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### Mature for your Age

I am the only one in class still pondering what I saw on the news last night.

The man getting killed by the officer looked like my father, my uncle, my cousin. Why am I the only one who seems affected by what was on the news?

I was 7 years old when Trayvon Martin was killed by George Zimmerman, I was nine years old when Laquan McDonald was shot in the back 16 times by Jason Van Dyke, and when Eric Gardner was killed by Daniel Pantaleo. I watched Eric Gardner die in a chokehold, saying, "I can't breathe," I watched my mother cry, and I watched my father try to comfort her with an "I will be ok," that he knew he could not promise because he had no control over what the world would do to him as a Black man.

I watched people in the streets all across the nation hold signs that read: "Hands up, don't shoot," "I Can't Breathe," and "It could have been my son."

"You're so mature for your age!" was the phrase I heard all too often growing up. From the age of six, I would be called "mature" and "well-spoken." While this is often deemed a

compliment, this maturity was not by chance. I had to be mature. I am from a predominately white suburb outside of Chicago, a suburb filled with privilege and little to no education about the challenges people who looked like me had to go through. I had to be mature because I knew others would not.

It is because of my maturity that I have overcome the ignorance that took my innocence. I hate that Innocence. The complete blindness toward what is happening to other people in the world. The complete oblivion to the fact that the person sitting next to you in class hates it when her Black father leaves the house because she doesn't know if a speeding ticket can turn into a death certificate. This innocence that I despise now is the innocence I wish I had growing up. The white innocence.

In Cathy Park Hong's autobiography, *The End Of White Innocence*, she delivers an uncensored illumination of the contrasting childhoods of minorities, which are filled with moments of shame, unhappiness, and harsh truths, to the traditional American childhood that promises an era of innocence and purity to the outside world. The latter life has always been reserved for white children. She utilizes examples like the movie *Moonrise Kingdom* and the widely known novel *Catcher in the Rye* to elucidate the "sheltered unknowingness" white people today utilize so they can avoid situations involving racism concerning the world around them that make them feel "targeted."

I never experienced the "sheltered unknowingness" growing up.

When you are a child of color growing up in a white area, your experience is completely different. Hong describes the "envy" that comes with this circumstance; she elaborates on the

notion of envy by describing times in which she would be with her white peers' family or even watching the T.V. and society "...made it clear what a child should look like and what kind of family they should grow up in" (68). While I grew up in a loving and safe environment, on the outside, it was completely different from the homes my peers had, a home with no tears in response to the news, a home with no tremendous anxiety during elections, and observing this left me feeling envious and wishing to fit into the societal norms. I would often ponder if they had any clue what was going on in the world or what they would think if they ever saw.

It wasn't just in the outside world where these differences were illuminated, as stated above; the vast differences were also depicted in school, where everything, especially history, was glossed over. In school we would read coming-of-age novels like *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Outsiders*, in which we were supposed to connect to the protagonist's innocence and grow with them. However, whilst reading these novels, I had no connection to the protagonist. The level of innocence they fostered was one I, a young Black girl at the time, could never connect to. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, I never lived in a level of unawareness or innocence that Scout had, I was, on the other side, I was the societal antagonist in the novel, getting "saved" by ignorance.

Hong describes that when we read these coming-of-age novels in school and connect to the protagonist, we are expected to "mourn the loss of [their] precious childhood, as it were [our] own" (69). However, her experience reading *Catcher in the Rye* while in school was completely different than her white peers. She pondered the fixation Holden had with not wanting to grow up because she was in a hurry for her childhood to end. She didn't foster the innocence that the children in these coming-of-age novels did because that innocence doesn't exist for children of color.

While I sit with my white peers watching movies and reading books that romanticize the fifties poodle skirts and greasers and the 60s architecture and fashion, they utter the statement, “I wish life was like that now,” and their innocence is once again displayed. Even at a young age, I had no desire nor connection to the romanticized films of white innocence because I am faced with reality. Hong argues that while 1965 can be displayed as whimsical and free, like in Wes Anderson's *Moonrise Kingdom*, a person of color's mind goes to the fact that 1965 was also a pivotal portion of the civil rights movement, filled with violence and discrimination. Even in Hollywood, that fact doesn't disappear. The period pieces that often depict a grand time for the protagonist, often white, and their peers, often a predominately white cast, further reinstate the image of the history but not the facts. These facts are ones that people of color don't have the privilege of ignoring.

Hong's dissection of innocence is a gleaming example of this awareness

. Hong asserts that the norm of only white children being able to fully experience innocence is depicted in the fact that “White boys will always be boys but black boys are ten times more likely to be tried as adults and sentenced to life without parole” (74). This mere fact is what stripped me of my innocence as a child.

The innocence that I and Hong were envious of growing up is not just being unaware of what is going on in the world beyond our bubble. Hong quotes scholar Robert Bernstein in defining innocence as “an active state of repelling knowledge” (74), utilizing the phrase “Well I don't see race” as an example of being completely unaware of “ones position in the socioeconomic hierarchy”(75). It is the children of color, like Hong and I, that lose that innocence the second we become cognizant of the fact that the odds are against us in terms of race and societal standing. Hong mentions one of the notable black comedians, Richard Pryor

jokes, stating, “ ‘I was a kid until I was eight. Then I became a Negro’ ” (75). I was no longer a “kid” after seeing a Black man killed in the arms of law enforcement.

Growing up with this promptness to maturity also made me come to realize that I often had to be the “teacher” in instances where I shouldn't have had to. Hong highlights this “characteristic of racism,” asserting, “...children are treated like adults and adults are treated like children”(77). I could not and in some instances, still cannot depend on white authority figures. As a result, to keep a group of friends in school that I knew would back me and not rely on their innocence to get out of being knowledgeable about situations, I often had to be the educator and delve into the discomfort of confrontation. This is because I knew what people were capable of, I knew that adults had uttered ignorant remarks to my Black father and been offensive to my immigrant mother. The clear examples of adults using their innocence as an excuse for racism depict the fact that they were not told nor shown the truth as children. Hong explains that as a child she knew other adults would act maliciously toward her Asian immigrant parents, and she was “hypervigilant” in times when her mother would have to interact with a white adult. The action of children of color taking the role of adults in racially sensitive situations reflects the continued use of innocence as an excuse for racism that carries over into adulthood.

Hong’s essay illuminated something that I also find myself juxtaposing: the envy towards innocence alongside my gratefulness for my maturity. It is because of the maturity that I fostered at such a young age that I am now aware of issues of ignorance that affect a multitude of communities around me. Asian Americans such as Hong have faced and continue to face racism today, queer individuals face challenges by simply trying to exist amongst those with different beliefs, and so many other groups are forced to mature at a young age in order to not fall victim to the ignorance many people foster. It is because of my maturity that I do not turn a blind eye to

these issues. I can acknowledge their existence and investigate solutions. Nonetheless, it should not only be in the hands of fellow minorities to recognize and enact change in the face of hatred. Confronting this ignorance is not a simple fix. One cannot tell everyone to open their eyes to the world. It means having to find a way in which children and adults can learn about minority groups in a way that is not centered around “I don’t see color” but instead see the differences and applaud them, see the problems, recognize them, and address solutions. Face the shame and learn from it. Hong's emphasis on such a valuable topic concerning the impact of a lack of awareness towards race and inclusion from the point of view of a minority developed an even broader question concerning education: How can we implement a more diverse form of education that both children and adults could benefit from, without instilling the fear of shame from the other side?

Works Cited

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