

WRIT 1700B Portfolio 2 | Familiar Essay

Value: 15% of your final grade (+ 1% CR applied from participation).

Due: Assign 2.3 *Draft*—for *Tutorial*, eClass Feb 15, 11:59PM, Assign. 2.4, **Final—eClass, Feb 22, 11:59PM. Note that this is in Winter term Reading week.**

Length: 6-7 double-spaced pages (no more than 2500 words), excluding works cited + CR

Instructions:

- Compose a full *familiar essay* as per the requirements above. For this paper, your audience is “well-informed layperson,” Imagine writing for *The Globe and Mail* or *The New York Times* and their readership. Consult course models in matters of style.
- For this assignment, you are required to use at least two published sources (essays, novels, short stories, poems, and so on, as per 2.2), one scene (2.1), and include a *Beginning* and an *Ending* for your essay. Your paper must show *movement* between sources and ample *thought-reflection*. You may include a third source and/or close off your narrative with a second (short) scene that acts as a resolution for your *Journey*.
- Essays of this type do not ordinarily call for a “Works Cited” list; citation is normally done within the text, *without* parenthetical documentation. For this essay, omit the parenthetical documentation within the text; write in your sources (as per Catalli). But include a “Works Cited” list at the end of your essay.
- Include an *epigraph* that helps illustrate your *Idea* or your solution.
- Your TA will arrange for Peer review for assignment 1.3 (just like the Fall term).
- Please review “Housekeeping” in the Syllabus for formatting requirements. Word or PDF format please!

Please Note:

- You are not locked into a final scene or source until the portfolio is due. You may change your mind about your subject or source at any time. All Portfolio assignments must be completed once and uploaded to eClass.
- Remember the structure of *the Journey* and incorporate it into your work. Do you return and reintegrate (show evidence of growth and new understanding)? Remember, *the Journey* can be physical, spiritual, or both. Show us yours! Don’t forget the *moment of change*!
- Remember, if your *Journey* has not been completed, then this is not a good experience to discuss. Avoid traumatic, personal events in favour of positive learning experiences. You don’t need to literally name your paper “How I Learned to Be Awesome!” but that is the general idea. If you got to University, you are a success story. Tell us about it!
- Overall, your purpose in this paper is to use an example, experience, or moment from your life that illustrates a moment of growth or understanding for you. **Communicate this wisdom** to your audience using your *scene*, sources and *Idea* developed in prior assignments.
 - Take into account all the feedback you have received in order to help you continue to analyze and fine-tune your *Idea/Preferred reading*.
 - In other words, do not ‘tack on,’ **integrate** and develop. Be *recursive*. Your work should show evidence of an ongoing writing process.
- You may not use a newspaper article, blog entry, print or online study guide, or any sort of encyclopaedia to fulfill the “sources” requirement for this assignment. However, if you read

any of these sources in completing your assignment, you still must list them in your works cited, and reference them in-text appropriately.

- **For each pre-assignment that is missing from your final submission (including peer-reviewed drafts), 5% may be deducted from the assessed grade of your final draft. If you turn in nothing but a final copy, 15% will be subtracted from Assignment 2.4 (Final) Your tutorial leader may also choose to apply late grades to incomplete assignments.**
- Your TA may have additional advice for success on this assignment.

Composing Reflection #2

- How did you arrive at your subject? Why did you choose it? If your scene does not make it clear, explain how your paper illustrates a *Journey (Self-reflection)*
- Why did you choose the secondary sources you did? How did they speak to you? (*Thinkers*)
- Was this easier or harder than Portfolio 1? Why? (*Reflection*)
- Has your writing process or how you think about your writing process changed since last term? If so, how? Discuss one specific element of the advice given on the course as applied to your work on this portfolio. (*Process*)
- Your TA will also assess if your work grammatically sound and readable (*Technical Soundness*)
- Your composing reflection is a separate piece of work from your familiar essay. Paragraph form is normal (i.e. 3-4 paragraphs) or you may use subheadings. Take care to answer all the questions!

Against All Odds

*Tried to make me
Stop laughin', stop lovin', stop livin' -
But I don't care!
I'm still here!*

~ Langston Hughes, "*Still Here*"

There were rumors of English streets being paved with gold; however, nothing was further from the truth. Ordinary asphalt covered the crowded streets and several people plodded along the concrete pavement where the skeleton of umbrellas had come to rest, even as dirty handkerchiefs (having escaped from pockets), floated aimlessly in the crevices of brick walls. I watched as a young mother with a baby-carriage, moistened her finger with saliva and proceeded to wipe the child's eyes. The vapour from her breath attested to the cold, but at least this spectacle provided a bit of relief from the blaring horns of buses and cars, the screeching of tires and the clanging of bustling industries, which were deafening, to say the least. Thick black smoke spewed from large brick chimneys and unpleasant odours irritated my nose. Even the houses were painted either gray or a murky green and everything looked smoky and dull in this dismal terrain.

As this scene suggests, England was a place where things were never quite what they seemed. I learned this firsthand when in the spring of 1965, while amidst Grade 6, my family emigrated from Jamaica to England. Our island paradise was once a British colony, and for reasons best known to themselves, my parents decided the family would be better off in the so called "motherland". However, it was hard for me to understand how the "motherland" somehow despised her own children. I found myself among people who thought very little of me and made snide racial remarks, which were deeply hurtful. In fact, these conditions almost crushed me at first, but then I decided to use their underestimation of me and my capabilities to fuel my success. Prior to immigrating to England, I perhaps had nothing to prove, but being in foreign quarters, I had everything to prove. Believing myself to be a capable individual, I

decided my path to recovery from the damaging effects of racial discrimination was sheer excellence in all that I did, and this became my mantra.

But it wasn't easy.

Unwittingly, I was enrolled in the school of hard knocks. This new school was only a ten-minute walk from my house, and as mom and I were leaving the house, it was a bright enough morning but rather nippy. I felt good as I walked along the sidewalk confidently with my new satchel slung over my shoulder. In fact, everything about me was new. I was wearing a new overcoat, uniform, and plimsols on my feet. I grinned as an older lady who was walking her dog passed by us and said, "top of the morning." I was on cloud nine - what could possibly go wrong? My excitement about the prospect of making new friends was so great, that the short distance seemed like an eternity. As Mom and I drew closer to the school, there was a man holding a lollipop-like sign who led children across the busy road. While at the front of the school, I noticed several swings, a seesaw, and some slides on a sandy surfaced playground. There were a few shrubs and some large trees but no signs of life. Perhaps it was just too dark and cold for them to survive.

As myself and mom passed through the large creaking door at the school's entrance, we faced a long blue corridor with several doors on each side. This place was huge and with so many large doors, I felt I was in the "Land of the Giants" - fear gripped me. We cautiously entered the dimly lit classroom where there were rows of desks and matching chairs at which several children sat, all crisp and proper. I was duly handed over to the teacher: a pale, pink-skinned lady with piercing blue eyes, who sported a yellow-looking ponytail. While mesmerized by her colourful appearance, I thought "she lived far from the kitchen"¹ and her ruffled green dress had seen better days. I did feel some level of comfort since she seemed

¹ *Jamaican euphemism for being thin.*

genuinely glad to see me and promptly introduced me to the D section of the Grade 6 class. Some of the children said hello, while others just stared. No other child looked like me and so I was led to a wooden desk at the front of the class where I could be on permanent display. There didn't seem to be many Caribbean people in the school, so I was in a minority, along with a few Asians, sprinkled here and there. From my perspective, I was just a person, but it wasn't long before I was termed a *coloured* person. However, seeing that even my teacher had a much more "colourful" appearance than myself, I grappled with that terminology.

Imagine, this was only the first day of school, and I found myself fielding questions from not only my classmates but others also. Although I told them I was from Jamaica, they queried whether I came from Africa, and if I lived in a tree. During recess nasty comments were made such as, "she's coloured because she doesn't bathe." Others insisted on touching my hair because they suspected it felt like a "Brillo pad." I remember running and hiding in a bathroom stall where my ample tears watered my new footwear.

My newly styled identity as a "coloured person" placed me in a space of being at best, *persona non grata* or least, a non-person. Prior to this encounter I had looked forward to school, but ultimately it proved to be an absolute nightmare. The taunts I had to endure affected my self-worth because, supposedly, coloured people had no feelings and therefore kind words and attitudes were not a requirement. Further, I didn't see any teachers who looked like me in the school with whom I could relate, nor anyone who expressed any level of care or understanding of my pain. I seemed to be surrounded by people who perceived me as an "other" with seemingly no recourse. In my alienation, I lamented the loss of my childhood friends, but although loneliness was cutting into me; I did all that was possible so that the blood would not show.

It seemed I couldn't escape being "othered". You see, no one bothered to do any testing; the assumption was made that I could not speak or write proper English. This may have

been due to my accent, but regardless, I was placed in the “D section” of the Grade 6 class, which was essentially ESL designed for new immigrants. I knew I didn’t belong there, and frankly I felt it was an affront to my intelligence. Despite these circumstances, I struggled to maintain my composure because I felt if I allowed my emotions to get the best of me, I would have relinquished my power to survive. All of this was overwhelming, and enough to discourage any child. What started off as a good day became very bad and I wished the day would end, but time stood still.

The foregoing strongly suggests that the sheer weight of the racial discrimination I encountered was enough to break my spirit. The taunts I had to endure affected my self-esteem and left me nervous and lonely. I think it’s safe to say, my overall mental health was at stake. But I refused to crumble. Thus, Maya Angelou’s poem, *Still I Rise*, resonates with me because it asks the very poignant questions that I most likely asked myself that day:

Did you want to see me broken?

Bowed head and lowered eyes?

Shoulders falling down like teardrops,

Weakened by my soulful cries?

Angelou manages to capture the emotions of the despairing, the downtrodden and oppressed yet there is still a sense of optimism because of the way the questions are posed. The poet is challenging where society has placed her, as indeed I also did with respect to my ESL placement, as well as the supposition that people who look like me had no feelings.

Moreover, Angelou is not simply waiting to get answers; she has the answers ready, indicative of self-love and the self-defining aspect of this piece of work. As I reflected on the poet’s words, they became meaningful to me because I needed to define myself and fortunately an opportunity arose that permitted me to do so.

As soon as our class returned from lunch, the teacher told us we had to write about how we spent the spring holidays. This is something I knew I could do, and I felt challenged to prove I was a talented and capable individual with a better command of the English language than I had been credited for. So, I seized the golden opportunity that presented itself that day and wrote a very engaging composition. My teacher was suitably impressed and promoted me to the top Grade 6 class. But, that in itself was not enough to wash away the bad taste of the day.

Although Angelou's words inspiring and motivating, the issue of living with purpose is not clearly addressed in her poem and that missing element became apparent in the first stanza of Russell Kelfer's poem, *You Are Who You Are for a Reason*, which states:

You are who you are for a reason.

You're part of an intricate plan.

You're a precious and perfect unique design,

Called God's woman or man.

This poem is a reminder that as human beings our lives have purpose and finding that purpose is our gift to the world. The words Kelfer uses relates directly to the reader. They tell us, we are here right now as part of God's divine plan. Kelfer implies that we must believe that an important place in the world awaits us and that we need to be audacious in moving towards it. Thus, having a sense of purpose makes it easier for one to remain grounded and able to fulfill their purpose even when there are challenges, such as those I experienced.

After a very long and distressing day, I finally returned home from school and relating what transpired, my parents consoled, reassured, and motivated me. In retrospect, my class reassignment in Grade 6 proved to be the confidence booster I needed. It was an affirmation that I was a capable human being and as a result, I felt more grounded. The ability to forge forward and pull myself out of the pit of despair within that school environment was a major

achievement which demanded not only due diligence, but the grace of God. Otherwise, I might well have become another statistic due to the prejudice I experienced at a very tender and impressionable age.

In her dissertation, *An Ethnography of the "Epidemic" of Schizophrenia among Individuals of African-Caribbean Heritage in England*, Johanne Eliacin alludes to the fact that when individuals are continually exposed to racial discrimination's psychological violence, their self-esteem is affected because mulling over racial taunts and comments, causes their thoughts to ruminate and it stifles their social and educational growth. Thus, it becomes difficult, if not impossible for people *not* to break down unless they have a true sense of purpose, good friends, and a supportive family unit helping to (build resilience and act as buffers against racial attacks).

My experiences taught me that it's important to take comfort in knowing that there are many areas in which one can excel. I was good at chess and dominos, so while confidence in my abilities were somewhat diminished by a less than favourable school experience, it was not totally lost. Also, listening to music that speaks to one in positive ways is an effective means of solace. However, one of the most important things I have learned is that people do not necessarily live according to what they know, because let's face it; we know a whole lot of things, especially in this technological age. But ultimately, people live according to what they believe, and I believe all human beings should be treated with dignity and respect and be allowed to reach their fullest potential.

Of course, there are those who might not see value in you, but one needs to see value in themselves and live with purpose, to deliver their gift to the world as per Kelfer's poem, *You Are Who You Are for a Reason*. For me, and people who look like me, this required tenacity and a determination to survive and persistently work to debunk negative and prejudicial beliefs about black people due to ignorance, but more often, deliberate cruelty. Eliacin's writing

further suggests that racial discrimination should be viewed as a social determinant of health and I would agree wholeheartedly since a whole slew of people, including some members of my own family, have suffered significant psychological distress resulting from racial discrimination. Yet by God's grace, there are some lucky ones, including myself, who against all odds, was able to withstand racism's crippling effects.

Work Cited:

Angelou, Maya. "Still I Rise" from *And Still I Rise: A Book of Poems*. Copyright © 1978 by Maya Angelou. Used by permission of Random House, an imprint and division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved. Poetry Foundation.org. Accessed January 18, 2023.

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Kelfer, Russell. *You Are Who You Are for a Reason*. Best Poems, October 16, 2015. <https://www.best-poems.net/poem/you-are-who-you-are-for-a-reason-by-russell-kelfer.html>
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