

# ***RACISM AND ANTISEMITISM***

THE HANNAH ARENDT CENTER'S ANNUAL FALL  
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“Racism may indeed carry out the doom of the Western world, and, for that matter, of the whole of human civilization.”

—Hannah Arendt

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## Louis Armstrong House Museum Hires a New Director to Guide Expansion Project

“We will now be able to pick up on the thinking of this great artist and innovator, who’s really contributed so much to American life and American identity,” Kenyon Victor Adams said. Photo by Ike Edeani

***By Giovanni Russonello***

Feb. 5, 2019

Big changes are coming to the quiet block in Corona, Queens, where Louis Armstrong spent his last three decades. And a new artist and curator has arrived to help guide those changes.

Kenyon Victor Adams will take over as director of the Louis Armstrong House Museum, effective immediately, the museum announced on Tuesday.

Mr. Adams, 40, steps in as the museum works to finish construction on a 14,000-square-foot education and performance center in a lot across the street from the home, where Armstrong lived until his death in 1971. The museum also received a \$1.9 million grant from New York City last

year to renovate the house next door, known as Selma's House, which will provide office and storage space for the organization.

And the museum recently completed a monumental, nearly \$3 million digitization process of its entire archive, making thousands of items available for listening and viewing online. That collection has long been housed at nearby Queens College, but it will move to the museum's expanded campus in Corona when construction is completed.

"The Armstrong legacy has the opportunity at this moment, with the new center, to be brought into the 21st century," Mr. Adams said. "And I don't think anyone is aware of just how grand and rigorous and expansive the legacy will show itself to be."

Mr. Adams comes to the museum from Grace Farms, an arts and cultural center in Connecticut, where he led its Arts Initiative. He previously studied religion and literature at Yale Divinity School, and theology of contemporary performance at the Yale Institute of Sacred Music. His artistic work includes "Prayers of the People," an interdisciplinary work based on the writings of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and directed by Bill T. Jones.

At the Armstrong house, Mr. Adams fills a role that has been vacant since the museum's founding director, Michael Cogswell, retired last year. Mr. Adams's goal will be to bring the house and its rich collection — which offers a deep look into Armstrong's life through letters, reel-to-reel tapes, visual art and much more — into conversation with the neighborhood around it, as well as with a broader community of archival institutions devoted to black history.

"We are in the midst of a sort of renaissance of African-American arts and letters, and diasporic arts and culture," Mr. Adams said. "Jazz history is black history, so this is a fantastic time to take up again and repurpose — from a 21st-century perspective — this particular legacy of artistry and innovation."

Mr. Adams added: "We will now be able to pick up on the thinking of this great artist and innovator, who's really contributed so much to American life and American identity — to what Martin Luther King would call the 'human personality.'"

# Alice Walker's Terrible Anti-Semitic Poem Felt Personal — to Her and to Me

**By Nylah Burton**

Feb. 5, 2019



Photo: Peter Earl McCollough/The New York Times/Redux

When I first read Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, I leaned into every word, inhaling Celie's tragic and triumphant story. In Celie, I felt the presence and pain of my female family members brought up in rural Alabama. In Walker's unflinching descriptions of misogyny, domestic violence, homophobia, and incest, I saw an open accounting of issues buried deep within the larger southern black community — and within my own family.

Above all, I was drawn into *The Color Purple* because it was haunted by ghosts — the ghosts of Alice Walker's past. Eloquently and bravely, she was able to confront generational trauma by telling a universal tale that still felt faithful to her own story. And it was Walker's ability to throw open the shutters and allow her ghosts — our ghosts — into her writing that made it so revelatory. It cemented her standing as an acclaimed

novelist, a civil-rights icon, and a formidable thought leader in the field of black feminism.

That changed abruptly two weeks ago, after the *New York Times* invited Walker to list her favorite books in its weekly “By the Book” column. She took the opportunity to promote David Icke’s *And the Truth Shall Set You Free*, which contains some of the most hateful anti-Semitic lies ever to be printed between covers. As excerpted in the *Washington Post*, Icke’s book alleged that a “small Jewish clique” had created the Russian Revolution and both World Wars, and “coldly calculated” the Holocaust to boot. Icke has also accused Jews (among others) of being alien lizard people. After a week of criticism, Walker doubled down in her assessment of Icke’s indefensible work, calling him “brave” and dismissing charges of anti-Semitism as an attack on the pro-Palestinian cause.

It’s chilling to think that such an acclaimed novelist could regard Icke’s work as “a curious person’s dream come true,” but it turned out that Walker’s endorsement wasn’t an isolated deviation. Readers soon unearthed her poem “It Is Our (Frightful) Duty to Study the Talmud,” published on her website in 2017, which confirmed that Walker had been indulging in virulent anti-Semitism, and that it permeated not just her thinking but her work.

The ghosts in *The Color Purple* helped me to better understand my own identity and the suppressed history of my ancestors — a journey I’m constantly engaged in as a black Jewish woman. But the ghosts in “It Is Our (Frightful) Duty” leave me with more questions than answers. How did Walker’s curiosity curdle into paranoia? How was her commitment to improving the human condition twisted into support for genocide apologists? How could the artist who helped America to better understand black women use her writing to promote the oppression of another group?

In her essay, “The Black Writer and the Southern Experience,” Walker writes that “an extreme negative emotion held against other human beings for reasons they do not control can be blinding. Blindness about other human beings, especially for a writer, is equivalent to death.” Lately it seems that Walker has willingly allowed herself to be blinded. “It Is Our (Frightful) Duty” is a terribly written poem filled with terrible things. It oozes deep paranoia, defensiveness, and rage. In every single way, it’s *ugly*.

The “poem” utterly fails as poetry. It isn’t lyrical. Its lines and stanzas are choppy and graceless. Each stanza seems to end with an aggressive exhale, the kind that a person expels when they finish purging the awful thoughts that consume them. In some places, it reads like a rambling lecture delivered by a tenured professor who isn’t afraid to offend her students anymore. At other times, it reads like a Breitbart article with line breaks. There is no artistry here, but there is plenty of trauma.

Walker writes that we must examine the “root” of our broken world. For her, the rabbinical commentaries in the Talmud are this root. She claims that the Talmud has provided justification for Jews making slaves of goyim (non-Jews), which world history proves to be untrue. She also claims that the Talmud permits the rape of young boys and 3-year-olds, which is a misinterpretation often used to justify anti-Semitism. Walker is unequivocally wrong about the root of the world’s evil. But how should we begin to search for the root of Walker’s hatred? What ghosts lurk within her stanzas?

I have a deep abiding love for black women and all that we do. Because of that love, I feel betrayed by Walker, and like all scorned lovers, I find myself consumed with a need to understand why. Guided by a singular question (*What the fuck happened?*), I spent Christmas buried in her writings, trying to understand how Walker could turn on women like me.

The opening of the poem speaks of a male friend, a “Jewish soul,” who accused Walker of anti-Semitism because she didn’t support the state of Israel. Walker refers to this anonymous friend with a great deal of intimacy; charged with anti-Semitism, she herself reacts like a lover betrayed. When she mentions the house that they shared in Mississippi — “where black people often assumed he was a racist” — it becomes clear that she is referring to her ex-husband.

In 1967, Alice Walker married a young Jewish civil-rights lawyer named Mel Leventhal. Their interracial marriage — the first such legal union in the state of Mississippi — was still illegal in Walker’s home state of Georgia at the time. Leventhal’s mother was also deeply opposed to the union, and his other family members didn’t allow Alice to attend family events. “Leaving no question about how she felt about her son’s marriage to a *shvartse* (a pejorative Yiddish term for a black person), Miriam Leventhal sat *shiva* for her son, mourning him as dead,” Evelyn White writes in *Alice Walker: A Life*. A source who knows the family

told me that Mel preferred to ignore rather than confront his family's bigotry. This caused Walker to feel increasingly isolated and resentful. The marriage ended in 1976, after the pair had one daughter together, named Rebecca.



From left: Mel Leventhal, Rebecca Walker, and Alice Walker, 1970.

Photo: CSU Archives/Everett Collection

When writing of Mel in her essays, Walker links him inextricably to his Jewishness, as well as his occupation as a lawyer. Even when they are not arguing (frequently, according to her) about the abuses against Palestinians, each mention of him is some variation on “white Jewish lawyer husband.” Perhaps Walker is combining those disparate words — each a piece of his identity, yet each reductive — to make sense of his contradictions: How could he fight for the dignity of black people while allowing his white family to deny dignity to his wife and daughter? How could he be white, and yet not fully welcomed by white gentiles in Mississippi? How could he crusade for justice at home and dismiss her concern for Palestinians abroad?

I loathe the misogynist assumption that a woman's faults must be the direct result of a man's actions, but I find myself incapable of separating Walker's fraught marriage from her hatred of Judaism. She doesn't separate the two either. In her 2014 book, *The Cushion in the Road*, Walker writes about meeting an elderly Palestinian woman in the



Occupied Territories. The woman accepted a gift from Walker, and then bestowed a blessing upon her, “May God protect you from the Jews,” to which Walker responded, “It’s too late, I already married one.”

It’s telling that Walker feels she should reference her marital strife in such a context, even as a joke. In both this comment and in her poem, she seems incapable of reconciling the conflicts inherent to Leventhal’s identity — conflicts that put a strain on their marriage. Instead of accepting that white Jews can both oppress and be oppressed, Walker leaps to blaming all Jews (and the Talmud) for *all* oppression.

Walker writes in the poem of trying to educate the “Jewish soul” on the topics of “dignity,” “justice,” “honor,” and “peace.” She sets off each of these words with quotation marks, casting doubt on whether Jews are capable of learning these values. Walker is quite proud of her subsequent epiphany, insinuating that those (like her younger self) who believe that any Jew can desire peace, justice, and honor know “Nothing. Nothing at all.”

Walker’s fights with Leventhal are not the only ghosts in this poem. There is also Rebecca Walker, Alice’s daughter. Rebecca and Alice haven’t spoken in many years, and Rebecca has publicly denounced her mother for being neglectful during Rebecca’s childhood. “I came very low down in her priorities,” Rebecca wrote in 2008, “after work, political integrity, self-fulfillment, friendships, spiritual life, fame and travel.”

While Rebecca never addressed her mother’s anti-Semitism, she is known for publicly embracing her Jewish identity, most notably in her book *Black, White, and Jewish*. How must Rebecca be feeling right now? How would it feel to have the whole world discussing your mother’s hatred of your Jewish soul, your religious texts, your heritage?

As a black Jewish woman, I find the white Jewish community’s focus on black anti-Semitism hypocritical and distracting. Its negative impact is often exaggerated, and dwelling on it is counterproductive to racial justice and solidarity. But in an attempt to show compassion toward black people — especially black women — I sometimes find myself burying my own opinions about it at the expense of my soul. Recently, I was at an event where someone implied that Jews were naturally more conniving and exploitative. I shut down the conversation, but I wanted to flip the table in anger. What does that do to the soul of the black Jewish woman, who is often rejected by both the white Jewish

community and — more rarely — by the sisters who are supposed to understand her?

In an interview for the PBS documentary “Alice Walker: Beauty in Truth,” Walker said she was hurt and confused by her estrangement with her daughter. “You bring children into the world. You love them with heart and soul,” she said. “But, as (author) Tillie Olsen told me, ‘You have your own children and do the best you can until they are able to get out in the world. And then the world takes over.’”

In the poem, Walker invokes her maternal status as a source of her authority over all of humanity. She refers to herself as an “elder” who went to Palestine to “do my job / of keeping tabs / on Earth’s children.” It’s a particularly defensive stanza in an already-paranoid poem. I feel that she is trying to convince herself that she has done her job as an *actual* mother. Her claim on the “Earth’s children” reads like a deflection from the one child she has, who is surely bothered by her mother’s hatred of Jews like herself.

Another source of the poem’s purported authority is age. Walker tells us that we will understand the evils of the Talmud as we get older. “We must go back / as grown-ups now, / Not as the gullible children we once were ... It is our duty, I believe, to study the Talmud.” But Walker isn’t talking to us. It feels like a plea to her child. A plea for what? Understanding? Forgiveness? Permission?

I can understand Walker’s trauma: I live much of it. But I cannot understand how she could write such awful things. I understand that Walker experienced virulent anti-blackness from many in the white Jewish community — as I have — but I don’t understand how she could spin that off into a hateful conspiracy. I don’t understand why this poem was written. But I do understand that everything about it paints a picture of heartbreak. I see a person who has made terrible mistakes, and who is desperately trying to run away from them. I may not be able to forgive or excuse, but it is *my* frightful duty — as a black Jewish woman — to try to understand.

I spoke to a black Jewish woman who said that Alice Walker’s anti-Semitic “trolling” needed to be called out, but also that Walker was “a monster of [the white Jewish community’s] own making.” She warned that a failure to address such racism would push more people — notably, Jews of color — to this extreme. I believe this; I’ve already reported on

the ways that racism was pushing black Jews away from the community. The impact of this dynamic on Walker's work is supported by her description of her writing process in the essay "From an Interview":

*"All of my poems ... are written when I have successfully pulled myself out of a completely numbing despair ... Poems — even happy ones — emerge from an accumulation of sadness ... I become aware that I am controlled by [the poems], not the other way around. I realize that when I am writing poetry, I am so high as to feel invisible, and in that condition it is possible to write almost anything."*

Still, I wonder how Walker could put the burden of her trauma onto us — black Jewish women. What is her responsibility to her daughter, and what is my responsibility to Alice Walker? Many of my black and Jewish friends refuse to even judge her. Perhaps it is I who know nothing, nothing at all.

I know that I will not cancel Alice Walker. I can't erase the incredible work she created. I will continue to read *The Color Purple* and her other works. But I will never be able to rid myself of the ghost of this poem. It would be irresponsible and self-hating of me to do so. I will read and teach Walker's work with love, but this poem will always be there, fluttering in the wind like a torn-out page of the Talmud.

# The Academy's Assault on Intellectual Diversity

**By Robert Boyers**

March 19, 2017



Illustration: Natalya Balnova for The Chronicle Review

"A university is among the precious things that can be destroyed."  
— Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*

It is tempting to describe the battles convulsing American campuses with epithets like “the politics of hysteria.” More than a bit of hysteria was unleashed at Middlebury College in early March, when large numbers of protesters prevented the right-wing author Charles Murray from delivering a scheduled lecture and, in the face of rebukes delivered by the college President and several prominent faculty members, others defended the shut-down by citing the poisonous views expressed by Murray in a misguided book called *The Bell Curve*. Though in some respects an expression of so-called “free speech” controversies lately ignited on the nation’s campuses, the Middlebury incident doesn’t begin to reveal the depth or virulence of the opposition to robust discussion within the American professoriate, where many self-described liberal

academics continue to believe that they remain committed to “difference” and debate, even as they countenance a full-scale assault on diversity of outlook and opinion, enwombed as they are in the certainties enjoined upon them by the posture they have adopted, which alone confers upon them the sense that they are always in the right.

Confront contemporary left-liberal academics — I continue to regard myself as a member of that deeply troubled cohort — with a familiar passage from John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty* and they will be moved at once to proclaim that Mill espouses what virtually all of us have long taken for granted. OF COURSE we understand that “the tyranny of the majority” must be guarded against — even when it is *our* majority. OF COURSE we understand that “the peculiar evil of silencing”— or attempting to silence — “the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing...posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose...the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error.”

What can be more obvious than that? OF COURSE we understand that there is danger in abiding uncritically with the views of one’s own “party” or “sect” or “class.” Who among us doesn’t know that even ostensibly enlightened views, shared with other well-educated persons like ourselves, cannot entitle us to think of those views, or of those who hold them, as “infallible”?

And yet a good many liberal academics are not actually invested in the posture to which their avowals ostensibly commit them. Mill noted among his own contemporaries, more than 150 years ago, what is very much in evidence in our own culture, namely, that certain opinions have come to seem so important “to society” that their usefulness can not be legitimately challenged. Thus a great many contemporary liberals subscribe to the belief—however loath they may be to acknowledge it—that certain ideas are “heretical” and that those who dare to articulate them must be, in one way or another, cast out. The burning desire to paint a scarlet letter on the breast of those who fail to observe the officially sanctioned view of things has taken possession of many ostensibly liberal persons in the academy, which has tended more and more in recent years to resemble what the cultural critic David Bromwich calls “a church held together by the hunt for heresies.”

When Mill wrote of the threat to liberty of “thought and discussion,” he was responding, at least in part, to Tocqueville’s idea that in modern societies the greatest dangers to liberty were social rather than legal or political. Both men believed that the pressures to conform, and the pleasures associated with conformity, were such that these societies would not find it necessary to burn heretics at the stake. Mill explained:

And thus is kept up a state of things very satisfactory to some minds, because, without the unpleasant process of fining or imprisoning anybody, it maintains all prevailing opinions outwardly undisturbed, while it does not absolutely interdict the exercise of reason by dissentients afflicted with the malady of thought... But the price paid for this sort of intellectual pacification is the sacrifice of the entire moral courage of the human mind. A state of things in which a large portion of the most active and inquiring intellects find it advisable to keep the genuine principles and grounds of their convictions within their own breasts

Sad to say, however, the expectations nowadays enforced with increasing and punishing severity in various contemporary precincts—most notably in the academy—are the basis for something rather more alarming than the regime Mill described. While dissentient views are today not always “absolutely” interdicted, and we do not hear of persons who are imprisoned for espousing incorrect views, we do routinely observe that “active and inquiring intellects” are often cast out of the community of the righteous by their colleagues and, in cases that have received national attention, formally “investigated” by witch-hunting faculty committees and threatened with the loss of their jobs. One need only mention the widely debated eruptions at Oberlin College, or Northwestern University, or others, to note that this is by no means a phenomenon limited to a handful of institutions.

The fact that these eruptions have drawn wildly inaccurate and misleading coverage in the right-wing media should not distract us from the serious implications of the kinds of intolerance promoted by ostensibly liberal faculty. Such show trial-like events are the leading edge of efforts to create what the critic Lionel Trilling once called “a total cultural environment” built upon “firm presuppositions, received ideas, and approved attitudes.”

What does “a total cultural environment” look like? In the university it looks like a place in which all constituencies have been mobilized for the same end, in which every activity is to be monitored to ensure that everyone is “on board.” Do courses in all departments reflect the commitment of the institution to raise “awareness” about all of the approved hot-button topics? If not, something must be done to address that. Are all incoming freshmen assigned a suitably pointed, heavily ideological summer reading text that tells them what they should be primarily concerned about as they enter? Check. Does the college calendar feature—several times each week, throughout the school year—carefully orchestrated consciousness-raising sessions led by “human resources” specialists trained to facilitate “dialogues” leading where everyone must agree they ought to lead? Check. Do faculty recognize that even casual slippages in classroom or extra-curricular discourse are to be met with condemnation and repudiation? See to it. Is every member of the community primed to invoke the customary terms—privilege, power, hostile, unsafe—no matter how incidental or spurious they seem in a given context? Essential. Though much of the regime instituted along these lines can seem—often does seem—kind and gentle in its pursuit of what many of us take to be a well-intentioned indoctrination, the impression that control and coercion are the name of the game is really hard to miss.

Of course there are those who will defend the emergent “total culture” by arguing that we know very well how devastating bias and other forms of abuse or violence can be, and thus that we have an obligation to mobilize to prevent them. And of course it is impossible to deny that such things continue to exist, and that efforts to raise awareness about them in an academic setting are indispensable. Even those of us who are worried about the future of liberal education, and about regimes of intolerance on the nation’s campuses, have often acknowledged, with however many reservations, that speech codes can be a good and necessary thing. I’ve never met an academic—liberal or conservative—who believes that we should give a pass to racists who openly spread their poison in a classroom. When Donald Trump complains of the protocols and protections mandated to ensure that workplace and academic environments protect their citizens from flagrant abuse or intimidation, and declares these safeguards a laughable species of political correctness, we observe that he and his friends do not understand the relationship between freedom and responsibility, between open discussion and the civility that alone makes real discussion possible.

But things have gotten out of hand. For many academics, the desire to cleanse the campus of dissident voices has become something of a mission. A distinguished scholar at my own college writes in an open email letter to the faculty that when colleagues who are “different” (in his case non-white, non-straight, non-male) speak to us we are required not merely to listen but to “validate their experiences.” At a faculty reception a week or so later a colleague asks what I think of the open letter, and I tell him I admire the guy’s willingness to share his thoughts but have been puzzling over the word “required” and the expression “validate their experiences.” Does he mean thereby to suggest that if we have doubts or misgivings about what a colleague has said to us we should keep our mouths firmly shut? Exactly, replies my earnest, right-minded companion, who can’t believe that I have any trouble with that.

In the last year or two, those wishing to restrain real talk or, god forbid, actual debate, more and more deploy terms like “entitlement” and “privilege” to suggest that people who stir the waters inevitably create a “hostile environment” and intimidate their colleagues, some of whom — so it is said — are thereby made to feel “powerless.”

In this context, the term “entitlement” refers to people who have the confidence to speak with conviction and independence. The implication, unmistakable here, is that only those with power can speak, and that when they do so, they inevitably silence or strike fear into the hearts of everyone else, which includes the overwhelming majority of those who acquiesce in the established consensus. Not acknowledged in this scenario, though it ought to be obvious to anyone who actually values debate and difference, is that the “entitlement” belongs to all of those willing to speak out, and to take the heat, and to proceed without taking it for granted that what they say will be applauded. The puerile notion that only those who are powerful and secure will ever feel entitled to speak out is one of those unfortunate assumptions promoted by those who want to be protected from actually having to confront controversy or discomfort.

Though it must seem odd to those who spend little or no time in the academy to hear that academic intellectuals are notoriously susceptible to groupthink, there are several compelling ways to account for this. For one, as Jonathan Haidt has pointed out in *The Righteous Mind*, academics are much like other people in “trying harder to look right than to be right” when they conduct an argument. “They search for



reasons to convince themselves that they have made the ‘right’ choice.” Within the confines of a community which is apt to pride itself on its disciplined commitment to a consensually agreed upon set of “enlightened” views, deviations once regarded as signs of a robustly diverse intellectual culture come more and more to seem intolerable, given the strenuous efforts of the community to create a “total culture.”

Though new ideas, new evidence, unfamiliar works may now and then briefly challenge the comfortably accredited views underwriting the official stance of academic institutions—think of the creative turmoil provoked by the writings of Thomas Kuhn, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Elaine Showalter a generation ago—the “confirmation bias” described by the psychologist Peter Wason will typically ensure that new ideas, no matter how compelling, will be received only in ways that confirm the enlightened consensus. A wide range of psychological tests conducted by Wason and others cited by Haidt provide no evidence whatsoever that the professoriate is any more likely than a less educated cohort to think independently, that is, to process fresh ideas and to draw from them anything but the officially sanctioned conclusions.

As Wason and other psychological researchers note, academics tend to have higher than average IQs, and are predictably “able to generate more reasons” to account for what they believe. But high IQ people like academics typically produce “*only [a greater] number of my-side arguments*” and “are no better than others at finding reasons on the other side.” This is especially troubling — or ought to be especially troubling — in the culture of the university, where diversity of outlook and idea, and resistance to accredited formulas, is at least theoretically central to the institutional mission.

But academics today are increasingly behaving like members of an interest group, whose opinions they hold and value primarily as tokens of membership in the high status, politically virtuous elite to which they subscribe. It was once possible to suppose that this particular interest group — given its ostensible commitment to education — would want to promote genuine diversity of opinion, if only to weaken the “confirmation bias” we all share, “a built-in feature” of what Haidt calls our “argumentative mind.” But the ideological intolerance in the liberal academy at present is such as to make the confirmation bias seem to most academics not a danger but an entirely desirable feature of our collective enterprise.

Of course the intolerance is disturbing in a whole variety of ways, and represents for many of us a threat to institutions of higher learning and to the work we hope to do as educators. But it is well to remember that, like other intellectual formations, our present troubles have a history. In the early 1950s, in a book on *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*, Isaiah Berlin identified what he called “a common assumption” informing the work of “Enlightenment thinkers”: “that the answers to all of the great questions must of necessity agree with one another.” This “doctrine,” Berlin argued, “stems from older theological roots,” and refuses to accept any suggestion that we must learn to live with irresolvable conflicts. The consequence? John Gray calls it “a monistic philosophy that opened the way to new forms of tyranny.”

The word “tyranny” is perhaps just a bit extravagant as a description of tendencies at work in the contemporary academy, and yet, when we speak of the attempt to create “a total culture,” dedicated to promoting a perfect consensus, we may well feel that we are confronting a real and present danger. The danger, for example, that context and complexity will count for nothing when texts or speech acts become triggers for witch hunts, and when wit and irony are regarded as deplorable deviations from standard protocol. “Tyrants always want language and literature that is easily understood,” Theodor Hacker observes. At my own college, when a senior colleague at a public meeting last fall uttered an expression (“in their native habitat”) felt by some auditors to be “offensive”—though clearly not intended to be so, and unmistakably ironic, and followed by a clear apology when a complaint was voiced—there were calls for her to resign from the faculty, and though she is, and will remain, with us still, the incident prompted a volley of abusive and self-righteous email rhetoric, drove more than one faculty member to advise students away from courses taught by “that woman,” and stirred a renewed emphasis on “re-education” and “rehabilitation.”

Astonishing, of course, that those very terms—“reeducation” and “rehabilitation”—do not scare the hell out of academics who use them and hear them. That they do not call to mind the not so distant history of Authoritarian regimes in Europe, or lead on to the thought that “diversity,” for many of us in the academy, has now come to mean a plurality of sameness. More important: The words, apparently, do not suggest how vulnerable we are—all of us—to error, slippage, and hurt, and how the protocols, tribunals and shamings currently favored by many in the academy have distracted us from our primary obligation,

which is to foster an atmosphere of candor, good will, kindness and basic decency without which we can be of no use to one another or to our students.

A portrait of Agnes Heller, an elderly woman with short brown hair and glasses, wearing a brown leather jacket over a patterned blouse. The background is dark and textured.

Hungary

## Ágnes Heller: Orbán is a tyrant

From the time he became the prime minister of Hungary, Orbán was always interested in concentrating all the power in his hands.

Jan Smoleński

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### **Jan Smoleński: Is Viktor Orbán a populist?**

**Agnes Heller\*:** I do not like the term populist as it is used in the context of Viktor Orbán, because it does not say anything. Populists rely typically on poor people. Orbán uses nationalistic vocabulary and rhetoric, he mobilizes hatred against the stranger and the alien, but it has nothing to do with populism. It has to do with the right-wing, but this is also questionable, because Orbán is a man who is interested only in power.

### **What would you call him, then?**

From the time he became the prime minister of Hungary, Orbán was always interested in concentrating all the power in his hands. I would describe him as a tyrant. He is a tyrant because nothing can happen in Hungary that he does not want, and everything that he wants is carried through in Hungary. This is a very tyrannical rule.

### **Have all the institutions been taken over?**

There is only one power that is relatively independent and it is judiciary. To control the judiciary in order to be able to indict and convict the

opposition will be the next step for Orban. Poland is ahead of us in this respect as Jarosław Kaczyński controls the judiciary now.

**Today's authoritarianism is frequently compared to that of first half of the twentieth century, like the regime of Miklos Horthy in Hungary in the 1920s and the 1930s.**

There are important differences. First of all, the environment is different. Horthy worked in an environment constrained by the right wing, first Mussolini's fascism and later on with nazism, and western democracies were weak and far away. Orban works in the environment of the European Union, he could have carried out different politics, more democratic, more liberal. He does not do it and it is his choice.

There is another element that is different. In Horthy's period there was a class society. In a class society there are different class interests. Even among aristocracy and gentry there were class differences. Those who were under Horthy could have different opinions, even than Horthy. When the war on Russia was declared, one of the ministers was against it.

Now it is impossible. Everyone who is under Orban must serve him and must agree with him. No counter opinion is tolerated because this is a mass society, not a class society. In a mass society, there are no class interests. Even the poor people have no class interest.

In a mass society, a new thing appears, which we call refeudalization. It means that corruption is different from traditional corruption. Traditional corruption is that rich people corrupt one or another politician, they buy a politician in order to serve their economic interests. In refeudalization the opposite is true. The rulers of Fidesz and Orban in particular create their own oligarchy, and the oligarchy depends on politics, and not politics on oligarchy. Take the mayor of Felcsut and a childhood friend of Orban, Lorinc Meszaros. He was a nobody but in a few years he amassed enormous wealth and now is one of the richest people in the world. He basically has half of Hungary under his control. Of course, everybody knows that this is Orban's money, not Meszaros' but this cannot be proven.

**Do people take nationalism now less seriously and with a kind of post-modern irony, or is it the same as under Horthy?**

It is very difficult to answer, because after the first world war all European countries became nationalistic. The nation became the god and nationalism became the religion. And nationalism is still the religion of all European countries. They differ in only one sense: how strong this nationalism is, how much the government uses it for its purposes. I don't think that the French, Germans or Belgians are less nationalistic than Poles or Hungarians. Nationalism is not mobilized to the same extent in the former as in the latter, it is not about hatred the stranger, the other.

The present Hungarian nationalism incites hatred against the other. In the times of Horthy there was also hatred but it was not just hatred against the other, it was also directed against the institutions which established the peace of Trianon. Trianon is a concrete place, it is a castle in France. The French were perceived as responsible for the trauma of Trianon, too, not only the neighbors of Hungary who benefitted from the settlement.

Now, I do not think that Hungarians hate their neighbors, especially the Slovaks, because Orban believes in the Visegrad 4. Now we hate the migrants and are against one person – George Soros, who is the great enemy in Hungary. This, by the way, Orban learned that from Erdogan and the way he treated Fetullah Gulen. Soros organizes the immigration, he organizes everything against Hungary. There are many things that make him appropriate for that. He was born in Hungary but he is an American millionaire and he is a Jew. All these things together make him a wonderful target for hatred and if there is antisemitism it can be channelled against Soros. He is a typical Jew and the head of global conspiracy, he dictates everything to the European Union, Donald Tusk is just a servant of Soros. This kind of nationalism is utterly stupid.

I need to add one thing. All this propaganda is for the countryside. No liberalism, no left could get through to the countryside, the villages. They are absolutely under Orban's control. They are prone to nationalism and this servant attitude because freedom of the press is entirely gone. In Hungary there is no opposition daily. All local papers were bought by Fidesz. There is one TV channel and one radio station with independent information and they are accessible only in Budapest and few other places. Under Kadar people listened to the Radio Free Europe. Now there is no Free Europe, there are only state channels which are Fidesz propaganda channels. No opposition has access to them.

**How does the nationalism that Orban mobilizes now differ from fascisms of the past? Do you think that people who now follow Orban and buy into his ideas are willing to die for Transylvania and Voivodina?**

The term fascism, just like nazism, stalinism or bolshevism, is irrelevant. We live in different times. These were categories valid in class societies, when you could seize the power only by violence. Nowadays Orban, Putin, and Erdogan remain in power by the majority vote. This is a different kind of world and this is a new type of tyranny which is carried by the refeudalization of the society. Maybe we need to find a new name but I do not think it is necessary. All these old names are misleading, because they prevent us from recognizing what the real danger is. The real danger is not the takeover by violence.

**So what is the real danger?**

That refeudalization and that it gets upper hand also in Europe, just like it is dominant in most parts of Asia and Africa, and in many parts of Latin America.

It has economic background and economic relationship. It means that there is a one tyrant or few tyrants who determine the politics of a country and they are elected by general elections. By the way, this is why the word democracy without liberalism makes no sense anymore.

The economic background is interesting. Where there is market there is profit and almost everywhere the ruling oligarchy gets the profit. It is reversed redistribution. In a social democratic Europe the redistribution of profit was based on a model that the greater part of it was distributed to the poor than to the rich, through taxation and other means. Now we have the opposite situation when most of the profit goes to the rich. The politics and the economy of refeudalization are strongly connected to each other.

**Do you think that there is a difference between Orban and Jobbik?**

It is very difficult to answer. Within last few years Jobbik turned to the center and even in comparison with Fidesz it became the center and Fidesz became the extreme right. Gabor Vona did it, but in the last

parliamentary elections in April, when Jobbik got 20 percent, he resigned. The new leadership took the same course.

Some didn't like this, they split and formed their own party which they say is not racist but of course it is. They resisted the move to the center and remained on the extreme right together with Fidesz. It is not difficult to see that they will be swallowed by Fidesz in no time, because Fidesz will not allow a rightist party besides his own.

**Do you think that supporters of Orban support him because they participate in refeudalized politics or because it is because they buy into the nationalistic agenda?**

Of course they buy into his agenda. In addition, in Hungary there never was liberal democracy. Greater part of the population awaits everything from above, they ask favors from the government. It has its name in Latin: ius suplicationis. There is no other party they can ask favors from. They are not used to making their own choice, to rely upon their own force. People have no idea about democracy, people have no idea how liberty can be used.

Hungarians got their liberty as a birthday present, they did not do anything for their it. Everything was settled around the round table. They did not feel that this regime was their regime, somehow more important than the previous one.

In the 1990s, when there was a relatively all right government in Hungary, people believed that politics is done in the parliament and did not want to have much to do with it. Politicians were convinced that people outside the parliament would be happy if in the representatives do the right thing.

So Orban is not only Horthy. He is a combination of Horthy and Janos Kadar. The good father Janos Kadar who will satisfy our wishes.

**Do you think that the goulash communism of Kadar created certain habitus (to use Bourdieou's term) that Orban is relying upon right now to gather his support?**

This habitus of the servant dates back earlier than Kadar and Horthy's time. It was already there and Orban recognized it. Goulash communism is still there and you cannot get rid of it; and the 19<sup>th</sup> century the



socialist government did not do anything to prevent the survival of this habitus.

**Did socialism and goulash communism of Kadar and his successor put the nationalistic identities in the freezer so to speak and they defrosted after 1989?**

Yes, the Trianon problem in particular but also the Holocaust; the two traumas of the society, which were in the freezer. After 1989 everything came out.

It is true that the Trianon resolution was unjust to Hungarians, that Hungarians suffered in the result of the peace after World War I, it still aches, it is still a wound in the Hungarian body. So he relies on a real problem and real suffering. Orban uses Hungarians in the neighboring countries as supporters of the government through this kind of a Trianon reference. They participate in Hungarian elections and 98 percent of them voted for Orban. It was at least one seat in the parliament that Orban got from the people in Transylvania and other places outside Hungary. But this is not the main support of Orban.

But there is something else. He understand the country. The left does not understand the country, the liberals even less. The left believes that the country will be leftist because people want redistribution and more just access. The left puts it ideological message into the social democratic tradition of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

But this is not the same country, people are not that interested in economic issues. There are other issues, issues of hatred. Immigration is the leitmotif of Orban. Migrants pose the threat, they are the great enemy. Not Gypsies or Jews anymore but migrants are those who destroy our culture. Hungary protects the whole Europe from migrants, Hungary protects Christianity from migrants and Islam. Hungary protects Hungarian women from rape by migrants.

**This is the same rhetoric they use in Poland.**

There is one difference though: Poland is really a Catholic country. Hungary is a pagan country. No one is religious there. Christianity is not an issue in Hungary, it is just an ideological, rhetorical device.

**Why didn't goulash communism heal Hungary from the trauma of Trianon?**

The trauma of Trianon was never used under communism. Antisemitism yes – under the guise of the anti-Israeli: Israel was the greatest enemy, together with the USA. This antisemitism had the way to be expressed. Trianon never had that chance because all the neighboring countries were brothers in socialism. There was no way for nationalism to be emphasized, Trianon was never mentioned. Only in the last years of the 1980s did they start to mention it.

**When I lived in Hungary I saw taxis with maps of greater Hungary. Why does this nostalgia for greater Hungary, imperial Hungary, exclude the imperial tolerance of many nations and cultures?**

This is also a bad tradition. Already under Austro-Hungarian Empire, Hungary was in equal standing with Austria and did not want to share this standing with Czechs, Slovaks, Romanians, etc. Perhaps it could have developed into a kind of federation, Danube Confederation, as Lajos Kossuth suggested. But Hungarians already were nationalistic and became even more nationalistic after the first world war. All these neighboring countries became enemies and Horthy did abide by, besides his own class interest, the interest of the gentry, this slogan: everything back, we need to get everything back. That was a slogan in all the schoolbooks. It obviously could not continue under communism. Well, except in regard to Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia could remain the enemy because of the well known reasons.

**Let's move from talking about the past to talking about the future. You are a pessimist. You believe that our condition is a postmodern condition, that is, that history has ended and we cannot come up with nothing new. Is liberal democracy the best we can hope for?**

Liberal democracy is imperfect, in some places more imperfect than in others. But we do not have anything else to protect. This is the only thing we can protect. And where is liberal democracy? In very few places in the world. Certainly not in Eastern Europe. The tradition of monarchy, the rule of one person, one man, is still the most widespread form of rule in the world. Liberal democracy is the only system which offers certain kind of liberty for a single person, for groups and ethnicities, this kind of plurality of traditions and ways of life. This is the

only kind of political arrangement that is worthy being defended even if not adored.

### **Can we not make a step forward to come up with something better?**

What can be better? There was a socialist conception of something better and it did not work out. Everything that was considered better turned out just worse, as you know well. What can we have better than expressing opinion freely, organizing ourselves and fulfilling ourselves? Yes, we still live under the pressure of the economic market society, which is not good, which is not optimistic.

### **How do we defend, and what can we rely on in our defense of liberal democracy?**

In Anglosaxon countries there is a longer tradition of liberal democracy. Despite of Trump, the US has a tradition of liberal democracy and will not abandon it, just like the British, Australians or New Zealand.

Regarding the European continent – with the exception of France and some Scandinavian countries there is a very little experience here with liberal democracy. Hungary had none, I do not think that Poland has had much. Germany had very little experience and it was always in danger. Italy the same.

Twentieth century was a massacre. 100 million Europeans died – I am talking only on the European continent and not about the colonies! This is our tradition! The problem with the European Union is that from the beginning it did not face the European past. You speak about the European values as if Europe was born yesterday! But Europe has a terrible past. And if you do not face the terrible past, you will not have a good future either. Because the past has to be understood in order to be overcome. Germans have had to confront their Nazi past. But what about the first world war? What about the old Prussia and the old Kaiser? This past remains there and it is almost forgotten. So we think about the European values and we think that Europe started to exist yesterday.

All countries have a terrible past. If you speak about the religious wars in Asia and Africa, please remind yourself about the Thirty Years' War. It was a religious war and Europe was devastated after it for the first time by a man-made disaster. We forget about it even though it ended in

the 18<sup>th</sup> century only. We have to seriously face the European past in order to protect liberal democracy as a present from the heaven.

**Despite Trump you believe that the US will keep their liberal democratic tradition. Nonetheless it seems that Donald Trump has awoken a lot of racism and a kind of white nationalism that hasn't been seen in the US for a long time.**

This is true. But America used to be a liberal democracy for over two hundred years. And it is not the first time that this kind of white supremacy got more support than anything else. It is an interesting country. It has a violent history – there was a civil war, for heavens' sake! And it was the most bloody civil war since Marius and Sulla. It is not that there is no racism or white supremacy there in the US, but they themselves become victorious against it. Jim Crow was still in place in the 1950s. The young white people from the East Coast went to the South, talked to the Black population and Black activists, and they succeeded. Many white students gave their lives for this. Bad things can happen but they themselves got it right. There was a similar thing in Great Britain with the Irish issue. There was imprisonment and other repressions but they themselves overcame it.

The population in the continental Europe has not been strong enough to overcome our own issues. In Europe there has had to be foreign army to put it right.

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**Agnes Heller** is a Hungarian philosopher. In 1977 Agnes Heller, along with other members of the 'Budapest School', chose exile in Australia. Her influence on critical theory is evident to this day. Now in her 80s she continues to live the philosophical life at full pitch, travelling, lecturing, and standing firm against injustice as she sees it.

# This is what an antiracist America would look like. How do we get there?

*By Ibram X. Kendi*

Dec. 6, 2018



‘A racist or antiracist is not who we are, but what we are doing in the moment,’ writes Ibram X Kendi. Illustration: Richard A Chance

Congressman George H White opted not to seek re-election in 1900. North Carolina’s brand-new poll tax, literacy test and grandfather clause – the forebears of today’s voter ID law, voter purge and felon clause – ensured the defeat of the last black congressman.

When the all-white, male 57th Congress sat in 1901, America had been made great again after decades of dueling, after “all the forces that made for civilization were dominated by a [southern] mass of barbarous freedmen,” according to the nation’s leading Reconstruction historian, William Archibald Dunning. Racist progress seemingly overtook antiracist progress, like when Donald Trump overtook Barack Obama. Powerful white men were colonizing and disenfranchising, convict

leasing and lynching, pillaging and selling land and labor, segregating public spaces and raising up Confederate statues. They were writing literature to “demonstrate to the world that the white man must and shall be supreme”, as attested by the bestselling novelist Thomas Dixon.

Serving up hope for an antiracist America seemed unhealthy in those days. Nearly all the fresh hope from the jubilant end of slavery in 1865 had seemingly molded over. Sound familiar?

All these years later, some historians consider the turn of the 20th century as the “nadir” of America’s racial story. Historians also remember the anti-lynching journalism of Ida B Wells, the organizing of black clubwomen and black colleges and black towns, the early decolonization stirrings, the early strivings of the civil rights movement, the spiritual stirrings and strivings of all these souls of black folk, as recorded by WEB Du Bois.

We do not see the early 20th century as the end, but the beginning. Likewise, we should not see our era of resurgent white nationalism as the racist end, but the antiracist beginning.

Look behind and beyond the daily news of voter suppression and voter fraud fables, the daily news of “invading” Latinx immigrants and Muslim bans, the daily news of mass deporting and incarcerating and impoverishing and enriching, the daily news of defending Confederate monuments like racist policies, the daily news of police shooting black bodies sitting in their apartments or doing their jobs, the daily news of the white president berating black women journalists, the daily news of the white president identifying as a nationalist, the daily news of white nationalists terrorizing Americans with their cop calls and guns, inspired by their president.

Look behind and beyond the daily news of racist power at the people thinking and organizing, stirring to uproot racist policies and ideas, striving to lay the foundation for an antiracist world. They are there, like the most diverse incoming class of House Democrats in history. They are there, behind racism, stridently confronting racist power at nearly every turn, like Stacey Abrams. They are there, beyond racism, silently thinking and organizing in its shadows, like Colin Kaepernick. We have assembled some of them here, in *Antiracism and America: A Series*, a collaboration between the Guardian and The Antiracist Research and Policy Center at American University in Washington DC.

The times when all seem lost is when we most need to see the people and ideas trailblazing the way out of the muck.

The times when all seem lost are the times when we most need to see the people and ideas trailblazing the way out of the muck. This series provides the hope and direction essential for change. It previews the future, or what future generations, perhaps, will most adore about what we began in our racial era.

*Antiracism and America: A Series* stands as an alternative to the daily news of racism, to the daily reactions to the daily news of racism. We take a step back from the news cycle and offer essays and reporting that are reflective rather than reactionary, ambitious rather than restrained, looking forward as we look back, treating as they diagnose. We want to set out a vision for some of the policies and ideas that can usher in an antiracist society, while addressing some of the old and new policy and ideological impediments. We plan to showcase those people imagining and building an antiracist society where antiracist policies are common practice, where antiracist ideas are common sense.

What about an antiracist society where racism is no longer intersecting with other bigotries to manipulate people away from their self-interests? Where we reframe the achievement gap as the opportunity gap? Where love and hope guide us, instead of fear and white fragility? Where we recognize biological and behavioral group sameness? Where we level color and cultural group difference? Where native and immigrant become one? Where we all can be fully human through embracing humanity fully?

What about an antiracist society where instead of standardizing our tests or closing our schools we standardized school resources and open first-class schools for all? Where we honestly share our racial history? Where free, high-quality healthcare is as universal as basic incomes and fresh food? Where instead of stocking prisons with poor and mentally disabled people of color, we stock those people's communities with high-paying jobs and mental health services? Where instead of enslaving and traumatizing prisoners, we are healing and restoring them? Where guns are as controlled as police officers fearing for their lives? Where voting is easy and accessible?

Many Americans who say they oppose racism are not striving to build an antiracist society. People across the political spectrum have the same

aspirations as Trump does: a “not-racist” society. They imagine, like the president, that the opposite of racism is “not-racism”, the opposite of a racist is a “not-racist”, without ever supplying a definition of not-racism.

“No, no, I’m not racist,” Trump said when asked about calling black nations “shithole countries” early in the year. How many of us say we are “not-racist” after expressing there is something wrong with one of the racial groups, after judging different racial groups from our own sociocultural standards, after refusing to believe equal opportunity will produce equal outcomes among racial groups, after supporting “race-neutral” policies that yield racial inequity?

We say Trump is in denial when he says: “I am the least racist person you have ever interviewed, that I can tell you.” What I can tell you is many of his detractors are in denial, too.

There is no such thing as a “not-racist” policy, idea or person. Just an old-fashioned racist in a newfound denial. All policies, ideas and people are either being racist or antiracist. Racist policies yield racial inequity; antiracist policies yield racial equity. Racist ideas suggest racial hierarchy, antiracist ideas suggest racial equality. A racist is supporting racist policy or expressing a racist idea. An antiracist is supporting antiracist policy or expressing an antiracist idea. A racist or antiracist is not who we are, but what we are doing in the moment.

In this moment, as we stare at the pervasiveness of racist power, it is hard not to deny the prospects for an antiracist future. That she will come. But if the writers in this series can aspire, if Congressman White could give a farewell address of confidence on 29 January 1901, then why can’t we?

“This, Mr Chairman, is perhaps the negroes’ temporary farewell to the American Congress,” he said, “but let me say, Phoenix-like he will rise up someday and come again.”

- Ibram X Kendi is the contributing series editor of *Antiracism and America: A Series* and the director of the Antiracist Research and Policy Center at American University. He is the National Book Award-winning author of *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* and the forthcoming *How To Be An Antiracist*





## Playing a ‘Game’ to Reveal Uncomfortable Truths About Race

Jennifer Kidwell and Scott Sheppard, creators of “Underground Railroad Game.” Photo: Krista Schlueter for The New York Times

***By Laura Collins-Hughes***

Sept. 7, 2016

For Scott Sheppard, a creator of a new play called “Underground Railroad Game,” the real game it’s based on was one of those childhood experiences that seem normal at the time, but weird, even horrifying, in retrospect.

Playing it was meant to be educational for Mr. Sheppard, now 32, and his fellow fifth graders in 1990s Hanover, Pa., a historically minded town just north of the Mason-Dixon Line, near Gettysburg.

For a unit on the Civil War, teachers split the students, who were overwhelmingly white, into two teams: Union soldiers, whose task in the game was to smuggle as many slaves — represented by dolls — as possible to freedom in Canada, and Confederate soldiers, charged with recapturing the dolls as they made their way north.

“Basically the Confederate soldiers were patrolling the hallways and looking around between classes or at lunch,” Mr. Sheppard said. “The Union kids were looking for opportunities to sneak the slaves in their book bags or in their pockets so that they could move them to the next safe house.”

Whichever side amassed the most points by the end of the unit won the war.

Beginning performances on Tuesday, Sept. 13, at Ars Nova, “Underground Railroad Game” — a squirm-inducing, comic two-hander about the legacy of slavery in America, sex included — is the creation of Mr. Sheppard and Jennifer Kidwell with their Philadelphia-based theater company, Lightning Rod Special. (Toby Zinman, a theater critic for The Philadelphia Inquirer, called the play a “brilliant theatrical commentary on contemporary race relations.”)

Directed by Taibi Magar, the show’s New York premiere comes at a moment when the Underground Railroad has returned to the cultural conversation (think Colson Whitehead’s novel “The Underground Railroad” and Ben H. Winters’s novel “Underground Airlines”), partly because of the 150th anniversary last year of the end of the Civil War.

Ms. Kidwell plays Teacher Caroline, who in the game is the general of the Union Army. Mr. Sheppard plays Teacher Stuart, her Confederate counterpart. Like their characters, Ms. Kidwell and Mr. Sheppard are a study in contrasts, not just physically — she’s more compact, he’s lankier; she’s black, he’s white — but also in personality, background, outlook.

Her humor is dry and jabbing, her conversation inquisitive and disputatious. A chatty Baltimore native, she can shift easily between academic-speak (at Columbia, she studied the literature of marginalized communities) and astrology. She’s been in the thick of debates over racial politics, having played the fictional black artist Donelle Woolford in Joe Scanlan’s “Dick’s Last Stand,” a piece that drew heat from some actual black artists at the 2014 Whitney Biennial.

The earnestly reflective Mr. Sheppard, on the other hand, seems exactly like the Friends school English teacher he once was.

“We are not natural collaborators,” Ms. Kidwell, 38, said recently at a cafe around the corner from Ars Nova. Yet in the years since they started working on the show, in 2013, a tight friendship has grown between them. “We’re very close,” she acknowledged. “And it’s kind of crazy.”

“We infamously disagree and argue all the time,” Mr. Sheppard said in a separate interview. “We agree on the core 10 percent that is the heart of the piece, and everything beyond that is battleground.”



Left, Jennifer Kidwell and Scott Sheppard, creators of “Underground Railroad Game,” rehearsing for their play. Photo: Krista Schlueter for The New York Times

Yet watching them wheel around a rehearsal room late one August afternoon, gracefully remaking a dance in the show with the choreographer David Neumann, their chemistry was obvious.

When they met five years ago in Philadelphia, as students at the brand-new Pig Iron School for Advanced Performance Training, Ms. Kidwell was a little skeptical of Mr. Sheppard. Even in their small class, they didn’t work together much. She had no idea how wickedly funny he could be until the night they went out with mutual friends, and he told the bizarre story of the Underground Railroad game.

Later he suggested that they make a piece about it. But it was only when they went to a talk about the Underground Railroad, at Independence National Historical Park, that they found in the speaker's awkwardness something they could latch onto.

"He was a white man, and he was having a lot of difficulty saying 'black people,' 'African-American people,'" Ms. Kidwell said. "He kept stumbling over the large swath of people that the talk was referencing."

Language about race is a principal focus of the play: who is permitted to say what, the way speech shapes and reveals thought, the pain that history has embedded in certain words. In rehearsal, some white members of the production team have been skittish about uttering a racial epithet that is part of the show, while Ms. Kidwell says she is fine with that word in context. What bothers her is calling anyone a slave — rather than, say, an enslaved person.

Using the word slave, she said, puts "a distance between us and their personhood."

One mocking bit of dialogue in the show, calling the Underground Railroad "a silver lining to the dark cloud of slavery," was inspired by a 2015 episode of the public radio program "Here & Now," which said that "with the abolition of one of the worst parts of our history" — that is, slavery — "came the end of one of the most uplifting, the Underground Railroad."

To Mr. Sheppard, such phrasing is "seemingly a small verbal slip that actually demonstrates this much larger problem with the way we obfuscate the horror of slavery," telling stories that "allow white people to not look or feel so bad."

"Underground Railroad Game" is not interested in providing that kind of salve; it would like to shift its audience's thinking. Yet Ms. Kidwell and Mr. Sheppard have realized that in many ways, the show echoes their own attempts to find affinity with each other.

"If I took a survey, I would fill out all the correct answers about my beliefs of race in America," he said. "But what we're getting at in this piece is the more unconscious things, the things that happen around your feelings and how you connect with people and whether or not there can be true intimacy."

To judge by their opposing interpretations of a metaphor borrowed from geometry — the asymptote, whose lines approach without ever intersecting — the answer to that might not be an easy yes.

“One line is curved, the other line is straight,” Ms. Kidwell explained, “but the principle of the asymptote is that they’re never going to meet.” She sees “a kind of crushing beauty” in that futility, whereas Mr. Sheppard looks at the same thing and sees something more like hope.

“He’s like: ‘Yeah, but they’re trying. They’re moving toward it,’” she said. “And I’m like: ‘They can try all day, but it’s not going to happen.’”

# Playing Underground: An Interview with Underground Railroad Game creators Jennifer Kidwell and Scott R. Sheppard

*Interview by Woolly Mammoth Literary Director, Kirsten Bowen*

Apr 3, 2018

As a fifth grader at Hanover Middle School in Hanover, Pennsylvania, Scott R. Sheppard learned about the Civil War and slavery by participating in a live action role playing game called the Underground Railroad Game. Years later, he and co-creator Jennifer Kidwell unpack the effectiveness of that experience, as well as race, history, and the ways we still struggle to teach and talk about both. Kidwell and Sheppard spoke with Woolly's literary department about the genesis of the play, power dynamics, and the complexity of the Underground Railroad itself.

## **What inspired the play, and how did you develop it together?**

S: In Hanover, which is a small town in South Central Pennsylvania, there's a lot of reenactment culture and Civil War lore because it's near Gettysburg. There was a thematic unit for every grade, and for fifth graders it was the Civil War. They decided that it was going to be a live action role playing educational war. One of the games we played was called The Underground Railroad Game, where teachers explained that dolls were going to stand in for fleeing slaves. The teachers split the class into two groups: the Union soldiers and the Confederate soldiers. If you were a Union student then you would earn points for each safe house you were able to safely transport a doll to. And the Confederate students were out to catch you. Years later, the game started to resonate with me in a different way. It revealed a lot of the unknown or latent cultural assumptions, blind spots, and racism about my hometown, in ways that I don't think they realized. I told this story to Jenn when we were in Pig Iron's School for Advanced Performance Training. The idea was to use this as a jumping off point to explore dares, games, and the ways in which competition can get us to reveal things about ourselves that we

would normally protect, censor, or edit. The reality of a middle school and two teachers became central threads of the piece later on.

J: One really pivotal moment of research for us was when we went to the National Portrait Gallery in Philadelphia and watched a talk given by a federally funded historian/park ranger about the Underground Railroad. This white man was talking about the Underground Railroad and the conditions of slavery but having a very difficult time talking about Black people and just stumbling over his words: “slave...enslaved...Afro-American...Negro...” He never landed on what to call Black people. So instead of us learning anything about the Underground Railroad, we learned what it was like to not be able to speak about a troubled history. It is amazing to me that I would walk out of a talk about the Underground Railroad thinking more about the white guy who was talking about it. We were doing an improv for two of our classmates one day and it was not going well and then we both just started playing around with the hilarity of this man. I think that’s how we jumped to, “Oh let’s be teachers. Let’s teach about this.”

**Tell us about the significance of the props in the play.**

J: One of the things that really struck me was that these teachers were trying to teach about objectification of body and objectification of labor and race through the use of rag dolls. And I asked, “Your school, let me guess, is predominantly white?” “Yes.” So basically the only black bodies in the building were rag dolls that people were carrying around and using as tokens, which seems like just the worst pedagogy ever. When you can see an object in more than one dimension, so that it signifies more than one thing, we start to understand different facets and different points of view. I think the reuse and re-inscription of the objects was once for utility because of the budget, but also “To you, this is the icon of freedom, to me it’s actually the icon of death.”

**Over the course of the play Teacher Caroline and Teacher Stuart become romantic partners. Why did you decide to take their relationship in that direction?**

S: With these two teachers there was an impulse of crossing lines and wanting to see how far they could go. That started to be a motor for the way in which these two characters operated. We realized that with every scene in the piece, they’re on different levels of caricatures of themselves. When we wear masks, what kind of games can we play with

each other, and what does that free us to express about ourselves that we might not ordinarily if we weren't wearing a mask?

J: And if you're going to do a piece dealing with race in America, and you have a white guy and a Black woman, you have to talk about sex. To me that's just so present, so forward and funny, because we don't want to talk about sex in a puritanical country like this. We wanted there to be a clear and immediate understanding of what's at play with what those two bodies stand for.

S: What does love look like, or can love exist, with such a deep power imbalance to start? And how does love potentially allow people to negotiate that power imbalance? Or does that power imbalance preclude love from really ever happening?

J: The power that Scott is referencing really comes out in the performance of those two bodies. That's what the piece is trying to do, to get at "So this is public and this is private," or is it? And so what is the power dynamic outside of that public space? Can you actually create an ecology between two people that doesn't reference the outside world and so isn't beholden to those vectors of power?

**What are your thoughts on the Underground Railroad as a historical icon? Teacher Caroline refers to it "as a silver lining to the dark side of slavery." Do we tend to forget the origin of these historical icons and why they existed in the first place?**

J: People have been asking, "Why is this in the zeitgeist?" Part of the function of the piece is to say that it's certainly convenient to talk about the entire system of slavery, spend a little time talking about how hard slavery was, and then say, "But there was this really great Underground Railroad and there were a lot of really helpful white people on it." I think that that's bound in this: a lack of being able to reckon with the evil, the injustice, the perniciousness of the institution of slavery, and to shed light on this narrative of the white savior. Because as long as that white savior exists, we don't have to fully deal with it. I think that the nation feels like an adolescent right now, and that's why people have used the term "woke," because it's like, "Wait, wait, I didn't actually realize that all of the things that I've held to be true are A) not true for everybody and B) are wrong." And there are some people who are like, "I will not look at things like that." I think that the mythos of the Underground



Railroad helps assuage the brutality of actually reckoning with truth for those who need that salve.



# The Left Is Making Jews Choose: Our Progressive Values Or Ourselves

*By Batya Ungar-Sargon*

March 6, 2019

In the past three weeks, Minnesota Congresswoman Ilhan Omar attempted to discuss the U.S.-Israel relationship three times. And each time, her words descended into anti-Semitic tropes.

“It’s all about the Benjamins!” She wrote in a now deleted tweet, misconstruing the Israel Lobby in a way that evoked the anti-Semitic trope of Jewish money controlling the levers of power.

“I want to talk about the political influence in this country that says it is O.K. for people to push for allegiance to a foreign country,” she said at a town hall meeting, evoking the anti-Semitic canard of dual loyalties.

“I should not be expected to have allegiance/pledge support to a foreign country,” she tweeted, since “our democracy is built on debate,” again evoking the idea that there are sinister forces at work demanding allegiance to Israel that undermine U.S. democracy.

Omar apologized for the initial tweet and acknowledged the hurt she had caused. But she only seemed to double down on the very sentiments that had offended Jews in the first place.

Almost as upsetting as having a member of Congress repeatedly say things that evoke the most horrific episodes in Jewish history was the response to Omar's words on the progressive left. Instead of expressing support for American Jews horrified that a sitting Congresswoman – a person with access to state power who has a vote on whether the most powerful military in the world goes to war – they started a hashtag on Twitter: #IStandWithIlhan.

Omar, a refugee and one of the first two Muslim women to be elected to Congress, has been repeatedly and deplorably targeted by bigots with ugly, anti-Muslim sentiments and even threats to her life. Every decent human should vigorously oppose these kinds of attacks.

But her supporters went further. They based their defenses around a bizarre, self-contradictory combination of denying that her words evoked anti-Semitic stereotypes while implicitly admitting her words *did* evoke those stereotypes with elaborate deflections and whataboutisms. (“Don’t throw the book at a Muslim woman of color while ignoring the many, many white Christian members of Congress who’ve trafficked in anti-Semitic tropes and tell me you’re doing it to protect Jews” was a typical sentiment.)

The whataboutism ramped up after House Democrats announced they would be bringing a resolution against anti-Semitism in the wake of Omar's comments.

“Dems doing more to ‘confront Omar’ than Donald Trump,” tweeted Symone Sanders of CNN. “Where is the resolution about the president?”

Of course, House Democrats *did* call for censuring President Trump for his remarks defending the White Supremacists who marched in Charlottesville; it was blocked by Republicans, who controlled the House. And just two months ago, Congressman Steve King was censured by name for defending white supremacy, and stripped of all his committee memberships.

Still, it's true that Republicans like Kevin McCarthy and Jim Jordan have not apologized for their own deeply anti-Semitic tweets, just as the President has never apologized for pushing an anti-Semitic conspiracy theory cited by the murderer of 11 Jews at prayer in the Tree of Life Synagogue. And for now, the Democrats' resolution about anti-Semitism appears to be on hold with members of the Black and Progressive Caucuses reportedly not wishing to distract from fighting President Trump.

Fair enough. But a more disturbing rationale emerged among some of Omar's other supporters on the progressive left: a kind of resentment towards Jews over the fact that House Democrats would come to our defense.

And it's this resentment that has replaced the "intersectional" ideal of fighting all forms of bigotry together. For when it comes time to fight anti-Semitism, there's always a more pressing issue.

Thus, Linda Sarsour on her Facebook page raged against years of "blatant anti-Muslim racism, islamophobia, propaganda against Muslims" which "Democratic leadership were never swift to condemn." "You want a resolution?" she wrote. "Condemn all forms of bigotry. All forms of bigotry are unacceptable."

All but the one Omar waded into, apparently. "We stand with Representative Ilhan Omar. Our top priority is the safety of our sister and her family," Sarsour concluded.

By comparing what Omar said to Islamophobia, Sarsour was implicitly admitting that her words were hurtful to the Jewish community. And yet, this didn't make them worthy of censure. The opposite; Sarsour was enraged that members of the U.S. government would stand up for Jews. The outrage that there are no resolutions protecting other vulnerable people was seamlessly melded into the outrage that there might be one protecting Jews.

By Tuesday, these sentiments had spread to New York Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's Twitter feed.

“One of the things that is hurtful about the extent to which reprimand is sought of Ilhan is that no one seeks this level of reprimand when members make statements about Latinx + other communities (during the shutdown, a GOP member yelled “Go back to Puerto Rico!” on the floor),” she tweeted.

Ocasio-Cortez, too, seemed to implicitly admit that Omar’s words were racially problematic by comparing them to a racist remark against herself. And yet, instead of concluding that it’s wonderful to see racist language attacked full on — she claimed to be “hurt” by seeing Congress stand up for Jews.

Ocasio-Cortez went on to suggest that Jews “call in” Omar instead of calling her out, apparently unaware that Omar’s Jewish constituents have been unsuccessfully trying to do just that for a year now, thanks to yet another anti-Semitic tweet from 2012 accusing Israel of “hypnotizing the world.” “To jump to the nuclear option every time leaves no room for corrective action,” Ocasio-Cortez wrote, apparently forgetting that this week was the fourth time Omar invoked an anti-Semitic stereotype.

“It’s not my position to tell people how to feel, or that their hurt is invalid,” she wrote. “But incidents like these do beg the question: where are the resolutions against homophobic statements? For anti-blackness? For xenophobia? For a member saying he’ll ‘send Obama home to Kenya?’”

But do these incidents, actually, beg the question? And why do these questions only come up when Jews are seeking redress for harm?

Ocasio-Cortez, like Sarsour, has bought into the notion that is prevalent on the left and the right: that it’s Jewish safety *or* Muslim safety; Jewish self-determination *or* Palestinian self-determination; Jews can thrive *or* black people can.

And above all, when Jews hear racist stereotypes, the onus is on us to not go “nuclear” and to stay silent, to reach out to the offender privately (again and again and again and again) and if that doesn’t work, to never, ever involve the authorities.

This, too, is familiar to us. Resentment against Jews for seeking the protection of a sovereign — and for the rare times that we got it — is just

as much a staple of our history as the ugly tropes Omar seems incapable of refraining from using.

Are Jews supposed to stay in a progressive movement that resents us for standing up for ourselves? That has leaders who are “hurt” when they see Congress defend us? A movement that is lionizing a woman for the fact that she has offended us?

Just because the Republicans are weaponizing Omar’s repeated gaffes in problematic ways while hypocritically ignoring the anti-Semitic remarks of their fellows doesn’t mean that the Democrats — or Jews — should be silent about anti-Semitism, especially after repeated attempts to “call in.”

America — and its progressive wing — will surely be worse off if Jews can no longer find a political home there, and it’s for the soul of this country that we are fighting as much as for ourselves. Because Jewish safety and sovereignty and the safety and sovereignty of others in need of justice are not a zero-sum game.

We can vigorously oppose the disgusting bigotry against Omar while also demanding that she not demean us. We can vigorously oppose the Occupation of the Palestinians while also demanding that people join us in this endeavor without reverting to anti-Semitic tropes.

Anti-Semitism is still much more dangerous on the right. But it’s the progressive left that is asking Jews to choose between our progressive values and ourselves.

# Why Don't Jews Realize How Dangerous Anti-BDS Laws Are?

*By Batya Ungar-Sargon*

December 18, 2018

The movement to boycott, divest from and sanction Israel, known as BDS, is in the news this week, thanks to a harrowing tale reported in *The Intercept* about a Muslim speech therapist in Austin, Texas named Bahia Amawi. Amawi was told she could no longer work in the Texas public school system unless she signed an oath promising that she does not and will not boycott Israel or “an Israeli-controlled territory.”

As Glenn Greenwald points out in his report, the oath applies exclusively to Israel.

“In order to continue to work, Amawi would be perfectly free to engage in any political activism against her own country, participate in an economic boycott of any state or city within the U.S., or work against the policies of any other government in the world — except Israel,” Greenwald writes.

In other words, Texas's anti-BDS bill doesn't only impinge on the free speech rights of a U.S. citizen in a bizarre attempt to “stand with Israel;” it turns every potential contractor with the state of Texas into a literalization of the anti-Semitic canard of dual loyalty. Texas citizens are now literally more loyal to Israel than they are to the U.S., insofar as they may say and do things to their own country that they may not engage in vis-à-vis Israel.

Amawi is suing the state of Texas. But Texas is not the only state to suppress its residents' right to free speech in such a way. 26 states have enacted such laws, with 13 more pending, and an anti-BDS bill is currently making its way through Congress.

There will be more cases like Amawi's. And the choice she was presented with, to have her free speech rights suspended only when it comes to Israel and even its settlements in the West Bank — or be denied employment by the state of Texas — is a version of a choice all

Americans are being presented with: Suspend your free speech when it comes to Israel, or be condemned as an anti-Semite.

It's a choice that American Jews must be at the forefront of resisting.

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A non-violent campaign, BDS's stated goals are ending Israel's occupation of the Palestinians, ensuring equal rights for Palestinian citizens of Israel, and securing the right of return for Palestinians who fled in 1948.

It's this last goal that BDS's opponents say is anti-Semitic, in that such a huge influx of Palestinians from around the world would surely spell the end of Israel as a Jewish State, making it a Muslim-majority. Others claim that BDS holds Israel to a higher standard than other problematic states, and thus is inherently anti-Semitic.

But the Texas oath reveals that it is BDS's opponents who want Israel held to a different standard, its own, unique, protected standard. By demanding that Israel alone be treated to its own oath of loyalty, those who promote anti-BDS laws in support of Israel are actually demanding Israel be held to a lower standard, as Lara Friedman once put it.

This is not to say that BDS is worthy of support. I, like many Jews, find BDS distasteful. I find its leaders morally unimpressive and its ranks full of anti-Semites, some of them Jews.

Even worse, Palestinian activists have been hurt by the prohibition against normalization imposed by the movement, making solidarity between left-wing Israelis and Palestinians that much harder to achieve. And by including in its goals an impossible one — the right of return — BDS has undermined the important, achievable goals of ending the occupation and equal rights for Palestinians, as well as undermining the work being done by Palestinian activists on the ground.

Despite my personal reservations, making it illegal on pain of state-sponsored penalty for an individual to organize over what they perceive to be an injustice is outrageous. The entire point of the First Amendment is to protect the speech of people we despise (you don't need the law to protect the speech of people you like). It's something we Americans hold dear, and something we seem to recognize as crucial to



our identity in all areas but Israel. It's nothing short of a *shonda* for Israel to be the one topic where Americans forget about their most dearly held values.

It's especially ironic given that it wasn't Iran or Hezbollah or any of the real threats Israel faces that led to this collective amnesia, but a movement that has indisputably been so far a total failure. As The Brookings Institution concluded earlier this year after an extensive study of BDS's economic impact on Israel, "given the basic structure of the Israeli trade, the threat to the Israeli economy is a far cry from that often described by both supporters and detractors of BDS."

Brookings went even further: "The Israeli government is thus doing itself a disservice by paying so much attention to this movement, both through its own deeds and words, as well as through lobbying with other countries to enact anti-BDS legislation."

Like Israel's attempt to fight BDS by barring its supporters from entering the country, these anti-BDS legislations will serve only to strengthen the otherwise ineffectual movement. Still, one can understand why Israeli Jews would vociferously oppose a campaign, however non-violent, that seeks to turn them into a pariah state. While Israel has inadvertently given the movement a huge boost by drawing attention to it, and even ridiculously comparing it to violent means of resistance, one can understand why Israeli citizens view the movement to boycott them as a threat.

And one can understand why American Jews would feel sympathetic to their Israeli brethren, and why those who seek to harm Israel, even ineffectively, might be seen as enemies of the Jews. Indeed, at a time when we are ever more divided, BDS has emerged as something still able to unite Jews. It has been Israel's most successful export in a way, convincing American Jews that they can be great heroes on the front lines of protecting Israel from behind the safety of their computer screens.

Fighting BDS has become a vigorous exercise in virtue signaling to the right that you still care about Israel.

The problem is that American Jews aren't only Jews. We are also Americans. And it is through America that we have chosen to seek our

self-determination; granted equal rights in America, six million Jews have opted out of Jewish nationalism.

As the poster children for self-determination as a minority in a Christian majority country, American Jews cannot plausibly assert that BDS seeks to deny *us* self-determination, even as we continue to refuse the version of self-determination offered by Israel. BDS can at most be said to pursue a world in which American Jews would no longer have an *extra* source of self-determination, a backup source of self-determination, in case things go south here in the U.S.

There's something really chilling about telling Palestinians that we Jews need two sources of self-determination, while Palestinians don't even deserve the one.

Worse, in allowing the fight in the U.S. against BDS to escalate to bizarre oaths of loyalty, American Jews have shown themselves willing to deprive other American citizens of the civil rights protections that make this country so great, rights like freedom of expression which are surely not incidental to our choice to be American, rather than Israeli, citizens.

As Americans, we are committed to the First Amendment. And as Jews, we know that criticizing Israel is sometimes the most Jewish thing you can do.

It is we who must lead the way in rejecting the false dichotomy of being silent on Israel's failings or belonging to BDS. It's a choice that denies us our very identity, and we must oppose it by vociferously defending the First Amendment rights of our fellow citizens.

# The Virtue Signalers Won't Change the World



Third-wave antiracism makes sense, and fits into the longer struggle, but it's a dead end. Photo: Scott Olsen/Getty

***By John McWhorter***

Dec 23, 2018

FEMINIST HISTORY is typically described in three waves: The struggle to secure voting rights, then workplace rights, and third—roughly—to upend stereotypes. The battle against racism and its effects is often described in a similar three-part timeline, with movements against slavery and segregation, and then—vaguely—the post-civil-rights era.

The ambiguity of that last term masks that third-wave antiracism, as one might call it, and reflects a profound change in methods and attitudes. Just as the first and second waves of both feminism and antiracism transformed social structures, third-wave antiracism may seem parallel to third-wave feminism in moving on to a different form of abuse, psychological rather than institutional. But this focus on the psychological has morphed, of late, from a pragmatic mission to change minds into a witch hunt driven by the personal benefits of virtue

signaling, obsessed with unconscious and subconscious bias. As noble as this culture of shaming genuinely seems to many, it's a dead end.

IN THEIR NEW BOOK, *The Coddling of the American Mind* Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt discuss modern antiracism as it exists within the collegiate social-justice culture. (The book is expanded from the eponymous 2015 article in *The Atlantic*.) On American college campuses, it is typical to depict unwelcome opinions as injurious to one's sense of safety. In a version of self-defense, it's vogueish to "de-platform" controversial speakers. Occasional unsavory incidents are said to render a university a thoroughly racist establishment. And questions interpretable as exotifying—such as "Where are you from?" to someone born in the United States—are considered as hurtful as bullying.

Crucially, this phenomenon of hypersensitivity extends far beyond campus. The virally popular *Stuff White People Like* blog of 2010 was a wry self-parody of the cultural mores that had settled in by roughly the late 1990s amidst a certain stripe of educated white people. "Being Offended" was one of the cleverest entries, describing a kind of almost recreational quest to take umbrage on behalf of people other than whites. Already, the satirical tone of this entry dates awkwardly: Many of the people it describes would read it today as disrespectful to the urgency of attesting to one's white privilege. As the writer Meghan Daum has argued, it's now customary for many educated whites to take on a strident, uncompromising, radical tone in the guise of justice and truth. Middle-class adult playdates are as central to this mise-en-scène as dorm lounges.

Taking the longer, academic view, Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, in their 2015 monograph *Inventing the Future*, identify the rise since the 1960s of what they term "folk politics," which reduces the complexity of politics down to human-level grievance, elevating protest over planning and wedge issues over platforms.

To roll the eyes and dismiss this cultural movement as "crazy" is unhelpful and incurious—as is decreeing it "complex" while hoping the subject changes soon. Although I ultimately find it counterproductive, I think this movement actually does, in the formal meaning, make sense; as I noted, the modern social-justice paradigm can be seen as a legitimate third phase in a continuing struggle.

THE ABOLITION OF SLAVERY was the first major victory in black progress in America. A reading of David Blight's recent biography of Frederick Douglass vividly underscores what a titanic struggle abolition was for people white and black, given not only the violent hostility that it regularly elicited, but the bafflement. Many intelligent people found it counterintuitive and even ridiculous that black people could ever be treated as whites' equals. Yet the battle was worth it: Slavery ended.

Perhaps more familiar is the violence, skepticism, and indifference that civil-rights leaders of the mid-20th century encountered in fighting legalized segregation. Even many educated, temperate-minded people—some of them black—thought Martin Luther King Jr. was a hasty rabble-rouser “stirring that stuff up,” at least until his murder led to his more respectful evaluation in martyrdom. Yet the bloodiness of Selma and Birmingham served a purpose: Segregation was outlawed, and black lives changed profoundly.

Crucial, also, is that religion played a key role in making the case for both of these phases of the struggle. Blight stresses how much Douglass relied in his speeches on the prophetic teachings of Jeremiah and Isaiah, and the stories of Exodus, Job, Lot's wife, and others, identifying the hypocrisy of a nation calling itself Christian while nakedly oppressing so many of its people.

Racism, quite obviously, has not been vanquished in American life. Might the logical next task be a transformation of psychology rather than sociology, as argued on college campuses and elsewhere? The contemporary left's concern is with the underlying biases that bolster the racism that remains. It seeks, as a way forward, a society not only without racist structures, but without racist thought, which, for one, can foster race-based disparities that eerily parallel those conditioned in the past by overt segregation.

The new quest, then, will focus to a new degree on how people think. Blight notes that even in Douglass's time, his “message to whites, therefore, was morally change yourselves. The new order was as much for whites to give as it was for blacks to take.” That facet of the quest has taken center stage since. The historian Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn has noted that after the 1960s, in civil rights “the desired goal was no longer civic equality and participation, but individual psychic well-being.” This would include that of black people as well as nonblack ones, with their

racist bias qualifying as a kind of mental imbalance in itself, as thinkers from Douglass through James Baldwin have taught.

The secularism of this new therapeutic approach to racial progress may seem fundamentally dissimilar to the previous two phases. In fact, however, third-wave antiracism is a profoundly religious movement in everything but terminology. The idea that whites are permanently stained by their white privilege, gaining moral absolution only by eternally attesting to it, is the third wave's version of original sin. The idea of a someday when America will "come to terms with race" is as vaguely specified a guidepost as Judgment Day. Explorations as to whether an opinion is "problematic" are equivalent to explorations of that which may be blasphemous. The social mauling of the person with "problematic" thoughts parallels the excommunication of the heretic. What is called "virtue signaling," then, channels the impulse that might lead a Christian to an aggressive display of her faith in Jesus. There is even a certain Church Lady air to much of the patrolling on race these days, an almost performative joy in dog-piling on the transgressor, which under a religious analysis is perfectly predictable.

Add in the tendency to let pass certain wrinkles in the fabric as "complex"—the new religion, as a matter of faith, entails that one suspends disbelief at certain points out of respect to the larger narrative. Beyond a certain point, one must not press too hard when asking a priest why God allows bad things to happen to good people. In the same way, one must not ask, "If black people are strong survivors, then why do they disallow the utterance of the N-word even in referring to it rather than using it?" And if one does dare to ask, the answer is inevitably heavier on rhetoric than reasoning. Antiracism requires one to treat the word as taboo—blasphemous—in all its manifestations and go in peace, as it were.

When someone attests to his white privilege with his hand up in the air, palm outward—which I have observed more than once—the resemblance to testifying in church need not surprise. Here, the agnostic or atheist American who sees fundamentalists and Mormons as quaint reveals himself as, of all things, a parishioner.

THE PEOPLE ESPOUSING this third-wave ideology are not unintelligent, mentally imbalanced, or working from some nefarious agenda. They want to be on the right side of history. However, upon reflection, and

aware of the risk of how an essay like this might read in the future, I suggest it is going nowhere fast.

More specifically, it is a mission creep from the second wave—or “concept creep,” as Lukianoff and Haidt put it, citing the psychologist Nick Haslam. They have defined trauma downward, as it were. Where antiracist progressives once looked to bondage, disenfranchisement, and torture, today they classify as equally traumatic the remark, the implication, the unwelcome question.

There are three main reasons that third-wave antiracism is a less convincing project than the first and second waves.

First, to what extent is it possible to alter human sentiment as opposed to actions and behavior? Can a whole society’s inner biases and naïvetés about black people be expunged through preaching? Bias and ignorance remain “under the surface,” from films like *Crash* to the election of Donald Trump. Is there any evidence that today’s religious crusade is making any significant changes in Americans’ deepest thoughts, or ever could?

Second, and more important, is it even necessary to force a revolution in thought? Certainly a people cannot succeed as slaves, or under a system that condemns them to officially segregated and second-class status. However, human history hardly shows that an oppressed group needs the wholehearted love and acceptance of its overlords. Are black hands truly tied because whites are more likely to associate black faces with negative concepts in implicit-association tests, especially when evidence suggests that the results do not correlate meaningfully with behavior? Or because whites aren’t deeply informed about the injustices blacks have suffered throughout history? Precisely why must whites transform themselves to so extreme a degree for racial disparities to close?

Many will answer with what can be summed up with the grand old mantra, “If you’re white, you’re all right, if you’re brown, stick around, but if you’re black, get back.” The idea is that animus against black Americans—as opposed to Latinos or Asians—is so profound as to stanch striving. But that line is a tad elderly now, and the success since the 1970s of so many Caribbean and African immigrants—richly familiar with racism—has shown its obsolescence. In Ivy League institutions, typically almost half of black students come from

immigrant families, despite such students representing less than 15 percent of the general black population of people their age.

Okay, first-generation Americans have, as it's often phrased, a "pluck" one can't expect native-born blacks to have as often. But to insist that native-born blacks require whites' love in a way that Nigerian newcomers do not would seem to claim weakness as a birthright. And upon what basis do modern antiracists preach that a people embrace impotence? In my experience, it is not unusual for a black American person, if free to show his best and live a full life, to not really care whether whites see him as their true equal deep in their hearts.

Some will feel the previous two observations as accommodationist, insufficiently imaginative. However, that objection is less effective regarding a final problem with third-wave antiracism: its immaturity. Third-wave antiracism is a call to enshrine defeatism, hypersensitivity, oversimplification, and even a degree of performance. Lukianoff and Haidt are useful here, in noting the three guiding tenets of the new antiracist culture:

1. What doesn't kill you makes you weaker.

2. Always trust your feelings.

3. Life is a battle between good people and bad people.

It may be difficult to see the relationship between these tenets, baldly stated, and the commitments of well-intentioned social-justice warriors, as they're sometimes called. Notably, however, the approved methodology of persuasion is based on the impulses of the child.

The call for "safe spaces" from any failure to be fully understood. The microaggression treated as slashing slander. A black student shouting obscenities at a professor because an email urged reflection before condemning Halloween costumes as culturally appropriative. Or beyond the campus, how readily many usually measured people call views dissenting from the new orthodoxy on race "white supremacist," a term generally associated with poll taxes and lynching. Consider also the reductive notion of black people engaged in endless battle against a monolith of "white people," often benevolent but endlessly racist despite themselves, blissfully unaware of their inherent privilege, incapable of genuine empathy, and tarred as clumsy phonies for any attempt to show themselves as anything but the just-described. The lack of fit between this cartoon and reality is supposed to be fine because black people are



punching up, but then King was arguably punching upper and let's face it, this kind of professional hatred of the Other is exactly what he preached against.

The new normal is, "If you don't like it, cry loudly and then louder, because you're always right and they're just bad." Contrast this approach with that of people lionized today who worked within a racism none could disagree was more implacably overt and hostile than today. The black lawyer and activist Pauli Murray insisted in 1963 that none other than Alabama Governor George "Segregation Forever" Wallace be allowed to speak at Yale. She believed that the speech rights blacks had fought for so hard must be extended to people she found noxious, including on issues as personal to her as race. James Weldon Johnson, the NAACP head and author, insisted in 1934, "I will not allow prejudice or any of its attendant humiliations and injustices bear me down to spiritual defeat. My inner life is mine, and I will maintain and defend its integrity against the forces of hell."

Under the new regime, people like Murray and Johnson had it wrong and apparently now qualify as antique figures; fostering social justice requires fashioning oneself as vulnerable, injured, and/or broken by things thoroughly "woke" people in the past would have treated as things to be brushed off their shoe.

The contrast here is not simply "complex." It suggests that the struggle has gone off the rails. The new zeitgeist is under-considered and even condescending, seductive but fruitless, a fashion statement in the guise of a program, and finally, a distraction for a people who have already been through so very much.

SOCIAL CONCERN AND ACTIVISM must not cease, but proceed minus the religious aspect they have taken on. One can be fervently dedicated to improving the lot of black Americans without a purse-lipped, prosecutorial culture dedicated more to virtue signaling than to changing other people's lives.

Progressives can battle a War on Drugs that creates a black market that tempts too many poor black men into lives of crime. They can fight for free access to long-acting, reversible contraceptives for poor women and phonics-based reading instruction for kids from bookless homes. They can stand against Republican attempts to discourage the black vote via a

sham concern for all-but-nonexistent voter fraud. The struggle must, and will, continue.

But the black person essentially barred from the polls gains nothing from someone sagely attesting to their white privilege on Twitter and decrying that “no one wants to talk about race in this country” when America is nothing less than obsessed with race week in and week out. One may consider President Trump a repulsive, bigoted excrescence without morally equating anyone who didn’t prioritize his racism enough to deny him their vote in 2016 with those who cheered a lynching 100 years before.

All of the above hinges on feigning claims of injury, on magnifying indignation in a trip-wire fashion, and on fostering a Manichaeian, us-versus-the-pigs perspective on humanity out of *Lord of the Flies*. Racial uplift in modern America does require dealing with matters more abstract than what a Douglass or a King faced. This is a challenge. Progressives shirk that challenge, however, in fashioning a new kind of activism based on performance and display. They should not do less; they should do better.

# Skin in the Game: How Antisemitism Animates White Nationalism

**By Eric K. Ward**

June 29, 2017

One September weekend in 1995, a few thousand people met at a convention center in Seattle to prepare for an apocalyptic standoff with the federal government. At the expo, you could sign up to defend yourself from the coming “political and economic collapse,” stock up on beef jerky, learn strategies for tax evasion, and browse titles by writers like Eustace Mullins, whose White nationalist classics include *The Secrets of the Federal Reserve*, published in 1952, and—from 1967—*The Biological Jew*.

The sixth annual Preparedness Expo made national papers that year because it served as a clearinghouse for the militia movement, a decentralized right-wing movement of armed, local, anti-government paramilitaries that had recently sparked its most notorious act of terror, the bombing of the Oklahoma City federal courthouse by White nationalists Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols. A series of speakers told expo attendees the real story: the attack had been perpetrated by the government itself as an excuse to take citizens’ guns away.

Not a lot of Black folks show up at gatherings like the Preparedness Expo, one site in an extensive right-wing counterculture in which White nationalism is a constant, explosive presence. White nationalists argue that Whites are a biologically defined people and that, once the White revolutionary spirit awakens, they will take down the federal government, remove people of color, and build a state (maybe or maybe not still called the United States of America, depending on who you ask) of their own. As a Black man, I am regarded by White nationalists as a subhuman, dangerous beast. In the 1990s, I was the field organizer for the Northwest Coalition Against Malicious Harassment, a six-state coalition working to reduce hate crimes and violence in the Pacific Northwest and Mountain States region. We did a lot of primary research, often undercover. A cardinal rule of organizing is that you can’t ask people to do anything you haven’t done yourself; so I spent

that weekend as I spent many—among people plotting to remove me from their ethnostate.

It helped that, despite its blood-curdling anti-Black racism, at least some factions of the White nationalist movement saw me as a potential ally against their true archenemy. At the expo that year, a guy warily asked me about myself. I told him that I had come on behalf of a few brothers in the city. We needed to resist the federal government and we were there to get educated. I said I hoped he wouldn't take it personally, but I didn't shake hands with White people. He smiled; he totally understood. "Brother McLamb," he concurred, "says we have to start building broad coalitions." Together we went to hear Jack McLamb, a retired Phoenix cop who ran an organization called Police Against the New World Order, make a case for temporary alliances with "the Blacks, the Mexicans, the Orientals" against the real enemy, the federal government controlled by an international conspiracy. He didn't have to say who ran this conspiracy because it was obvious to all in attendance. And despite the widespread tendency to dismiss antisemitism, notwithstanding its daily presence across the country and the world, it is obvious to you, too.

From the time I documented my first White nationalist rally in 1990 until today, the movement has made its way from the margins of American political life to its center, and I've moved from doing antiracist organizing in small northwestern communities to fighting for inclusive democracy on a national level, as the Gender, Racial, and Ethnic Justice program officer at the Ford Foundation until recently, and now as a senior fellow at the Southern Poverty Law Center. Yet if I had to give a basic definition of the movement—something I've often been asked to do, formally and informally, by folks who've spent less time hanging out with Nazis than I have—my response today would not be much different than it was when I began to do this work nearly thirty years ago. American White nationalism, which emerged in the wake of the 1960s civil rights struggle and descends from White supremacism, is a revolutionary social movement committed to building a Whites-only nation, and antisemitism forms its theoretical core.

That last part—antisemitism forms the theoretical core of White nationalism—bears repeating. Let me explain.



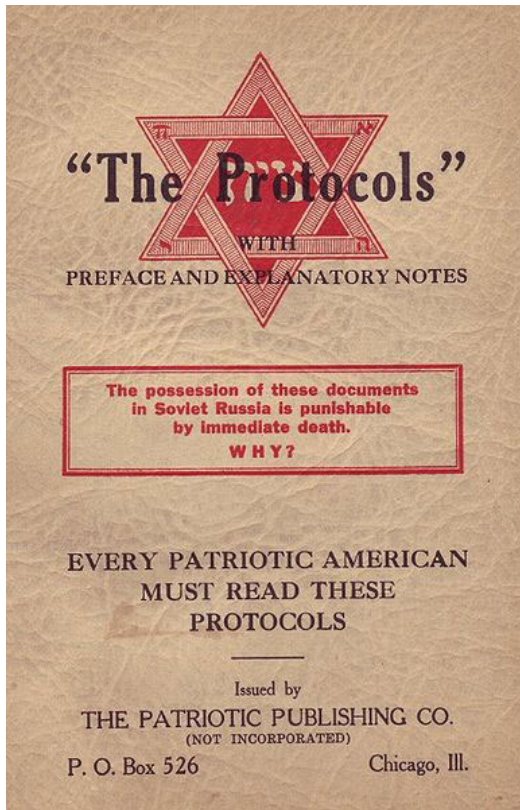
The bombing of the Oklahoma City federal courthouse by White nationalists Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols was painted as a conspiracy by the government itself as an excuse to take citizens' guns away.

The meteoric rise of White nationalism within national discourse over the course of Donald Trump's presidential campaign and freshman administration—through Trump's barely coded speech at fascist-style rallies, his support from the internet-based "Alt Right," and his placement of White nationalist popularizers in top positions—has produced a shock of revelation for people across a wide swath of the political spectrum. This shock, in turn, has been a source of frustration within communities of color and leftist circles, where White liberals are often accused of having kept their heads in the sand while more vulnerable populations sounded the alarm about the toll of economic crisis, mass incarceration, police violence, deportation, environmental devastation, and—despite and in reaction to the election of Barack Obama—the unending blare of everyday hate. This is an understandable reaction. It's one I've often shared. But the fact that many of us have long recognized that the country we live in is not the one we are told exists doesn't mean we always understand the one that does. Within social and economic justice movements committed to equality, we have not yet collectively come to terms with the centrality of antisemitism to White nationalist ideology, and until we do we will fail to understand this virulent form of racism rapidly growing in the U.S. today.

To recognize that antisemitism is not a sideshow to racism within White nationalist thought is important for at least two reasons. First, it allows us to identify the fuel that White nationalist ideology uses to power its anti-Black racism, its contempt for other people of color, and its xenophobia—as well as the misogyny and other forms of hatred it holds dear. White nationalists in the United States perceive the country as having plunged into unending crisis since the social ruptures of the 1960s supposedly dispossessed White people of their very nation. The successes of the civil rights movement created a terrible problem for White supremacist ideology. White supremacism—inscribed *de jure* by the Jim Crow regime and upheld *de facto* outside the South—had been the law of the land, and a Black-led social movement had toppled the political regime that supported it. How could a race of inferiors have unseated this power structure through organizing alone? For that matter, how could feminists and LGBTQ people have upended traditional gender relations, leftists mounted a challenge to global capitalism, Muslims won billions of converts to Islam? How do you explain the boundary-crossing allure of hip hop? The election of a Black president? Some secret cabal, some mythological power, must be manipulating the social order behind the scenes. This diabolical evil must control television, banking, entertainment, education, and even Washington, D.C. It must be brainwashing White people, rendering them racially unconscious.

What is this arch-nemesis of the White race, whose machinations have prevented the natural and inevitable imposition of white supremacy? It is, of course, the Jews. Jews function for today's White nationalists as they often have for antisemites through the centuries: as the demons stirring an otherwise changing and heterogeneous pot of lesser evils. At the turn of the twentieth century, "The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion"—a forgery, first circulated by Czarist secret police in Russia in 1903, that purports to represent the minutes of a meeting of the international Jewish conspiracy—established the blueprint of antisemitic ideology in its modern form. It did this by recasting the shape-shifting, money-grubbing caricature of the Jew from a religious caricature to a racialized one. Upper-class Jews in Europe might have been assimilating and changing their names, but under the new regime of antisemitic thought, even a Jew who converted to Christianity would still be a Jew.





"The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion," first circulated by Czarist secret police in Russia in 1903, established the blueprint of antisemitic ideology in its modern form.

In 1920, Henry Ford brought the "Protocols" to the United States, printing half a million copies of an adaptation called "The International Jew," and the text has had a presence in American life ever since. (Walmart stocked copies on its shelves and for a time refused calls to take them down—in 2004.) But it is over the past fifty years, not coincidentally the first period in U.S. history in which most American Jews have regarded themselves as White, that antisemitism has become integral to the architecture of American racism. Because modern antisemitic ideology traffics in fantasies of invisible power, it thrives precisely when its target would seem to be least vulnerable. Thus, in places where Jews were most assimilated—France at the time of the Dreyfus affair, Germany before Hitler came to power—they have functioned as a magic bullet to account for unaccountable contradictions at moments of national crisis. White supremacism through the collapse of Jim Crow was a conservative movement centered on a

state-sanctioned anti-Blackness that sought to maintain a racist status quo. The White nationalist movement that evolved from it in the 1970s was a revolutionary movement that saw itself as the vanguard of a new, whites-only state. This latter movement, then and now, positions Jews as the absolute other, the driving force of white dispossession—which means the other channels of its hatred cannot be intercepted without directly taking on antisemitism.

This brings me to the second reason that White nationalist antisemitism must not be dismissed: at the bedrock of the movement is an explicit claim that Jews are a race of their own, and that their ostensible position as White folks in the U.S. represents the greatest trick the devil ever played. The bible for generations of White nationalists is *The Turner*

*Diaries*, a 1978 dystopian novel by the White supremacist leader William Pierce, published under the pseudonym Andrew Macdonald. The novel takes place in a near-future in which Jews have unleashed Blacks and other undesirables into the center of American public life, and follows the triumph of a clandestine White supremacist organization that snaps into revolutionary action, blowing up both Israel and New York City. Its narrator, a soldier in the White revolutionary army, insists that “trying to distinguish the ‘good’ Jews from the bad ones” is as absurd as the way “some of our thicker-skulled ‘good ol’ boys’ still insist on trying, separating the ‘good niggers’ from the rest of their race.” Contemporary antisemitism, then, does not *just* enable racism, it also is racism, for in the White nationalist imaginary Jews are a race—the race—that presents an existential threat to Whiteness. Moreover, if antisemitism exists in glaring form at the extreme edge of political discourse, it does not exist in a vacuum; as with every form of hateful ideology, what is explicit on the margins is implicit in the center, in ways we have not yet begun to unpack. This means the notion that Jews long ago and uncontestedly became White folks in the U.S.—became, in effect, post-racial—is a myth that we must dispel.

...

Long Beach, California is planted on the line that locals call the Orange Curtain, the border between the working-class and immigrant neighborhoods of southern Los Angeles County and the White conservative suburbs of Orange County. By the time my mom and I moved down from L.A. in 1976, when I was in sixth grade, this endless sprawl of White flight was increasingly interrupted by people of color looking for affordable housing in safe neighborhoods. The civil rights and radical social movements of the 1960s and early Seventies had already been smashed by the state or self-destructed. White nationalism, on the other hand, was part of the scenery. Just down the street from one of our Long Beach apartments was an outpost of the John Birch Society, the foremost right-wing anticommunist organization during the Cold War—now having a Trump-era revival—which officially disavowed White supremacism and antisemitism but fought the civil rights movement and described the communist menace as an international cabal.

I was bussed to school in middle-class suburbs through the fanciest neighborhoods I’d ever seen, where White people rolled down their car windows to call us monkeys or tell us to go back to Africa. At school, White kids initialed SWP on their desks: Supreme White Power. One of



our local celebrities was Wally George, a public access television star whose show, “The Hot Seat,” was a forerunner to the hate radio of shock jocks like Rush Limbaugh and Tucker Carson. As teenagers we’d get stoned and watch his show for laughs. But there was fear, too, beneath the laughter. Neonazis, a kid on the bus told us one morning, were marching in a nearby park. I’ve avoided that park to this day.

Photo: courtesy of the author



The L.A. punk scene of the late 1970s brought me into constant, unavoidable contact with proto-White nationalist youth. The scene was utopian and dystopian, thrilling and violent, gave me friends for life—Black, White, and Filipino, U.S.-born and undocumented—and killed some of them. The scene attracted the brightest minds and the burgeoning sociopaths from across lines of race and class. Chaos broke out at shows and kids formed gangs. There were racist and antiracist skinheads. Someone wearing a swastika armband might be a neonazi or might just be fucking around. The cops stationed outside shows terrorized everyone present. We didn’t expect to make it far into

adulthood and we had fun, until the war on drugs intensified and we knew it was a war on us.

When I was twenty-one, working minimum-wage jobs and playing in a garage band called Sloppy 2nds, some friends announced they'd be starting college at the University of Oregon and asked me to come with them. When I imagined anything north of San Francisco and south of Seattle, all I conjured were endless stands of trees. I said no. But working one night shift, pumping gas at the Union 76 station, the Specials song "Do Nothing" came on—"Nothing ever change, oh no/Nothing ever change"—and I knew that if I didn't leave southern California I would die soon. So I moved with a multiracial group of L.A. punks to the remote college town of Eugene, Oregon and we bunkered down in a house we called Camp Iceberg because we never turned on the heat. Sloppy 2nds disbanded and when it later reformed without me, it became Sublime, the most famous Long Beach band of all time.



Photo: courtesy of the author

White liberals have long imagined Oregon as a kind of haven. Portland has now largely replaced San Francisco as the destination of choice for White youth with West Coast dreams of alternative living. But it is also where the White liberal imagination becomes a libertarian one: implicitly, it imagines a place free of people of color and therefore pregnant with the possibility of social harmony. But Oregon's Whiteness—and, particularly, its non-Blackness—was the product of deliberate, violent exclusion; founded by White supremacists before the Civil War, by the 1920s the state boasted the largest Klan membership west of the Mississippi. Klan campaigns often chose Catholics as their immediate targets, because Blacks were not allowed to reside in Oregon until 1926.

The White nationalist movement that emerged in the last decades of the twentieth century grew across the country. But it was Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming that neonazis in the 1980s carved out as the territorial boundaries of their future Whites-only state, a region that self-identified "Aryans" from around the country began to colonize with nothing short of White national sovereignty as their goal. "Ourselves alone willing," declared White nationalist leader and Aryan Nations organizer Robert Miles, "we shall begin to form the new nation even while in the suffocating embrace of the ZOG." In White nationalist parlance, the United States is the ZOG, or Zionist Occupied Government. It was in the Northwest that the nascent militia movement—notorious in the 1990s after standoffs between White nationalist compounds and the FBI in Ruby Ridge, Idaho and Waco, Texas—declared war on their country loudly enough they could no longer be ignored.

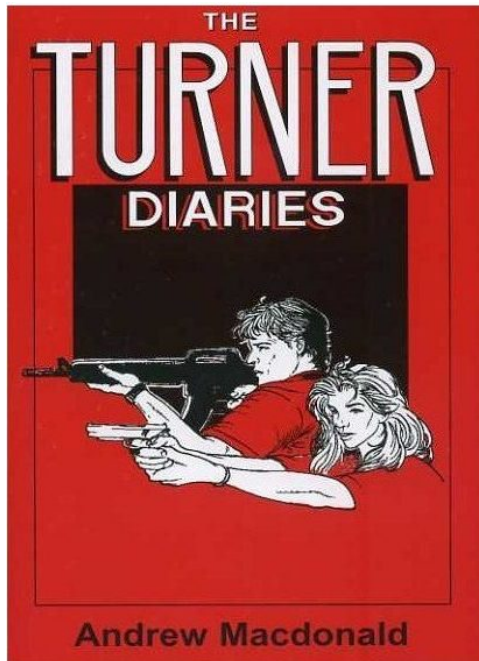
Ironically, then, if I had moved to Oregon to get away from the unpromising life expectancy for a Black male punk in southern California, the people who had decimated urban life in my home state had gotten there first. In 1978, California's White conservative voters passed the infamous Proposition 13, which cut taxes and slashed social services, turning the state into a laboratory for the Reagan revolution. Poverty and drug crime increased, and the same White folks who had gutted Californian cities in their flight to the suburbs after World War II now fled up the coast. I arrived in liberal Eugene in 1986, walked into workplace after workplace, and despite my resume, my smile, and my charm—funny, but no one was hiring. I didn't understand Oregon yet; I thought it was just me.

Meanwhile, the growing clashes between racist and antiracist skinheads in the punk scene that had made life in Long Beach dangerous were a fact of life in Oregon as well, and often took place beyond the reach of the law. As part of their nation-building project in the Pacific Northwest, White supremacists were establishing their own common law courts, their own religions, and their own paramilitaries. They attacked and sometimes killed cops, and the local authorities, cowed, turned a blind eye. So when gangs of neonazi punks terrorized people of color and other vulnerable groups in Portland, it was coalitions of the communities under attack that struck back and eventually beat them off the streets.

In the end, I began to fight white nationalism because my world, my scene, my friends, and my music were under neonazi attack. The great postpunk band Fugazi was on a national tour, and an unwanted audience of neonazis had begun turning up at their shows. Fugazi would stop playing, give the neonazis five dollars, and refuse to start up again until they left. A venue in Eugene cancelled a scheduled appearance when rumors spread that skinheads were planning to disrupt the show, and the community erupted in anger. By that time, I was a student and an activist. I had stumbled into student of color politics while attending community college and now co-directed the Black Student Union and Students Against Apartheid at the University of Oregon. I spent a semester in France and while I was away, a 28-year-old Ethiopian international student named Mulugeta Seraw was beaten to death by White supremacists on a Portland street. I returned to a community deeply shaken and in mourning. But it was in the wake of the cancelled show that I founded an organization, Communities Against Hate, in the way these things often happen: no one else wanted to do it. We created a zine called *The Race Mixer* ("Miscegenation At Its Finest"), reporting on the activity of hate groups in the Northwest; during the standoff at Ruby Ridge, we stood outside the Portland City Hall dressed as Klan members to warn against the spread of the militia movement. Two years later, in Eugene, Communities Against Hate got Fugazi to come back and play.

...

When folks ask me, skeptically, where the antisemitism in the White nationalist movement lies, it can feel like being asked to point out a large elephant in a small room. From the outset of my research on White nationalism all those years ago, it was clear that antisemitism in the movement is everywhere, and it is not hidden. "Life is uglier and uglier these days, more and more Jewish," William Pierce wrote in *The Turner*



The *Turner Diaries*, a 1978 dystopian novel by the White supremacist leader William Pierce, takes place in a near-future in which Jews have unleashed Blacks and other undesirables into the center of American public life.

*Diaries*. “No matter how long it takes us and no matter to what lengths we must go, we’ll demand a final settlement of the account between our two races,” the narrator promises at the book’s conclusion. “If the Organization survives this contest, no Jew will—anywhere. We’ll go to the uttermost ends of the earth to hunt down the last of Satan’s spawn.” White nationalism is a fractious countercultural social movement, and its factions often disagree with each other about basic questions of theory and practice. The movement does not take a single, unified position on the Jewish question. But antisemitism has been a

throughline from the Posse Comitatus, which set itself against “anti-Christ Jewry”; to David Duke’s refurbished Ku Klux Klan, which abandoned anti-Catholicism in the 1970s in order to focus on “Jewish supremacism”; to the neonazi group The Order, inspired by *The Turner Diaries*, which in the mid-1980s went on a rampage of

robberies and synagogue bombings in Washington state and murdered a Jewish radio talk show host in Denver; to evangelical leaders like Pat Robertson who denounced antisemitism but used its popularity among their followers to promote an implicitly White supremacist “Christian nationalism”; to the contemporary Alt Right named by White nationalist Richard Spencer, which has brought antisemitic thought and imagery to new audiences on the internet—and now at White House press conferences.

Doing primary research on hate groups revealed the contours of the movement’s antisemitism in even more intricate detail. At a time when many larger social justice organizations refused to take White nationalism seriously, regional groups like Communities Against Hate, Coalition for Human Dignity, Montana Human Rights Network, Rural Organizing Project, and dozens of others did much of the groundwork documenting its theories, strategies, and warring currents. That’s why in



1990, for instance, antiracist activists were itching to get our hands on a copy of *Vigilantes of Christendom*, a self-published book by a writer named Richard Kelly Hoskins influential on the Christian Identity circuit. (I scored a copy by marching into a book vending tent at a White supremacist rally and marketing it to passersby as a life-changing volume I had read at the behest of a White friend.) We learned that Hoskins's book appropriated the Old Testament story of Phineas, a prominent Israelite who marries outside the faith and is punished for his transgression by a rogue member of the tribe who kills him and his bride with a spear. Historically unpopular within the rabbinic tradition for appearing to endorse this lawless act, Hoskins's work celebrated the tale. To join the Priesthood, he wrote, an Aryan must act as a latter-day Phineas by perpetrating lone-wolf attacks against inferior races and their White apologists.

The Phineas Priesthood does not, in an organizational sense, appear to actually exist. But for decades, domestic terrorists—like Eric Rudolph, a Christian Identity acolyte who killed people in a string of bombing attacks at Southern gay bars, abortion clinics, and the 1996 summer Olympics in Atlanta—have allegedly seen themselves as Phineas Priests. Like the Phineas Priesthood, one small formation that might stand in for the whole, contemporary White nationalism has no clear center. Yet it does have a deadly commitment to revolutionary violence against racial others, and to the state apparatus perceived to do their bidding. And like the Priesthood, it rests upon a tortuous racial cosmology in which Jews form a monstrous, all-powerful cabal that uses subhuman others, including Blacks and immigrants, as pawns to destroy White nationhood.

Over years of speaking about White nationalism in the 1990s and early 2000s in the Northwest and then the Midwest and South, I found that audiences—whether white or of color, at synagogues or churches, universities or police trainings—generally had a relationship to white nationalism that, at least in one basic sense, was like my own. They knew the scope and seriousness of the movement from personal experience, and—if they didn't take this for granted to begin with—they were not shocked to discover its antisemitic emphasis. The resistance I have encountered when I address antisemitism has primarily come since I moved to the Northeast seven years ago, and from the most established progressive antiracist leaders, organizations, coalitions, and foundations around the country. It is here that a well-meaning but counterproductive thicket of discourse has grown up insisting that Jews—of Ashkenazi

descent, at least—are uncontestably White, and that to challenge this is to deny the workings of White privilege. In other words, when I’m asked, “Where is the antisemitism?” what I am often really being asked is, “Why should we be talking about antisemitism?”

And indeed—why? Why, when the president of the United States appears bent on removing as many dark-skinned immigrants from the U.S. as he can, and when men who look like me are shot in the street or tortured to death in prison with impunity? Why, when the leadership of some mainstream Jewish communal organizations level false charges of antisemitism in order to silence critique—whether by Jews or non-Jews—of Israeli government policies? Why, after decades of soul-searching by Jewish antiracists has established a seeming consensus that Jews—with Mizrahi and Sephardi Jews posited as an exception—should regard themselves as White allies of people of color, eschewing any identity as a racialized people with their own skins at risk in the fight against White supremacy? Why, when Jews are safe and claims to the contrary serve to justify rather than to challenge racial and other oppressions, like conservative commentator Alan Dershowitz’s cynical recent attempt to discredit antiracist and anticolonial struggles by declaring intersectionality an antisemitic concept? Why, when Jews of European descent are supposedly “White,” have long been, will ever be?

I can answer this question as I have been doing and will continue to do: antisemitism fuels White nationalism, a genocidal movement now enthroned in the highest seats of American power, and fighting antisemitism cuts off that fuel for the sake of all marginalized communities under siege from the Trump regime and the social movement that helped raise it up. To refuse to deal with any ideology of domination, moreover, is to abet it. Contemporary social justice movements are quite clear that to refuse antiracism is an act of racism; to refuse feminism is an act of sexism. To refuse opposition to antisemitism, likewise, is an act of antisemitism. Arguably, not much more should need to be said than that. But I suspect that much more does need to be said. To the hovering question, why should we be talking about antisemitism, I reply, what is it we are afraid we will find out if we do? What historic and contemporary conflicts will be laid bare? And if we recognize that White privilege really is privilege, what will it mean for Jewish antiracists to give up the fantasy that they ever really had it to begin with?

And yet this impasse seems finally to be breaking down. It has long been the case that at moments when the left has suffered another devastating and seemingly inexplicable political loss, my phone rings more often; now that the White nationalist movement has come to national power, it is ringing off the hook. The public and private discussions I've had just in the past month suggest a hunger to understand antisemitism—within and outside the Jewish community—the likes of which I have never witnessed before. Certainly many American Jews who regard themselves as White are feeling less so over these recent months as the candidate-turned-president seemed reluctant to disavow his endorsement by David Duke, the most notorious White supremacist in America. Meanwhile, Jewish cemeteries are desecrated even as the administration directs the FBI to double down on the surveillance of Muslims and focus less on the White supremacists who constitute the principal domestic terrorist threat in the United States. Jewish thought leaders and journalists are being harassed on social media. Just last week, White House press secretary Sean Spicer caused a furor by favorably comparing Adolph Hitler to Bashar al-Assad of Syria in remarks that, whether intentionally or not, echoed the apologetics of Holocaust deniers.

We do not yet know where Trump's coalition will land on the question of White nationalism. That Trump's son-in-law and adviser Jared Kushner is Jewish should not in itself be of comfort; there were Jews who worked with Hitler, too, and Blacks in the Confederate army. But it is important to note that the White nationalist faction of the administration led by Stephen Bannon—now ousted from his position in the National Security Council—is just one of several warring parties and currently appears to be losing ground. In other words, we do not yet have a fully activated White nationalist administration. (If we did, we'd know.) At the same time, the fact that this remains an open question at all likely invites more than a few ostensibly "White" Jews to contemplate the provisional nature of their Whiteness, their privilege. Privilege, after all, is not the same as power. Privilege can be revoked. And this means too that progressive movements and social change organizations must come to understand that all social movements have influence, including those that seek to construct a society based on exclusion and terror.

Sometimes I wish I had a better story to tell about how I arrived at this analysis—a story more dramatic or more heartwarming, somehow more about *me*. If I live and work, as I do, in the kind of daily, intimate Black-Jewish coalitions that were a mainstay of the civil rights movement but



are now supposed to be fraught with mutual suspicion, I must have experienced a historically uncanny revelation or been drawn to the Jewish community through some mysterious pull of identification. It's true that back in Long Beach, on days I opted out of middle school, the man at the corner deli would call me over and give me blueberry blintzes. He was the first person I knew was Jewish. I didn't know what that meant, but the blintzes were good, and when you don't have a lot of food, they are even better. But I also remember the delicious sushi a local Japanese restaurant gave me. I still love sushi, and blintzes, but neither helped me to understand racism or social change. There was no kumbaya experience, no light bulb, no moment where I became Paul on the road to Damascus. It was just common sense to study my enemy, White nationalism. And like any worthwhile research project, it has taken time. A central insistence of antiracist thought over the past several decades is that, as with any social category produced by regimes of power, you don't choose race, power chooses it for you; it *names* you. This is why all the well-meaning identification in the world does not make a White person Black. Likewise, as much as I draw inspiration from the Jewish community, and as much as I adore my Jewish partner and friends, it was my organizing against antisemitism as a Black antiracist that first pulled me to the Jewish community, not the other way around. I developed an analysis of antisemitism because I wanted to smash White supremacy; because I wanted to be free. If we acknowledge that White nationalism clearly and forcefully names Jews as non-white, and did so in the very fiber of its emergence as a post-civil rights right-wing revolutionary movement, then we are forced to recognize our own ignorance about the country we thought we lived in. It is time to have that conversation.