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OPINION | OP-EDS

Our identities matter in Core classrooms

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Courtesy of Esther Jung

By [KAI JOHNSON](#), [TANIKA LYNCH](#), [ELIZABETH MONROE](#), and [TRACEY WANG](#)
April 30, 2015, 1:02am

During a forum hosted by the Multicultural Affairs

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Advisory Board on Literature Humanities last semester, a student shared an experience with an audience of instructors and fellow students. This experience, she said, came to define her relationship to her Lit Hum class and to Core material in general.

During the week spent on Ovid's "Metamorphoses," the class was instructed to read the myths of Persephone and Daphne, both of which include vivid depictions of rape and sexual assault. As a survivor of sexual assault, the student described being triggered while reading such detailed accounts of rape throughout the work. However, the student said her professor focused on the beauty of the language and the splendor of the imagery when lecturing on the text. As a result, the student completely disengaged from the class discussion as a means of self-preservation. She did not feel safe in the class. When she approached her professor after class, the student said she was essentially dismissed, and her concerns were ignored.

Ovid's "Metamorphoses" is a fixture of Lit Hum, but like so many texts in the Western canon, it contains triggering and offensive material that marginalizes student identities in the classroom. These texts, wrought with histories and narratives of exclusion and oppression, can be difficult to read and discuss as a survivor, a person of color, or a student from a low-income background.

The MAAB, an extension of the Office of Multicultural Affairs, is an advocacy group dedicated to ensuring that Columbia's campus is welcoming and safe for students of all backgrounds. This year, we explored possible interventions in Core classrooms, where transgressions concerning student identities are common. Beyond the texts themselves, class discussions can disregard the impacts that the Western canon has had and continues to

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have on marginalized groups.

For example, another student who attended the forum shared that her Lit Hum professor gave her class the opportunity to choose their own text to add to their syllabus for the year. When she suggested the class read a Toni Morrison text, another student declared that texts by authors of the African Diaspora are a staple in most high school English classes, and therefore they did not need to reread them. Toni Morrison is a writer of both the African Diaspora and the Western world, and her novels—aside from being some of the most intellectually and emotionally compelling writing in the last century—should be valued as founding texts of the Western canon.

The student's remark regarding Toni Morrison was not merely insensitive, but also revealing of larger ideological divides. This would have been an opportune moment for the professor to intervene.

The MAAB has held two forums in our On the Core series and had multiple meetings with professor Roosevelt Montás, the director of the Center for the Core Curriculum. The goal of the forums on Literature Humanities and Contemporary Civilization was to give students, professors, and faculty a space to hold a safe and open dialogue about experiences in the classroom that all too often traumatize and silence students. Repeatedly, we heard from students who demonstrated that having difficult experiences in a Lit Hum or Contemporary Civilization class may actually be part of the norm. Unfortunately, not all professors seem equipped to be effective facilitators in the classroom.

Students need to feel safe in the classroom, and that requires a learning environment that recognizes the

Moving our community forward

Nungesser files lawsuit against Columbia

multiplicity of their identities. The MAAB has been meeting with administration and faculty in the Center for the Core Curriculum to determine how to create such a space. The Board has recommended three measures: First, we proposed that the center issue a letter to faculty about potential trigger warnings and suggestions for how to support triggered students. Next, we noted that there should be a mechanism for students to communicate their concerns to professors anonymously, as well as a mediation mechanism for students who have identity-based disagreements with professors. Finally, the center should create a training program for all professors, including faculty and graduate instructors, which will enable them to constructively facilitate conversations that embrace all identities, share best practices, and think critically about how the Core Curriculum is framed for their students.

Our vision for this training is not to infringe upon the instructors' academic freedom in teaching the material. Rather, it is a means of providing them with effective strategies to engage with potential conflicts and confrontations in the classroom, whether they are between students or in response to the material itself. Given these tools, professors will be able to aid in the inclusion of student voices which presently feel silenced.

Students at the forum expressed that they have felt that Literature Humanities and Contemporary Civilization's curricula are often presented as a set of universal, venerated, incontestable principles and texts that have founded Western society. Such a presentation does not allow room for their experiences in the Western world or in class discussions. While these founding principles have been liberating in many ways, instructors should more consistently acknowledge during class discussions that

many of these same principles have created an unjust, unequal, and oppressive existence for many, as Professor Montás has suggested during our forums.

One of the defining elements of a Columbia education is the Core. The Center for the Core Curriculum, professor Montás, and many instructors have been receptive to our feedback and expressed dedication to addressing these issues. Altering the Core Curriculum is another important discussion—one that would undoubtedly require the insight of the larger student body. In the meantime, we hope that our recommendations will enable students to have a more intellectually rewarding experience in their classrooms.

The authors are members of the Multicultural Affairs Advisory Board. Tracey Wang is a former news deputy for Spectator.

To respond to this op-ed, or to submit an op-ed, contact opinion@columbiaspectator.com.

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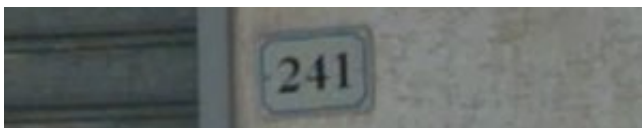
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Anonymous posted on Apr 30, 11:21am**+153**

"She did not feel safe in the class"

"Students need to feel safe in the classroom"

You people sound like 1980s Christian mothers talking about their kids being exposed to the evil influence of Madonna. Grow up, open up, care less about your identity and more about your passions, and please be passionate about anything... except your own identity. Such an insufferable breed of self-centered Care Bears.

reply

Alum CC'14 posted on Apr 30, 11:55am**+92**

I really, really, really distrust people who write pieces like this. As an Hispanic former student, I really don't trust people who merely invoke minority struggles as a cudgel in order to dictate what can and can't be taught in a classroom and how it can or can't be taught.

"Toni Morrison is a writer of both the African Diaspora and the Western world, and her novels—aside from being some of the most intellectually and emotionally compelling writing in the last century—should be valued as founding texts of the Western canon.

The student's remark regarding Toni Morrison was not merely insensitive, but also revealing of larger ideological divides. This would have been an opportune moment for the professor to intervene."

"Intervene" being code for "shut down the conversation". Merely disagreeing with another student about whether or not Beloved should be in the Core b/c people likely already read it in high school IS NOT an opportunity to 'intervene,' but to argue. THIS is where intellectual (and believe it or not, emotional) growth happens for both students. You don't get to unilaterally decide what texts should be in the Core over FEELINGS of safety. Although it no longer amazes me people fall for this sort of emotional manipulation, I still find it disgusting. I also find it disgusting that half the people reading this will be inclined to pay attention to it (at first) because I labeled myself as Hispanic (as if that lent me any authority on the subject).

As much as I'd like for Beloved and 100 Years of Solitude to be in

the Core, I have to recognize that I need to make a case for it. I don't want a Disaffected People's Feelings Committee representing me. They're censors and manipulative busybodies invoking others' struggles in order to make themselves feel important/relevant.

reply

CC '15 posted on Apr 30, 1:35pm

-65

" I don't want a Disaffected People's Feelings Committee representing me. "

I'm sorry, but I think your argument about people who "invoke minority struggles as a cudgel" and implications that these women (I am assuming by the names; I apologize for any mistake) who are writing this op-ed are "disaffected" by minority struggles is incredibly rude. A quick Facebook search would show you that that is not the case and that, in fact, all four authors of this piece are women of color. Debasing their arguments because of an (incorrect) assumption that they are merely appropriating minority struggles in order to work some other agenda is incredibly unhelpful to the conversation.

Also, thanks for assuming that Beloved is the only Toni Morrison book, or the only Toni Morrison book worth reading? My Lit Hum class read A Mercy, a very underappreciated Toni Morrison book, and we had an incredibly fruitful conversation about it. And my professor was the chair of Lit Hum, so I don't think it was an absurd addition.

reply

Anonymous posted on Apr 30, 2:29pm

+6

Look up the word "disaffected."

But you're right about A Mercy.

reply

Alum CC'14 posted on Apr 30, 2:44pm

+44

At no point in my post did I mention or imply that Toni Morrison's Beloved is the only book of hers worth reading. My favorite book of hers is Song of Solomon, actually. I took a wild guess as to the identity of the book given how often Beloved comes up in conversation, in my experience (shrug), so sue me.

It's funny how your response shows traces of the kind of

annoying tendencies I mentioned in my post. You're free to dismiss my argument as 'rude,' but keep in mind this is mere dismissal, not refutation - I can be a big meanie, but that's not going to automatically make your suggestions for the Core any more legitimate. Neither is appealing to authority via your LitHum prof. {{pathetic}} Which is a shame, because there are a handful of cases to be made for changing the Core and including a Toni Morrison book. What I'm railing against isn't the book, but the authors' arrogant insistence that an 'intervention' was due when a student disagreed with the idea.

I'm struck by the phrase "unhelpful to the conversation." ... are you sure you don't just mean "doesn't support the authors' argument" ? How much of a "conversation" is it if 'playing nice,' so to speak, is conflated with agreeing with the people who intend to change the Core?

reply

Kelvin Rojas CC'15 posted on May 1, 2:00am -34

- 1.
2. Nobody is trying to dictate what should and should not belong in the core. A dialogue is being had in which both parties are figuring out the best way to make Core Classrooms more inclusive of marginalized groups. Once again, a DIALOGUE, is being had. Much different than dictating. This dialogue is being had because at the present moment, students of marginalized groups generally have bad experiences with the core. The 4 women of color writing this op-ed are advocating for marginalized students.
3. Whether you want to admit it or not, one of the reasons that Toni Morrison is not included in the core is because the writings of women of color are not valued in this Eurocentric western world. However, the truth is that to understand the western world, you need to analyze it from the perspective of the ones being oppressed by the Western world. At the moment, we are only getting the perspective and narrative of White Europeans.
4. "Intervene" does not mean, shut the conversation down. If anybody is trying to shut the conversation down, it is people like you who do not want to hear and consider the grievances of marginalized students. On the contrary, WE want conversations like this to be had until the problem is

solved. Once again, this is why the four women of color wrote this op-ed; not to shut down the conversation, but to spark it.

5. The people who are unilaterally deciding what texts are in the core, is Columbia. These four women are not unilaterally doing anything. They are simply advocating for more balance and inclusion of the narrative of marginalized peoples in the experience of Columbia's Core.

6. Your entire post is riddled with hypocrisy. You are claiming that we are dictating and shutting down conversations, yet you are the one who is using backhanded arguments to defend your bigotry. Stop hiding behind the veil of impartiality and actually make a comprehensive rebuttal instead of painting people as "Disaffected" simply because they are bringing to light the complaints of the marginalized student body. Just as you don't want the "Disaffected People's Feelings Committee" representing you, I'm sure that these women are not out to represent snarky bigots like you.

reply

What is your Identity? posted on Apr 30, 3:44pm +51

I feel bad for people who feel like the fact they were born a certain race or sexual orientation is the most defining characteristic of their personality. You are a person, not a category.

reply

CC'15 posted on May 1, 6:53am -50

Race and sexual orientation are more than just arbitrary categories in America. While it is a nice idea that we might be able to come together someday, ignoring that these categories exist and have been used to discriminate and to justify acts of violence against these communities aren't going to bring us any closer to that day. America was built on dehumanizing people because they fell into these categories. It continues to dehumanize people who fall into these categories every single day. Thus, race and/or sexual orientation does play a large role in the lives of people and any history book (or even current events) will tell you this. Denying the fact that these categories are important means completely ignoring American history and how institutions like Columbia came to be.

reply

Anonymous posted on May 1, 8:48am -53

your remark screams ignorance. Maybe ask a patient person of color why, because lord knows you're gonna need someone patient & calm to explain to you & the other 1,000 ignorant folk why your lack of compassion is incredibly ignorant. If you ACTUALLY tried to put yourself in the shoes & everyday life of someone who has to undergo constant "accidentally" subtle racist remarks every day, you would see that the world would look just a little different when you don't live in your ivy tower.

reply

Gullah posted on May 1, 4:15pm +72

Oh Precious! Precious? My precious little snowflake, speaking as a black man who has been around the block more than a few times, all of you need to grow up and get over it. You re not the center of the universe, none of us has a right to not be offended in a democracy and if you can't handle it repair to your padded room with your lollipops, Valium and whatever other pacifier makes you happy or better still make an appointment with a shrink. We are all always going to be offended by something. Using 'feeling safe', 'respect', and 'trigger-warnings' are just treads in a rope to lynch free speech.

reply

To GULLAH posted on May 2, 8:24pm +12

What you wrote is fabulous!

reply

Blixkrogg posted on May 2, 1:08pm +28

I've been a 1st generation Hispanic immigrant in the U.S. for most of my 36 year old life and have had to endure extremely bigoted treatment after moving to the mid-west in my 20s.

I don't need to be coddled nor protected from bigotry. I get the strength to deal with it from myself, not from other people empathizing with how I feel whenever someone says something disparaging about me because of the color of my skin or birth place.

My black, Mexican, and Jewish friends don't need the pity of anyone or the understanding of anyone to have the strength to go about my business and we don't need everyone, especially "1,000 ignorant (you mistyped what you meant, come out and say it, "white") folk, to know how it feels to be in my shoes.

You whine about subtle racism while people who suffer overt, blatant racism like I have work around it and DEAL with it. Grow some skin and stop being translucent, exposing your weaknesses to the world by blasting it over a megaphone. If you have a problem with your ability to handle the world, that's your personal problem and it doesn't give you the right to demand everyone live their life around you and your egocentric self.

reply

CC15 posted on May 1, 10:27am

+5

A few questions for the authors that I think may help further explore possibilities:

What do you think is the PURPOSE of Lithum, at present? What are we supposed to walk away with? Do you think his is a "good" or "useful" purpose? If yes, which texts would you like to incorporate into that methodology and to those PARTICULAR ends? And if not, what do you think SHOULD be the function of the course, and how/with what texts do you propose to change it? The article gestures toward some answers, but I think it's pedagogically important to come up with more concrete ones.

reply

CC15, the one with the questions posted on May 10:36am

+3

To clarify, I mean something beyond professor training. I'm with you 100% on the professor training part. I personally had one bizarrely insensitive professor who allowed lots of weird racist comments to go unchecked (like some girl who claimed that indigenous peoples of South America were "savage cannibals" I just could not believe that anyone had said it and that she let that go I just I can't oh my god sorry I'm having CC flashbacks). It's really really obvious that a lot of professors, especially in CC, are living in some strange Victorian universe. I'm more interested in the syllabus-oriented half of the authors' argument.

reply

Anonymous posted on May 1, 12:40pm

+64

So many young people are just so pathetically weak these days. You say that sitting in a classroom reading a book makes you feel "unsafe" which makes me wonder if you've ever actually been in an unsafe situation in your life. A large number of students taking core classes have been in a fucking war being shot at and shooting people but cry babies like these can't even read a book without feeling unsafe. It's time to grow up kids.

reply

One other thing posted on May 1, 12:56pm

+26

Why do you think issues of sexual assault only exist in Western literature? There's something quietly racist (to non-Western cultures) about assuming that everything non-Western is perfect just by virtue of not being Western.

reply

Anonymous posted on May 1, 2:24pm

+39

This op-ed is riddled with hypocrisies that I don't understand how the authors could not see when they wrote this. All you people are saying is that if someone disagrees with my opinion the teacher should shut them down, but my opinion should be heard. I read Morrison in LitHum, sure it was a decent read, but it came at the cost of Crime and Punishment because my teacher wanted to add in more diverse readings. While Morrison's works are decent, just because she is black does not make her books more worth reading than the books of someone of any other race. The fact that you are even implying this should be the case is incredibly racist and all the authors should look at themselves and ask if they are part of the problem because I think they are just as guilty as the people who say only whites should be read in the core. NO! The answer is that the best BOOKS should be read in the core regardless of author and if the case is that all authors are white then we should accept this as the case. No one here can make a real argument that "A Mercy" is a better text for LitHum than Crime and Punishment based off the book itself without bringing race into it

reply

Anonymous posted on May 2, 4:11pm

-14

It's not just the quality of the work itself, but the value of the

themes. Taking an intimate look at the black experience in the U.S. is super valuable to students

reply

Anonymous posted on May 2, 4:19pm +10

As an alum, I must agree Crime and Punishment absolutely belong on the LitHum syllabus.

reply

Anonymous posted on May 1, 5:28pm +31

Just want to point out that it's quite disingenuous to categorize this as "Dialogue". For an individual to use his/her status as a survivor to justify the removal of "triggering" texts is just throwing one's weight around and putting an end to discussion. This is not making a good point, this is making it impossible for anyone with a hint of manners to respond (who wants to talk back to a survivor?).

It's entirely possible to come up with good arguments against certain aspects of the Core, but if you want us to take you guys seriously, stop appealing to your own identity. If you make an argument as X/survivor/chicano/african-american, people will respond to your arguments as if they were made by an X/survivor/etc, instead of taking them seriously.

reply

Life... posted on May 1, 9:00pm +12

...is full of triggering events.

Like encountering liars and calumnists... those things trigger me. Yet Columbia celebrates those people and their slanders.

reply

Steve posted on May 2, 8:53am +39

Sometimes the culture of phony victimization goes so far sometimes that you can't tell if you are reading parody or not. This is one of those times.

reply

Dave posted on May 2, 9:05am +29

A lot of it has been well covered, but I'm going to just leave with a few questions:

If it is not acceptable to teach controversies about race, sexual orientation, socioeconomic gaps in society, or gender, how are

we ever supposed to confront and overcome those issues as adults in society?

If we cannot talk about them using characters in fiction, how can we even begin to discuss what really happens in the world?

If you expect to treat college students as such children that they cannot handle being exposed to uncomfortable concepts, when in life are we supposed to grow up enough to deal with an uncomfortable world?

reply

Chip posted on May 2, 9:09am

+44

It disturbs me that people think that talking about subjects they find uncomfortable means that they are "not safe" in the classroom.

"Not safe" is being a female student in Afghanistan, not being made uncomfortable by statements you disagree with or even statements you find offensive. The solution to what you think is bad speech is more speech, not the suppression of ideas.

If you can't handle people who disagree with you you're going to have a tough time getting through life.

reply

WartHog posted on May 2, 9:11am

+22

Students need to be challenged in the classroom, not wrapped up in soundproof cotton wool. We are not talking about children, despite the recent display of kindergarten histrionics at Oberon. Perhaps, you will suggest a safe room with cookies, colouring books and a video of frolicking puppies next.

Treating minorities as some sort of special class requiring kid gloves is downright insulting, not to mention bigoted. Next, there will be suggestions that they should be segregated into separate classes to allow for their special needs.

Grow the hell up and maybe the students will follow suit. I am embarrassed on your behalf.

reply

Tanika Kanita posted on May 2, 9:32am

-15

It used to be the blacks and lesbians who sought to destroy western culture, but now the asians have joined.

PS what kind of name is Tanika

reply

Anonymous posted on May 2, 9:34am

+10

"Hey Hey, Ho Ho, Western Civ has got to go!"

-- Call at protest of Stanford University about their curriculum, led by Jesse Jackson in 1998.

I've been around long enough to hear this song before.

reply

Alum cc'12 posted on May 2, 10:01am

+45

Wow -- I could not disagree more with this article and everything it stands for and suggests and demands. Life doesn't come with built in trigger warnings, and great literature channels life's complexity, including its distasteful aspects, and even its horror. If your professor refused to entertain your comments about the disturbing sexual ethic of *Metamorphoses* because she was so swept up with its imagery, then she's not doing her job as a facilitator and you have a valid complaint. But it seems to me that you find the entire idea of reading Ovid or other 'canonical' texts distasteful, and are offended by the very concept of a western canon.

Well, you can have that view. But just in case no one has told you this yet: it's simplistic, it's myopic, and it's intellectually lazy. The cultures that produced most of the texts we read in lit hum don't share your cultural sensibilities. In fact, their values systems are foreign to the extreme. Sometimes we focus too much on universalizing, but putting yourself into the mind of an Ancient Greek or a medieval European monk might as well be entering the brain of an alien. Old white men? Try explaining that concept to Vergil or Augustine or whoever -- your method of filtering your experience through lenses of privilege and marginalization would seem as kooky to them as Aquinas and his hierarchies of divine law and creation probably seemed to you (if you did the reading). Sifting through all this is the thought exercise the core, at its best, is supposed to structure. I think it's great to suggest texts that are nuanced and sophisticated enough to add to the core, and to represent alternative viewpoints. But the underlying idea that classic texts can do violence in the classroom simply because of their content, and that the instructor's job is thus to shelter rather than expose? That's some pretty twisted dystopian thinking right there.

reply

the Mothership Connection posted on May 4, 8:3 m6

"The cultures that produced most of the texts we read in lit hum don't share your cultural sensibilities."

OUR culture doesn't share your cultural sensibilities.

As George Clinton once said, "Free your mind and your ass will follow!"

reply

TDB posted on May 2, 10:27am +31

And people wonder why the US is sliding down the toilet. If students are that socially/psychologically crippled, they shouldn't leave their homes unsupervised without their case worker.

reply

John Milton posted on May 2, 10:34am +28

Ok, this is an article from "The Onion", right?

reply

John Milton posted on May 2, 10:35am +9

Ok, this is an article from "The Onion", right?

reply

Sarah AB posted on May 2, 10:53am +35

It's a good thing Toni Morrison wasn't so squeamish about engaging with the Western canon as these students or she wouldn't have been able to base *Beloved* on a rather 'triggering' myth about a woman who cut up both her brother and her enemies' father, before killing her own small children.

reply

Anonymous posted on May 2, 6:46pm +8

SHH PLOT SPOILER

reply

Sprague CC '88 posted on May 2, 11:22am +37

This essay triggered my fears of political correctness undermining the value of a Columbia education. Where's my safe space?

reply

Will posted on May 2, 12:04pm +22

this article is just beyond ridiculous...beyond a caricature of ridiculous really.

reply

Anonymous posted on May 2, 12:48pm +14

How dare anything challenge my worldview? I can, of course, challenge other worldviews as much as I like, because they aren't mine!

reply

Juvenal posted on May 2, 1:03pm +22

Toni Morrison's novels are "founding texts of the Western canon"? So, um, the Western canon entered into existence in the late twentieth century? "Foundational," perhaps. "Founding," no way.

I'm worried about the state of a Columbia education, and not on account of its potentially triggering subject-matter.

reply

Swarthmore Alumna posted on May 3, 12:45am +11

So, you noticed that too? It doesn't make any sense to claim that Toni Morrison novels are founding texts of the Western canon, unless Columbia University believes that the Western canon didn't begin until the twentieth century! I would consider Ovid's works to be much better described as founding texts of the Western canon.

I wonder if Columbia University MAAB is redefining Western civilization in order to fit MAAB's view of racially and politically sanctioned ideology.

reply

Classicist posted on May 2, 2:06pm +24

If you had read the Metamorphoses carefully, you would see that Ovid has an incredibly nuanced view of sexual assault for the time. He is in fact criticizing the gods for their horrible actions, a motif that reappears throughout his oeuvre, such as in the *Ars Amatoria*.

reply

Boris The Spider posted on May 3, 12:09pm +12

Nuance and careful reading are racist tools of the white patriarchy and must be destroyed.

reply

Anonymous posted on May 2, 4:01pm -2

It is true most read Many Morrison works in H.S. A great alternative would be Butterfly Burning or anything else by Yvonne Vera, a literary genius from Zimbabwe. Also of course the achingly beautiful Breath, Eyes, Memory or anything else by genius Edwige Danticat.

reply

Anonymous posted on May 2, 4:10pm

+11

Ovid is worth it for the beauty alone.

reply

Anonymous posted on May 2, 4:12pm

+4

Ovid is worth it for the beauty alone.

reply

CC17 posted on May 2, 4:23pm

+15

To me the most infuriating thing about this article is the fact that they are trying to use someone's experience of sexual assault to promote their argument for the existence of and solution to racism in the CC syllabus. I agree with the views seemingly held by the majority of commenters on free speech and challenging class discourse, but even if I didn't, I would still find it totally absurd to use the example of a victim of sexual assault having experienced triggering to promote your views on what is racist and what should or should not be in Contemporary Civilizations. If it were my experience of rape being used for this article, I would feel that it had been degraded and belittled. Your stance on sensitivity is hypocritical in the extreme.

reply

Anonymous posted on May 2, 4:55pm

0

Some aspects/definitions of a safe space don't sit quite right with me...but one thing that seems really DANGEROUS in the lithum classroom is learning important things WRONG. So when a student tries to break down racist propositions and sees that they won't be able to carry their point (maybe it's just wrong, but maybe the prof is racist, MAYBE they're just too worn out by explaining this position for the hundredth time and get overwhelmed and choose to leave), that can be very scary--they are watching the re-education of the ideas that are hurting our society. In this case, that fear is not of primary concern--the fear is a symptom of a problem we need to address.

reply

Anonymous posted on May 2, 7:38pm

-13

If you think you felt uncomfortable, imagine how uncomfortable the rapists (read: men) in your class felt...

reply

Anonymous posted on May 2, 9:23pm

0

Toni Morrison's extremely insensitive and indeed triggering view of rape should be entered into the public record as a data point in this debate. I quote from her introduction to *Birth of a Nation*: hood: Gaze, Script, and Spectacle in the O. J. Simpson Case:

"Another issue the official story both exposed and blanketed is the matter of domestic abuse, by which is meant the physical harm males do to females—the reverse being rare, warranted, a joke or all three. There are patently excessive responses to these claims. A six-year-old boy was suspended for kissing a girl classmate on the cheek (prompting the question of whether expulsion would have been the consequence if she had kissed him). And there are undoubtedly some fabrications, abuse being the easiest and most effective claim in divorce settlements. But the more recent understandings of the law and the unassailable argument of men and women who trying to get the general population and the courts to take this issue seriously lead toward one conclusion: a female must not be physically accosted by a male under any circumstances—excepting a demonstrable threat to his or somebody's life. That means whatever the reasons, there are no excuses. If she curses him, humiliates him or degrades him, he must not hit her. If she betrays him with another sexual partner, he must not hit her. If she abuses his children or burns his supper; wrecks his car or chops off his penis; whether he is shooting up, messing up or cleaning up, he must not hit her. Why? Because he is stronger. The power relationship is unequal. (Except when she is armed.)

"As for sexual assault, the thinking is similar. Rape is a criminal act whatever the circumstances. A woman riding the subway nude may be guilty of indecency but she may not be raped. If she invites or even sells sex at 10:00 and refuses it at 10:45, the partner who disregards her refusal and forces sex is guilty of rape. If she is drunk, asleep, mentally defective, paralyzed or dead, she must not be raped. Why? Because sexual congress must be by consent. And males are stronger.

"Trying to ensure that view has been difficult partly because the

masculinist side of the debate (She was “asking” for it) still pervades, but also because in the negotiation of power, the physical strength and the allegedly uncontrollable sexual hunger of males are seen as unequalizing factors. The popular counterargument that concerns female responsibility in these matters of power is a subversive, almost treasonable one. Men must be retrained and socialized into non-aggressive, respectful behavior. But women, whose historically repressive social education has been ruthless and whose self-esteem has been systematically plundered, are understood to have no responsibility. As long as the wildly irresponsible claim of “It doesn’t matter what she does” is the answer to the helpless idiocy of “She made me do it,” the complicity in power/abuse relationships will be unaddressed. It does matter what she does. And she can't make you."

Morrison says of a hypothetical rape victim, "It does matter what she does." Can an author with such views enable the creation of a safe space in Lit Hum?

reply

Catherine Fitzpatrick posted on May 2, 11:38pm +17

This is extraordinary psychosis and the campus administrators and professors who enable this mass hysteria should not only a deep sense of shame, they should get a lot more pushback than they do from the media, parents and even governments. Of course the White House emphasis on dealing with campus rape without due process or the rule of law, instead of having the police deal with it, under fear of losing funding, is part of what drives this cultism.

I also can't help wondering if the reading was the story about the Prophet and Ayesha and the Battle of Karbala that suddenly, it might be blessed as beautiful and not a trigger at all but a blow for freedom against the oppressive White Man.

reply

Swarthmore Alumna posted on May 3, 12:37am -2

Toni Morrison won a Nobel prize in literature, however, Ovid's works should be valued as "founding texts of the Western canon".

reply

Anonymous posted on May 4, 3:26pm +1

Oh my God, you're right! Virtually no one on the Lit Hum syllabus has won a Nobel Prize! Homer didn't win one! Vergil

didn't win one! Neither did Jane Austen or Virginia Woolf!
Quick, somebody get some Mikhail Sholokhov and Rudyard
Kipling on the list!
(Which is not to say that Morrison isn't a great writer.)

reply

John Seal posted on May 3, 3:39am

+8

I'm not familiar with the format of Columbia's Literature
Humanities classes, but do they generally include fiction as
contemporary as Morrison's? Most of her books are only 30 or 40
years old and surely their place in any kind of 'canon' is not yet
assured. In my opinion it takes many decades, centuries
sometimes, for the value of most works of fiction to become clear.

reply

The Sanity Inspector posted on May 3, 11:26am

+6

This is what happens when "college is for everyone." It isn't
college anymore, but pre-K circle time. Do you want an
education, or do you want an ego massage?

reply

Paul Rizzo posted on May 3, 12:08pm

0

Yes, let's burn every copy of Ovid and while we're at it let's
pretend Toni Morrison's Affirmative Action Nobel Prize was even
remotely legitimate. Hey, let's go all the way and declare "Doctor"
Maya Angelou (the only "Doctor" not to finish high school!) the
greatest poet in the Western Canon.

This is absolutely horrifying.

reply

Rachel Jeantel C'18 posted on May 3, 12:21pm

0

I can't wait to take Dr. Emma Sulkowicz's (that's right Sen.
Gillibrand pulled some strings and forced Columbia to award her
an instant Ph.D!) seminar next fall: Trigger Warnings, Rape
Culture, Regrets, and YOU. I hear a live rapist will be dissected
onstage at the first lecture.

reply

Anonymous posted on May 3, 1:09pm

-2

Just fire the instructor and drop the greek classics from program.
Teach Dr Seuss. You will get as much from studying his work
than the old world stuff.

reply

Stuart posted on May 3, 10:01pm +3

Most of these comments should be added to the western canon.

reply

Anonymous posted on May 4, 12:20pm +2

Reading Toni Morrison's biography, I wonder what she would have to say. I doubt she'd agree with this article.

reply

Chuck L posted on May 4, 9:37pm +1

Grow-Up! The thought that the current generation of college students will be in positions of powers some day soon is horrifying.

reply

Sam posted on May 4, 9:42pm +2

this entire article is a load of horseshit. Everyone is so easily offended these days and can't learn to get over things. All we end up with are students that are less and less capable of making any headway in the world because they never gave any real tests of character in university.

Keep it up, you're doing two things:

1. Ensuring people like me, in the work force already have ever greater job security
2. Continuing to show corporate America that universities are more useless every day, reducing the value of them in favor of iq testing

Good work.

reply

Cynthia Mackley posted on May 4, 9:46pm +7

As a woman, I find other women who can't take a literature class without swooning because of upsetting material embarrassing. That's why they didn't let women read the newspapers back in the 19th century, because it might disturb their delicate psyches. The pathetic state of higher education makes me ill.

reply

Scott posted on May 4, 9:47pm +4

Yes, let's keep old Ovid, who has been entertaining people for 2000 years) out of the class because a poor little snowflake was

offended by some bad words. I suppose Shakespeare (ie Titus Andronicus) will be banned next.

Quit making women look like such weak & cowardly pussies.

reply

Intersectional feminist posted on May 5, 8:20am -3

Shakespeare was just another white male oppressor. How about reading some works by women, people of color and transsexuals?

reply

Scott posted on May 5, 11:18am +2

But Tracy Wang lists him as one of her favorite authors. Damn you internalized misogyny!

reply

Lin posted on May 4, 9:52pm +5

"Students need to feel safe in the classroom"

No, students need to be challenged in the classroom, they need to be shown opinions and material that will test them, that will make them think and yes in many cases offend them.

College is designed to prep these people for the real world, these are our future leaders, the people that will decide the course of the world after most of us are long dead and thus far, we are creating a legion of children that will crumble and collapse at the first sign of trouble, we keep coddling people like this, we are going to get run over by anyone who only has conflict and war on their minds.

reply

Anonymous posted on May 4, 10:53pm +2

This is so pathetic. Where do they get all this? Do incoming students go through a course on how to use buzzwords to sound like a victim? And I thought the ad nauseum repetition of "hegemonic" and "phallo-centric" in the '90s was bad.

reply

Ian Martinez posted on May 4, 11:08pm +5

These "trigger students" need to toughen up, like all males are expected to do.

reply

m posted on May 5, 7:03am +3

Farewell western civilization, drowned in a sea of cowardness and self pity. Oh boy!

reply

Trigger Warning: Sanity posted on May 5, 8:18am +3

This must be satire. There is simply no way anyone can be this crazy.

reply

Steve Bensen posted on May 5, 8:21am +4

These women are like a baby watching a movie and thinking the monster is going to come out of the screen and get them. These days colleges infantilize women and encourage them to be helpless babies. 'Trigger warnings' are nonsense. If you need trigger warnings then you need to stay in a nursery with the other babies. An adult is a person who has learned the lesson, "Why do we fall? So we can learn to get up!"

reply

what? posted on May 5, 11:36am +3

This genuine act of intellectual cowardice has to be some form of belated April fools joke. If not then the professor did the right thing and dismissed her. Oh he shouldn't ignore her. Instead he need to try to get her expelled. She clearly doesn't meet the standards required of a functional adult needed for one to be in college in the first place.

reply

Daniel Schmutter posted on May 5, 1:35pm 0

Students do not need to feel "safe" in the classroom. They need to be intellectually challenged. When students need to feel "safe" in the classroom that is the death of intellectual growth. Learning is uncomfortable. The idea that a "trigger" should stifle intellectual discourse is utterly antithetical to the academic environment. Shame on Columbia for having students that need such coddling.

reply

Nietzsche posted on May 5, 2:04pm 0

Slave morality, resentment

reply

Anonymous posted on May 5, 2:40pm 0

Speaking of lit classes, do schools still require students to read The Crucible? I think the authors of this piece should read The Crucible. Pay particular attention to the shrieking nonsense of the girls any time they need silence others or divert attention.

reply