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LA 478 Final Reflection

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### Call to Perpetual Awareness

My parents have told me, time and time again, that they consider themselves to be global citizens rather than belonging to one nation. Of course, we live here, we pay taxes, we more or less follow the laws, and we take part in pop culture and have a socioeconomic niche. I believe that one can have a country and still be a global citizen. To me, being a global citizen means that you uphold intersectionality, diversity, and inclusion in absolutely every context, whether that means the workplace, the home, your political and economic lifestyle, and your pop culture intake. Let's use pop culture as an example. The other day I realized that I listened to primarily white artists, so I began to explore people of color as musicians. I didn't try to make myself listen long to music that I didn't like, even if it was made by a person of color. Instead, I searched until I found music that I enjoyed and was also produced by someone who was not white. Being a global citizen is about being mindful and open to change. It's about constantly keeping yourself in check in order to make sure all peoples are being respected equally. I was going to say that being a global citizen means staying on top of global events, until I realized that that would be inappropriate because it would exclude people who don't have the time or energy to keep up their global awareness.

That being said, I'd like to say that time and time again I've made the mistake of being "up in my ivory academic tower" which I've certainly done by accident before. I used to look down on and dislike members of the blue collar working class who had different political views than me. I thought of them as ignorant and hateful. Reading "Deer Hunting with Jesus" completely changed me in that regard. "By 'conservative,' I do not mean a wild-eyed neocon. I

mean that you would be cautious and traditional enough to vote for the man who looks strong enough to keep housing values up, to destroy your unseen enemies abroad, and to give God a voice in national affairs” (Bageant 8). If I had read that quote before this class, I would have snorted in derision. But now, saturated with the context of Bageant’s book, I sit back, and I become thoughtful. Certainly, if I had been raised in a different household and a different lifestyle, I would think a different way. I might be politically conservative, or more religious, if I hadn’t been exposed to so many world views and been allowed to choose the one that made the most sense to me. In retrospect, I was shocked to realize I had written off an entire class of people without a second thought because I considered them to be ignorant. I also realized that to question everything is a privilege for those who have the time, energy, and comfort to do so. For those who work two jobs and are also trying to raise a family, there’s less time to sit back and think deeply. There’s less time to reevaluate yourself and your beliefs.

It was shocking to find so much bias in myself—after all, I consciously trained myself to not have a deeply southern accent. I never really had a strong southern accent but it showed up in the way I said some words (like “egg” and “pecan”) and I quickly adapted a more northern way of saying those words. I had to take a step back and evaluate why having a southern accent made me uncomfortable. Is it because there are so many negative connotations with the South? Is it because I thought it made me sound ignorant? Then I had to remind myself that people’s accents do not allow me to assign them anything—not a belief system, not a background, not a level of education. Then I gave myself a little wiggle room by recognizing that we all make snap judgements without even meaning too—it’s what you think next that matters. I once read an incredible quote that said, “I was always taught by my mother that the first thing that goes

through your mind is what you have been conditioned to think. What you think next defines who you are.”

Not only does this quote truthfully encapsulate what it means to be human, seeing as we instinctively create an “us” and “them,” it also gives us a grace period to collect ourselves and realize that the first thing that pops into our head doesn’t necessarily define us. It more than anything defines what we have been conditioned to think. The thought that comes next is much more under our control and we can shape it to be much more positive, which will then reflect out into the world with our actions. I tried to enact positive ripples throughout my community this semester by volunteering at CWALC. I spent two hours there every Wednesday, spending time around children who were certainly being raised a different way than I was raised. Most of them came from a lower tax bracket than me and were being raised within an extremely religious environment. From what I observed, they believed in a simpler view of the world, where “boys are always stronger than girls” and there’s a sensible reason for everything that happens. Many of the children there were of African heritage. I couldn’t help but wonder which Asheville neighborhood they lived in, considering that my city is segregated. That sounds extreme, but it’s true. There are entire neighborhoods here where the majority is white.

One time I got lost on the way to an internship interview, drove over an overpass, and into a strange place. It was an enclosed neighborhood where there clearly used to be a gate across the road, which was now broken. The cheaply constructed, battered houses were sandwiched close together and there were no driveways, so all the cars were parked in the road, inhibiting traffic. And 95% of the people there—children running over the grass, young women in sundresses, middle aged men brooding on tiny porches—were African American. It was shocking. I felt like I had stepped back in time and was in some kind of bizarre servants’

quarters. And isn't Asheville tourist industry mainly supported by people of color in blue collar labor? Many kitchens in the expensive restaurants here don't speak in English because everyone cooking the food is Hispanic. My Hispanic ex-boyfriend lived in a trailer park filled with mostly other Hispanic people. *Asheville is segregated*. Not legally, of course—but socioeconomically. I usually see the pretty, whitewashed side of it when I go to class on campus and drive through Biltmore. As gentrification is continuing, people of color in Asheville are being shunted farther and farther back in affordable housing that is hidden from the eyes of tourists. I think of the impact this must have on communities of color. They are all thrown together with each other and certainly profiled by the police. The kids that I was befriending and helping with homework at CWALC—what were their home lives like? Were many of them, as I suspected, residents of the affordable housing sections of Asheville? My experiences with these children was humbling. I was in awe of their social and political awareness at such a young age, and jealous of their never-ending honesty and energy. I was reminded that part of good citizenship is giving back to a community, something that I haven't been focusing on these past four years as an undergraduate.

I now think about the experiences of people of color in America on a much more intimate, comprehensive level. While I will never truly understand what it's like to be in their shoes, I feel an echo of the oppression they deal with every day. "Instead, when police go looking for drugs, they look in the 'hood. Tactics that would be political suicide in an upscale white suburb are not even newsworthy in poor black and brown communities" (Alexander 124). This quote from a class text forced me to confront my privilege: because am I white, my life will be easier. That's a very general statement, but I believe that it holds true. It's already proven to be true. I grew up in a middle-class suburb in Fayetteville, Arkansas. The police never raided my neighborhood. The police were never even in my neighborhood. I spent my days playing in the

grass in our large backyard with my sister without fear of violence. This is very different from the childhood of Ta-Nehisi Coates, who grew up in a predominantly black neighborhood in Baltimore during the heart of the crack epidemic. This was when the police were actively raiding and profiling black neighborhoods in the pursuit of crack cocaine, using it as justification for violating human rights. One of Coates' earliest memories is being flashed a gun by another boy on the street. "There the boy stood, with the gun brandished, which he slowly untucked, tucked, then untucked once more, and in his small eyes I saw a surging rage that could, in an instant, erase my body" (Coates 19). He grew up in a grimy atmosphere of fear and violence that was facilitated by the war on drugs.

Coates speaks of seeing an America that was inaccessible to him—an America of backyard barbecues and home cooked dinners, of fireworks and clean houses and other children that only had to worry about homework and poison ivy. He speaks being a black child and understanding that there was a divide between him and that pristine America, but not understanding why. "I felt, but did not yet understand, the relation between that other world and me" (Coates 21). That other world *was* my world. I grew up in the American dream. We always had everything we needed, and often more. We had barbecues and we celebrated the fourth of July and we ate home cooked dinners around a clean table on clean plates and had dessert afterwards. So why is it that I get to have the American dream and others don't? Is it so simple as the color of my skin, or is there more to it? Will the color of my skin give me an edge in future job interviews? After all, isn't there racism everywhere in America? Within the healthcare system, the penal system, the educational system, and every other system. As I was growing up and going to school, I was told that I was going to succeed, so I did. I attended my AP classes and did my homework and took standardized tests. There are many children who are subtly told

that they will fail before they have even tried. It could be because they are poor, black, or dyslexic. They are not told to take AP classes and they are set on academic tracks that will barely earn them their high school degree, so they can go work in the back of a restaurant for the rest of their lives. Certainly, this cycle can be broken by determined souls, and that happens all the time. But I believe that it was easier for me to succeed because everyone around me believed I could do so.

I could talk forever about how this class changed my worldview. Without my liberal arts education, I would not be the person I am now. My mind feels like it expanded. I think my comprehensive education was extremely important because it made me into a critical thinker. It made me compassionate, calm in the face of change, and open to new experiences. And it wasn't just the class material, it was also the people in the class. I always felt like people wanted to hear what I had to say and were really listening. That was so nurturing. So many people in this world just need to be listened to. It wasn't just a class, it was a close-knit community. With that, I want to close with a very short creative piece that I named "Call to Perpetual Awareness."

*Always and forever, be willing to change your mind, but know when the time is right to stand firm. Know when to protect other people, and when to protect yourself. Be aware of when you are privileged, and when you are being oppressed. May you always have the liberation to fail monumentally and then hold yourself accountable for your actions and think of how to change for the better. May you always have the liberation to succeed in the highest degree and have people to celebrate your achievements. May you uphold intersectionality, diversity, and inclusion in all areas of your life. May you be a lifelong learner, forever and always.*

Bibliography

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