

Maya Angelou's Inaugural Poem

by John Meroney

Plagiarized or Inspired?

When Bill Clinton picked writer Maya Angelou to create and read a poem at his swearing-in ceremony, he was given kudos by the media and academia for the “diversity” and brilliance of his selection. Many spoke of how a woman whose books (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas* among them) are about the struggle of growing up in black America, her own rape, and her life as a single mother would bring an unparalleled depth of understanding to the inauguration, far more than what JFK offered when he selected Robert Frost to create and read a poem at his swearing-in ceremony 32 years earlier.

Angelou’s poem, “On the Pulse of Morning,” which opens with “A Rock, A River, A Tree” and uses those images throughout as the structure of the poem, was roundly acclaimed and said to be of tremendous depth, insight, and originality. Hillary Clinton told Angelou, “It is as if you have been looking in our brains for the last six weeks. You said it

much better than we could.”

On the Wake Forest University campus in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, where Angelou was appointed professor-for-life in 1982, there was also celebration. As the editor of a student magazine, and one who has written about Angelou, I took special note of the reaction. One prominent English professor described the poem as “remarkable . . . an eloquent call for justice, inclusion, and peace” and talked about how, months later, the “brilliant presentation” was still “resonating for so many of us.” In the alumni magazine, Angelou was grouped with Frost, Walt Whitman, and Ralph Waldo Emerson as “distinguished visionaries who appeared on deck as the ship of state was about to embark on a new course” and whose poetry was a guide that offered courage for the long voyage.

The reaction to Angelou’s poem, however, was not the same in all corners. One of those listening in rapt attention on Inauguration Day was Norton F. Tennille, Jr., Oxford student with Clinton, Harvard Law ’68, and now an attorney in Washington, D.C., at Jones, Day, Reavis & Pogue, the second-largest law firm in the nation. Tennille, who was raised in Winston-Salem, educated at a local high school and the University of North Carolina, had a different reaction when he heard Angelou’s poem—one of *déjà vu*.

In 1985, after participating in a wilderness adventure sponsored by the North Carolina Outward Bound School, an educational organization that promotes self-reliance, Tennille was so profoundly affected that he wrote a poem about it—a poem that begins, strangely enough, “Rock, rope, river, hands” and, like Angelou’s, uses those images, and that of the tree, as the structure of his poem. Upon hearing her poem, Tennille declared, “My God, that sounds very familiar. One can see the manifest similarities.”

Hours after the Inaugural, Tennille, who is reported to be a staunch Democrat, wrote directly to Angelou, whose real name is Marguerite Johnson, enclosing copies of both poems, wherein he outlined and diagramed what he called

the “striking similarities.” When I carefully examined both poems, I found that each was structured in a similar way:

<i>Angelou</i>	<i>Tennille</i>
I. Rock	I. Rock
II. River	II. Rope (wrapped around trees)
III. Tree	III. River
IV. Hands	IV. Hands

Tennille asked Angelou, very politely, “Did you ever read my poem, and did you draw on its concept, structure, [and] images in constructing your own?” He also requested a meeting with Angelou to discuss the similarities.

One might expect a well-known writer like Angelou simply to dismiss Tennille by telling him that she hadn’t read his poem and that it didn’t matter that they had expressed similar thoughts. Instead, for the past eight months, Angelou has maintained a suspicious silence, ignoring Tennille’s letter as well as subsequent ones he has sent to her publisher and employer.

By the time it became apparent to Tennille that he would not be receiving a response from Angelou, he noticed that her inaugural poem had been published by Random House and that an audio cassette had also been released. In April, Tennille sent a polite, certified letter to Random House in which he included a copy of his January letter to Angelou along with the poems. “Enclosed is a copy of a letter I sent to Maya Angelou in January concerning certain similarities between her Inaugural Poem, which you have now published, and a poem that was published by the North Carolina Outward Bound School in 1985,” wrote Tennille. “I have received no response from Ms. Angelou. . . Could you please make sure that she receives this copy?” It was a thinly veiled threat: here was a letter, in effect, from an attorney at the second-largest law firm in the nation saying Random House may be publishing material that was merely an expansion of a poem published and distributed nine years earlier. By June, both Angelou and Random House had failed to respond, so Tennille sent a certified letter to Thomas K. Hearn, Jr., the

president of Wake Forest University. Tennille told Hearn of the similarities and Angelou's failure to respond. "Would you make sure my letter reaches Professor Angelou and relay my request for a response?" asked Tennille.

By the middle of July, Angelou, Random House, and Hearn had all failed to respond to Tennille, except for a short note he received from a lower-level Wake Forest administrator who said, "Hearn is away for a couple of weeks" and Angelou "has been in great demand as a speaker." Although that may be the case, Angelou's schedule certainly wasn't crowded by her responsibilities at Wake Forest, where she is paid over \$100,000 a year: she offered no classes during the entire 1992-1993 academic year, save one course in the fall that she canceled after two weeks.

Tennille also wrote to John Huie, director of Outward Bound. Rumor had it that Tennille's poem came to Angelou's attention because she had extensive contact with individuals connected with Outward Bound after Clinton selected her. Because I thought this rumor seemed particularly damaging, I contacted Huie and another Outward Bound staffer, both of whom confirmed Angelou's involvement. Not only did Angelou meet with individuals closely connected with Outward Bound, but she had a *three-hour* conversation with Huie where Outward Bound was discussed "in great depth." When I interviewed Huie, who had received copies of Tennille's letters to Angelou and had been apprised that the central images of the inaugural poem might not be entirely her own, he doggedly argued that the story was "benign," "esoteric," and hardly "newsworthy." Charitably construed, his words to me were clearly designed to protect Angelou, whom he had asked to be on the Outward Bound advisory board and whom he said may have contributed money to the organization.

Huie revealed that during his lengthy meeting with Angelou, she "shared her struggle" over creating the poem for Clinton. It was clear from Huie's statements that she had difficulty rising to the occasion. Angelou had a great deal of access to information about Outward Bound not only because of her lengthy discussion with Huie but also because a man reported to be a mentor to Angelou has been extensively involved with the organization. In addition, a framed calligraphy version of Tennille's poem hangs

on the walls in the offices of many people who have been through the program, or are associated with it, including Arthur Sulzberger, Jr., publisher of the *New York Times*.

In a recent television interview with Oprah Winfrey, Angelou described the "struggle" she experienced during the writing of the poem. "I had to wait until it could get all into the marrow of my bones, and get into my fingernails, and into my hair follicles, and when I finally understood what I had to do, then I started writing," she said. Angelou even repeated a bizarre ritual she frequently follows when writing: she checks into a local motel, asks the manager to remove any decorative material in the room that may distract her, and with a Bible, thesaurus, yellow legal pad, and bottle of sherry, starts to create profound literature.

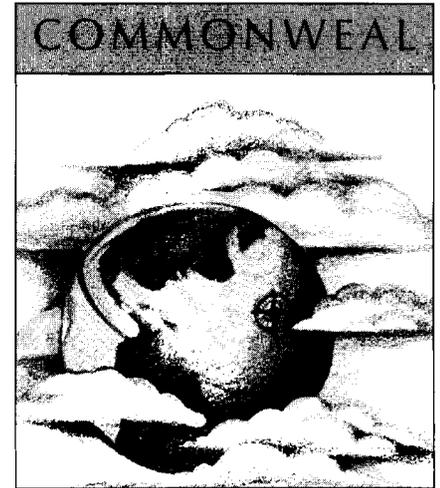
The concept, structure, and central images of the two poems are, as Tennille notes, quite similar. The only major difference I could perceive is that Angelou's poem features a gratuitous, voluminous, out-of-context filler about ethnic groups, homosexuals, greedy capitalists, and the environment. One wonders why she has failed to respond, in almost nine months, to appeals to her, her publisher, and her employer from a man who, very politely but very pointedly, suggests that she may have freely borrowed from and built upon his material. In fact, I have made repeated attempts to get Angelou to respond to these developments. None of my telephone calls has been returned. Tennille declined to say whether he is considering legal action for copyright infringement; he clearly would like to hear from Angelou first.

The moral of this story is not so much that Angelou may have borrowed extensively from Tennille's earlier work. It is that those who wrote about the extraordinary diversity she brought to the opening moments of the Clinton administration are now in the position of having to admit, at the very least, that the central images of her poem did not come, as she has said, from the "genius of the African American canon of art" because a white male wrote a similar poem nine years earlier.

A cynic could argue not only that Norton Tennille beat Maya Angelou to the punch, but that he was her inspiration. Perhaps Angelou's approach to writing Clinton's poem was similar to her approach to the rest of her life: changing

her name, purporting to be a professor but teaching no classes, and representing herself on a record album of calypso music as being from Trinidad rather than from a dusty little town in Arkansas not far from President Clinton's home. Perhaps.

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Anna Mycek-Wodtke

Notes From the Immigration Front

by Ruth Coffey

In less than two generations, America has evolved from a nation of proud, courageous, freedom-loving citizens into a fragmented group of pandering, cowardly supplicants who spend their days pleading with ethnic "political piranhas" and their advocates in the media to forgive them for taking up space in their own country, speaking their own language, cherishing their own traditions and history, and, above all, having the temerity to ask that the laws of this land be obeyed. Proof that we are no longer a country of red-blooded Americans who brook no interference from any foreign country was the news report of a March 8, 1993, "hearing" held at Fort Mason, California, to collect testimony from "immigrant" (translate, "illegal alien") women claiming to be the victims of everything from rape to inadequate wages.

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