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Spring 2023

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Consent in Conversation:

Education of Sexual Violence in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

Maya Angelou's memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, is just one of many titles challenged and banned in public schools for "sexually explicit" content. On page 71 of her 281 page autobiography, Angelou discloses that she was raped at 8 years old by her mother's boyfriend, and despite it being followed with scenes that emphasize the value of healing through literature, public attention has been directed to the (non-consensual) intercourse itself as a reason for censorship. As censorship efforts have expanded in the past two decades, challengers have continued to add more ban-worthy qualities to the list as the book has been deemed "anti-white" for its description of Arkansas before the Civil Rights Movement, anti-religious for Angelou's shift from Christianity to atheism, and homosexuality for her brief contemplation of her sexual orientation. The racism and rape culture that Angelou describes in her memoir continues to control American society as demonstrated by these challenges of her story, but by engaging in open and honest dialogue in the classroom, public schools can develop a community of citizens that can identify and navigate these unhealthy power dynamics at home, in school, and in the sociopolitical sphere.

Angelou, a renowned Black female writer and poet, grew up in a highly-segregated Stamps, Arkansas before the Civil Rights Movement so it is no surprise that her memoir includes vivid imagery of her first-hand experience with racism, hate crimes, and discrimination, but challengers of her autobiographical account have evolved to include her "anti-whiteness" as another ban-worthy quality. Although "racism" and "offensive language" have been recurring reasons on the ALA's "Top 10 Most Challenged Books Lists," the concept of "anti-whiteness"

did not truly appear until 2021 when the book was officially challenged for “anti-white messaging” at the Matanuska-Susitna Borough School District in Palmer, Alaska when “one board member claimed that it could generate an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission lawsuit” (Titus). With the value and societal implications of race becoming a more prevalent conversation, books like Robin DiAngelo’s *White Fragility* pose a unique perspective on post-Civil Rights Movement racism that makes itself apparent through power dynamics such as this one. Too often racism is defined through a “good/bad binary” that DiAngelo works to contradict. When a book written by a Black female author is banned for “anti-white” messaging, it demonstrates her main argument that racism is not indicative of *bad* people vs. non-racist *good* people but rather a *bad system* that enables white privilege. She explains, “Prejudice is foundational to understanding white fragility because suggesting that white people have racial prejudice is perceived as saying that we are bad and should be ashamed [...] When a racial group’s collective prejudice is backed by the power of legal authority and institutional control, it is transformed into racism, a far-reaching system that functions independently from the intentions or self-images of individual actors” (DiAngelo 20). A school board that possesses the power to determine and challenge a book because of its ability to “generate an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission lawsuit” illustrates this subsisting white privilege. These board members demonstrate not only a self-awareness of a potential lawsuit due to inequitable employment opportunities in their community, and yet, rather than address these systemic issues via productive conversation, their fear guides them to censor youth that may seek inspiration from Angelou’s memoir to institute effective change for Women of Color.

Angelou’s words have also been consistently censored for their “sexually explicit content” as she discloses the sexual abuse that she experiences by her mother’s boyfriend early-

on in addition to her agentic sexual encounters near the memoir's conclusion, but this censorship of her "promiscuity" reinforces Black female stereotypes rather than empowering her bodily autonomy. Her description of her first encounter with sexual abuse is as follows:

"He threw back the blankets and his 'thing' stood up like a brown ear of corn. He took my hand and said, 'Feel it.' It was mushy and squirmy like the inside of a freshly killed chicken. Then he dragged me on top of his chest with his left arm, and his right hand was moving so fast and his heart was beating so hard that I was afraid that he would die. Ghost stories revealed how people who died wouldn't let go of whatever they were holding. I wondered if Mr. Freeman died holding me how I would ever get free. Would they have to break his arms to get me loose?" (71).

This description is reflective of her youth—it is written for adults but as a child which can be disorienting for the reader to experience, just as a child is disoriented when encountering something so developmentally mature at such a young age. This adoption of perspective and the poetic purpose of her writing proves fruitful for literary analysis in a classroom, and although the age-appropriateness of the scene in a high-school classroom may be a discussion worth having (but certainly to a depth worthy of another paper), age defies the boundaries of this scene—sexual violence can and does happen at any age and the reality of this situation is not resolved when it is ignored or saved for a more developmentally mature time. Later, Angelou explains her decision "to have sex with one of 'the most eligible young men in the neighborhood' (239)" as a means of healing from her loss of bodily autonomy at an early age despite it resulting in her being pregnant alone, without the support of the father or her family. Scholar Mary Vemillion explains in her essay that

"it would be wrong to see Maya's motherhood as a 'tragic way to end the book and begin life as an adult.' While Angelou portrays the pain and confusion resulting from Maya's pregnancy, she places a far greater emphasis on her new-found autonomy. Even Maya's naïve style of seduction accentuates her feminist stance. She asks the young man, 'Would you like to have a sexual intercourse with me?' (239). In posing this straightforward question, Maya claims control of her body and her identity for the first time in the text" (142).

This parallel is crucial to the understanding of Angelou's memoir as a whole; it provides context and hope for women who read it, but without discussion of the sexual content in a community that is willing to engage with the literature from this analytic viewpoint, it reinforces stereotypes demanding to be addressed.

The lack of systemic support that Angelou receives in response to her rape disclosure as a Black woman is a byproduct of *rape culture* which utilizes existing power structures to normalize and excuse rape and sexual violence in media ("Rape Culture"). In a presentation that I had the pleasure of experiencing as a Peer Advocate, Dr. Shondrika Merritt from The New School in New York discussed her research of intersectionality and rape which provided much-needed insight to the work that our advocacy group does on our campus. She explained that Black women are significantly less likely to disclose their experiences with Title IX violations because of a general "mistrust in systems and processes, lack of representation [in these policies], and [lack of] diverse messaging and educational efforts" (Merritt). Most of the women she interviewed disclosed that "it would be easier for [them] to disclose to a Black woman" because the shared identity would combat the lack of support that they experience in the established systems that do not represent their experience nearly as well (Merritt). Likewise, Angelou explains,

"The Black female is assaulted in her tender years by all those common forces of nature at the same time that she is caught in the tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hate, and Black lack of power. The fact that the adult American Negro female emerges as a formidable character is often met with amazement, distaste and even belligerence. It is seldom accepted as an inevitable outcome of the struggle won by survivors and deserves respect if not enthusiastic acceptance" (265).

Not only do these words speak truth to the disclosure of her sexual abuse, posing a perfect opportunity for teachers in the public school system to identify the author's purpose so explicitly and poetically spoken, but Angelou's account recognizes and conjoins the issues of racism and

rape culture. In the academic article “Rape, Racism, and the Capitalist Setting,” scholar Angela Y. Davis claims,

“If black women are conspicuously absent from the ranks of the anti-rape movement today, it is, in large part, their way of protesting the movement’s posture of indifference towards the frame-up rape charge as an incitement to racist aggression. Too many innocents have been sacrificially offered to gas chambers and lifer’s cells for black women to seek aid from police and judges. Moreover, as rape victims themselves, they have found little if any sympathy from these men in uniforms and robes. And stories about police assaults on black rape victims are heard too frequently to be dismissed as aberrations” (40).

America’s political, economic, and social systems have not supported and still do not support Black women sexual assault survivors in the ways that it needs to. Black women are too often ignored, silenced, or invalidated because power is still unevenly distributed to predominantly white systems as it has been since before the Civil Rights Movement. Davis continues in arguing that “Racism has always nourished itself by encouraging sexual coercion” because the concept of taking one’s virginity or sexual integrity is an extreme means of establishing psychological, physical, and social control as it was utilized in the routines of slavery (40). Just as DiAngelo explained in her re-definition of racism, even though slavery is no longer a functioning system within American society, the power of its racist ideology is still present, making conversation of its lasting impact, especially on Black women, all the more important.

Renowned author and activist bell hooks poses a powerful argument for conversation and acknowledgement of Black women’s experiences through her concept of the “oppositional gaze.” In her article, “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators,” hooks explains that “mass media was a system of knowledge and power reproducing and maintaining white supremacy [but] It was the oppositional black gaze that responded to these looking relations by developing independent black cinema [...] watching television was one way to develop critical spectatorship” (117). hooks goes on to explain various examples of television programs and

films that reinforce Black stereotypes, most notably the antagonistic character Sapphire from *Amos 'n' Andy* who she explains “was there to soften images of black men, to make them seem vulnerable, easygoing, funny, and unthreatening to a white audience. She was there as a man in drag [...] *She was not us*. We laughed with the black men, with the white people. We laughed at this black woman who was not us [but] We did not want our construction to be this hated black female thing – foil, backdrop” (119). This example demonstrates that the “oppositional black gaze” that hooks and many other Black women use to navigate these racist systems is exactly what is taken away when media like Angelou’s memoir is removed from circulation. In order for Black female viewers of *Amos 'n' Andy* to protest the system itself, they must engage with it on a critical level and use it as a means to identify and empower themselves apart from that which is being reinforced. Likewise, in order to identify with and extrapolate the empowerment of Angelou’s disclosure of being sexually assaulted, readers must engage with the material to critique and identify the *real* systems that enabled and invalidated her rape and that continue to do so (i.e. the censorship itself). Angelou’s production of autobiographical media as a Black female writer is an example of something that would warrant the oppositional gaze to the system itself, guiding attention away from the content of the individual characters thus rejecting the rape culture habits of blaming the victim and towards the system that allowed it to happen in the first place.

Angelou’s memoir poses opportunity for White readers to recognize these important qualities about her disclosure and by retaining books with sexual violence in schools’ circulation, especially experiences as told by Black voices, schools will have more opportunities to educate on anti-racist and anti-rape ideology. In *White Fragility*, DiAngelo emphasizes that the biggest threat to resolving racist systems is someone she defines as a “white progressive [...] who thinks

he or she is not racist, or is less racist, or in the ‘choir,’ or already ‘gets it’” (5). She elaborates that this mentality of having essentially “succeeded” at becoming a non-racist (not *anti*-racist) White person prevents “ongoing self-awareness, continuing education, relationship building, and actual antiracist practice” which is necessary for challenging and replacing the racist structures that fuel this type of censorship. However, this paradoxical thinking can be avoided if younger generations are introduced to this type of thinking earlier in their educational career. Sociologists Danielle M. Currier and Jessica H. Carlson share their research on the relationship between rape myth acceptance (RMA) and educational programming on attitudinal change in their article “Creating Attitudinal Change Through Teaching: How a Course on ‘Women and Violence’ Changes Students’ Attitudes About Violence Against Women” (1735). Using various scales to measure attitudinal change, their research assessed whether students who elected to take a women’s studies course experienced a shift in RMA (1741). Although their results did not reveal *statistically* significant relationships between RMA and their other variables (gender of the student, type of class, etc.), their “overall sample had a high percentage of women and Whites, both of whom typically have low RMA levels [which] meant that there was little room for improvement”; however, they also “found that all of the students [they] surveyed had similarly low RMA levels” regardless of gender or race (1749). These results, although not conclusive, generate the necessity for additional research on how these classes may be better apt to reach higher-RMA samples which is possible if the environment enables rather than censors content that works towards having the conversation in the first place.

Maya Angelou’s story is *real*—a historical account that not only addresses racism in a pre-Civil Rights Movement era but also the paradigmatic shift of rape culture as women have become more vocal about their experiences. These cultures make rape and hate crimes against

young people, as young as 8 years old, possible, and they can only be mitigated through conscious and *diligent* efforts to harness new ideologies. By censoring *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, we continue to silence Black female voices that offer so much to this conversation on social change, but to be inclusive of her story, and those that it has and will spark to be published, honors her life in the highest respect.

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