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The Dangers of Dogmatism

> Reflections on Professor Vincent Lloyd's "A Black Professor Trapped in Anti-Racist Hell."

By Steven Mintz (/users/steven-mintz)

// February 26, 2023

Ours is the golden age of creative nonfiction—a genre that recounts personal stories, memories, experiences and observations using the literary techniques typically associated with fiction—voice, style, language, imagery, narrative and more.

Personal essays written with grace and literary flair aren't, of course, new. Montaigne's 16th-century *Essais* certainly put the lie to any sense that creative nonfiction represents something novel or original. Montaigne's writings constitute a literary self-portrait of the essayist's inner life, exploring topics as wide-ranging as cannibalism, child rearing, politeness, repentance and suicide. By combining the historical, the philosophical, the topical and the intensely personal (including his naps and bowel movements), he invented a new literary form, one that dominates writing in our time.

Creative nonfiction is manifest especially vividly in *The New York Times*' popular "Modern Love" column—with its raw, revealing, often wrenching narratives that illustrate the "complicated workings of the human heart." Here are tales of betrayal, disappointment, heartbreak and at times redemption rendered in the language of literature.

These stories offer windows into the messy, complicated, frequently ugly, instrumental and adversarial emotional realities of contemporary romantic relationships, a world in which dreamy, sentimental, starry-eyed fantasies of true love collide with such ugly phenomena as benching, breadcrumbing, cloaking, cuffing, firedooring, gaslighting, ghosting, kittenfishing, lovebombing, orbiting and stalking.

Exploitative, manipulative, dishonest and abusive sexual relationships may be old hat, but in today's cultural environment, in which older norms have broken down and stability and constancy are a mirage, it's not surprising that the "Modern Love" column provides some degree of comfort and reassurance: however bad your relationships have been, others have had it worse.

Enough with my musings about the sorry state of romance in the 21st-century digital jungle. Let's turn to the academy.

I just read a poignant, truly unforgettable example of creative nonfiction that I'd urge you to examine closely. It's by Vincent Lloyd, a professor of religious studies and director of Africana studies at Villanova University, and its title sums up the story: "A Black Professor Trapped in Anti-Racist Hell (https://compactmag.com/article/a-black-professor-trapped-in-anti-racist-hell)."

Lloyd asked the nonprofit Telluride Association if he could lead one of its free summer seminars for highly motivated, diverse high school students. Himself a program alumnus, he was eager to repeat a successful seminar that he had offered in 2014 on "Race and the Limits of Law in America" in the wake of the George Floyd protests and the nation's ongoing reckoning over persistent racial inequalities.

The Telluride association's summer programs, which are intended to provide "transformational educational experiences rooted in critical thinking and democratic community," have, Lloyd observes, played "an important role in shaping the U.S. elite," with alumni that include "queer theorist Eve Sedgwick and postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak (its first female member), Georgia politician Stacey Abrams and journalist Walter Isaacson, neoconservatives Paul Wolfowitz and Francis Fukuyama."

Lloyd's intention was to devote four of his seminar's six weeks to examining anti-Black racism, with two weeks studying anti-immigrant and anti-Indigenous racism. But what actually transpired is described by one reader (https://leiterreports.typepad.com/blog/2023/02/a-black-professor-trapped-in-anti-racist-hell.html) as "*Lord of the Flies* meets Ibram Kendi."

Lloyd begins the essay by assuring readers that his piece is not "just another lament about 'woke' campus culture (https://d.docs.live.net/efcfbb8871617888/2023/just%20another%20lament%20about%20%E2%80%9Cwoke%E2%80%9D%20campus%20culture)." After all, his antiracist bona fides could scarcely be more authentic. He not only directs his university's Black studies program but has led "antiracism and transformative-justice workshops," "published books on anti-black racism and prison abolition," lives "in a predominantly black neighborhood of Philadelphia," sends his daughter "to an Afrocentric school," and serves "on the board of our local black cultural organization."

But his qualifications and credentials would not insulate him from attack. A majority of his 12 students and their college-aged "factotum" (who ran afternoon workshops on white privilege, African independence movements and transformative justice) accused him of racism and perpetrating various microaggressions. "I had used racist language," he writes. "I had misgendered Brittney Griner … My body language harmed them."

What Lloyd discovered was that his seminar and the antiracism workshops were very different beasts. The seminar emphasized the slow process of closely reading carefully curated texts. "Specific words, phrases, arguments and images from a text offer essential friction for conversation," he explains. "The instructor gently—ideally, almost invisibly—guides discussion toward what matters."

At its best, a seminar succeeds when its participants listen intently and make comments offer insights that complement and challenge each other's.

The workshops, in stark contrast, consisted of rigid, doctrinaire propagandizing and indoctrination. Students were fed a language and a framework of analysis that they were expected to internalize and repeat. There were no opportunities to voice a "controversial (or just unusual) view."

It would be easy to dismiss Lloyd's experience as an anomaly, an extreme and unrepresentative example that "is totally unique and proves nothing (https://marginalrevolution.com/marginalrevolution/2023/02/trapped-in-anti-racist-hellhtml) ." As we all know, "data" is not the plural of isolated anecdotes. And yet … exceptional one-offs sometimes point to more profound problems that shouldn't be ignored or written off.

Some readers liken Lloyd's unhappy experience to historical examples of intolerance: to previous "purity crusades" like the Night of the Long Knives, the Nazi liquidation of their political opponents, the Anabaptist riddance of the Lutheran leadership in Munster or the 1793 purge of the Girondins from the National Assembly during the French Revolution. Although I'm impressed with the readerships' cultural literacy, I consider these responses pretty hyperbolic.

So what lessons or insights do I draw from Lloyd's bitter experience?

- **Many students will pick up a new vocabulary and a framework of analysis in college (or before); don't be surprised when they bring that discourse into the classroom.** Youth, after all, is a time for experimentation, for embracing new identities and adopting new modes of thinking and self-expression. We shouldn't be surprised when, at times, those ideas are turned against their professors.

The academy and the classroom are, in fact, sites of power, privilege and hierarchy (one hopes rooted in expertise)—and a key purpose of the new language of social justice is to invert power relations, lay bare previously unrecognized power dynamics and challenge established authority and assumptions.

We, like Lloyd, should probably not have been shocked when some of our own students turn our own ideas against us.

- **Classroom dynamics are ultimately the instructor's responsibility.** Not all classes will be successful, but in the final analysis it's up to an instructor to make a seminar as successful and meaningful learning experience as possible.

I know no faculty members who ever received any formal training in classroom management. But if we want all students to have the opportunity to thrive, we must master those techniques. Set clear expectations, preferably in partnership with your students. Build a relationship with each and every student and call upon them by name if possible. Address inappropriate, off-task and disruptive

behavior promptly but without embarrassing the student. Never inflict collective punishment on a class.

Remember:

- Misbehavior is often caused by stress and frustration. Make a point of speaking with students one on one or in small groups about what's bothering them and respond in positive, forward-looking ways.
- You are in control. Maintain your authority—not by raising your voice or responding emotionally, but by setting limits and making it clear what will happen if a student violates classroom norms or rules. Make a special point of stopping "witch-hunting": the not uncommon tendency of students to gang up on a classmate.

More positively: Engage your students in active learning. Share responsibility; ask students to introduce class sessions, pose questions, lead discussions and review end-of-class session takeaways.

- **Treat your students as classroom assets.** Today's highly diverse students bring all kinds of expertise and experience to class. Many have firsthand experience with hardship or discrimination that are otherwise treated as abstractions. Some hold viewpoints and perspectives that can challenge the conventional wisdom. Encourage students to speak from their distinctive personal vantage point.
- **A humanities classroom shouldn't be a safe space—even for the instructor.** Certainly, a classroom needs to be sufficiently relaxed, comfortable and supportive so that students can learn free from anxiety, including the fear of appearing to be stupid or obtuse or wrongheaded. Do be responsive to students' academic and emotional needs and don't be cruel and tell students to toughen up, be more assertive and work harder. Still, students need challenges and frank feedback in order to grow intellectually.
- **Groupthink has no place in a humanities classroom.** Consensus isn't the humanities' paramount goal. It's to foster independent thinking, individual judgment and critical analysis. Unity of opinion is the enemy of a liberal, humanistic education and will invariably result in a decline in intellectual dynamism and vitality.
- **A classroom shouldn't be struggle session.** We should strive to create classrooms that are a community—a community of inquiry, a community of practice, a solver community and a community of care. But we should be careful not to create classrooms that expel

dissidents and dissenters, that achieve cohesion by defining themselves against an outgroup.

Lloyd's seminar students, who knew little or nothing about how cults function or about Maoist China's Cultural Revolution's struggle sessions or about John Humphrey Noyes's Oneida community and its "mutual criticism" sessions—which sought to defuse group tensions, vent feelings of guilt and aggression, and promote community cohesion—wound up re-enacting some of the worst features of those precedents.

Certainly, a robust humanities education does inevitably throw into question received orthodoxies, but intellectual growth requires students to wrestle with their values and doubts individually and at their own pace in dialogue with an expert and peers. It's among humanities instructors' most important responsibilities to convince today's students of the value of an approach that involves skepticism, close textual analysis, critical inquiry and independent thinking. Self-righteousness, moralism, performative virtual signaling and indoctrination have no place in a humanities classroom.

Please don't read Lloyd's essay, or my own posting, as a diatribe directed against efforts to efforts to bring highly charged issues of race, racism and equity into the classroom. Also, please don't treat this as an attack on "woke" thinking or social justice warriors or antiracism or diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives.

Instead, read it as a cautionary tale about the dangers of dogmatism—and about how easily classroom dynamics can go wrong and how important it is to treat the humanities seminar room as an environment committed to inquiry, dialogue and problem solving guided by a spirit of mutual respect and trust.

One reason I'm unwavering in my criticism of asynchronous online learning for undergraduate humanities classes is that the whole point of such an education is the passionate exchange of ideas—a give-and-take that is pap if it isn't contentious, combative and confrontational. We want students in the humanities to understand that ideas matter, that interpretations diverge and that argumentation is the life of the mind's essence and marrow. That can certainly result in classes that bristle with conflict and are riven with friction and even rancor. But that requires a decent respect for diverging points of view.

Much as a relationship without disagreement is too brittle to last, just as writing that is bland and lacking in style and strong opinions is drivel, so too a humanities seminar without contention is fluff.

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