

RADICAL TEACHER

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Radicalizing the Liberal Arts: Race and Racism at Small Liberal Arts Colleges

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GRAPHIC FROM JUSTSEEDS' 2014 LIBERATING LEARNING PORTFOLIO

The Leftist excess at small liberal arts colleges (SLACs) has long been a popular topic in conservative and “moderate” politics and journalism, from 1960s reactions against anti-war and various liberation movements to the recent pearl-clutching around “wokeness.” A quick survey of newspaper articles and blog posts toggling between outrage and ridicule, alerting their readers to the dangers of radical SLAC students in the past few decades, reveals a cavalcade of complaints about overreaching institutions and intolerant students.

The roots of current critiques of politics at SLACs is the sexual consent policy (officially known as the Sexual Offense Prevention Policy or SOPP) that Antioch College, in consultation with students, unveiled in 1991. According to this policy, students had to be sure that all sexual interactions were consensual and were expected to check with partners before initiating various kinds of sexual activity. The SOPP was widely ridiculed, from a sketch on *Saturday Night Live* that featured a game show called “Is It Date Rape?” to essays in the *New York Times*. (1) A policy that launched a thousand OpEds, the SOPP was characterized as a symptom of political correctness gone wild, puritanical, and infantilizing. In her 1998 book *Bitch: In Praise of Difficult Women*, Elizabeth Wurtzel argued that all women needed to negotiate sexual situations was self-respect because, after all, “one Antioch College is enough” (119). (2)

The deluge of alarmist think-pieces, scolding editorials, and belittling comedy routines that responded to the SOPP set the pattern for future reactions to debates over sexual violence, racism, and homophobia on college campuses, especially at SLACs. More recently, the focus has shifted primarily towards discussions of race and racism. Articles in right-wing and right-of-center publications like the *New York Post*, the *Washington Times*, and *The Economist* and online venues such as Quillette and *Discourse Magazine*, lament the deleterious effects of “woke” politics on college campuses, especially SLACs. In a 2020 article on the *MarketWatch* website, Howard Gold listed a number of colleges that “fail students and free speech,” all of which were SLACS and (not coincidentally?) three out of four of which were women’s colleges (the fourth, Sarah Lawrence, was a women’s college that went coed in 1968).

But to what extent do radical politics actually exist, let alone thrive, on SLAC campuses? Are SLACs really a juggernaut of wokeness, crushing all opponents in their path? My co-editor Heather Moore Roberson and I suspected that the reality was more complicated, more multilayered and multivocal than the establishment and right-wing media led their readers and viewers to believe. SLACs offer a unique learning and teaching environment. Undergraduate students (and even college faculty) often choose liberal arts settings for the intimate classroom settings, the collegiality between faculty and students, and even opportunities for collaborative faculty-student research. And we knew that inside small college classrooms, many faculty worked tirelessly to explore, question, and deconstruct racism and power in intimate, discursive settings. On the other hand, SLACs are still part of an elitist structure of higher education which are heavily populated by white, wealthy perspectives. Discourse about race, racism, and power are often framed

within college settings which have very little racial/ethnic diversity within the student body and even amongst the faculty/administrators/staff.

This mini-cluster explores the contradictions inherent in small college environments when it comes to radical politics, especially around race and racism. Written by a mix of faculty, students, and alumni, these five articles come from institutions quite different from each other, although there are fascinating overlaps. Three of the colleges featured are in some way religiously affiliated – Catholic, Lutheran, and Buddhist. In two of the essays, the writers ventured outside the walls of their institution to understand the dynamics of race in their college. And two actively engage with strategies for countering white-dominant practices either in the classroom or in the college as a whole.

Jolivette Mecnas and Yvonne Wilber describe their work in co-designing a First Year Writing (FYW) curriculum that centered anti-racist information literacy (IL) for students. Although their institution, California Lutheran University, was historically a denominational college from its founding in 1959, its decision to expand from a college to a university and from an explicitly religious to a non-denominational campus has allowed it to drift away from the progressive politics of its prior religious affiliation, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA). As the ELCA has increasingly embraced pro-LGBT and anti-racist principles, California Lutheran has seemed to achieve less around the same issues. In fact, despite a variety of mostly successful efforts to diversify California Lutheran’s faculty and student body (they increased Latinx student representation to such an extent that they were designated a Hispanic-Serving Institution by the federal government), students and faculty of color report feeling isolated and lonely, and that the culture of the college does not encourage cross-racial dialogue or meaningful analysis of white supremacy.

Mecnas, the coordinator of Cal Lutheran’s composition program, and Wilber, a librarian with expertise in anti-racist IL came together in 2020 to construct an FYW curriculum that would have critical IL, composition pedagogy, and anti-racism at its core. In their article they describe how establishing Ta-Nehisi Coates’s *Atlantic* essay “The Case for Reparations” as a shared text for all FYW students made space for students to think deeply about the legacy of slavery, Jim Crow, redlining, and other racist policies, while learning how to write well-researched and cogent essays. Students chose topics for their research papers that intersected with Coates’s essay, and instructors nominated the highest-achieving papers for Outstanding and Honorable Mention Essay awards. Through Mecnas’s and Wilber’s work, students engaged with a radical political idea – reparations – and had to form their own responses to it. If the winning essays for the essay award is any indication, students developed not just writing skills but a sharp political analysis of white-supremacist government policy and its ramifications for Black Americans.

Student radicalization is the central theme of “Mobilizing BIPOC Student Power against Liberalism at Soka University of America: A Collection of Voices.” Coauthored by students and faculty, the essay chronicles the attempts by students at Soka University, a Buddhist-affiliated college of only 400

students, to raise issues of racism in their institution and to establish a concentration in Critical Global Ethnic Studies (CGES). They faced an uphill battle despite – or perhaps because of – Soka University’s stated commitment to dialogue and consensus. From student efforts to create a Black Student Union to the fight for CGES to the demand to acknowledge the Black Lives Matter movement, the essay zeroes in on the struggle between radical students and a hierarchical liberal institution.

Strikingly, one side effect of student activism was increased connection between students and faculty. Moreover, in sharing an activist agenda, both groups worked to counter the power differential between them. As Aneil Rallin, a faculty contributor to this essay, observes, “as our BIPOC student leaders are teaching us, we have to completely reorganize the world, and that means reorganizing our university.” In the end, students were not able to establish a CGES concentration and their efforts were further undermined by an administrator-founded Center for Race, Ethnicity, and Human Rights, in which students and faculty had minimal input. But students, especially, gained the opportunity to link their own political work with larger national and international movements, and educate their peers about racial and imperialist inequities.

Student-faculty collaboration can be institution-wide, as it was at Soka University, or it can be more limited, but the close interactions that SLACs in particular make possible can generate insight for both students and instructors. Robin Chapdelaine’s and Megan Toomer’s essay, “Experiential Learning in Ghana: Decentering the White Voice,” provides readers with an analysis of a study-abroad trip to Ghana from both perspectives. In exploring student responses to this program, which combined coursework in pre-colonial African history with site visits, Chapdelaine and Toomer expose the shortcomings of an institution that focuses on “cultural competence” rather than meaningful anti-racist pedagogy. The primary disconnection between white students and students of color (especially Black students) was, as Chapdelaine and Toomer report, the inability of white students to understand Black students’ more visceral connection to the legacies of slavery and more personal reactions to visits to sites in which Africans were held before being shipped off to enslavement in the Americas.

Study abroad is a complicated phenomenon. On the one hand it can replicate the model of tourist imperialism that U.S. travelers bring with them to the global South. On the other, it can expand students’ understanding of global history and how the U.S. is intertwined with the histories of enslavement and imperialism in Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Chapdelaine’s design of the course was oriented towards the latter result, but, as she acknowledges, it’s hard to predict what will emerge from a study abroad experience. At the same time, for a participant “on the ground” (so to speak) as Toomer was, the ability of students to absorb an expanded world view that includes a consideration of the role of slavery in shaping both Ghana and the U.S. was more ambiguous.

Jaira Harrington’s essay also takes us outside the walls of the college, geographically closer but in many ways equally foreign to the experience of studying and teaching

at a SLAC. Harrington was especially conscious of the disjuncture between the claims of her employer, Villanova University, to support efforts towards diversity and equity and the results: an institution in which 75% of students and 80% of faculty are white, and the bulk of students come from the top 20% of the economic ladder. As one of the few Black women faculty members, Harrington was not able to forge the close mentoring relationships with students that SLACs so often boast of.

Ironically, she found those relationships teaching at the Pennsylvania State Correctional Institution (SCI)-Phoenix, as part of a Villanova program. Knowing she would be teaching a majority-Black student body, she offered a class in Race and Politics in Brazil, introducing her students to a fuller understanding of the African diaspora. Too often, prison education programs reproduce the racial dynamics of the outside world, in which white instructors teach mostly Black and Latinx students from a paternalistic perspective that they are heroically bringing a benefit to their students. In Harrington’s experience, however, the prison classroom was a liberatory space *for her*: it was her first time teaching in a predominantly Black environment.

We end the mini-cluster with a view from a distance: Richie Zweigenhaft’s essay on his experiences as the class notes editor for the alumni/ae magazine of his alma mater, Wesleyan University. In a breezy yet incisive style, Zweigenhaft reveals that the corporatization of higher education reaches beyond the classroom and into the image that SLACs want to convey to their graduates (and, let’s not forget, potential donors).

Of course, these five essays represent only a very small slice of the political work being done on the campuses of small liberal arts colleges. And we did not receive submissions from faculty or students at predominantly Black colleges, who would tell quite different stories about how their institutions deal with racial politics. But they do give us a richer, far more layered sense of how students and faculty are engaging with questions of racialization and racism than sensationalist headlines and stentorian OpEds provide. While SLACs quickly created or updated offices of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the wake of the murder of George Floyd, and often foreground their commitment to racial equity on their websites (see, for example, the websites of Amherst, Smith, Macalester, and Reed either prominently feature Diversity and Inclusion statements, or foreground events with BIPOC themes), these essays go beneath the surface. Through these articles we can see the difficult, not always successful, work of anti-racism in real time.

Notes

1. Ironically, the SOPP was widely praised as prescient in the wake of #MeToo and raised consciousness about the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault in the workplace and on college campuses. For a list of articles engaging in this analysis, see “Antioch’s SOPP In the News” <https://antiochcollege.edu/campus-life/sexual-offense-prevention-policy-title-ix/antiochs-sopp-in-the-news/>

2. This was also in the context of the so-called Culture Wars around abortion, artistic representation, and “family values, and academic struggles over the racial, gendered, and other exclusions characteristic of literary canons and traditional scholarly inquiry.

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