

Born to Stand Different: A Miraculous Journey of Perpetual Knowledge

by

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“I prefer to be true to myself, even at the hazard of incurring the ridicule of others, rather than to be false, and incur my own abhorrence.”

-Frederick Douglass (40)

INTRODUCTION

It's very strange to think about on how the world envision us. Remember how we would dress up for Picture Day? We would look for the perfect outfit that screams "this is me," showing off our daring personalities, and reminding us how capable we are of being and becoming someone special, and shining our brightest smiles that lets the world know "I am here." Once we received those pictures everyone—including our families— was proud of our accomplishments. What if I told you that your family doesn't understand the truth hiding behind those gorgeous smiles or the shame and disappointment covering behind those colorful eyes?

When I was three years old, my dream was to make the world a better place. As I grew up, I always believed that I was living in a world where everyone can be whatever they want to be, live the life we want to live, and become something that we want to become. Everyday my father always told me to "always have a thirst for knowledge" and to "never be ashamed to ask questions when you need help."

When I was learning to adapt to the environment and academic curriculums in Hempstead High School, I struggled to understand how to use the resources that were provided and how to know when I needed help. As I tried to figure out the material on my own, there were moments when I was frustrated and there were other moments when I was too embarrassed to ask for help. In my mind, I thought, if I taught myself how to understand the material on my own, it would make me seem confident enough to remind myself that I did something—something that I had no idea that I was capable of from the beginning. However, when I took the initiative to ask for help, there were some bumps in the roads that lead me towards bigger concerns about my education, in other words, when I try to get access for help, some of their resources were either delayed or unavailable. This type of approach was not only irresponsible, but it was humiliating. Knowing that there were limited sources that were capable of helping me prepare for my future, all of a sudden, my school was incapable of guiding students with learning challenges. They did not act upon this academic issue, but left me feeling unprepared, ignored, and deserted. Ever since I learned how my school's curriculum was at play, every summer I had to re-teach myself some of the materials that were not addressed to me, and it worried me to the point where I was afraid that this kind of system would cost my chances of going to college.

After years of struggling, transitioning, and learning to accept more of what life has to offer, I realized that I've been trapped in an endless loop of what I thought life was supposed to be and how I was supposed to live it. I also realized that I wasn't living for myself—physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Everyday I'm constantly overwhelmed and always overthinking about how everything works, and no matter how hard I try to be present with what I have, it feels like an everlasting battle that forces me to fight, run, and isolate myself from the changes of everyday life. That's when I later discovered throughout my complicated growth, that I wasn't feeling fulfilled about myself or supported in a way that helped me to understand that we have choices in this world that we can make. That there's people that love you and want to give you as much support as they can always give. I felt that throughout the years of struggling and finding a grounding connection of education through books, I realized that that's what I needed. I needed to be accepted, to be supported, and to be loved for who I am to myself. But the one thing that I truly want is to be complete.

My name is Alexis Brantley, I'm a college student studying Literature and Screenwriting at Purchase College and I struggle with a learning challenge called Receptive and Expressive Language Disorder (RELD). When I first walked into a Humanities event, the first thing that came to my mind was that I was becoming to myself and this school. I thought about how I spent my whole life doubted and constantly misunderstood to the point where I was becoming invisible. After listening to Katie Kresek

telling her story about her senior project on Beethoven and Wordsworth and how she became a successful musician on Broadway, I felt a rude awakening of jealousy because part of me was desperate and embarrassed that she worked so hard to become the person she deserves to be; and I felt like where I was then was not good enough for me or my family and part of me wanted the same confidence that she had. I wanted to one day tell my own story about my successful journey as a student and how it created change for all educators and storytellers. That's when I realized that I knew what I wanted to do: I wanted to write a senior project about my spiritual journey of what it feels like to have an "incomplete" education.

This is my story of how I was born to stand different!

Education and Me

What is Education? At the simplest level, "Education" is a noun meaning the process of receiving or giving systematic instruction especially at a school or university and it is an enlightening experience. Questions, however, remain. A major question is: to what extent has education transformed our educator's perspectives in a social, cultural, and academic manner? Education is also an environmental process that encourages humans to establish growth and maturing into something beautiful and becoming someone new.

"Born to Stand Different: A Miraculous Journey of Perpetual Knowledge" is a multifaceted work—part scholarly essay, part series of letters, and part annotated bibliography—about how I overcame the anxiety of feeling incomplete throughout my educational experience. This project examines how education is a formative pathway and a challenge to the development of self-identity. By examining how different characters or authors narrate their educational transformations, I argue how the accessibility to resources, equity for different learning styles, and forms of community have generated a helpful or harmful approach towards character development. In this Senior Project, I write about the problem of an incomplete education as experienced and narrated by Tara Westover's memoir, *Educated* (2018), Audre Lorde's biomythography, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, and Frederick Douglass' autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*.

Educated is about how Westover's life in Idaho encourages her to gain independence by getting an education. *Educated* is an important memoir because Westover's journey characterizes the power of knowledge. Her novel articulates how education is key to freedom and how we can live a virtuous, authentic life as a result of the educational system. While reflecting some of her complications within her Mormon family, Westover displays some parallel connections between her and my experience with self-identity and power. While the high school system was challenging my learning abilities, bullying captivated my attention more than me trying to sit alone and collect my thoughts on how to blend in with the rules of high school. Westover also understood what it means to be misunderstood and how overbearing it is to carry the weight of isolation, while trying to escape her controlling, violent family. Westover's memoir witnesses a bridge of growth for all educators. She expresses how getting an education is not about providing well-known information as a form of survival, but getting an education is a spiritual highway towards healing. She shows how to discover our self-worth because we students are works in-progress!

Westover's life seems to mirror my life because throughout middle school through high school, I was a human wreckage. I was dealing with a lot before college became a part of my life. I was dealing with family problems, being bullied in schools, making friends, and I even gained a history of emotional eating throughout my studies. Dealing with those problems made me feel lost inside and out. My school's curriculums were hardly organized and, because the school board did not take actions upon those concerns, I found out I was getting lack of support. I had problems focusing due to my

mental health. I kept procrastinating between assignments, and most of all, I could not get access to any of the “helpful” sources because I was always informed that their options were either delayed or unavailable. Ever since I realized my schools were hardly preparing me for my future, I started losing confidence in myself and the skills that I had, hoping that they would help me get through college, but somehow, I feel like they haven’t. The worst part about this journey was I had to re-teach myself the material all over again because the topics that are discussed in college were not taught to me from my previous schools. These concerns worry me because it made me feel like I fell behind on everything because of the complications with my learning challenge, Receptive & Expressive Language Disorder, and because I was not given the tools or strategies to help me move forward with my studies. It was troublesome for me! Even though I passed my classes and got on the Honor Roll, I felt like I was left behind on the important information that should have been taught from the very beginning, and that is when I began losing motivation because I felt extremely unprepared for what was coming my way.

Educated does not only speak to me, but to all the readers who also felt lost or left behind, or those who felt like they failed themselves or the people they managed to love and take care of. Some people who did not make it in high school or went to college had to make severe sacrifices for their families. Most of them had to drop out because of lack of financial coverage for their tuitions, school supplies, room & board, and so on. Westover’s memoir is not only discussing about how she overcame her struggles and found an escape from her Mormon family’s control, but she is also inspiring readers to see that regardless of how hard things get or how misleading life becomes, it does not mean we are worthless. Our stories mean that we are striving to do what we can to support our communities and they also mean that those who feel embarrassed or ashamed because of the fear of disappointing the people we love and the hopes and dreams we wish to achieve—we can achieve, we can succeed!

Educated is a timely memoir because Westover is educating all readers that education is important, and you do not have to be ashamed or embarrassed about not completing your life’s courses. Westover believes that even though she had a challenging childhood and went through a conflicted journey of getting a good education and an independent life, she gave us a message that ‘it’s okay to tell your life’s story, and the more you strive for your goals, the more you are becoming a legend to all readers and future generation.’ *Educated* takes us into a welcoming space where everyone is free to tell their stories and confront how being uneducated or missing an education took a toll on those who want to succeed and live valuable lives. *Educated* reminds us that education is important, but it also taught us that it is a brief steppingstone to reach for the finish line and aim for success!

Below, you will find: 1) a series of letters, 2) an autobiographical essay; and 3) an annotated bibliography. Taken together, these parts testify to my journey trying to understand perpetual knowledge. Even now, I feel like some of these aspects are more successful than others. Some feel forced and not in my genuine voice.

LETTERS

2/14/23

Dear Alexis, Age 3,

This is you in 2023! I know shocking, isn't it? You and I were just kids finding our way through the curiosities of life and here we are.

The reason why I'm writing to you is because I wanted to apologize for everything that I put us through. After speaking with our college counselor, Ms. Catherine, and going for a walk around campus, I realized throughout our childhood we both were not okay with ourselves and how everything started changing around us. I also realized why when it comes to education why we don't feel complete.

When I was your age, I always thought that the world was going to be everything that we imagined it to be. Even who we would become out of it. I've always thought that our life was going to be something bright, beautiful, and a supportive space where we can both be happy and free. However, I realized after dealing with our parent's divorce, emotional eating, struggling with self-confidence, and crumbling through anxiety and depression; I realized that we were living life all wrong. I thought as you grew older, we were going to be okay; we would be creating exciting memories and we would be becoming someone who can change the world! But I was wrong.

Growing up, I felt very empty inside and everything that I thought I was doing right made me feel unfulfilled by various things that I would never understand. I felt like no matter how hard I try to learn something, be understanding, or try to make some improvement with our lives, I feel like I failed you. I failed us and maybe our future self who will be waiting for us soon.

There were so many great memories we shared together, and I didn't want to leave it behind. I didn't want to lose the good moments that made us so confident and fulfilling that I knew we were going to take on the world together. But there's one thing that I learned that was hard to accept but too powerfully true to ignore: we may not be able to change the past we grew in together, but we can always change and grow into a better, happier future.

Alexis, you are the sweetest, funniest, proudest, and the most creative person that we grew up to be. I'm so sorry that everything has been so hard and that there's so many things we wish to undo and change it into something better; but I'm extremely proud of you! I'm proud of you for fighting back, finding your voice, and taking yourself towards the best journey that I had no idea we could get through together.

I love you so much and I'm so happy that we love being ourselves; don't stop doing what you're doing. Keep writing and never stop growing as the person you are becoming!

Love you with all my heart,

Alexis, Age 21, 2023

AUTOBIOGRAPHY ESSAY

There are many people in this world that want to be a part of something. There are some that want to be better than others, while others are forced to be set in motion to be left behind. When I look out the window there are days where I wonder as I watch the world go by ‘what will it take to live the life other people had that you wish could’ve been yours?’ Sometimes, I try to wrap my head around the fact that I’m not here to be someone I’m not, I’m here because my dream is to make the world a better place through the active imagination of writing. I tell wonderful stories and passionate ideas but there are times when I feel the stories I tell don’t matter and the hard work is unappreciated.

When I was three years old, my dream was to make the world a better place – by giving everyone an opportunity to live a life that truly matters. I wanted everyone to know that they have a choice. I wanted them to have something that some people fail to recognize, to live however they want, say whatever they want to say to create a difference, and be whatever they want to be. Some people say the following:

- “you can do anything as long as you set your mind to it”
- “you got this!”
- “I know that you’re going to be successful”
- “I know that you’re going to find something”

But some people fail to understand how these statements may seem motivative as a kind gesture to support and guide us towards our goals but there are some that are embarrassed to accept it for what they can do or who that person is within and beyond their experience.

As I grew up, I learned that there’s so many people in this world that want to be a part of something. There are moments where people want to be better than others, while others are forced to be set in motion, feeling left behind. No matter how hard we try to remind ourselves how gifted we are and how much we can be for our future, we’re left spiraling in a constant cycle where we’re left abandoned and unappreciated. Everyday, when I look out the window, there are days where I wonder as I watch the world go by, ‘what will it take to live a life where others live so happily that you wish could’ve been yours? What will it take to show the world that I’m more than how the world visualizes me to be?’ When I was three-years-old, my dream was to make the world a better place by sharing stories and revealing another side of the world in ways no one can imagine.

As Westover rights in her prologue: “I had been educated in the rhythms of the mountain, rhythms in which change was never fundamental, only cyclical...our lives were a cycle – the cycle of the day, the cycle of the seasons – circles of perpetual change that, when complete, meant nothing had changed at all.”

Throughout my youth, I slowly realized that I’ve been trapped in a pattern that has affected my views of how I value life that means so much to those that also experience the unethical changes of life’s purpose. Growing up, I noticed that even though I value life in various ways, I slowly understood how being introduced to education can change a person's use of critical, skeptical, ethical, and creative skills. Today, I choose to share a story that will allow me and other people to view the world differently in a way no one has ever managed to try before. My name is Alexis Brantley, I’m a college student studying Literature and Screenwriting at Purchase College. My dream is to become a writer to help people experience the world in various perspectives and allow them to create change from a

different point of view. My goal is to find the healing properties of learning through the magic of books and practicing the skills of knowledge – physically, emotionally, and spiritually. I also want to give people the opportunity to be true to themselves without carrying the weight of fear, doubt, shame, and disappointment. This is the story about how I discovered the true powers of learning through virtuous knowledge. This is my story of how I was born to stand different!

When I was three-years old, I didn't understand the value of how everything works or what my purpose was when I was falling in and out of expectations of what my family wanted for me. As time slowly transitioned, I remember being introduced to many things that I wish to understand without fighting the arguments on what's considered right from wrong. But there were also memories that continuously came and go leaving me lost and out of focus. In the words of Frederick Douglass: "I know nothing; the means of knowing was withheld from me" (Douglass, 16). I turn now to a letter to Douglass.

4/16/2023

Dear Frederick Douglass,

My name is Alexis Brantley. I am a college student from Purchase College and I'm studying Literature and Screenwriting to become a writer. Let me just say that this is a huge honor writing this letter to an African-American man who was born into slavery but later learned the horrid truth behind the physically and emotional brutalities of slavery but then later found his freedom through the art of patience and the practice of reading and writing.

I'm writing to you because I read your famous narrative, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. After reading your autobiography about how you fought through the brutalities of slavery and found your freedom, I was not only hurt and disappointed by the constant fear and struggles you and your family were forced to face; I was also inspired. I was inspired by how you found the strength and courage to find your voice not only through the brutal reality of slavery, but through the practice of learning to read and write your true story.

Mr. Douglass reading your narrative made me realize a few things about you that I didn't realize until I read the first few pages of your book. First, I learned that you and I share a few things in common: you and I both wanted to know the purpose behind our existence. When you were young, you and your mother were forced to be separated by the laws of owning a slave but when you were young, you had to visit your mother at night before she died. Not only did it break your heart, but it made you afraid. You were hoping to one day understand why this was happening and your goal not only as a slave but as a person that wants to be a part of the country. You felt isolated no matter how hard you tried to become something you got abused through harsh language. You showed me what it means to be an out and proud American that deserves to live through Liberty and freedom.

Second, I learned that we both have a love affair of reading and writing. It's almost like we learned a similar language: literature. I'm not sure if you're familiar with this topic, but when I learned about how reading made you feel and how writing gave you some vision of how freedom will look and how it will influence you through your life, it made me realize that you and I are very much alike because in 2023, I now struggle with a thing called a learning disability, specifically called Receptive Expressive Language Disorder. RELD is when I struggle to understand the basic English Language or how to process simple information that will help me live a life that truly matters. I don't know if you or anyone that you're familiar with has a learning "challenge" but I do know that a lot of African American slaves that tried to learn how to read or write hit a brick wall when you introduced them to a new kind of freedom that gives them the opportunity to find themselves and become someone that matters.

Mr. Douglass, when I read your *Narrative*, there were parts of you that were not only speaking the language about the physical and emotional brutalities of slavery, but you were speaking the language of what it means to feel incomplete in knowledge and incomplete in yourself. You once said, "I know nothing; the means of knowing was withheld from me" (pg. 16). In other words, you didn't know anything about who were as a human being that needed love and for someone to see what kind of person you are courageously to become. When I learned that I had RELD, I was not only confused by what it meant or what it made me do but I was in a position where I felt isolated, misunderstood, and lost in a space where I couldn't cope with myself or with other people that wanted to get to know me.

I know this topic about learning disabilities is beyond your experience, but within your autobiography, I see that you understand what kind of reader I am and what chances of what wisdom I will learn from your *Narrative*.

On the back of your book, it says, “only think of it; one hundred miles straight North, and I am Free! Try? Yes! God helping Me. I will.” When I read this quote, I realized that your journey to freedom was not only a milestone towards becoming an abolitionist but it was an experience that you knew you needed not only to escape slavery and the traumatizing abuse, but to escape the realities of what a slave was and who a slave was to those white plantation owners. “From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. It was what I wanted, and I got it at a time when I least expected it” (pg. 42). You found a chance to not only teach and guide your fellow brethren towards a motivational and encouraging journey of learning to read and write, but to find freedom within both themselves and each other. You inspired me to see an opportunity to bring justice not only towards local Black communities but towards students that struggle with learning challenge or “disabilities.” Mr. Douglass, your *Narrative* made me understand not only the power of having a voice, but what it means to be educated and to have a chance to give yourself the time and patience to be someone that matters and deserves to have a purpose.

Mr. Douglass thank you for giving me the chance to see through the eyes of a true writer that not only helped me see the power behind education, but also how you found the opportunity to be free at heart and free within the pages of your story.

Sincerely,
Alexis Brantley, 2023

5/1/2023

Dear Audre Lorde,

This is a huge honor to be writing a letter to an American writer, womanist, radical feminist, professor, and civil rights activist. Not only were you valued as a writer and proud feminist, but a “Black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet” as you cited from your empowering authentic poems along with your compelling novels. My name is Alexis Brantley, I’m a college student studying Literature at Purchase College. The reason why I write to you is not only because I’m a huge fan of your dedicated work, but I started to grow a marvelous connection that inspired me from your amazing biomythography, *Zami: A New Spelling of the Name*.

Throughout the semester while I was writing a senior project about the “incompletion” of education, I realized that your book created both a physical and spiritual connection as to what makes individuals feel incomplete and why it sudden feels that way, spiritually. On the back of your book, you defines ‘Zami’ as ‘a Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers.’ When I analyzed the meaning of *Zami*, I slowly interpreted on what makes it the new spelling of the name. Throughout the semester, I’ve been taking a class that teaches fitness cardio but illuminates through dances called Zumba. As I was taking these classes, I thought about some of the quotes that made me realize why I’ve been feeling incomplete through my educational experience.

In other words, the main reason why I’m discussing about the “incompletion” of education is to remind people what struggles with the adversities of learning challenges have developed and why these connections have us feeling lost, misunderstood, and invisible to ourselves and to those who want to create change. Hence why, your book has provided very well elements that support the themes: family dynamics & educational growth inside/outside a classroom. Personally, I know that most of your work tackles the major themes: confronting and addressing injustices of racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia, but within this critical topic there was so much wisdom that captured so much growth and self-identity. It makes me feel heard, beloved, and accepted for my learning abilities.

Last Thursday when I was taking my last class in Zumba, I walked in carrying anxiety and had empty knowledge of what to do for myself next out of my educational growth or my mental health. As my instructor, Eliana, created a moving atmosphere that allowed me to breathe and rise up for my well-being, it made feel like I was communicating with your story in a way that I couldn’t explain. Until the music started to the play and the lights were dancing across the room, I felt an awakening of peace, warmth, and protection from the harmful thoughts that corrupted my views of educating myself more successfully than doubtfully.

The one thing that I value from *Zami* was how you emphasized the “images of women” and from what perspective we define all women.

“Images of women flaming like torches adorn and define the borders of my journey stand like dykes between me and the chaos. It is the images of women, kind and cruel, that lead me home” (Lorde, 3).

Images of women not only created a cultural input on what a woman is, who a woman is, and what a woman of color represents, historically. However, it reflects deeply on the images of education; what it is, what it represents, and from what angle is education helping us and providing us with the knowledge we need to survive. “Images of women” slowly transitioned a route on what education is and how African Americans gain unbelievable knowledge that lead us towards the powerful meaning of “images of women” and education.

Secondly, I admire how you metaphorically described the external resources of learning. In other words, I love how you talked about who your mother was and how her history you to become the women you'll someday hope to be. Since *Zami* is focusing on women power and creativity in the first three section, there were two key points that elaborated both Family Dynamics and Educational Growth outside a classroom themes. First, you clarified a lot on how your mother learned a lot of unexpected moments while living in America and most of her lessons were like her mentioning you and what to expect and how to adapt within certain environments.

I would like to conclude this letter with a quote: "I would like to enter a woman the way any man can, and to be entered – to leave to be left – to be hot and hard and soft all at the same time in the cause of our loving. I would like to drive forward and at other times to rest or be driven. When I sit and play in the waters of my bath I love to feel the deep inside parts of me, sliding and folded and tender and deep. Other times I like to fantasize the core of it, my pearl, a protruding part of me, hard and sensitive and vulnerable in a different way" (Lorde, Prologue).

When I read your quote about how you would like to enter as a woman the way any man can and how you like to be driven like any resourceful being we could be, it almost feels like you are trying to be a true woman, but not the kind of woman society would expect you to be. You were trying to find a connection that is more willing and free.

Sincerely,
Alexis Brantley, 2023

11/07/2022

Dear Tara Westover,

My name is Alexis Brantley. I'm a Literature major and Screenwriting minor at SUNY Purchase. You probably don't know me, but I know you. Over the summer, I was reading your memoir, *Educated*, hoping that reading your biography will teach me about the true meaning of education. And it definitely has. The reason why I'm writing this is because throughout my whole educational journey, I've struggled to accept how my experience started and how those common areas made me felt incomplete.

You're probably wondering 'what my senior project is about?' and 'how did your memoir help capture that idea?' Well, to answer your questions: 1) my senior project is about the "incompletion" of education. In other words, I'm talking about how the American school systems is disrupting every person's chance of getting a good education and taking effect on everyone's lives, including mine. 2) When I read your memoir, I was not only touched by your story on how you found education and how education found you. But I was inspired to learn that there's other people in the world that understands what it's like to feel incomplete with their learning, and I'm so happy that I found you!

Educated, not only made realize that I wasn't alone, but it made me realize that we have something in common when it comes to education. For example, we both wanted something that some people struggle to have: we both wanted to be seen and we both want our stories to be heard. But what we truly want is to "get to the heart of what education is and what it offers" (Westover, blurb). As much as your memoir has touched the hearts of many readers who've struggled to find their voices in education, you made me see that sometimes you don't have to be in a classroom or rely on various resources in order to get a good education. Sometimes, you have to look within and ask yourself, 'what kind of person do you want to be?' or 'what life do you hope to create?'

Before I go any further into my senior project, I just wanted you to know how grateful I am for coming across such an amazing memoir that gave me the courage to value education in a different way. I also wanted to share some feedback on how reading your memoir created a huge impact on the personal narrative of my story. First, what changed my idea of education was how brave you were during your childhood to adulthood. From working in the junkyard with your Mormon family to transforming into a well-educated, independent, young woman. Visualizing all the hard work that you had to accomplish in order to survive, it made me realize, as a reader, how agonizing it is to be under so much pressure in order to understand what is considered right and wrong. Reading that big chunk of your childhood really motivated to see the true meaning of "being educated." What also grabbed my attention was even though you were torn between your family and being independent, you carefully took your time to get to know yourself and understanding what you want for you: Tara Westover.

Secondly, some of the scenes you've captured through your teen years not only created some déjà vu moments about my personal narrative, but it collected some empathetic memories about what we could've had throughout most of our childhood. For example, some of the moments that changed throughout the book was your mother-daughter relationship, and the reason I say that is because as a young Black woman, when it comes to education, my parents would do anything to make sure that I get a good education to create change. Specifically, trying to set a good example for future generation, otherwise known as, 'Freedom of Literacy and Literacy is Freedom.' After learning that your father was against the idea of you and your brothers going to college, it puzzled me that when you confidently told your mother that you weren't going to BYU, it was strange on how your mother

revealed a change of venue of wanting you to have an education. It's also strange that behind your father's back, your mother expressed deeply on what she expected from you and your brothers.

The next morning, I found Mother mixing oils in the kitchen..." I've decided not to go to BYU," I said... Her gaze shifted to me. I hadn't felt its strength in years and I was stunned by it. "Of all my children," she said, "you were the one I thought would burst out of here in a blaze. I didn't expect it from Tyler – that was a surprise – but you. Don't you stay. Go. Don't let anything stop you from going" (133-34)

At first, I wasn't just appalled by how your mother reacted towards your decision, but I was confused. I was confused about how you made a very mature decision on not going to BYU and decided to stay to support your family. But all of a sudden, your mother wanted you to go and get educated. I was also surprised by the fact that even though your father was totally against the idea of education, your mother stood by you and asked you to break the rules for your independence! Looking back at this scene, this reminds me of Gwendolyn Elders' personal narrative on her educational experience, when her family worked very hard to do what they could to make sure their daughter gets a good education so she can have a better life. Just like your father, he tried to teach you and your family about the way of life through God. Seeing through half of the novel on how close you and your mother were, it's uncanny because my relationship with my mother was similar to yours: challenging and very misunderstood. Our relationship came to a point where I've maybe found one of the reasons why my educational experience was "incomplete." It probably start with family or maybe not, but from what I've gathered from this scene, it's possible that past memories could be the first source of how you might feel incomplete, emotionally.

Thirdly, the next scene that symbolically made me felt closer to you, as a teacher, was your reaction after taking the ACT and getting your results. In my mind, I thought after entering a classroom and taking the test for the first time, it would be an exhilarating moment for you because you finally understood what school looked like. I didn't expect that taking the ACTs would be [unexciting] for you through your journey. What's even more interesting was how you confirmed the world of education as "their world," as if being in a classroom was a fantasy and returning back to the junkyard confirms that you've returned to your world.

I drove home. I felt stupid, but more than stupid I felt ridiculous. Now that I'd seen the other students – watched them march into the classroom in neat rows, claim their seats and calmly fill in their answers, had thought I could scare in the top fifteen percent. That was their world. I stepped into overalls and returned to mine" (135).

From what I've captured from this scene, it's ironic that when I first started going to school and taking exams, when I receive my results from my teachers/professors, there were moments when I felt little in my own world. In other words, when I work very hard on my studies and share new ideas for our future, sometimes I feel like all the hard work I put into my classes were not good enough, as if everything I worked hard for was for nothing. The reason why I feel this way is because every time when I express what I've gathered from most of my classes, some of the ideas that I share were either politically incorrect or I interpret it in the wrong way without memorizing what I learned from my previous classes. As if whatever I say or how I say it, it always comes out stupid or [mentally challenged]. When I come home from school, whenever I finish my homework and I always pick up a good book to help me escape and recollect my feelings that I've been carrying throughout high school. Sometimes, when I'm reading it not only makes me feel better, but it helps me feel like I fit in somewhere like I'm a part of something for a change. Just like you after you found out you got a twenty-two on your ACT. Congrats, by the way!

I returned from the junkyard to find a white envelope. I tore it open, staining the page with grease, and looked past the individual scores to the composite. Twenty-two. My heart was beating loud, happy beats. It wasn't a twenty-seven, but it opened up possibilities...I showed Mother the score and she told Dad. He became agitated, then he shouted that it was time I moved out" (136-37)

Reading this scene really brought excitement into my day because even though the score wasn't a twenty-seven, you still saw hope after studying hard and receiving a huge compliment off that piece of paper, getting that twenty-two was worth it! The only thing that I didn't understand was why your father wanted to kick you out just because you got a great score on your ACT. Which brings me to my next few questions, why was you father so strict about you and your brothers getting an education from the American school system? What was he afraid you would know once you enter into another classroom? Was there something your father witnessed when he was in the educational system, or was he afraid that something in the system would worry him to believe that you and your brothers would turn against him? I just don't get it, what is it about education that make it seem so dangerous to your father?

Speaking of education being considered 'dangerous,' why does your father think, from his perspective, that education is considered unholy and dangerous? First, when I read the section about you discovering what the n-word is or what it represents, at first, I wasn't sure if rather or not racism, gender, or religion was ever brought into question during homeschool. But reading about you discovering the n-word reminded me of Audre Lorde's story about her education and how race became one of the important events that affected Audre's joy of reading and writing. However, in your case, it's different because your educational experience "is not about Mormonism. Neither it is about only other form of religious belief...The author disputes any correlation, positive or negative, between the two" (Westover, Author's Note). Second, I'm very fascinated by the way you re-introduce the reader not only in the classroom, but in the lectures that you mentioned. I admire hearing the narrator explain how the professor is talking about slavery, the Great Depression, the Holocaust, and WWII. This scene not only made me remember the lessons I used to take in high school, but it made me felt like I was more confident to learn more about certain topics that I never came across throughout the school's curriculum. "Then the world had turned upside down: I had entered a university, where I'd wandered into an auditorium and listened, eyes wide, mind buzzing, to lectures on American history" (177). I feel very captivated by the way you expressed the positive side of education and how it welcomed you into various places throughout your experience in BYU.

Sincerely,
Alexis Brantley, 2022

11/22/2022

Dear Tara Westover,

It's Alexis Brantley from the previous letter that I sent you a few weeks ago. I know this seems so sudden that I'm writing to you like this, but there's something you need to know about what I've learned from both your novel and my educational journey.

Ms. Westover, I didn't write this project only to explore how the American school system made us feel incomplete, I wrote it because I was ashamed of how I adapted with the school's curriculum and what sources were provided. Throughout the fall semester, I've been confused, lost, and isolated. Over the summer when I tried to read your book, I had to use an audiobook to help me catch up easier but as I write this, I realize what I did wasn't reading and my way of close-reading what I've read was done wrong.

I know this information sounds like I'm being hard on myself but what I mentioned before, whenever I try to work hard or give my best efforts in every assignment I give, it's not good enough and I turn to books as my way of escape and maybe teaching myself multiple things that I never notice until this nervous breakdown. I learned that the characters in every book I read share some familiar aspects of my life when it comes to learning. I learned that in every narrative the main protagonist gives not only the basic plot of one's story, but it also tells one's point of view of who or what that person is and what makes their story unique.

You mentioned in your memoir about never understanding being in Shawn's place before he started to abuse you physically and emotionally.

I had never thought about the day Shawn had fallen from the pallet. There was nothing to think about. He had fallen because God wanted him to fall; there was no deeper meaning in it than that. I had never imagined what it would have been like to be there. To see Shawn plunge, grasping at air. I had never allowed myself to imagine what happened after – Dad's decision to leave him by the pickup, or the worried looks that must have passed between Like and Benjamin...After that night, there was never any question of whether I would go or stay. It was as if we were living in the future, and I was already gone (146-47).

When I read this quote, what grabbed my attention was how when it comes to education and trusting the information around you, as humans, it's hard. In community college, when I was handed extreme literary material that I didn't understand, I was embarrassed. Hell, I couldn't even understand nor figure out Jane Austen's language or who she was as a proud, pristine woman who's extended her life like a puzzle that only a reader can unravel. I'm not that reader.

I know that the first time you went to school was at seventeen and you went to BYU without the standard, curricular knowledge as any student. However, our first impressions of school was way more complex than you think. Between you and me, I struggle with a learning challenge called Receptive Expressive Language Disorder (RELD). A language disorder that's been throwing my dreams and interests in and out of my life because this also affects memory. You may not have mentioned struggling with a learning disability, but I know that you're struggling two sides of Tara Westover in Buck's Peak compared to Tara Westover in BYU.

Suspended between fear of the past and fear of the future, I recorded the dream in my journal. Then, without any explanation, as if the connection between the two were obvious, I wrote, I don't understand why I wasn't allowed to get a decent education as a child (163).

In Buck's Peak, I noticed based on the nervousness of your tone that when you try to be "Buck's Peak Tara" you try aimlessly to not mention education or your experience in BYU around your family--especially your father.

I wanted to tell someone I'd failed the exam, but something stopped me from calling Tyler. It might have been shame. Or it might have been that Tyler was preparing to be a father...Dad and I hadn't spoken since he'd screamed at the me about VCR..." (164)

That's how I felt as I transitioned after one school after the other; I couldn't understand where I fit in. Even though you were trying to adjust with the environment of learning, you struggled to see who you were if education did or did not show up for you. Aside from the fact that you tried to be the most devoted being to your Mormon family, you still had to find a safety branch between Buck's Peak Tara and BYU Tara.

Sincerely,
Alexis Brantley, 2022

4/21/2023

Dear Alexis (age 3),

I've been thinking after having a meeting with Professor Megna about our senior project that we're working on for our senior year, I realized that we've been trying so hard to become something that we never meant to become and what I mean is everyday when we look out the window and watch the world go by, we always feel trapped in a position where we felt like we hardly belong anywhere as ourselves. My whole life I always thought that I have to be somebody in order to be a part of something important or something that matters. However, I realized that I viewed ourselves wrong and I felt like I wasn't being fair with us or our future.

Alexis, remember when we would go on those adventurous walks with dad and whenever the sun hit our face and the wind blew through our arms, we felt like we are a part of something real, something beautiful that we feel like the only people in the world that matters? I felt like that's something I thought we deserved and/or wanted because Alexis, I hate walking outside and seeing other people have something that I felt like I wish I could've had.

There were days where I felt so mad at not just the world but myself, that I felt like I wasn't making an effort to be something that would inspire people, even our family. There were also other days where every day when someone told me something special or important happened to someone else, I felt jealous. Jealous of not standing out, being someone important or special in me as a person, not as an Honor Roll student who goes to class and gets good grades; I'm more than that, we're more than that. Sometimes, I feel like it's not fair that when the world goes by, we fall behind it.

I know that this letter seems extreme, but Alexis, we've been struggling for so long and I knew from the moment I admire what our family can do, I thought we will become something better even if it's not perfect, I still think that we were going to make something of this world by making the world a better place. By helping people, letting everyone know that they're heard and we're not the only ones who've come across brutal dead ends that make us feel less than everyone who also put in the work for themselves and others.

I want us to have a good life, I want us to be the best writer in the entire world; I don't want us to feel disappointed or embarrassed to be our best selves because that's all we are is ourselves.

Alexis, I love you and I'm proud of how much you came across in both youth and as a senior college student. I know once we graduate we're not going to take on the world like champions, we're going to take on the world like Alexis Brantley and that's all we're going to be. Alexis Brantley who loves being me/us.

Good job Alexis, I love you with all my heart. Finish this project strong and never forget who you are and what person you're really going to become.

Love you with all my heart,
Alexis, age 21, 2023

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- 1) Perry, Theresa. "Freedom for Literacy and Literacy for Freedom: The African-American Philosophy of Education." *Young, Gifted, and Black: Promoting High Achievement Among African-American Students*. Perry, Theresa; Steele, Claude; Hilliard III, Asa. Beacon Press, 2004.

"Freedom for Literacy and Literacy for Freedom" is about how African-Americans found their freedom through the journey of reading and writing. Perry talks about how African-Americans slowly developed an opportunity of citizenship by using the narrative tradition to share how their struggles from slavery to the contemporary era empowered them to educate themselves for survival and to become part of American society. "These narratives – some literature and some not – allow us to see how this philosophy of education found expression in the real lives of people, or at least in their memory" (Perry, 12). Not only do these narratives dig deeper into why biographies and autobiographies are important for our Black heritage, but it gives us endless opportunities to carry our cultural traditions and create a community where everyone is welcome. "For the slaves, literacy was more than a symbol of freedom; it was freedom. It affirmed their humanity, their personhood" (Perry, 13). These ideas about the narrative traditions will fit beautifully with my argument because each story contrast to how African-Americans in the contemporary era is aiming for high achievement in the American school system and it explores deeper into the main idea of education and what it's truly about. I also enjoy how each narrative serves a familiar pattern between the past and present, this will help me compare and contrast my narrative of education. These narratives will reflect Westover's memoir very well, however, Tara discusses about her family's traditions in Mormonism. Which means, I have to research what Mormonism is and why American's educational system is not considered "true education" to the Westover family.

- 2) Cannon, Sarita Nyasha. "Reading, Writing, and Resistance in Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*." *Biography* 42 (2019): 335 - 354.

"Reading, Writing, and Resistance in Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*" mainly talks about Audre Lorde exploring how literacy can be a hegemonic tool of oppression, as well as how it can be transformed into an implement that furthers her development as a Black lesbian artist. Canon discusses how Lorde reflects her personal, painful experience of the literacy and transitions her contemporary narrative into a new genre she calls, biomythography, a style of composition that weaves myth, history, and biography in an epic narrative; "one of the most striking manifestations of her discursive manipulations" (Canon, 337). Drawing on both the lessons of the American educational system and the linguistic legacy of African Diasporic women, Lorde creates her own discursive world where she "highlights both the competing demands of individual and community and the possibility of reconciling the two" (Canon, 350). This text will work nicely for my project because it emphasizes a white women's perspective versus a black women's perspective on education, and it redefines "literacy as a dialogic and recursive process of consuming and creating narratives within a woman-centered community" (Canon, 351). *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* has been one of the most important contemporary narratives, written for many years and I highly suggest that using both this peer-reviewed article and Lorde's biomythography will create a well-organized context on character development and provide multiple-narration from a group of historically, marginalized women of color.

- 3) Baldwin, James. "A Talk to Teachers" (1963). *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948-1985*. First edition., St. Martin's/Marek, 1985.

"A Talk to Teachers" brings excellent insight on how America is organized and why America is in a racist, corrupted battle when it comes to education. Baldwin discusses why America is in a really bad shape especially-- for Black Americans. "All this enters the child's consciousness much sooner than we

as adults would like to think it does. As adults, we are easily fooled because we are so anxious to be fooled. But children are very different. Children, not yet aware that is dangerous to look too deeply at anything, look at everything, look at each other, and draw their own conclusions” (326-27). Baldwin describes the differences between black and communities to emphasize what the narrator is physically and emotionally feeling. Same for the reader. He exclaims “it’s very hard to relate yourself to this” (327) because he’s talking about social identity and how it could be the lead cause of control and chaos which emotionally attacks Black men/boys and assuming their living conditions are “criminals.” “But if I was called a “ni**er” in your eyes, there was something about you – there was something you needed. I has to realize when I was very young that I was none of those things I was told I was...I never touched a watermelon for all kinds of reasons that had been invented by white people, and I knew enough about life by this time to understand that whatever you invent, whatever you project, is you!” (329). Because Baldwin dealt with years of assumptions and being called the n-word multiple times, it’s amazing that white man analyzes who and what a black man is, but it never came to mind that white communities don’t know anything about who and what black people are from our eyes. “The Bible says somewhere that where there is no vision the people perish. I don’t think anyone can doubt that in this country today we are menaced – intolerably menaced – by a lack of vision” (331). Education being provided to Black Americans would not only perish the idea of white Americans losing control, but it perishes the main purpose of their existence and history. “A Talk to Teachers” would be the best, alluring source for my project because this not only closely identifies how and why American standards are tearing us apart, but it identifies who and what Black Americans are and what could be taught to live and strive for new opportunities and create change.

Women in Higher Education Struggling to Gain Identity” is mainly about...

- 4) African American Families in the Special Education Process: Increasing Their Level of Involvement
Brandon, Regina R., and Monica R. Brown. “African American Families in the Special Education Process: Increasing Their Level of Involvement.” *Intervention in School and Clinic*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2009, pp. 85–90, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1053451209340218>.

“African American Families in the Special Education Process” mainly talks about how the involvement of African American families [can/might] improves a student’s academic achievement. I must remind you some of the content in this reading nearly sounded offensive and misread in certain ways, however, I do find some of the information very helpful and well-oriented with the main idea of this project. Brandon and Brown spoke very direct towards not only the U.S. Department of Education’s main goal for academic and social [mobilities], but they spoke towards the concerns of parents that want what’s considered necessary for their children to succeed and [make great progress for the next generation]. Some maybe surprised about where this topic is going, but I assure you, from what was collected, there were some misread contexts on what appears to set a tremendous example on Family Dynamics and Educational Growth inside/outside of Classrooms. According to the data, “African American students were (a) 2.9 times more likely to be labeled as having intellectual disabilities, (b) 1.9 times more likely to be labeled as having a serious emotional disturbance (SED), and (c) 1.3 times more likely to be labeled as having a learning disability (LD)” (86). [As crazy as this might sound], this data serves [humorous] content on how parental involvement would change a student’s perspective on how we [stride/strive] through the system with or without learning disabilities. Let alone the data, most of the content left me asking various questions about the special education programs and where the parents’ roles in this scenario creates changes for African American students with and/or without learning disabilities. “School personnel may have the misconception that African American parents are apathetic, disinterested, or indifferent to their child’s education and may not work to encourage these parents to participate in school” (87). In other words, according to Brandon and Brown, they both believe that since African American

parents are barely present in the educational world of support, they're at a crossroads between what they could do for their child's education and what the educators are capable to do for their child's education. It's confusing, I know, but there's a dedicated reason into why this information [pertains] towards African American student's education. "There appears to be a recursive cycle concerning the noninvolvement of African American parents in the school setting. Parents do not feel welcome, and educators believe that parents' lack of involvement signals apathy" (87), in other words, without the support from the parents, it's very likely that this cycle will create an isolating, negative environment on how they should learn or what they're supposed to learn throughout the curriculum. As frustrated as I was with the nearly offensive contents of this article, I believe this article will support the theme: Family Dynamics perfectly, because there's some pros and cons that will emphasize on the what if questions about what is expected and what will support African American students throughout their educational experience, and I believe this is going to be very interesting.

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