

“This is Not How They Are”: On Contemporary Education, Political Correctness, and Inattention to Craft

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Abstract

The quote from Jhumpa Lahiri’s novel *The Namesake* prompts a discussion and argument about how education, particularly education in the liberal arts, is impacted in a contemporary culture of political correctness, international competition, Millennial and Generation Z sensibilities, pervasive technology, and ongoing, entertained tension. Lahiri, Neil Gaiman, Junot Diaz, Shakespeare, Mark Twain, Chris Rock, Trey Parker, Slavoj Zizek, Donald Trump, and others are brought into an article that began with a student refusing to read profanity, and that asserts teachers and professors should refuse to strip literature, art, and history of its essence, however unsettling.

Keywords: Political correctness, reading, higher education

There are any number of weighty and tragic phenomena in the world and in the US with which one might open an article or essay today. This essay opens instead with a call to shared experiences, and rather innocuous ones at that. It builds to trauma. A call, then: Readers, teachers, and scholars likely all face instances in which they question profanity and other potentially-offensive or relatively inappropriate content in literary or other texts. Violence to the human eyeball comes to mind.

Jhumpa Lahiri won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for her debut short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies*—ostensibly an exemplar of masterful writing craft. She followed that accolade in 2003 with her first novel, *The Namesake*, one of the literary texts I have used in an undergraduate World Literature course curriculum and one that is an exemplar text for upper secondary reading according to the Common Core State Standards. An excerpt from early in the novel, Bengali protagonist Ashima Ganguli is in a Boston maternity ward, preparing to deliver her first child, and she listens in on the other expectant mothers, all American:

One woman’s name, she gathers from bits of conversation, is Beverly. Another is Lois. Carol lies to her left. “Goddamnit, goddamn you, this is hell,” she hears one of them say. And then a man’s voice: “I love you, sweetheart.” Words Ashima has neither heard nor expects to hear from her own husband; this is not how they are. (Lahiri, 2003, p. 3)

One term, an American student in class references the passage above for the cultural reflection she feels from Ashima’s Bengali perspective, and when asked to read the passage, stutters and reads around Beverly, Lois, or Carol’s exclamation. She notes the foreign concept of not vocalizing love, but does not make the metacognitive parallel to Lahiri’s point at drawing the reader to the idiosyncratic and cultural constructs that shape one’s identity (e.g., the student’s).

This and related experiences prompted the position that even when it comes to brilliant literary text, if the text includes profanity or other such content, “this is not how they are” accurately describes dispositions to reading. If traditional and multimodal literacies, particularly in relation to college and career readiness in the global market, concern scholars, educators, parents, and legislators, understanding the causes and implications of this dispositional phenomenon is important.

Consider several additional instances of dispositions relative to literature and teaching that should resonate with contemporary educator and scholar experiences. A teaching intern, strangely ignorant of content knowledge and Mark Twain, stumbles through student questions of race in the novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Students ask him about Twain’s depiction of Jim and of the language used, but he doesn’t know enough about Twain to respond. Students left the class unsure if Twain was a racist, possibly and inaccurately situating him within modern racial dynamics in the US, and that outcome is certainly unfortunate, unsatisfying, and harmful—both for the students and for Twain.

A different intern at a different school struggles when a student offers a textual example from Ray Bradbury’s *Martian Chronicles*, and the intern’s compelled to address the word *goddammit* when she goes to read it. She explains in debrief afterward that she feels uncomfortable reading anything in literature or poetry that involves race or religion and that might be offensive.

In a Pre-AP class with *Of Mice and Men* on the curriculum, yet another teaching intern and an in-service teacher grapple with ideologies, regardless of the ideas of the students. *Of Mice and Men* is like *Huck Finn*, *Catcher in the Rye*, and many other canonical and secondary school texts that have been censored and banned by parents and communities because of profanity and other perceived inappropriate content. In this case, the intern didn’t want to read the word *N¹*, and students vocalized that they didn’t want to hear her read that word either, but the teacher pushed back and pushed the intern to read it. In the requisite debrief, we discussed the interesting and important explicit vocalization by the students and the somewhat unrelated pragmatic and ideological conflict between the teacher and the intern.

That teacher’s position paralleled an ongoing stance from many teachers and scholars, including perhaps most famously, Shakespeareans—we value and study literary texts because, in sum, they provide us lasting artistic depictions of the human condition. New historicism and critical theory more broadly has supported teachers who contextualize literature and require students to understand its summative value. In the case of Shakespeare, to the infamous lament of the high school student, that pedagogical and ideological stance means learning and using Early Modern English. The story goes that Shakespeare includes jokes and puns, even in the tragedies, and that without the linguistic and historical knowledge, the reader or performer misses the substance (or, more basely, the meaning) of the text.

An example of this potential misreading or missing occurred in a student reaction to a passage from Junot Diaz’s Pulitzer Prize winning *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (p. 64). The student reads the passage but omits a description of Aldo’s genitalia, his “dick.” I prompt the student to explicate her reaction to this encounter in the novel between Lola and Aldo. She explains an affective and dispositional response to that particular language; in short, offense. Her peers interject before I can suss out what underpins this declaration that *this* is not how she is or

whether such an inquiry would be possible or generative in the class. That said, it becomes obvious in the student responses that they had not thoughtfully or carefully engaged the text, perhaps because the language dissuaded such attention. I ask them to focus on the literariness of the text and Lola's experience, on the compound adjective "kitty-litter-infested," on the word *grimly*, and on why Diaz and Lola place *virginity* in quotes. Students discuss and I push them to understand, empathize, and see the dingy, pungent room and the clear disconnect between Aldo and Lola, the poignant statement the scene makes about culture and adolescence and gender dynamics.

For at least one student, the word or image—*dick*—stymied comprehension. And yet *goddammit* and *N* and *dick* are each craftful punctuation (as I noted above with Lahiri, Twain, Shakespeare, and more above). The author's creative orchestration of language to capture deep resonances in the human experience is precisely what distinguishes a shopping list or text message or blog post from literature. For many authors, poets, and literary scholars, this manipulation and control of language—the compelling use of this highest form of human expression and intellect—further distinguishes such literary craft from other fine arts, from painting to film to jazz. Diaz masterfully populates *Oscar Wao* with distinct voices and cultures, announcing the primary litmus test of the geek through copious pop culture references, acknowledging the academic with dispassionate footnotes, celebrating the cacophony of the liminal immigrant experience through exclamations in Dominican slang and Spanish and English and Japanese, and the reader only comprehends the complicated novel if she is a generous, open, and attentive reader. Indeed, one might easily map *Oscar Wao* and related supplementary material onto Common Core State Standards (CCSS; or the ESSA updates), National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE) standards, Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) Outcomes, International Literacy Association standards, or others from around the world.

And yet acknowledge this dispositional phenomenon in JD Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. Holden Caulfield narrates the egocentricism and romanticism of adolescence, infamously populating his meditations with persistent profanity. He frequently identifies "goddamn phonies" in his experiences in New York, for instance, and the reader is invited to question his disposition, relative to Ashima Ganguli and the students above, when he goes to leave a note for his sister Phoebe. At her school, Holden is horrified, ironically, at profanity: "Somebody'd written 'Fuck you' on the wall" (p. 260). He continues, "It drove me damn near crazy," enough so that he "kept wanting to kill whoever'd written it" (p. 260). One might reasonably contextualize the novel to explain Holden's reaction, but readers understand the layered nature of the text—(a) identifying Holden's disposition, and (b) experiencing one's own disposition to profanity, if there is any important difference between *goddamn* and *fuck*.

In other words, "this is not how they are" not only prompted me as a reader to consider the literary significance of that early characterization in *The Namesake*, but also intersected with pedagogical and cultural discussions about contemporary education and Millennial and Generation Z students (e.g., see Williams, 2015) I knew as a professor and scholar. Below, I note discussions of theory, primarily relative to literature and the primary craft understood only through reading the full text (not censoring language or content that might be sensitive), and then I note discussions of critical theory, political correctness, and how those movements have impacted education in the US and elsewhere.

Reading and Teaching the Text

Extant theory, research, and cultural criticism suggest several responses to this dispositional phenomenon.

Fundamentally, composition and literary theory have developed a collection of approaches to texts, all of which seem to require the reader to engage the full text, intact. In one approach, the text in and of itself contains meaning and is the focus of attention, a position largely associated with structuralism. In another, attention is devoted to the text as situated within broader social, historical, political, and economic contexts, following new historicism. In embodying the perceived primacy of the author or artist in the text, one approach attends to authorial intent. Reader response theory informs the alternative position that the reader negotiates meaning with the text. Scholars might include other approaches (e.g., feminist), but these four hold prominent, if not implicit, roles in classrooms around the US and elsewhere. Regardless of approach, the reader cannot mediate, ignore, or truncate the text. Thus a precedent and professional impetus to celebrate the central and complete text, not idiosyncratic instances of “this is not how they are.”

While a strand of research contests the primacy of literature by focusing on these instances, perhaps most obviously in addressing reluctant readers and second-language learners, the result is uniformly capitalistic and devoid of literariness. Conferences filled with texts created explicitly to meet CCSS standards (and ESSA additions) and other literacy policies, graphic novel or manga iterations of canonical texts, and other such derivative texts directed at teachers and students undermine the literary craft readers and teachers of literature should be enjoying, discussing, and advocating. Authors, including those for children’s and YAL, are mindful of craft, and as author Barbara O’Connor writes, I “never used profanity simply for the sake of using it. I wrote the way my characters would speak in the real world” (2010, p. 466). Coyne, Callister, Stockdale, Nelson, and Wells (2012) link the use of profanity in YAL to social movements, including feminism, and find what we might expect—that YAL targeted at older readers often includes as much profanity as in books targeted to adults. What they cannot show is that there are any negative outcomes from this exposure to craftful reality and language. Sherman Alexie writes that the best kids books are “written in blood,” and that they should accurately depict the often troubling realities for young people (2011). Neil Gaiman argues the same, “that we learn about ourselves” when we confront these realities (p. xi), and research suggests that reading these craftful, representative texts aloud in classes increases literacy skills (Dreher, 2003). Gaiman writes

The monsters in our cupboards and our minds are always there in the darkness, like mold beneath the floorboards and behind the wallpaper, and there is so much darkness, an inexhaustible supply of darkness. The universe is amply supplied with night. (2015, p. xii).

Gaiman writes about the contemporary culture of self-censorship in his 2015 short story collection *Trigger Warning*. Following O’Connor, Alexie, Gaiman, and the countless other authors and stakeholders in education, curatorial work, and the arts, the American Library Association (ALA) opposes censorship, as does the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). NCTE makes an important distinction between censorship and professional guidelines (www.ncte.org/positions/statements/censorshipprofguide). Highlighting three examples of the

distinction here, they all suggest a response to the dispositional phenomenon. In the first example, the teacher's reactions are essentially negative (censoring)—e.g., "Review your classroom library and eliminate books that include stereotypes"—or essentially affirmative (following professional guidelines)—"Review your classroom library. If necessary, add books that portray groups in non-stereotypical ways." Some movements against the canon and broadly against the cultural capital of a classical liberal education and ED Hirsch's cultural literacy parallel the censoring action here.

Consider the next example, highlighting another pairing from the NCTE.

- Look at parts of a work in isolation (censoring)—Remove this book. The language includes profanity.
- See the relationship of parts to each other and to a work as a whole (following professional guidelines)—Determine whether the profanity is integral to portrayal of character and development of theme in the book.

My mother expressed interest last year in reading the award-winning Markus Zusak novel *The Book Thief*, a text exemplar in the CCSS Appendix B. I happily gave her a copy and, after some time, inquired about the read. I was surprised to find that she stopped reading the novel and was planning to donate it. After redirecting the donation to a local school, I asked what stopped her, and was baffled by her response. I did not remember a preponderance of profanity while reading the novel myself, and went about identifying the veracity of my mother's claim. After 24 pages, the novel included only a single and innocuous swear (i.e., *damn*, p. 7). But through a chapter break and the first 55, I noted in addition to German slang/profanity the following words, which would not have upset Holden Caulfield or Sherman Alexie but which did upset my mother: *hell* (p. 25), *ass/asshole* (pp. 28, 32, 41), *bastard* (p. 43), *slut* (p. 53), and *shit* (p. 54). Following the NCTE's example, not conceding or vetting my mother's "this is not how they are" statement, readers will note how the profanity is meant to support an understanding of Leisel Meminger (the protagonist) and her perception of her new home—"one of the small, boxlike houses on Himmel Street" in Molching, Germany (p. 32). Indeed, "in the beginning" in this new place for Leisel, "it was the profanity that made an immediate impact. It was so *vehement* and prolific" (p. 32, emphasis in original). In short, my mother's reaction to the novel seems itself to prove and support the function of the profanity in it.

Political Correctness

That same term, none of my students questioned that policy. Beyond the certainty some of that result is due to students not reading syllabi (e.g., Berg, 2015), it is equally certain that Lahiri quote and that policy are embroiled in a much more expansive and comprehensive discussion of higher education and political correctness. No doubt the concept of political correctness from the 1980s is different from what the culture is engaging today, and while both concepts ostensibly serve to create more equitable, safe, and understanding communities, political correctness is a flashpoint for the opposite, for vitriol. I substantiate that position through the following three appeals.

The first appeal: Political correctness strips literature of meaning while failing to address underlying biases that prompt PC censorship. Take the examples above of interns

and teachers grappling with questions about the word *N²* in canonical literature. Flynn (2012) argues that political correctness strips from us the possibility of needed discussions of craft, rhetoric, and politics. Most Generation Z students around the world are more likely to have heard that word in hip-hop from Kanye West and Jay-Z or in social situations that are contextually distinct from the bigoted and pejorative racial term that prompted its censorship. It's difficult to imagine teaching a child about that word without addressing the fundamental genesis for the discussion—racism. The overt racial bias and hatred that the Civil Rights Movement and anti-discrimination policies meant to combat is what many argue political correctness has shrouded. Refusing to read the word, particularly if one's not Black, ignores the poet, writer, artist, and musician and overall craft. Racist policing or hiring practices or housing policies aren't reformed by omitting words and discussions of racial issues prompted by literature in classrooms.

Race in the US is probably the most contentious and sensitive topic today. Another critical, but often less volatile and debated, issue is in disability and mental health. Flashpoints like the murder of disabled patients in Sagami-hara, Tokyo in July 2016 by an individual supporting state-sanctioned eugenics are rare. And yet the rhetoric around ability is running against logic in the medical and psychiatric fields. Where above, we don't reform racism by censoring language, here we don't best understand or treat persons with disabilities or mental health issues by broadening language, like the transition away from the abhorred term *retarded* to terms like *differently abled*. O'Neill (2011) describes this transition as a "euphemism treadmill." In medicine and psychiatry, he argues

The problem with this drive for politically correct language is that it attempts to deal with the problems of negative semantic change by outlawing accurate descriptors rather than by trying to rehabilitate them or to use them with proper context and tone. The advocates of politically correct language attempt to avoid the effects of negative semantic change by adopting a battle plan of constant retreat, thereby allowing every descriptor to be overrun eventually with vitriolic implications, real or imagined. (p. 288)

Jingree & Finlay (2011) find that "the constructed and constructive nature of language" and discursive choices made by caregivers and families of persons with disabilities can seriously impact the well-being of both groups. They show that across the US, the UK, New Zealand, and Australia, medical and psychiatric professionals may be using any number of ambiguous euphemisms to describe the same condition that was previously more specific and more accurate, but potentially socially offensive. They note that before the current, popular euphemisms, for instance, the preferred term might have been *mentally handicapped* (p. 427). Again, what the politically-correct euphemisms do in this (and every) field suggests that our world is without differing contexts and rhetorical spaces. In other words, political correctness conflates professional jargon with idiomatic speech, but more damagingly, it illogically posits that by censoring language we undermine the social issues (e.g., underlying biases) that may use that language. It's symptomatic rather than causal. As O'Neill (2011) writes,

Contrary to the claims of those who support the drive for politically correct language, such speech does not reduce offensive behavior or encourage conscious thinking about individual merits. In fact, it does the opposite: it relegates more and more terms to the exclusive domain of schoolyard bullies, while requiring unthinking, reflexive adherence to the latest stupid language fashions. (p. 290)

Gring-Pemble and Watson (2003) discuss the ongoing popularity and relevance of James Finn Garner's *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories*, and agree with O'Neill and others. Garner found, for instance, that attitudes are learned through Barbie rather than *Snow White* and that the attempts at controlling language are not changing attitudes and behaviors. He was "appalled to learn that some children's classics were actually being revised to remove allegedly offensive material and that kindergarten teachers were being advised to avoid certain stories" (p. 135). Garner's intention with his immensely popular book was clear—to show that political correct scrubbing of literature undermines understanding (p. 136). Indeed, if we follow Garner, we're forced to wonder why we're censoring language if it doesn't address attitudes and behaviors.

The second appeal: Education has overwhelmingly become more a "coddling," consumer space than one dedicated to craft and discipline mastery. Neil Gaiman's reaction to the public prominence of the "trigger warning" concept prompted him to frame and title his latest story collection around the concept. Higher education in the US is utterly replete with fear. Lukianoff and Haidt (2015) capture the essence of many of the issues causing this fear in their smart *Atlantic* article. They write, "A movement is arising, undirected and driven largely by the students, to scrub campuses clean of words, ideas, and subjects that might cause discomfort or give offense" (n.p.). Enter the trigger warning, a statement offered prior to engagement with content that describes anything offensive, contentious, or troubling within that might "trigger" someone to experience any sort of anxiety or discomfort or trauma. Lukianoff and Haidt and countless others from *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Slate*, *The New York Times*, and dozens of other popular and professional publications have detailed the degenerative effects of this new Millennial and Generation Z University.

Sexual assault statistics on US university campuses are staggering and should prompt deep administrative and cultural reform, and yet part of what's happening today is also the censoring of sexual content and of free speech (e.g., Shulevitz, 2015; Kipnis, 2015). As I have written, racism in the US is similarly disturbing, but what we saw in 2015 was the Wesleyan *Argus* debacle, in which free speech and journalism were disemboweled (Aleem, 2015), and the University of Missouri collapse, in which Black Lives Matter and other racial activism created a volatile campus, stymied funding and administration, and will have lasting effects (e.g., Eligon, 2016). Tenured LSU professor Teresa Buchanan was fired for offending students and administrators with her profanity (Schman, 2015) and however much the writing of professors (e.g., Schlosser, 2015) and their fear is derided, at least some of it must be genuine, and at least some of that fear is directed at the sway the PC students have over administrators, and thus their careers. The ways professors (especially, but all teachers) need to curate their language and curricula is captured in the lighthearted but indicative article "You're Not Stupid. You're Slow." by Orlin (2013). He writes what seems simple and what today's higher ed students and administrators don't seem to understand—Teachers shouldn't call students *stupid*, a word that is uniformly pejorative and unhelpful; yet "you don't educate kids by sparing their feelings and reciting politically correct mantras. You do it by confronting their challenges head-on, and showing them how to overcome them" (n.p.).

In my first year as a professor, I drove the creation of the university's Safe Zone Program. I joined other faculty and staff at my institution and the medical school to create a relevant curriculum and training program for faculty and staff on LBGTQ issues, resources, Title IX and other policy ethics, and advocacy. The LBGT or LBGTQ monikers are misleadingly

homogenous, particularly since intragroup biases and disproportionate privilege with the community are well documented (i.e., grossly simplified, it's much easier in the US to be G than it is to be T). Healthcare resources and problems differ widely, as do the public's understanding and disposition to members of the community. At the 2016 Republican National Convention, trans questions about restrooms was derided as unimportant, while the mass killing at an Orlando gay bar was berated as an assault on Americans. Amidst all the possible questions and learning the participants in the program might pose and experience, the most prominent and populous must be linguistic (e.g., please use the identifier used by the person) and rhetorical (e.g., please don't ever ask about someone's genitalia). Participants bring questions that reasonably stymie even the presenters. Increasing numbers of students are identifying as "gender non-conforming," for instance, and requesting non-binary referents, like "they." Even the concept of "microaggressions," miniscule and often habituated, unconscious things we do that are offensive (i.e., racist, sexist, classist, heteronormative, and the rest of the critical theory cohort), can be and frequently is identified in our habits of language (e.g., Fonder, 2013). My colleagues in linguistics may disagree, citing variable Englishes or something similar, but idiomatic English in the US (and by that I mean how the culture uses the language everyday) does not allow for the singular *they*. Equity for LGBTQ persons may require the reconstitution of some contemporary English grammar at some point, but within a larger culture of fear and consumer coddling, the needed activism for LGBTQ rights and equity is coopted as another possible offense, another hurdle to learning, and another threat to the (battered) professoriate and the desperately under-respected contingent faculty in our universities.

Many of these same issues appear in K-12 schools. Parents commonly challenge books on the basis of language, for instance, and compel teachers to consider where the value of the book lies within the curriculum. Teachers don't simply confront administrators and parents about perceptions of pay and resources, either, as they're meant to rationalize their curricular choices against the conflict-averse administration and the consumer parent. When gender non-conformity compounds special education 504 reports and IEPs (individual educational plans), the K-12 teacher is increasingly the locus of determining cultural precedents or ideology. University faculty and K-12 teachers are today faced with immense pressure not to offend and constant pressure to defend literature *in sum*.

Gaiman argues we should read (at least in part) because of what we learn *when* we're surprised, upset, challenged, or scared. If we omit, censor, or avoid entirely content that might offend, we're coddling rather than teaching. We're contributing to the dismissal of history and literature.

The third appeal: US schools and universities are satirized today. In 1986 we see Matthew Broderick skipping school in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, and in 1999 he's a disaffected teacher interested in skipping school in *Election*. Schools are only occasionally dramatically interesting places; mostly, they're boring. Or at least they were boring places pre-2000. The idea that schools should be interesting for students seems to have arrived in response to low-performing Title I schools, consternation about US academic performance compared to the performance in international competitors, and concern about Millennial and Generation Z academic apathy spawned the current advocacy of high-interest and traditionally non-academic content in classrooms. Teachers and professors today are tasked to deploy any and all technology and social media and pop culture to entice and interest students. In the process, they also face

evaluations like never before and scrutiny of their persona and political correctness. Thus, schools are often today tense and tedious.

South Park, the long-running animated program on Comedy Central by Trey Parker and Matt Stone, capitalized on this shift to turn it's often smart satirical focus on political correctness and schools. For those uninitiated, the program features four boys in elementary school in (fictional) South Park, Colorado. In Season 19 (2015), the boys are introduced to "PC Principal," the replacement for ousted administrator Principal Victoria. PC Principal is a satirical archetype of PC culture and behaves in ways that O'Neill (2011) captures in the following:

The alleged sensitivity of the practitioners of political correctness is often betrayed by the vitriolic way they treat people who use politically incorrect language in contexts where the speakers clearly intend no offense. Moreover, even with regard to their alleged desire to be sensitive and helpful to the downtrodden, the practitioners of political correctness show a very warped view of sensitivity. (p. 288)

PC Principal openly challenges and shames South Park Elementary students and community residents when he perceives that they are using language insensitively or not following political correctness. Throughout the season, Parker and writing team highlight the intersections of political correctness, university culture, frat culture, "bro" culture, and white entitlement in critical theory. One of the things PC Principal and his fellow White, hetero, male, state-school cohort vehemently defend—as literal—is the Safe Zone or Safe Space. Satirizing US schools and universities in this way would have been absurd in the mid 80s or the mid 90s, but today the satire is effective and timely precisely and *only* because we recognize truth in the caricature.

Caitlin Flanagan (2015) offered an interesting look at how universities today are both fighting to entertain students and also enforcing a precisely curated form of politically-correct and innocuous entertainment. While at the National Association for Campus Activities convention, she found, strangely, from diverse comics and university representatives that "students' taste in entertainment was uniform." Among other things, students "wanted comedy that was 100 percent risk-free, comedy that could not trigger or upset or mildly trouble a single student" (n.p.). She writes of the open criticism Chris Rock, Jerry Seinfeld, and other comedians have offered about university students and university "infantilization of the American undergraduate" (n.p.). As Gring-Pemble and Watson (2003) conclude of Garner's famous bedtime stories and similar works, that "because the combined use of the comic, burlesque, and tragic dissuades critical thinking and/or responses, information regarding important public issues, when conveyed in this manner, frequently goes unnoticed and unexamined" (p. 151). And so Trey Parker satirizes schools and political correctness, and when university students watch, they don't understand the irony, they don't see themselves, or they are as indignant and self-righteous as PC Principal.

Contentious cultural critic and philosopher Slavoj Žižek was on the Tavis Smiley show on PRI in 2015, and he took up the interplay between humor and political correctness. He argued that to gain "warm" empathic connections across cultures, in one example, you must get past the "rules" and customs and tell each other dirty jokes. He remarks of the "terrifying coldness" in political correctness. Thus, the tense and tedious schools and universities in the US today, saturated by censorship and fear, satirized and without humor, and filled with administrative and academic tediousness.

Conclusion

During the Black Lives Matter protests and problems at Mizzou in 2015, Suzanne Nossel contributed the following in an op-ed article for *The New York Times*:

Instead of deriding trigger warnings, safe spaces and censored Halloween costumes, free speech proponents need to advance alternatives that resonate with the students they want to reach. Instead of insisting that individual rights not be subordinated to the ethic of the community, advocates need to explain how free speech can fortify that ethic. They need to tackle ways that racism and discrimination can themselves chill speech. (n.p.)

Her argument has been echoed and complicated in innumerable conversations and discussions, private and public, including *The Chronicle Review* in late November 2015 on “When Free Speech Is a Tool of Oppression.” Indeed, the corpus of information today on political correctness, and on critical theory which prompted it, is vast. Like critical theory and movements in feminism, whiteness studies, and even queer theory, there is a particular position to take and an alternative position, the villainous one, to avoid. But adherents of third wave feminism in the 90s, remember, sought to reconstitute and broaden the focus of the suffrage movement, first wave, and second wave. The current threat to education (to say nothing of the broader culture), by political correctness and Generation Z sensitivity, is to ignore these changes within social progressivism and the problems with critical theory more fundamentally in service of rendering education an idiosyncratic, self-affirming, and innocuous affair much like news. Opt out if your classroom is too *MSNBC*; require trigger warnings from that professor who might be overly *Fox News*.

Popescu’s “The Educational Power of Discomfort” in the late April *Chronicle of Higher Education* makes just this persuasive argument. For Popescu, the world is “unsettling,” university is inherently “uncomfortable,” and that learning, including reading and discussing literature, is “disturbing.” Neil Gaiman certainly agrees, and so do I. So what are we to do when “this is not how they are?” As readers, teachers, and scholars of literature, the arts, history, science—as lovers of language and of literary, artistic, and creative craft—I argue we should intervene, suggesting the brilliant purpose for “Goddammit, Goddamn you, this is hell” in Lahiri’s narrative.

Endnotes:

¹ *N* here used in place of replicating the word many find deeply offensive.

² Again, *N* is a truncation.

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