

## Confronting Institutional Racism

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Panel: Excavating the Unsaid: Finding Language for Women's Anti-Racist Projects.

Sponsored by the Coalition of Women Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition

6:30-8:30

Weds. March 20, 2002 Special Events

I've created a course at the University of Michigan called "Un-teaching Racism." In the latter part of that course we explore what it means to be an ally. Students choose a memoir written by someone whose ethnicity is different from their own, and then write a long letter to the author or one of the characters, telling them what they now understand about their lives and explaining in detail what they could do, or preferably what they WILL do, to be an ally to that identity group. Students often have trouble with this assignment, although they are always moved by the book they've chosen, and can easily describe in detail what they've learned. But being an ally seems overwhelming. We can't single-handedly reform the education system or the criminal justice system, they say; we can't reverse the presidential election results, or turn war hysteria into rational peace-making. So what can we do? Write our Congressperson? Come on. They don't read their mail anyway. Interrupt the next racist joke we hear in the residence halls? We might as well try to dam the Mississippi. Every action seems either too huge and important, or too trivial to make a difference.

I have plenty of sympathy for these sentiments, because I feel them myself from time to time. Trying to protest institutional racism in any white liberal department is like flailing at a storm cloud. The cloud looks real. It IS real. It can do real damage to people – to individuals and to whole communities. But try to get up close enough to fight it, and it dissolves into a thin mist with no form or substance. No one is racist. No one is even strikingly conservative. Suggest, for example, that we need more faculty and staff of color, and everyone agrees. But come hiring time, the decision makers make little effort to look beyond the usual pool of applicants. No contacts are made with leaders of color in the field for suggestions of promising graduate students. If a top-notch person turned up on our doorstep at exactly the right moment with exactly the right combination of skills and interests, of course they would be hired. But when universities are competing for the relatively few Ph.D.s of color, it takes more effort than that, and more commitment. Without that, nothing ever changes. And the continuation of business as usual is never anyone's fault because, well, no people of color applied, so what can we do?

But even a nice white liberal status quo can sometimes be unsettled at opportune moments. And nothing is more opportune than an incident that rattles the sense that we're all down with multiculturalism, we're all anti-racist by nature. Once such an incident presents itself, you are no longer facing a formless, cotton candy kind of resistance, but a fiercely emotional adversary that can be extremely pointed and cruel. James Baldwin spoke of this in his essay, *A Talk to Teachers*, back in 1963 when he said:

...you must understand that in the attempt to correct so many generations of bad faith and cruelty, when it is operating not only in the classroom but in society, you will meet the most fantastic, the most brutal, and the most determined resistance. There is no point in pretending that this won't happen.

At Michigan, I do some of my teaching in a living and learning program that attempts to create a small liberal arts college atmosphere within a large research university. I'm very committed to this program because of its student centered, progressive atmosphere, its small classes, its freedom to teach alternative points of view, and its attempts at creating community across differences. Of course it's far from a multicultural paradise, far from my vision of what a university program could be. It's quite smug, actually, and that combination of self-congratulation and denial is irritating to many of the faculty and staff of color, and in fact to any cultural or religious minority that studies or works in the program.

Recently, this program scheduled its senior dinner on the second night of Passover. The senior dinner is a dress up affair where parents are invited, honors are given out, and there is all the hoopla proper to a graduation. The scheduling on a religious holiday was a mistake, of course, a decision that had been taken a year before by a staff member who just didn't happen to have a calendar of religious holidays at hand. But what's done is done, right? We can't change it, because after all, a large, un-refundable deposit has been put down, the invitations have been printed, and the restaurant is all booked up until the end of the semester.

Well – no, I said. Wait a minute. Let's at least discuss this. There must be alternatives we haven't explored. What about the students who won't get their awards, and faculty who won't be able to support the students they've worked so closely with all year? And we not only need to look for a solution to the problem, I said, we need to talk about why this has happened, and what can we do to make our program a more deliberately multicultural institution.

Well. Just this suggestion made publicly, over e-mail, produced the most incredible resistance, the most dramatic accusations from the staff who felt responsible for the mistake. "What? Are you suggesting that we're not sensitive enough to care about multicultural concerns? It was an honest mistake. There's nothing we can do. The case is closed. There will be no changes to the Senior Dinner, period."

Faculty, and even the director seemed frightened by this outburst from staff. Privately, many agreed with me. This was a bad situation that hurt students and could have negative consequences for our program. A few faculty went so far as to say that we should cancel the dinner on principle, money be damned. But they were reluctant to speak up or even to apologize openly to students. The conservative members of the department were also silent. For once, they didn't have to do anything – the liberals were destroying themselves.

I continued to insist, as politely and firmly as I knew how. “We need to talk about this. This isn’t about a staff person’s mistake. This is about who we are as a community.” But the accusations from staff only got louder and more personal, the emotions spiraling out of control. “You’ve insinuated terrible things. You have hurt people. Your accusations have kept me up half the night.” I understood better now, what people of color mean when they say they have to spend so much time attending to the emotions of white liberals who feel guilty or unjustly accused that their attention is diverted from the real problem.

I knew I needed allies. Privately, I began to seek out executive committee members who agreed with me and asked them to speak up. I talked to student leaders in the program, and to Jewish students, and urged them to turn their shock and disappointment into direct action. Since our program emphasizes student participation in governance, their comments were taken seriously – after all, they are the next generation of alumni. And then, to my surprise, the tide suddenly turned, the dinner was cancelled, and the awarding of prizes was incorporated into the graduation ceremony. A letter of apology for the insensitivity went out to all seniors, and even the staff people who had protested so hotly became reluctant supporters of the new plan.

I learned a couple of things from this incident. First, allies need allies. Taking an anti-racist stand alone can easily end in failure, but the more people you gather to support what everyone knows in their heart is right, the greater the moral force that is created. Martin Luther King said, “The arc of the universe bends toward justice.” We roll along that arc, sometimes imperceptibly slowly, but with allies, the momentum builds.

I also learned that students make great allies. Every college has some small core of students who want to “change the world,” as they put it. Their idealism is often ridiculed by their peers, and even their parents. Our support and guidance mean the world to them. I encourage them to write letters to the editor, and turn essays or journal entries into published op-ed pieces. I show them my own letters to Congress (and assure them that politicians DO read their mail, or at least tally the pros and cons to an issue, and that every letter represents to them a dozen constituents who feel the same way).

I tell them of my work on the Ann Arbor Human Rights Commission, that recently initiated a study of racial profiling without our police department, and that succeeded in lobbying City Council to pass a resolution on civil liberties because Muslims and Middle Easterners were being picked up and detained without trial or bail, indefinitely, in solitary confinement.

I tell them of my membership in peace and justice organizations and our efforts to bring the Muslim community together with white activists. I show up at student-initiated cultural events and rallies and protests. Since so few faculty do, I am rewarded more than I deserve for these small gestures. Last night I attended a lecture by the notorious conservative political commentator, David Horowitz, that drew an incredible two hundred African American undergraduates, dressed in black, in silent protest. Students who knew me gave me hugs and thumbs-up – just for being there! Students who didn’t

know me read my “Defend Affirmative Action” button and introduced themselves, and shook my hand.

I am rewarded, too, when my students organize a teach-in and invite me to speak on peace and justice issues, or when they respond to a racist incident in a residence hall with a meeting of concerned students and invite me to facilitate. Students draw in other students and promote dialogue in a way that faculty can't. And they take on issues that faculty are afraid to touch -- like self segregation on campus, racist school traditions, Israeli-Palestinian dialogue, relationships between blacks and Jews. We can encourage them by voicing our approval, acting as role models, and then, getting out of their way.

To my students who are struggling to decide what it takes to be an ally, I say that they can start small, with one letter to the editor, or with their disapproval of one racist joke. I tell them that one of the best ways to become an ally is to reflect on the ways they learned their own stereotypes and assumptions. I tell them stories of my own upbringing, my own mistakes, my own confusions. And I tell them they have both the power and the responsibility to educate themselves, educate others, and interrupt racism whenever they see it or hear it. And when they can't, when the task seems too enormous, too elusive, too risky, I tell them that they need to pause, and reflect, and wait for the way to open. It always will.