

Women in History

Maya Angelou's "On the Pulse of Morning"

By Christopher J. Ryan

President Barack Obama will be publicly sworn-in to begin his second four-year term in office, on Jan. 21. The traditional day, since the institution of the Twentieth Amendment, is Jan. 20, which the President will execute privately. This tradition began in simple form, with only an oath being taken to make the four-year term official. With time, though, traditions have made the Presidential Inauguration an all-day affair, usually having parades, speeches and balls.

As we prepare for this year's event, we remember a highlight in these traditions, when Maya Angelou read her poem, "On the Pulse of Morning," at the Inauguration of President Bill Clinton, in 1993. Angelou was the first African-American woman to read a poem at a Presidential Inauguration. What's more, she received a 1994 Grammy Award in the "Best Spoken Word" category for her recitation.

"On the Pulse of Morning" captures major American cultural motifs like change, social responsibility and economic security. The tree and the river are most commonly associated with development, understanding and fruition in America, the President and its citizens, and the cost of building a nation.

Angelou's poem is a subtle historical reminder that we, as a nation, must always look toward the future. And, like Chinua Achebe writes, "Travelers with closed minds can tell us little except about themselves." We must never forget, as a nation and as individuals, that we are in this together.



Photo: Maya Angelou at President Bill Clinton's inauguration. Via NPR, courtesy of the White House