

Cultural Daily

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Can Liberal Arts Education Get Past Identity Politics? (Part II)

Daphne Stanford · Wednesday, November 8th, 2017

(Part I)

Why must artists and writers police each other, rather than discuss their differences? That is the great experiment, after all: the democratic experiment of the United States, which at this moment is very divided. So divided, in fact, that there are some who would prefer that the people they disagree with be banished from spaces or shamed into submission. And, let's be clear, I'm not referring to the left versus the right, here: I'm referring to the left versus the left.

Yes, the United States has a racist and classist public education system. Yes, our public education system needs systemic change, but we need to put our heads together to do something about it, rather than waste time yelling at each other over nuances of identity politics.

Protests and sit-ins in educational lecture halls defeat the purpose of education—and anyone can access footage of these lecture hall disruptions, thanks to the miracle of modern-day smartphones imbued with high-tech video, audio, and [facial recognition technology](#).

However, if you want to protest a curriculum—as is written into the Reed protocol—protest outside the classroom. Don't disrupt the students inside that lecture hall trying to get an education. As one student said (and I'm paraphrasing), "I'm trying to learn, here!"

How are first-generation college graduates like me (I, too, who am of 'mixed race'—that dubious term which is never applied to people of 'mixed race' from more Northern countries) supposed to learn anything if we are not allowed the ability to learn? If we believe ourselves to be beyond the need to learn anything new, how can we argue with those with whom we disagree?

I remember thinking I knew a lot about the way the world worked when I was 18—and again when I was 21. But what about the idea of learning from our elders? Are critical thinking and logic themselves only tools of the oppressor, or are they the keys to being able to hold discussions with our oppressors in order to be able to differentiate between ideas in a critical manner?

Let's remember this: identity politics was a [white invention](#) invented by the people implementing Jim Crow Laws to prevent black voters from voting. It is not my obligation—as a Latina of mixed heritage, race, and culture—to write what a fellow Mexican-American poet termed "tortilla poems"—meaning poems about my upbringing into a bicultural, biracial household. I can, and should, write whatever I choose—and so should other women of color. In fact, taking advantage of my hybridized upbringing would be exploitative and catering to identity politics and today's hyper-

focus on colonialism, race, and cultural identity in the academy.

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My privilege as a pale Latina is not lost to me. What does concern me, however, is the notion that I am not allowed to speak my mind on issues of race, culture, heritage, and ethnic identity because I pass as white. I never asked to pass as white. I wish my hair and skin were darker so that people would believe me when I tell them I am Mexican-American—as well as Scotch-Irish, German, and Welsh. All cultures influenced who I am—but mostly, American culture influenced who I am. My mother immigrated to the States from Mexico when she was in her twenties, and after she gave birth to me and my brother, she was often asked whose children she was minding.

I am a descendent of both my father and my mother, but I almost feel the Mexican-American side more since my Spanish-speaking grandmother lived with us, on and off, while I was growing up. Also, because the culture of recent immigrants teaches people to fit in, it is a culture of assimilation and of working hard, via education and climbing the social ladder—regardless of heritage or skin color. That is the same thing all of us are trying to do—a profoundly ‘American’ idea.

I refuse to play identity politics, just as I refuse to see other writers as simply members of boxes to be checked off. Perhaps a healthy dose of virtual interaction in an online classroom is a good thing—if only because it can allow students to see each other in terms of the words they type, rather than the identity they do or don’t espouse—regardless of whatever part or role they are choosing to play, at any given time.

The Shakespearean concept of playing many parts rings true for me, as well as the problematic notion of false equivalencies. I am not saying asking for us to “all get along.” Rather, I am saying that we need to stop with the tone policing of other artists, *regardless* of the color of their skin or whether they identify as genderqueer, Latina, white, black, genderless, Latin X, Asian, etc., etc., etc.

We need to stop bullying each other into submission—subjecting each other to social media mob-shaming and in-person castigation, alienation, banishment, and punishment—for the sake of belonging to the club of woke-ness. Pretty soon, there won’t be anyone left to fight for the causes we supposedly believe in, because we won’t have a strong united front with which to address the other side.

Many on “the other side”—the ‘old guard,’ if you will—scoff at the idea of art and poetry, let alone anything having to do with identity politics. They see too many young artists and writers yelling into an echo chamber. They see us as being obscure, irrelevant, and overly concerned with identity and social justice politics to the extent that they are hostile to anyone who does not follow this ideology to a T. And you know what? They have a point.

I want to know how can we work to bring art, writing, music, and theatre to rural areas, older people, and shut-ins outside the world of academia and cultural identity politics. How can we interact with disabled veterans with PTSD who don’t understand how to discuss a poem or play? How can art help to heal these people and their families, too? There are more than [19 million veterans](#) in this country: 48.6 percent of them are aged 35-64; the other 46 percent are over the age of 65. How can we reach out to them?

If we, as artists, are so concerned about saying the wrong thing or doing the wrong thing, will we stop creating art? Will we stop showing up at plays, concerts, or readings that tout the ‘correct’ way to speak or way to be—regardless of the general goal? Will we fall away into obscurity? Or will we continue to create art (whether or not it is incorrect or flawed) for the sake of creating art?

As [Lucía Martínez Valdivia](#) argues, “The trick is realizing—and accepting—that no person, no text, no class, is without flaws. The things we study are, after all, products of human hands.”

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