she
can “go forward with the knowledge that she is supported by a network of citizens whose legacy of survival in the most adverse of conditions lives in her” (51).

Byrne argues that it is the bond of struggle that keeps the diaspora community in *Beloved* together (26). Just as the black community in Stamps in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Cohen’s description of diaspora communities as close-knit by the experience of exclusion and shared culture is displayed in this narrative. Byrne writes that “by renegotiating the common culture between blacks through the “rememory” of slavery and in the reliance of their shared consciousness, the townspeople are able to expound the limitations of their past by refusing to let Sethe’s daughter consume her” (46). The liberation of house 124 by the townspeople displays the strong bond that the diaspora experience of slavery and exclusion created for the black community. The importance of caring and nurturing their own transcended the fear of Beloved and the murder, as well as overshadowed Sethe’s arrogance and pride she had made known to the people of the town. The town peoples’ adherence to the community and its members hence accords with Cohen’s account of the diaspora community as “demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable link with their past migration history and a sense co-ethnicity with others of a similar background” (ix).

Byrne writes on the liberation of Denver that her struggles to overcome her fear “teaches her one of the most fundamental lessons for blacks in the public sphere, she learns (and quickly too) how to operate discerningly within the hierarchical social system that affects her condition” (50). When Denver breaks her isolation she looks for a job to support her mother and Beloved. Eventually she finds work in the house of the Bodwins who helped Baby Suggs when she first arrived to Cincinnati. At her first visit to their house she sees a figurine of a black boy with money in his mouth with the engraved text At Yo Service. The significance of Denver seeing the figurine is described by Byrne as a sign of Denver’s “cognizance of her social positioning in the public sphere […] the figurine is reflective of her social reality” (42). The figurine is thus a good example of what Fanon has argued on the identity for the black subject. Black identity for Fanon is, as described earlier, what is made available and defined by a community that has placed him or her at the mercy of their definitions and representations. Even though the Bodwins are considered good white people and are abolitionists they are not free of hegemonic views of race. The figurine becomes a clear representation of that just in the same way Denver finds her freedom in her reconnection with the black community she also finds her role in the public sphere and becomes a
“textual representation of black subordination” (Byrne 41). When Denver breaks her isolation she hence finds her place as the subordinate and different. As she is about to serve the public sphere she locates her position as both free, from the isolation, and bound to the ways and structure of the white society. Her found freedom is thus limited by racial hierarchy.

Denver expresses what she has internalized as her role as other when she explains what Baby Suggs taught her when she was a child. She acknowledges the otherness of her community and race as she at the same time accepts Baby’s lesson to refuse the label that has been put on her being and race by white people. Denver makes clear that “slaves not supposed to have pleasurable feelings on their own; their bodies not supposed to be like that, but they have to have as many children as they can to please whoever owned them […] she said for me not to listen to all that. That I should always listen to my body and love it” (247).

The act of reconnecting with the black community is an act of finding a self for Denver. Morrison writes that “somebody had to be saved, but unless Denver got work, there would be no one to save, no one to come home to, and no Denver either. It was a new thought, having a self to look out for and preserve” (297). Denver finds within the diaspora community an identity and a self to care for. Denver’s loss of history and belonging is healed as she finds herself in the midst of a community that cares and nurtures her. The kindness of the community enables her to go ‘out yonder’ with the confidence of the collective. Not only did the community nurture her physically by bringing food to house 124, they also nurtured her in finding a self outside the yard.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this essay has been to demonstrate how the African American community in the chosen novels affects and shapes the formation of self for the analyzed characters. Several examples have been given in the analysis to show different aspects of this notion. The research questions have been approached by using Fanon’s arguments on the psychological effects on the oppressed, Cohen’s description of diaspora communities and Bhabha’s notion of hybridization and culture. In this concluding section a comparative analysis and summary will be done to contrast and compare the two chosen characters' experiences with their respective African American communities and discuss common grounds, similarities and differences.
There are both similarities and differences found in the narratives of the African American community’s influence and role in the lives of the analyzed characters. As argued in the analysis, the role of the African American community in the life of Denver is one of healing and resurrection. By breaking her isolation and reconnecting with the black community in Cincinnati she is reconciled with lost history and context and finds within the community a self to care for. The world outside the yard offers Denver both liberties as an individual in her new context and community as well as confinements in the public sphere as the other due to her race. Byrne writes on the role of the African American community in *Beloved* by drawing attention to the repeating sentence that appears in the last concluding chapter of the novel that “the story to pass on is the reconnection of the black community. Through the layering and interweaving of multiple slave and postslave narratives, *Beloved’s* story to “pass on” becomes both the site for condemnation of slavery as well as an acceptance of it as part of a complex and continuing story” (46). Byrne argues that the story to pass on in the novel, if it is not the uncanny events in house 124, might instead be Denver’s reconnection with the African American community. The story to pass on is therefore Denver’s found strength in the collective as well as her experiences of the bond of shared heritage and memories in the diaspora community. The novel hence accords with what Dorothy H. Lee has voiced on Morrison’s novels that they “reveal a consistency in Morrison’s vision of the human condition, particularly in her preoccupation with the effect of the community on the individual’s achievement and retention of an integrated, acceptable self” (346).

The role of the African American community in Maya’s life and identity formation appears rather different from the liberating and empowering effects of the community in *Beloved*. The role of the African American community is, in conformity with the role of the community in *Beloved*, a site of inclusion and belonging, but it also functions to strain and limit Maya’s formation of self to accord with perceived and performed blackness. This binary notion is displayed by Maya’s ambiguous relationship to her community and its different roles in her process of identity formation. Maya is, as outlined in the analysis, strongly connected to her community by feelings of loyalty but she also questions her community’s views of performed blackness and its strain on the individual. Maya is aware of the strong bonds of the members of the community by shared religion, struggles and alienation and shows her concern, awareness and loyalty in the narrative in such events as the graduation ceremony and the boxing match. She however questions the role of performed blackness and the notion of culture as
something pure and essential.

It is thus clear that Maya’s life is lived in the in-between space of culture, not willing to conform to culture as something passed on from generation to generation like something holistic and pure. Maya’s interest in literature and her fascination with Mrs. Flower’s difference by her performed whiteness are signs of her understanding and alertness, but also critique, of her community’s nationalism and holistic views of black culture. The African American community is hence for Maya both a concept of bond and loyalty as well as a representation of notions she in part refuses to internalize, like its strain on her mind and creativity by favoring what is perceived as black culture. One could hence not argue that the liberating effect of the black community that characterizes Denver’s experience applies to Maya.

A similarity that appears in the narratives of Maya and Denver’s experience of the African American community is the consequences of the subordination and the segregation of the African American community for their formation of self. The white people’s claimed right to name, define and diminish the African American community and the black subject drives both Denver and Maya to internalize a sense of otherness in their formation of self. Fanon’s arguments on the psychological effects on the oppressed, internalization of otherness and power of the definer over the defined are hence clearly present in these narratives. Examples of this notion is Maya’s description of her physical appearance as secondary to anything white, as well as her description of God and Denver’s place in the public sphere at the Bodwin’s as the subordinate. Even though one could give multiple examples of Maya’s will to fight against the strains put against her because of her race it becomes somewhat difficult to agree with O’Neale’s description of Angelou’s novel and message as “one blending chorus: Black people and Black women do not just endure, they triumph with a will of collective consciousness that Western experience cannot extinguish” (28). A perhaps more suitable delineation of Maya’s process of identity formation in connection to the black community is provided by Manora as she writes

Critics […] have often read Angelou’s autobiography as the quintessential American story of the quest for self, celebrating Angelou’s ability to “find her/Self” despite the social forces that would limit her. Such readings are based on the unexamined and so precarious precept that the person’s emergence as an individual is positive, liberating. Angelou’s autobiography suggests that this mythic attainment is not so simple. As she
negotiates the spaces to which she is consigned because she is Southern, black and female, Angelou reveals the manner in which the black female subject, a distinctly communal and relational subject, is engaged in an ongoing series of negotiations with the social, cultural, and political interpellations of self. (374)

Even though Maya finds the strengths and will to fight against white people’s claimed power over her circumstances, community and self, she does not triumph over the Western hegemonic social order and system that on a whole keeps her in a subjugated position.

To conclude; one could hence argue that the impact and role of the African American community in the life of Denver is one of reconnection with history and healing of the individual. Denver finds within the diaspora community both a self to care for as well as a self connected to a communal and common experience from which she previously had been excluded. Denver’s loss of context and shared memories are healed as she comes within reach of the African American community’s kind and fostering members. Maya, on the other hand, though closely connected and loyal to the African American community, finds in her quest for self in the African American community notions that limit and strain her young mind. The African American community is for Maya, despite the aim of her affection and allegiance, a notion that limits the individual’s prospects of a free self. The many expressions of performed blackness, religious fundamentalism, Black Nationalism and racial segregation hence function on occasion as limiting forces. One could thus argue that the influence of the African American community in the lives of the analyzed characters display different roles and functions of the diaspora community, one reflecting the need of the individual to belong and identify with others in a communal experience, and the other showing how the community can form ways and patterns of inclusion that create boundaries which strain the individual to identify with anything outside its borders. Similarities that could however be claimed are Denver and Maya’s experience of the diaspora community as close-knit and loyal, as well as their internalization of otherness due to the segregation, alienation and racism that have been directed against the African American community and the black subject.
6. Works Cited


Manora, Yolanda M. "’What You Looking At Me For? I Didn’T Come To Stay’: Displacement, Disruption And Black Female Subjectivity In Maya Angelou’S I Know


