

FINDING TIES THAT BIND
(Seeking Bernice)

- E-1: Can analyze historical, social and cultural influences on Black female writers, identify commonalities with my experiences and background, and explore my potential for a writing career.
- E-2: Can analyze themes of personal and social development in the writings of Black female Pulitzer prize winners.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Authors' Backgrounds	2
<i>Maya Angelou</i>	2
<i>Toni Morrison</i>	2
<i>Alice Walker</i>	3
Commonalities Noted in Authors' Backgrounds	4
Authors' Experiences and Influences	5
<i>Historical Influences</i>	5
<i>Cultural Influences</i>	5
<i>Religious Influences</i>	6
<i>Social Influences</i>	8
Discussion of Authors' Pulitzer Works	9
<u><i>I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings</i></u> by Maya Angelou – 1969	9
<u><i>Beloved</i></u> by Toni Morrison - 1987	10
<u><i>The Color Purple</i></u> by Alice Walker - 1983.....	10
Common Themes Noted in Authors' Pulitzer Works	11
Intended Audiences for Angelou, Morrison and Walker	12
Personal Tributes to Morrison, Walker and Angelou	14
Writer? – Bernice Grier Johnson (BJ)	16
Background - BJ	16
Commonalities Noted in Authors' Backgrounds and BJ's	17
Cultural, Social and Religious Influences - BJ	18
Commonalities Noted in Authors' Experiences/Influences and BJ's	19
Intended Audiences - BJ	21
Final Comments	21

FINDING TIES THAT BIND

This paper takes a comparative view at the backgrounds, experiences and works of three Pulitzer prize winning Black female writers; namely, Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, for the ultimate purpose of possibly realizing a modicum of writing talent that may be present in this want-to-be writer. I believe that the ability to write well is a God-given talent. However, I also realize that there is extraordinary worth in using personal and cultural experiences to frame and tell stories. I am anticipating that by discovering commonalities in the backgrounds, experiences and works of these three brilliant female writers, coupled with the hope of making a connection with some of these same commonalities in my own life, I will be inspired and encouraged to move forward in fulfilling a writing career. I know that this will be a very humbling experience on my part; even so, I am prepared to undertake this initiative.

Without further ado:

Authors' Backgrounds

Maya Angelou

Maya Angelou was born Marguerite Johnson on April 4, 1928 in St. Louis, Missouri. She is the second child of Bailey, a doorkeeper and naval dietician and Vivian Baxter, a nurse and realtor. Maya Angelou has one sibling, a brother, Bailey. The name "Maya" resulted from her brother trying to say "my sister". When Maya Angelou was seven years old, she was raped and left traumatized, not talking for four years. During this time, Maya became a voracious reader of literature. When she did start talking again, it was with great eloquence. Because of Maya Angelou's turbulent childhood, she was promiscuous at an early age and was pregnant at the age of sixteen. By the time Maya Angelou was in her early twenties, she had been a Creole cook, a streetcar conductor, a cocktail waitress, a dancer, a poet, a madam and an unwed mother. Maya's last name "Angelou" is from her former marriage to a man named Tosh Angelou. By the end of the 1950s, Angelou became increasingly interested in developing her skills as a writer. She moved to New York where she joined the Harlem Writers Guild.

Toni Morrison

Toni Morrison was born Chloe Anthony Wofford on February 18, 1931 in Lorain, Ohio. Her father, George Wofford, was a shipyard welder; her mother, Ramah Willis Wofford, was a housewife. Toni Morrison is the second of four children. She graduated with honors from Lorain High School. Toni Morrison attended Howard University, where she majored in English and minored in classics. It was in college when she changed her name to Toni [explaining] that people had trouble pronouncing "Chloe." Ms. Morrison earned a master's degree in English at Cornell in 1955. Afterwards, she returned to Howard to teach English. At Howard she met and married Harold Morrison, a Jamaican architect. As the marriage was ending, Morrison returned

to Lorain, Ohio with her two small sons, Harold Ford and Slade Kevin. After Morrison's divorce, she moved to Syracuse, New York in 1965, where she worked as a textbook editor. Eighteen months later she went to work as an editor at the New York City headquarters of Random House. In 1989, Toni Morrison accepted the Robert Goheen Professorship in creative writing, women's studies, and African studies at Princeton University, becoming the first black female to be so honored by the Ivy League.

Alice Walker

Alice Walker was born on February 9, 1944 in Eatonton, Georgia. Alice was the eighth and last child of Willie Lee and Minnie Lou Grant Walker who were sharecroppers. Alice Walker is deeply proud of her cultural mixed heritage of African and Cherokee Indian. When Alice Walker was eight years old, she lost sight in one eye when her oldest brother shot her with a BB gun by accident. She graduated from high school as valedictorian of her class. Alice attended Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia for two years and then transferred to Sarah Lawrence College in New York. In 1964, Alice traveled to Africa as an exchange student. She received her Bachelor of Arts Degree from Sarah Lawrence in 1965. After finishing college, Alice Walker lived for a short time in New York. She moved to Tougaloo, Mississippi in the mid 1970s. Alice Walker currently lives in Northern California with her dog, Marley.

Commonalities Noted in Authors' Backgrounds

Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker were all born into lower socioeconomic families. According to experts, such as David Shaffer, children who are born into lower socioeconomic family units tend to be destined for blue-collar work, adhering to rules and regulations.

“For example, parents from the lower socioeconomic stratus, who typically work for a boss and must defer to his or her authority, tend to stress obedience, neatness, cleanliness, and respect for power – attributes that should enable their children to function effectively within a blue-collar economy. By contrast, middle-class parents, particularly those who work for themselves or who are professionals, are more likely to stress ambition, curiosity, creativity, and independence ...” (Shaffer 582)

These three authors, obviously, are exceptions to this generalization. This exceptional commonality underscores the authors' innate intellectual abilities to be creative writers.

Maya Angelou and Alice Walker both suffered traumatic childhood experiences. Walker lost sight in one eye and Angelou was raped, rendering both to be withdrawn as children. But this unfortunate loneliness allowed each to become avid readers, which has had a huge impact on their abilities to write well. Toni Morrison and Alice Walker both excelled in school, giving each a sense of early achievement, instilling pride and self-confidence in their intellectual abilities. Maya Angelou is an exception to anyone's measure of intellectual ability, given that she is largely self-educated.

Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison both changed their given names – Ms. Angelou explaining “Maya” as an affectionate name given to her by her brother, and Toni citing people's inability to pronounce “Chloe.” “Toni” is taken from her given middle name “Anthony.”

Angelou, Morrison, and Walker are single parents. This single-parental role is thematic in their storytelling. In Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, it is clear from her

constant references to her grandmother, who was the only stable force in Angelou's young life, that Angelou gives much heartfelt credit to the grandmother's single parent role in shaping her as a strong Black female and instilling moral character within herself and her brother. In Morrison's Beloved, the central character Sethe is a single mother trying to cope with her recluse teenager, Denver. In Walker's The Color Purple, the central character Celie takes on the role of a single parent to her sister Nettie.

Authors' Experiences and Influences

Historical Influences

Historically, the effect of colonization has had a direct impact on women writers. That is to say, women's writings usually encompass a voice, whether faint or demanding, for fair treatment, equality and acceptance. Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is an autobiographical account of Angelou's struggles as a young girl left traumatized from being taken advantage of by a Black male family-friend. In Beloved, Toni Morrison explores the experience and roles of black women in a racist and male dominated society. Also, Alice Walker's novel, The Color Purple, centers around the mistreatment, inequality and total disregard for women.

Cultural Influences

Maya Angelou's works depict "an impulse towards transcendence."¹ African-American culture is rooted in the belief that one must rise above one's humble beginnings, bad experiences and life challenges. Also in keeping with Angelou's African Southern roots, she acknowledges her superstitious nature in I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings:

¹ Angelou Quote: http://voices.cla.umn.edu/vg/Bios/entries/angelou_maya.html

“Naturally, I believed in hants and ghosts and thangs. Having been raised by a super-religious Southern Negro grandmother, it would have been abnormal had I not been superstitious.” (129)

Culturally, mysticism has always been associated with African storytelling. In the center of Morrison’s complex and multilayered narratives is the unique cultural inheritance of African-Americans. Morrison credits her parents for acquainting her with the black lore mysticism that permeates her fiction. Morrison confesses in an interview with Jean Strouse - *Newsweek Magazine*: “We were intimate with the supernatural. We were always begging them to repeat the stories that terrified us the most.”

Culturally, nonetheless, one’s storytelling can employ negative criticism from its related community. For example, Alice Walker’s The Color Purple exemplifies so well how culturally the “airing of dirty laundry” can have a negative impact. Alice Walker received great criticism from the Black community, especially from Black men, in her “negative” depictions of Black men in The Color Purple. On the other hand, we see Alice Walker’s cultural roots in The Same River Twice – Honoring the Difficult, an autobiography. In Honoring the Difficult, Walker is finding that she can maintain joy in her life even in the midst of tremendous pain. Surviving in the midst of tremendous pain has been a constant for African Americans. In Walker’s and Angelou’s works, we see them steadfastly maintaining themselves in the midst of their storms.

Religious Influences

In preparation for this segment of my paper, I read *Black Female Writers’ Perspective on Religion: Alice Walker and Calixthe Beyala*. I learned that traditionally, Black female writers’ treatment of religious issues, due in most part to their belated start to write literature, reprimanded and challenged the Black community to rid itself of the harmful patriarchal symbol representing God; that renders God as nothing more than a mere man of white hair and skin that

literally enslaved Black women for so long. Alternatively, these writers have urged the Black community to replace this male-symbolism of God with the image of God as being nature all around – trees, flowers, wind and dirt – as seen through the eyes of Walker’s female protagonist, Sug Avery, in The Color Purple.

Maya Angelou’s poem “Our Grandmothers” dramatizes so well Black women’s plight and past and/or present contemptuous attitudes toward mainstream religion:

“Our Grandmothers who stood in midocean, seeking dry land./She searched God’s face./ Assured, she placed her fire of service / On the altar, and though clothed in the finery of faith when/She appeared at the templedoor no sign welcomed/Black Grandmother.”²

Toni Morrison’s contempt for the traditional perspective of God is quite apparent in her novel The Bluest Eye. Morrison does not limit God to the traditional Western belief of Father, Son and Holy Ghost, rather she depicts a fourth face of God – a “redesigned Satan.” As Pecola is thrown out of Geraldine’s house, she sees a portrait of an Anglicized Jesus “looking down at her with sad and unsurprised eyes” (76) an image of God who seems either incapable of helping her or complicit in her suffering.

With this portrait of Jesus, Morrison introduces us to one of the shortcomings of the Western model of God, namely the problem of how a supposedly omnipotent and loving God can allow the existence of evil and suffering. Morrison reintroduces this model of an inadequate God, of a deity incapable of alleviating or unwilling to rectify the injustices of human society ...”
(2)

From Angelou’s, Morrison’s and Walker’s religious perspectives, there is mutually recognizable contempt for a “male” humanized God. This view is in keeping with early Black female writers who rejected traditional Western beliefs of God as all merciful and just,

² *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou*, p.19.

particularly in the face of the Black female's enslavement and domesticated mistreatment by men.

Social Influences

Demonstrating their respect and concern for others, these three prolific authors have been involved in many social activities. Angelou, Morris and Walker serve as universal social activists worthy of emulation.

Maya Angelou was very active in the tumultuous civil rights era, acting as northern coordinator for Martin Luther King Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference. She has been and still is an out spoken proponent for women support groups, advocating against violence and adversity toward women. Maya Angelou explains her membership in three different churches as viewing the church as a way to "literally reach out into the community."

Alice Walker has been a staunch supporter for countless social causes. She has written and spoken out for the women's movement, the anti-apartheid movement, the anti-nuclear movement, and female genital mutilation.

Toni Morrison has been an influential force for many during her professorships at Howard, Texas Southern, Yale, and Princeton Universities. Among her students have been the poet Amiri Baraka; Andrew Young, former mayor of Atlanta Georgia; Stokely Carmichael, civil rights activist; and Claude Brown, author of *Manchild in the Promised Land*. Morrison also nurtured Black authors such as Angela Davis, June Jordan and Wesley Brown.

Discussion of Authors' Pulitzer Works

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings by Maya Angelou – 1969

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings illustrates so well Angelou's proclivity for command of words. Ms. Angelou has the ability to use words and language that express deep heartfelt joy as well as sadness. This first work of Maya Angelou's is an autobiography of her early years. This book reflects the essence of her struggle to overcome the abuse and limitations that were placed upon her as a child. I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings inspires and encourages us to persevere in our own challenges with the assured belief that still we "shall rise."

Maya Angelou is gifted with linguistic and analytical intelligencies. Her work is analytical in nature as she writes about her adoration for her younger brother and her sympathy for her forelorned father:

"Of all the needs (there are none imaginary) a lonely child has, the one that must be satisfied, if there is going to be hope and a hope of wholeness, is the unshaking need for an unshakable God. My pretty Black brother was my Kingdom Come." (22-23)

Of her father she writes:

It seemed hard to believe that he was a lonely person, searching relentlessly in bottles, under women's skirts ... lofty job titles for his "personal niches," lost before birth and unrecovered since. It was obvious to me then that he had never belonged in Stamps, How maddening it was to have been born in a cotton field with aspirations of grandeur."(179)

Maya Angelou also analyzes herself as she takes on her roles as granddaughter, sister, niece, daughter, step-daughter, student and victim. Angelou's analytical perspectives about others and self are the keystones for her writings.

Beloved by Toni Morrison - 1987

Beloved is an excellent, no brilliant, example of a writer who assigns the reader to be the interpreter. Morrison's multi-layered work astounds us with its genius. In preparing for this paper, I read "*To be Loved and Cry Shame*": *A psychological reading of Toni Morrison's Beloved* by Lynda Koolish, an author and professor of English and Comparative Literature at San Diego State University. I was intrigued by Koolish's spin on the novel, probably because of my interest in psychology. Koolish suggests that Beloved is a story about the continuous attempt for psychic wholeness stemming from the aftermath of slavery, given the horrific events that took place during that time. Koolish's take is that Beloved's character is a multiple personality of Sethe's, the central character in the novel. Due to the horrific act of killing her children, Sethe creates multiple personalities, i.e., Beloved, Amy Denver, among others. Koolish's psychological rendering about Beloved at first seem to be a stretch but as one absorbs her spin, could not it be possible? Now that I have reread Beloved at this point and time in my life and am more open to accepting and appreciating others' opinions and interpretations, I believe Beloved to be as ambiguous as Morrison intended it to be. The ambiguity of Beloved is the premium force behind the novel. Given this, I do believe that not just one interpretation was intended; spins such as Koolish's just add to the deliberate cleverness and elusiveness of the story.

The Color Purple by Alice Walker - 1983

The Color Purple is a beautiful yet disturbing story about love, hate, yearning and loss. This is a story about a young woman and the mental and physical mistreatment of her by the Black men in her life. This young woman finds love in and empathy from another woman. This taboo relationship is at the source of the story as well as the main character's yearning for her lost sister and stolen children. This novel makes us painfully aware of how a human spirit can be

beaten down and left to die unless it wills itself to find survival out of the sheer grace of God. Celie, the main character, writes letters to God in a journal-like form which is cathartic in and of itself. It is clear that her writing to God gives Celie a safe place to deposit her intimate feelings and thoughts; in turn, giving the reader insight into her extraordinary spirit. Her physical ugliness is a matter of her environment and condition but her spirit is captured in her writings. Here is where I believe Walker dually demonstrates so well how writing can be one of the most useful tools in expressing and revealing one's inter-self as well as relating to and encouraging others to rise above their circumstances.

Common Themes Noted in Authors' Pulitzer Works

Four major themes among the three writers' works: (1) facing human tragedy; (2) overcoming adversity; (3) challenging perceptions and images; and (4) mysticism. An overarching theme in all three works is strong Black women.

In Angelou's, Morrison's and Walker's storytelling, there is a lot of human tragedy, i.e. rapes and killings. There is the rape of Angelou by her mother's boyfriend; the rape and hanging of Sethe's mother by a white angry mob; the rape of young Celie by her mother's husband. We have the apparent killing of Angelou's rapist. Celie's father is lynched and killed by white men because he has a thriving farm.

One huge lesson that permeates all three novels is: people can overcome the most difficult of circumstances. There is an attempt for psychological healing in the three main characters in each novel. Angelou gives glory to God in healing her mind. Celie finds solace in her life in writing to God. Toni Morrison's Sethe's mind splits in order to survive. The three main characters in each story seek redemption, forgiveness and peace.

There has been criticism about the misrepresentation and images of Black men in Angelou's, Morrison's and Walker's works. I think this unfair criticism lends itself to the unfair rendering of one being anti-white because they profess to be pro-Black. Because these authors write about strong Black women, this does not render them to be anti-Black male. There was wide criticism in the Black community about the representation of Black men in The Color Purple, particularly from the Black male's point of view. One such critic was Alvin Poussaint, M.D., professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School:

“... reintroduced tensions between Black men and Black women a decade ago ... because of its theme of Black male mistreatment of Black women in one Black family.”

There is also the peppering of mysticism in their storytelling. Angelou as a young girl – stops talking and when she resumes talking, it is with great eloquence. Sethe's baby girl is a ghost that has invaded her home. Celie signs to Mister with her hands as to put a hex on him. The use of mysticism in their storytelling can be credited to their African ancestries.

Intended Audiences for Angelou, Morrison and Walker (Who do Angelou, Morrison and Walker Write for?)

When I first began this project, I asked friends of mine whose personal and professional opinions I respected: “What would you want to know most about your favorite writer?” The most popular responses were: “Who do they write for; and why do they write?”

Dr. Maya Angelou is a remarkable Renaissance woman who is hailed as one of the great voices of contemporary literature. As a poet, educator, historian, best-selling author, actress, playwright, civil-rights activist, producer and director, she continues to travel the world, spreading legendary wisdom. Maya Angelou has inspired generations with her talent and passion for social change. In most of her writings, it is her contention to help people, especially children,

who are struggling in life. Maya Angelou is fluent in English, French, Spanish, Italian, Arabic and Ghanian Fante. Although Maya Angelou is often introduced as “Dr.” Maya Angelou, she does not have a college degree. All of her doctorates are honorary. Maya Angelou captivates audiences through the vigor and sheer beauty of her words and lyrics.

In 1993 while giving a lecture at Princeton, Morrison was asked by a student “who she wrote for?” Morrison replied,

“I want to write for people like me, which is to say black people, curious people, demanding people -- people who can’t be faked, people who don’t need to be patronized, people who have very, very high criteria.”³

Toni Morrison’s work is very challenging to read, indeed. I first attempted to read Beloved about 20 years ago. I have to admit I had not a clue as to what was going on in the beginning, in the middle, nor at the end of the story, zilch. In re-reading the narrative now with “all of my lights on,” I am amazed at every line. Toni Morrison engages us to think and think and think about the contention of the text.

The Same River Twice - Honoring the Difficult, is the autobiography of Alice Walker. In this book, Walker is very honest and open about her bisexuality, her broken relationships and her heartbreak over the misconception about her “apparent” distain for Black men. Alice Walker writes to encourage men and women to develop and honor “self” in whatever form may materialize. This concept is very present in her writing in the self-development of the central character Celie in The Color Purple. It is also apparent in Walker’s depiction of her self-development as well.

³ Morrison Quote: http://voices.cla.umn.edu/vg/Bios/entries/morrison_toni.html

Personal Tributes to Morrison, Walker and Angelou

I have to admit when I first decided upon this endeavor, I secretly hoped to find commonalities between myself and Toni Morrison. She is my favorite of the three authors. I love the way she writes, with such intelligence and cleverness. I had the pleasure of meeting Ms. Morrison at her book signing for Love in Chicago in 2004. While waiting in line for almost three hours, I pondered what I would say to her. Perhaps something like: "You are my favorite author. I have always wanted to meet you. I am one of your biggest fans. I admire you," etc. But when I finally met and spoke to her, all I could say was, "You are absolutely beautiful." She looked up at me and gave me a huge smile and said "Thank you." I tried to capture her smile with my cheap camera (needless to say, the photo image was poor) but, I have that beautiful image on my desk at home. I am not one easily impressed by people, but my meeting Toni Morrison that day made my year.

But then, there is Alice Walker -- and I am -- "*Seeking Bernice.*" At this point in my life, I have a very strong desire to discover my God given talent, which means discovering the essence of who God meant me to be. Honesty can be an agonizing, soul searching experience, as Ms. Walker demonstrates so well in "Honoring the Difficult." Pain promotes growth in all of us. I am attempting to do that right now as I write and finish this paper. I feel very vulnerable but yet open to where this journey may take me. I am so disturbed at the thought of -- is this all there is for me? I truly want to get on about the business of finding peace and joy in the rest of my life. I am very cognizant of the fact that I do not want to leave this world without experiencing the joy of realizing my God given talent, discovering my true self. We all deserve that, I truly believe that. I want to fully actualize as a person. I trust that Alice Walker, not only in her work but also in her personal life, has decided to honor the totality of herself and, regardless of what others may

think, abide peacefully in that place giving honor to it. Alice Walker, for me, is a model, a genuine person exercising her inalienable right to be who she is. This is a position I envy and am aspiring to reach.

Now that I have reread Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, my mind and heart are open to what it really means to "rise above one's circumstances." Ms. Angelou in I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings leaves to no one's imagination what it feels like to be raped at eight years old, the accompanying pain, the required strength and the ever-present knowledge of having been violated as a child and no one saved you, not even the "Green Hornet" or Almighty God.

"... His legs were squeezing my waist. "Pull down your drawers." I hesitated for two reasons: he was holding me too tight to move, and I was sure that any minute my mother or Bailey or the Green Hornet would bust in the door and save me. ...

"We was just playing before." He released me enough to snatch down my bloomers, and then he dragged me closer to him. Turning the radio up loud, too loud, he said, "If you scream, I'm gonna kill you. And if you tell, I'm gonna kill Bailey." ...

Then there was the pain. A breaking and entering when even the senses are torn apart. The act of rape on an eight-year old body is a matter of the needle giving because the camel can't. The child gives, because the body can, and the mind of the violator cannot.

... "I didn't mean to hurt you, Ritie. I didn't mean it. But don't you tell. ... Remember, don't you tell a soul." (63)

... Walking down the street, I felt the wet on my pants, and my hips seemed to be coming out their sockets. I couldn't sit long on the hard seats in the library (they had been constructed for children), ...I had started to burn between my legs more than the time I'd wasted Sloan's Liniment on myself. My legs throbbed, or rather the insides of my thighs throbbed, with the same force that Mr. Freeman's heart had beaten. ..." (64)

Maya Angelou's account of this rape, coupled with the realization that she and her brother were not the most important considerations in their parent's peculiar lives is heartbreaking. She gives us a lesson in how the "unconsidered" can find solace in each other,

which is absolutely inspiring and effective in helping hold little broken hearts together. Ms. Angelou writes about her personal life experiences, encouraging others to learn. I know why the caged bird sings – it sings because it must – or it will die. But it also sings to inspire others to sing so they can live as well. Angelou’s writings have been described as “joy and hope riding in a river of liquid prose.”⁴ How absolutely true.

Given my personal heartfelt tributes to Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Maya Angelou, I have to concede that I did not find strong connections between my background and experiences as they relate to the backgrounds and experiences of these three beautiful writers. However, I am still inspired.

Writer?
(Seeking Bernice)
Background - BJ

Bernice Grier Johnson – “BJ”

I was born Bernice Ann Grier in a small southern town in LaGrange, Georgia on May 20, 1951. I was raised by both parents and shared them with five other siblings, myself being the fourth child. We lived on an unpaved street in a “shotgun” framed house with two and a half bedrooms, a kitchen and living room. *(Honoring the difficult)* My mother never attended school, and my dad had a sixth-grade education and worked in the town’s textile mill. My brothers, sisters and I attended the combined local Black elementary and high school, East Depot.

⁴Kelly Luker Quote: <http://www.metroactive.com/papers/cruz/02.20.97/maya-angelou-9708.html>

Commonalities Noted in Authors' Backgrounds and BJ's

I also share a "low socioeconomic" background with the three authors. However, I tended to and I deliberately use this past tense, followed the general rule of adhering to rules and regulations while my brave three authors were exceptions. I too was a good student but had little ambition.

I, too, like Alice Walker, was born in Georgia and claim my African and maternal Indian heritages, I suspect for the same reason that Alice Walker does. African Americans have very short traceable origins – we claim what we can. One of the main reasons we are rendered confused about our identities today is because of the slave trade in which we were severed from our roots. My mother as well had a very superstitious nature that grew out of her African and Indian cultures. My younger brother had asthma really bad and at night he could not sleep. My mother sought remedies from Ms. Inez, "the known old voodoo woman" across the street. The woman advised my mother to let my brother sleep on a tree branch underneath his mattress that had as many notches in it as his age and at night to give him tea from pine trees. I am not sure what effect, if any, this really had, but I have to say I do not fully discount it. Voodoo is the oldest religion known to man and, supposedly, teaches a respect for the natural world which is in keeping with the image of God being nature all around, which is what our intelligent and profoundly gifted Alice Walker believes.

Also, I found it interesting that Toni Morrison was married to an architect at one time. My husband, Phillip, is an architect. What this means on the surface to me is that we both are attracted to smart and creative men. On another level, it can mean an innate appreciation for the arts. One of the things that my husband and I did a lot, at my insistence, was visit The Art Institute of Chicago. He introduced me to the concept of finding something interesting or

something to like about a piece of exhibited art work, whether through color, lines, blends, interpretation, subject matter, texture, depth, contrast or perspective. Needless to say, I had a familiar and successful experience in Art History 101.

I am also wrestling with and possibly trying to ignore, which does not make it nonetheless a fact, is that virtually every successful author I have ever read about has been an avid reader. I know that reading and listening to stories does give one a profound appreciation for storytelling. (*Honoring the Difficult*) This important ingredient is absent from my background. In the forward of Beloved, Toni Morrison shares a very key element in writing a successful novel. Morrison advises: "you invent the character then the story is spawn around that character." This may be elementary to some, but not to me.

Through additional reading about Toni Morrison, I have learned that Toni Morrison has been criticized about her work. Gauthier, Marni- Professor of English at SUNY-Courtland, in an article in The African American Review, accuses Morrison of "redressing the limited perspectives of mainstream United States history by reclaiming the narratives of African American history, particularly from a female point of view" and falsely reconstructing history in terms of "Subverting traditional accounts of US history." (395)

However, given this important absent ingredient, I still believe that I can be a worthy writer. At this point, I am entertaining the idea that while I may not become a successful novel writer, perhaps my forte would be more in keeping with Maya Angelou --to write about my own personal experiences or something thematic like "coming out of the basement into the light."

Cultural, Social and Religious Influences -BJ

During my early childhood and adolescent years, I did not have any interaction with people outside of my race. I used to love to go shopping with my mother in our small downtown

area because these trips afforded me the opportunity to stare and surmise about people who did not look like me. My siblings and I were brought up in two churches. My mother was Baptist. We attended her church, First Baptist, on the first and second Sundays of each month. First Baptist was the “icon” Black church in LaGrange. I was a member of the Children’s Usher Board and also sang in the choir. I enjoyed my Sundays there, but would have preferred to attend my *daddy’s* church every Sunday.

My *daddy* is Methodist. My *daddy’s* church is Wilson Chapel. The church is located in Stoval, Georgia, which is the birthplace of my *daddy’s* American family. Stoval is in a very rural area of Georgia, approximately ten miles southeast of La Grange, Georgia where I was born. We attended church at Wilson Chapel only on the third Sundays of each month with the exception of funerals, which were always sure to be one of a relative. The Grier Cemetery is located just across the road from the church. My family has lived and died in this small, relatively unknown place in Georgia for over 150 years. This has been a special place for me where I acquired a great sense of family values and pride. I suppose I took to heart what my evaluator in Foundations at SNL noted: “... with time you will be able to write a fine book ...”⁵

Commonalities Noted in Authors’ Experiences/Influences and BJ’s

Assessing the ability to write well using the comparative-commonality theory was not looking too promising for me in terms of my initiation into being an able writer. Then I found the following excerpt from an article entitled “*Black female writers shake things up- Shaking the Tree* – by Jennifer Mattson:

“At last, a number of older Black women writers can stop holding their breath and exhale,” writes Maya Angelou in her praise for *Shaking the Tree*: A

⁵ [See attached original comments.]

collection of *New Fiction and Memoir by Black Women*, ... The new anthology showcases the next generation of African-American female writers who are defining a new era of contemporary American literature.

Shaking is made up of 23 excerpted essays and chapters from books published in the 1990s. Weaned on the works of Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou and Jamaica Kincaid, the authors are their mothers' daughters, and yet nothing like them. They are the children of black power, Fat Albert, and the Reagan and Bush presidencies. Unlike their parents, this new wave of writers doesn't see the world in black and white. They are biracial and multicultural – children of mixed heritage who identify as black and white.

... Alice Walker's daughter, Rebecca Walker, writes about being black and Jewish. After moving from the Bronx to the predominately white New York suburbs, Walker is painfully aware that others perceive her as black, although she never identifies herself that way.

... and Walker, like several authors in the anthology, write about outgrowing the rigid classifications of race, while, unfortunately, the people around them have not. The collection is filled with stories of black women trying to find their way in a world unknown to their parents. ...”

I felt that this excerpt was important in illustrating how one's social environment can have as big an impact on one's frame of reference in telling stories, coupled with and/or aside from, one's cultural inheritance. However, it is quite evident to me that their mothers' mere revolutionary styles have impacted their desires to be revolutionary writers as well.

The message this excerpt sends to me is that there is a need for a new era of Black female writers; that I need not be “in keeping” with my “idolized” brilliant female authors; that I can perhaps carve out a writing career that can speak to “today's mature woman” who is trying to realize a deferred dream, with an ambition to change her impending destiny; and that I may be able to help younger women who may be confused about their identifies or worth in society etc.

Intended Audiences - BJ

An essay that I wrote and of which I am very proud is *Beauty Transcends Ethnicity*. It addresses the need for all young women to have obtainable models to emulate in order to derive a sense of appreciating and maintaining a sense of pride in their own ethnicity. In this essay, I tried to deliver the message that to be an authentic part of society, one's ethnicity does not have to be compromised. A general sentiment, the "melting pot" theory -- "if we just keep fucking each other, we will all eventually look alike" -- is a cop out. It is my opinion that we need to acknowledge, respect and appreciate our differences.

Final Comments

When I first began this project, I did not envision the cathartic value that it would bring to my life. Comparing, examining and acknowledging areas of my life that I am proud of and ashamed of has brought an awareness that is exciting but at the same time unsettling. I know without a doubt that "all is not well." I am rewarded with a good salary on a job that is unrewarding to me in terms of utilizing and challenging my intellectual abilities. When I first started at SNL, students were given a hand out "A Proper Education" by Charles Handy, which addresses the importance to recognize and develop one's natural intelligences. Throughout the SNL program, I have learned that I have pretty good analytical skills. I am convinced that in order for Bernice to fully actualize, I must explore avenues that will allow me to use these "pretty good analytical skills." At one point, I seriously thought about aborting this project because the consistency of discovering the brilliances of my three authors and having the audacity to compare myself to the likes of Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker was beginning to feel like psychological suicide. Life experiences and hard lessons sometimes threaten who God intended

us to be. I have been a witness to too many people who have resigned themselves into a life of “come what may.” I do not want to be a lifelong member.

(Honoring the Difficult) - I thank God for giving me the insight and courage to explore with a passion-filled heart the hope of finding my true talent in a craft that I can fall in love with and one that others can appreciate.

This has truly been an *intimate* experience.

Annotated Bibliography

Allen, Alexander. "The fourth face: The image of God in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*."

African American Review 32 (1998): 293-304.

This piece "... Focuses on the religious aspects of Afro-American history, as portrayed in Toni Morrison's novel 'The Bluest.' Question of what the fourth face of God represents; Indication that Morrison's portrayal of God owes much to African tradition, but retains certain Western characteristics; Variation African perspectives on the existence of evil; In-depth look at the book." This is a peer review article. This reading has helped me to understand why Morrison writes from the "negative" point of view of God. Very relevant to understanding Toni Morrison's frame of reference in writing about religion and God.

"Alice Walker Page." *Anniias*. 22 Jan. 2006

<<http://www.luminarium.org/contemporary/alicew/>>.

I used this website as a reference for biographical information on Alice Walker.

Angelou, Maya. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. 1969. *The Complete Collected*

Autobiographies of Maya Angelou. Trans. Modern Library. New York: Random House, 2004. 7-222.

First series in this anthology. Angelou's Pulitzer winning work is about growing up in the 1930's and 40's. Maya Angelou's life as Marguerite Johnson in Stamps, Arkansas; St. Louis and California. This was useful to read to get an understanding of her childhood experiences that is vividly presented in her work. This personal account of Angelou's life demonstrates so well how one can transcend one's bad experiences in life and share these experiences with others to learn from.

--. "Our Grandmothers." *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou*. N.p.: n.p., 1994.19.

Colombo, Gary, Bonnie Lisle, and Sandra Mano. Frame Work: Culture, Storytelling, and College Writing. Boston: Bedford Books, 1997.

This text book encourages students to take into account the value of their cultural affiliations which can greatly influence their growth as writers. I found this book very helpful in my writing class at SNL. Very instrumental in helping me to use my frame of reference to write about myself.

Gauthier, Marni. "The Other Side of Paradise: Toni Morrison's (Un) Making of Mythic History." African American Review 39.3 (2005): 395-414.

This peer review article criticizes Morrison for perpetuating the abused-female card and falsely reconstructing history in her work. Personally, getting a different take on Morrison's work allowed me to realize that "not everybody is a fan" – that there is always going to be criticism regarding one's work – no matter if they are a Pulitzer winner.

Handy, Charles. "A Proper Education," Change – September/October 1998.

Handout in SNL Foundations – addresses the importance to recognize and develop one's natural intelligence.

Koolish, Lynda, Ph. D. "To be Loved and Cry Shame: A Psychological Reading of Toni Morrison's Beloved." Geocities.com. 4 Oct. 2006

<<http://www.geocities.com/tarbabyu2007/beloved18.html>>.

Lynda Koolish, an author and professor of English and Comparative Literature at San Diego State University, suggests that Beloved is a story about the continuous attempt for psychic wholeness stemming from the aftermath of slavery. I believe Koolish's ideas are valid. She is an expert in the field of literary review. This was very useful information in terms of trying to understand Toni Morrison's complex work. This reading certainly

helped me to understand Beloved which was essential in helping me to write about this novel.

Luker, Kelly. Rev. of Poet and Essayist Maya Angelou Transcends Race and Gender.

MetroActive. 9 Mar. 2007

<<http://www.metroactive.com/papers/cruz/02.20.97/maya-angelou-9708.html>>.

Mañimo, Wirba Ibrahim. "Black Female Writers' Perspective on Religion: Alice Walker and Calixthe Beyala." Journal of Third World Studies 19.1 (2002): 117-136.

The main idea here is to help one to understand the perspectives of early Black female writers in their treatment of religious issues, i.e. images of God. Dr. Mañimo specializes in African literary studies. This article helps one to understand the black female writers' treatment of religious issues due to the invisibility and silence imposed on them by Western traditional norms and due in part to their delayed start in writing literature. This article was very helpful in helping me understand the different perspectives of Black female writers concerning God and religion from my authors' points of view and early female writers.

Mattson, Jennifer. "Black Female Writers Shake Things Up." USA Today Dec. 2003

<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx>.

This is part of an introduction to an anthology, based in part, about female writers outgrowing the rigid classifications of race. I found this reading very essential in helping me to consider other subject matter to write about.

"Maya Angelou." African American Literature Book Club. 9 Mar. 2007

<<http://authors.aalbc.com/maya.htm>>.

I used this website for biographical information for Maya Angelou.

Morrison, Toni. Beloved. New York: Vintage, 2004.

This is Toni Morrison's Pulitzer winning novel first published in 1987.

Because this book is so clever and elusive, re-reading it and reading Koolish's interpretation about Beloved aided in my understanding about the storyline. This was important to me as a learner, accepting and appreciating others' ideas and opinions is imperative to learning new perspectives about many things.

--. The Bluest Eye. New York: Knopf, 1993

This novel was first published in 1970. This story is about an eleven year old Black girl, Pecola Breedlove. She wishes for blue eyes so that she will be beautiful and therefore people will love her. After much yearning, her wish, for her, comes true and she steps into insanity. This complex book is an excellent example of illustrating class denomination and self hatred within the Black community. Re-reading The Bluest Eye gave me some insight into Morrison's perspective on religion and issues of racial controversy.

Poussaint, Alvin. "Enough already!" Ebony 48.4 (1993): 86-88.

This article discusses and contributes to the discord in the Black community regarding Alice Walker's perceived dislike of Black men in her work. This criticism is important because it comes from within the Black community from a respected peer.

Shaffer, David. Developmental Psychology – Childhood and Adolescence. Pacific Grove:

Brooks/Cole, 1993.

David Shaffer is an expert in child psychology. This textbook gives descriptions and explanations about children's and adolescents' behavioral development and changes that occur over the course of their lives.

Strouse, Jean. Interview "Toni Morrison's Black Magic," Newsweek, 30 March 1981, 54.

This is an interview with Toni Morrison giving homage to her family members for her execution of mythical characters and frame of reference to the super natural. Again, it is important to construct stories around one's cultural experiences.

"Toni Morrison Nobel Prize in Literature/Biography." Nobel Prize.Org. 9Mar. 2007

http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1993/morrison-bio.html>.

An online reference for Toni Morrison's background information. Relevant in helping me understand and write about her early beginnings which greatly impacts Morrison's writings.

Walker, Alice. The Color Purple. New York: Washington Square Press, 1982.

This book is Alice Walker's Pulitzer winning novel. This is a story about a young woman and the mental and physical mistreatment of her by the Black men in her life.

Personally, here is where I believe Walker dually demonstrates how writing can be one of the most useful tools in expressing and revealing one's inter-self as well as relating to and encouraging others to rise above their circumstances.

--. The Same River Twice: Honoring the Difficult. New York: Washington Square Press, 1996.

This book is Alice Walker's autobiography. It helps us to understand the writer and her philosophy. Personally, this book teaches an important lesson in qualifying and giving honor to one's personal experiences whether good or bad. These experiences make up the person we are.

Attachment:

(Original comments from SNL Foundations Instructor Re: *Learning Autobiography: Bernice Grier Johnson.*)