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“Still I Rise”

One day after being confirmed on April 7, 2022 by the United States Senate, and now being feted on the lawn of the White House, Supreme Court Justice-to-be Katanji Brown Jackson spoke to the world. She surely moved it both emotionally and historically. She projected the power of words, including the power of poetry, the latter by reciting one line from a poem by Maya Angelou titled “Still I Rise.”

That one line: “I am the dream and the hope of the slave.” It is in the last stanza of this resonating and haunting poem of human spirit and resilience.

“Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that’s wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.”

The poem appears in “The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou” (1994) published by Random House. There are six copies in the WLN catalogued collection. I borrowed one recently to read the poem in its entirety and in context, so to gain the full power in that one line spoken by Katanji Brown Jackson on that day.

But even that is not enough to realize the poem’s full power. There is more to read that finally breaks the heart. For those of us who have not lived the heartbreak of being enslaved or being treated as a slave in the aftermath of post-Civil War Reconstruction, reading may be the only way that we can begin to know what pain that is. So, as always, I have some reading suggestions, including a few that I may have mentioned before: (1) King, Gilbert, “Devil in the Grove: Thurgood Marshall, the Groveland Boys, and the Dawn of a New America” (2012); (2) Whitehead, Colson, “The Underground Railroad” (2016); (3) Foner, Eric, “Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877” (1988); (4) DuBois, W.E., “Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880” (1935).

It is timely to come back to these books and not too often to mention them. They are so important. The first two, by King and by Whitehead, won Pulitzer Prizes. Foner’s book was a National Book Award finalist. W.E. DuBois is a prize all to himself! Maya Angelou was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize for a previous collection of poetry, “Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'Fore I Diiiie” (1971), which is included in her “Complete Collected Poems.”

These are classics. They frame that emotion-filled moment, that historical moment, when Supreme Court Justice-to-be Katanji Brown Jackson spoke that Maya Angelou line: “I am the dream and the hope of the slave.”

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Reconstruction, not really over in 1877 (Foner) or 1880 (DuBois), even after passage of the 13th, 14th and 15th “Reconstruction Amendments” to the Constitution, has been a long hard slog, but well captured in scholarly literature, a dream that still is. We all need to know it.

Charles B. Greenberg
Board Director, Murrysville Community Library Foundation