

Lisa Johnson
African American Studies 5
Dr. Wendell Eckford
Reflection Essay
April 6, 2006

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

by
Maya Angelou

Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is an evocative portrait of life under segregation, racism and a first hand account of a dark period of our nation's history. A period where white America made it a priority to oppress Black people, chose lynching laws over justice and discrimination over honor. Maya illustrates how an innocent and naïve girl grew up in the midst of racial turmoil, intimidation, segregation and hate. Racism was the most prominent of Maya's cages due to society and ignorant ideas. A cage is something that bounds you, locks you in and keeps you from moving freely, from moving ahead. Having a feeling of being caged was not an isolated feeling only for Maya in Stamps, Arkansas. This caged feeling spilled over the entire South among the Black race.

The story of the Scottsboro Boys Trials is one of the most shameful examples of injustice in our nation's history. It was very clear in the Deep South of the 1930's and 1940's that jurors were not willing to agree that a Black man charged with raping a white woman had the usual presumption of innocence. In fact, the presumption seemed reversed: a Black man was presumed guilty unless he could establish beyond a reasonable doubt of his innocence. These cases showed that Black lives didn't account

for much. The self-serving and groundless accusations of a white woman were allowed to destroy the lives of nine innocent Black teenagers forever.

Maya Angelou's expression illustrates herself as a caged bird that sang by opening her wings and flying. But how can you fly with clipped wings and stifled songs. This was the deplorable predicament of the nine Scottsboro Boys. Suffocation of dreams for a better life, shackled by intimidation and injustice, these boys never had a chance to fly or sing. Who knows, these boys could have been the Tuskegee Institute Boys, the Hampton Institute Boys, the boys who followed W.E.B. Dubois. They were young enough to make something out of their lives, as far as the "cage" would allow in that era.

My father who was born in 1933 was also caged in that era. When asking him of the encounters he experienced of blatant racism, I cringed inside. He remembers being in the United States Army, stationed in the South. He was from Philadelphia, the North. The North was not as hostile as the South. When he enlisted, it was the first year of desegregation in the Army. He had befriended a white New Yorker and they went into the downtown area in a small town in Georgia. They both entered the eatery in their Army attire and the white man behind the counter said to the New Yorker, "I know you don't think you're going to eat in here with that nigger, niggers go in at the back entrance and eat in the back". I asked my dad what he said, and he said "nothing, but I wanted to, you didn't have a choice, you went by the rules". He ended up leaving with the New Yorker replying, "If I can't eat with my friend, I won't eat here at all".

There are still 'cages' in our society today. One major cage of the African American race is the fact that African American History is not taught in grade schools or high schools. I never learned about the Scottsboro Boys until I took this class. There

needs to be a clearer awareness of our heritage, struggles and experiences that we have encountered in this society and taught to our young African American population to understand how society looks at us and how we perceive ourselves. Just like white supremacy is passed on from generation to generation in the white race, the slave mentality also is passed generational in the Black race.

Today, I live in a prejudice cage. However, I am constantly fighting my prejudices because I would be no better than the white men who lynched Black people, all the white jurors in the Scottsboro Boys trial and all who wanted to keep African Americans as second class citizens.