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The Inexorable Discomfort in Learning

I rarely find books that I genuinely connect with, books that make me feel seen or heard. The only books that have given me this feeling are feared by others.

The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison spared no detail in depicting the oppression of Black women, the constant feeling of not conforming to the beauty standard, and the true horrors women have gone through.

The Hate You Give by Angie Thomas gave an unfiltered lens of the racial injustice and police brutality in America and how it affects Black communities all around.

The Perks of Being a Wallflower by Stephen Chobsky elucidates the process of navigating high school and dealing with mental health, sexuality, and friendships.

All of these books have some things in common. They are all perspectives from the real world; none of these books foster impossible storylines. They are stories that stem from actual experiences. The experiences of people of color, the backgrounds of queer people, and the experiences of adolescents navigating life and learning.

And according to the American Library Association, they are also some of the most commonly banned and challenged books.

Parents across the country are on a mission to ban books that share the stories of queerness, black joy, black tragedy, womanhood, and the challenges of adolescents. However, while they aim to “fight for the survival of America by unifying, educating and empowering parents to defend their parental rights at all levels of government” (Moms for Liberty Mission Statement), what they are doing is shielding their white children from reality trying to preserve their innocence and endangering communities along the way.

I was 7 years old when Trayvon Martin was killed by George Zimmerman, I was 9 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.”

I did not read about this. These events are my reality.

In Cathy Park Hong’s autobiographical essay, “The End Of White Innocence,” featured in her novel, “Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning,” 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 youth that promises an era of

innocence and purity to the outside world. The latter life has always been reserved for white children. She emphasizes a “sheltered unknowingness” white people today utilize so they can avoid situations involving racism and homophobia that make them feel “targeted.”

As I try to find the motive behind these parents' determination to shelter their children from these books, I return to the same thought: How lucky are these kids that they only have to *read* about racism and homophobia rather than experience it firsthand?

What about those kids who are coming to terms with their sexuality and identity? How much more fearful have they become knowing that the books set out to honor their journey are instead shamed?

African American sociologist W.E.B Du Bois coined the term, *double consciousness*, in his novel “The Souls of Black Folk” (1903). Du Bois honed in on the African American double consciousness in which African Americans have to live through the “twoness” of being “an American” and “a negro.” Assuming it is “two warring ideals in one dark body”(Bois).

Not only do I go about my life being heavily aware of my multiethnic identity, but I am also mindful of how the white people around me see me. I constantly ponder how they perceive my dark skin, my braided hair, and how I speak. I did not feel alone in these feelings when I read novels that brought this concept to light once again.

There is a notion that we need to protect the innocence of all children and not show them the harmful truths of the real world. However, protecting the innocence of *all children* is impossible. Children of color lose their innocence the second they become cognizant of the fact that the odds are against us in terms of race and societal standing. I became aware at the age of

seven. Having a mission to preserve the innocence of all children merely translates to protecting the innocence of only white children.

This need to protect comes from the fear that white people have of being confronted for their wrongdoings that date back many years in history. The feeling of shame that comes with the confrontation of oppression, whether it be in history or in the present time, is inevitable, but it is the only way to move forward.

In an effort to contribute to “white awareness training,” scholar Linda Martín Alcoff explores the idea of white double consciousness. This topic is so uncomfortable for white Americans because it “requires an everpresent acknowledgment of the historical legacy of white identity constructions in the persistent structures of inequality and exploitation”(25). As society is becoming more aware and racism is, as Hong asserts, “out in the open”(78), it is apparent that white Americans' social status is being challenged. This awareness makes white Americans feel under threat and targeted by the minorities that have been wronged in history and continue to be harmed in the present day.

This *white double consciousness* is precisely what the book ban aims to prevent. Organizations such as Moms For Liberty are rooted in fear of their white children being stripped of innocence when they realize they can see “themselves through both the dominant and non-dominant lens, and recognizing the latter as a critical corrective truth” (qtd. in Hong 87). These parents fear the discomfort their white child will inevitably experience when they learn that racism in this country exists and has existed for generations

The discomfort that comes with learning is inexorable, just like the discomfort that comes from experiencing.

It is that avoidance of discomfort that leaves America in a constant cycle of racism. Engaging in uncomfortable conversations is how people learn, and the books we read in class often lead to these conversations. However, if the books that foster the education are banned, the education is left up to the minority groups.

I often had to be the “teacher” when 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 have witnessed a considerable amount of racism coming from adults. I have also seen a considerable amount of adults get away with racism. 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.

During my freshman year of high school, I was sitting at my lunch table, and the topic of the lack of diversity in my high school came up. I attended high school in a predominately white farm town, and my home resided in a predominately white suburb. As my peers and I were discussing, the statement: “Grace, you are the whitest Black girl ever.” was uttered. This statement caught me off guard. How was I expected to react when someone said something like that to me? When I ponder this event now, I realize the part of me that was triggered in that instance was my double consciousness as a Black person.

I became utterly aware of how my white peers see me and how it conflicted with my true identity.

While the rest of the table let out subtle chuckles at this statement, I froze. I knew that if I didn't say anything, the comment would continue to be used, and the person I considered my

friend would be left with that ignorant thought in their head. I also knew that the confrontation would leave me with an intense feeling of discomfort. I chose to educate. In the depths of the vulnerability I was feeling, I told my friend about the effect that comment had on me and other Black girls in a school filled with people who do not look like us. I told them that when I heard that, I heard: “You are not enough.” You are not Black enough. You are not Latina enough, You are something you have never identified as and never will identify as.

The inability to rely on educators to educate on topics concerning race has left me and other people of color to do the educating. To foster a group of friends I could trust would not utilize their innocence as blindness towards issues, I have often had to be the educator and delve into the discomfort of confrontation.

White Americans' unwillingness to feel discomfort and recognize their wrongdoings is counterproductive to the anti-racism movement and harmful to future generations. While these book bans and projects to prevent education are not solely focused on race, the homophobia depicted has its roots in white supremacist ideals. In an analysis of the Klu Klux Klan raid that took place at a gay club in Miami called La Paloma nightclub in 1937, Professor Julio Capó, Jr notes that the actions of the Klan “represented its commitment to saving white homes, families, women, and traditions”(Capó Jr.). Being a part of the queer community does not fit into these “traditions.”

Many of the parents who banned books like “The Perks of Being a Wallflower” and “All Boys Aren’t Blue” are fearful of what the LGBTQIA+ themes will do to their children or perhaps how they will “influence” their children. However, in an effort to protect their children, they are instead harming the queer children and those grappling with the complexity of sexual identity. Books that deal with sexuality help children feel a sense of belonging and self-worth in

the world. The mention of “sex” is not just the action of doing; it is an identity that everyone has to discover. Preventing children from finding that identity and self-worth is the complete opposite of what education aims to achieve.

Why does this notion ignite so much fury within me?

Because I never had the ability to be sheltered from the real world, I am highly 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 to not fall victim to the ignorance many people foster. I do not turn a blind eye to these issues, I can acknowledge their existence and investigate solutions. I explore solutions and become aware of problems within different groups through reading. The reading that I do prompts discussions, and these discussions can get uncomfortable; nonetheless, they allow for learning, making me grow as a person, and others around me grow to become more socially aware individuals. To ensure a continuation of these conversations, it is necessary that we comprehend that learning done right is learning that makes one question their previous beliefs, empathize with the experiences of others, and connect with feared topics.

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I certify that this assignment represents my own work. I have not used any unauthorized or unacknowledged assistance or sources, or tools in completing it, including free or commercial systems or services offered on the Internet.

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