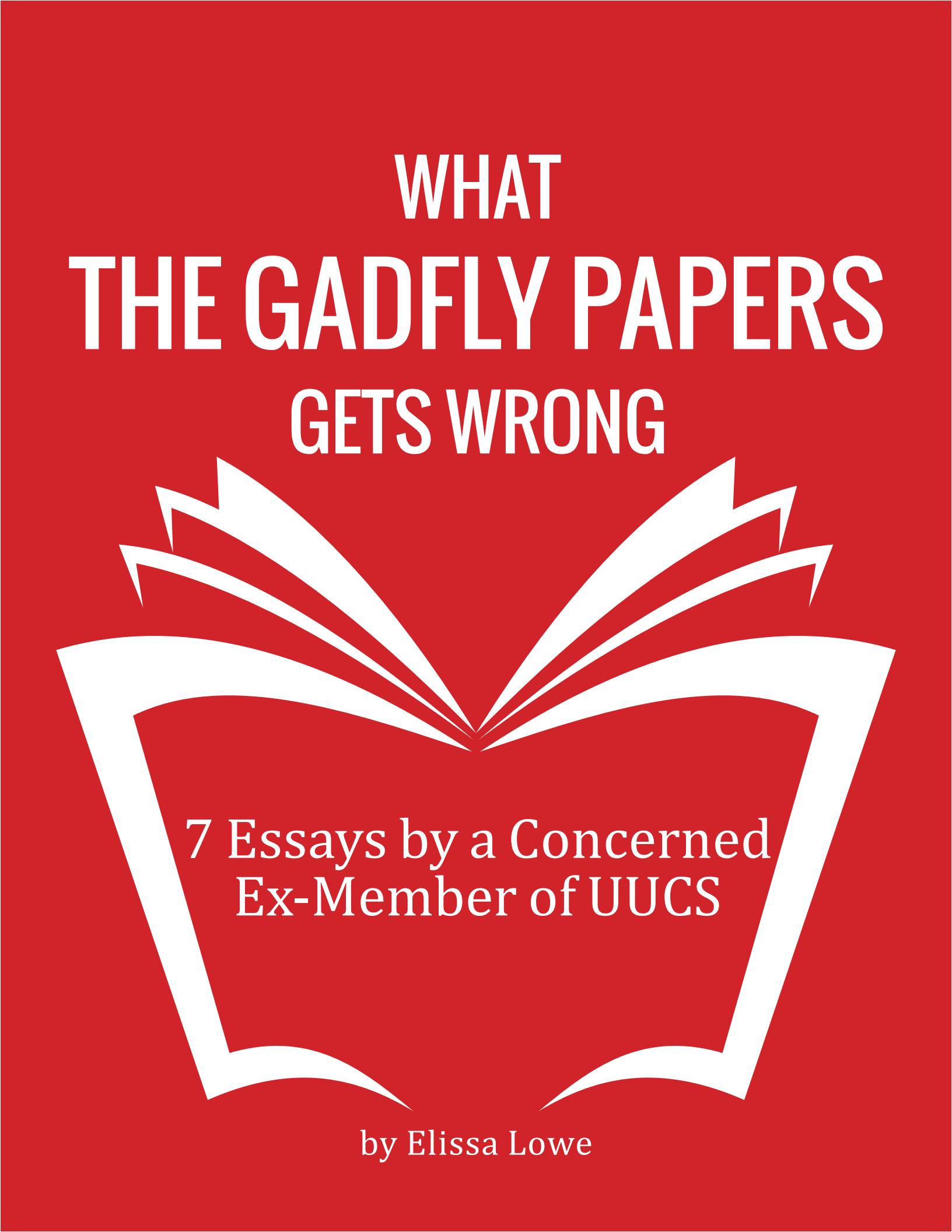


WHAT THE GADFLY PAPERS GETS WRONG



7 Essays by a Concerned
Ex-Member of UUCS

by Elissa Lowe

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INTRODUCTION: IT'S NOT OK TO BE WRONG

In his introduction to *The Gadfly Papers*, Rev. Eklof makes a statement that's key to this critique:

“I must say what I believe is true and do what I believe is right, even if I’m wrong...”

Emphasis mine. Wrongness, it seems, is no barrier to Rev. Eklof's speaking or acting, provided he believes he's right. And does he ever believe he's right! After reading *Gadfly*, I have zero doubts about the intensity of his beliefs or his desire to have us share them. His loathing for “political correctness,” “safetyism,” and “identitarianism,” which he insists are destroying Unitarian-Universalism from within, comes through loud and clear.

Here's the problem: I believe that much of what Rev. Eklof has written *is* wrong: not just about “political correctness” etc., but also about what his jut-jawed willingness to be wrong implies: courage and moral clarity. It's as if he feels it's totally ok to be wrong, because “freeze peach” (“free speech”) trumps fact-checking, fairness or the need to do good research.

I disagree. It's NOT ok to be wrong, because “truthiness” isn't on a par with the truth. In my writing, I want what “I believe is right” to be, you know, right, or at least plausible, based on an honest, thorough and transparent attempt to be right.

To see what I mean, consider [the cancellation of author Naomi Wolf's most recent book, *Outrages: Sex, Censorship, and the Criminalization of Love*](#). Her publisher withdrew the book after multiple errors were revealed during her promotional tour. Her errors were made in good faith but were far from trivial—she misinterpreted 19th century legal terminology that, alas, was vital to part of her thesis.

In other words, Wolf said what she believed to be true, and did what she believed to be right in researching and writing her book, but still got it badly wrong, and for a reason that was nothing to be proud of. She simply felt she didn't need to fact check her interpretation of historical documents. Historians proved otherwise. Her publisher pulled the plug because it wasn't willing to promote a “true” book that wasn't true. Good call, especially since the above linked article points out that “[t]his isn't the first time Wolf has been accused of being rather cavalier with facts.”

It's not ok to be wrong. Acknowledging this isn't some petty, niggling constraint on free speech. It's about having a commitment to responsible speech and the desire to earn (or maintain) your readers' trust. No one, of course, can be perfectly objective or cover every possible source of information, but these are still ideals to strive for. Being wrong while sincerely believing you're right can cause great harm (anti-vaxxers are an extreme, but useful example of this). Those of us who care about the truth should strive to do better, even if it complicates the story we want to tell.

It's about *credibility*.

This is the reason I spent several months following General Assembly digging into *The Gadfly Papers*, so I could determine for myself, as closely as possible, the truth of the charges Rev. Eklof makes.

In sum, I am disappointed—deeply disappointed—in this book. *The Gadfly Papers* has lofty ambitions, but I found too much that's wrong within its pages. Sadly, Rev. Eklof's zeal to condemn led him to publish a barely readable indictment of social justice perfidy that's riddled with right-wing pejoratives, hyperbolic language,

cherry-picked quotes, biased research and one-sided accounts. He includes the details that fit his narrative and ignores or distorts the ones that don't. The emotional tone of the book lurches from white-hot anger to icy contempt to flat, emotionless calm. It was disturbing for me to read and even more disturbing for me to research. People were hurt by this book, and I can see why.

That Rev. Eklof shares Naomi Wolf's hubris in "shooting from the lip" also troubles me deeply. There is, I believe, a thoughtful, spiritual, fair-minded critique that could be written about the UUA's often ham-handed efforts to become more equitable and inclusive, but *The Gadfly Papers* isn't it. Furthermore, the secrecy surrounding Rev. Eklof's plans to self-publish and "ambush" the UUA with it at General Assembly suggests he was less concerned with critiquing Unitarian-Universalism, and more concerned about centering himself as a controversial, transformative figure within it.

The essays that follow summarize just some of the results of my digging. After reading them, you may still disagree with the additional context I present, but I hope that you will at least better understand my objections to this book.

I'm not a theologian like Rev. Eklof is, but for me, humanizing people—especially those we disagree with—is what a "religion of common humanity" should strive for.

Because it's not ok to be wrong, especially when it comes to passing judgment on people.

WHAT THE GADFLY PAPERS GETS WRONG

FREE SPEECH

I. The Parable of the Facebook Writer

Toward the beginning of *Gadfly*, Rev. Eklof provides us with two examples of how “safetyism reflects a value system that stands in opposition to free speech.” The first concerns a violent protest at UC Berkeley that shut down a speech by Milo Yiannopolous in 2017. Eklof’s account of this incident is secondary: it’s taken from *Coddling of the American Mind*. The second, however, is drawn from Eklof’s own... unique interpretation of a comment posted on Facebook (FB) about the Westboro Baptist Church’s (WBC) pending visit to Spokane. Eklof links the two, because he believes the FB writer and the Black Bloc instigators of the Berkeley mayhem share the same mindset:

“In September 2018, for example, when it was learned members of the Westboro Baptist Church (the Topeka, Kansas based church notorious for using inflammatory hate speech) was planning a trip to Spokane, Washington to protest a local university, one understandably upset Facebook member responded by writing, ‘Sometimes there are no two good sides. That is a fallacy created by white supremacist hierarchy to use the value of free speech to spread hate and oppression. Hate and oppression is never okay.’ Although historians may explain the origins of free speech differently, the point here is that by conflating the concept of ‘free speech’ with the villainy of ‘white supremacist hierarchy,’ the writer justifies disregarding the former to prevent the latter, namely, the evils of ‘hate and oppression.’ In denying, further, that ‘Sometimes there are no two good sides,’ and, by implication, this is one of those times, the writer further justifies extremist thinking and behavior. In this case, the writer’s belief is not only presumed to be right but righteous, and, therefore, must be defended, even if doing so means denying the freedoms of those who disagree with the writer’s morally absolute ‘side.’” (Eklof, *The Gadfly Papers*)

I wouldn’t have thought it was possible to get so much wrong in just a single paragraph, but Rev. Eklof managed to do it. Let me count the ways:

1. There’s an obvious problem with equating a violent, destructive incident (Berkeley) with a quote from a random person on Facebook that—taken at face value—doesn’t suggest that violence or any other coercive measures should be used to stop the Westboro Baptist Church (WBC) from coming to Spokane and doing its “thing.”
2. Eklof’s assessment is incredibly uncharitable, given his description of the WBC and concession that the FB poster was “understandably upset.” Anyone who’s ever had an argument with a partner or friend knows

that people who are upset sometimes say things they later regret or at least wish they'd phrased more carefully. And this is Facebook, for crying out loud! Facebook is a platform designed for the publication of unfiltered thoughts.

Sometimes a person venting on Facebook is just a person venting on Facebook, not a harbinger of the Free Speech Apocalypse.

3. The projection is strong in this one. Eklof's doing a pretty good job of being "righteous" and "morally absolute" himself. Pot, meet kettle.
4. Eklof needs to think a little harder before dismissing ("[a]lthough historians may explain the origins of free speech differently...") a connection between "free speech" and "the villainy of 'white supremacist hierarchy.'" I doubt most modern historians would deny that the First Amendment was conceived by men who passionately believed in "white supremacist hierarchy," and that First Amendment law has been defined, refined, interpreted and defended by nearly all-white male elites (legislators, lawyers and judges). As legal activist, author and **Miami Law School Professor Mary Anne Franks** observed:

"What unites many of the groups that the ACLU protects is that they are dominated by white, often wealthy men who espouse white male supremacist ideology. White male supremacy can hardly be considered a 'controversial' or 'unpopular' view in a country that was literally founded on the concept." (Franks, *The Cult of the Constitution*)

5. The statement, "[s]ometimes there are no two good sides"—which Eklof claims "justifies extremist thinking and behavior"—is clumsily worded but recognizable as the well-known **logical fallacy of false equivalence**. In other words, both sides in a debate can't always be assumed to have equal merit. A classic example was the Creationist appeal to "**teach both sides of the controversy**" between evolution and Creation Science/Intelligent Design in K-12 science classrooms. The attempts failed to pass legal muster, because **Creationism/ID were conclusively shown to be unscientific**. To borrow the FB writer's phrasing: there were no two good (equal) sides to this "debate."

All the FB writer is saying is that the WBC's "side" ("hate and oppression") does not have equal standing with their own, or most people's for that matter, since **a clear majority of Americans support equal rights for gay people**. There's nothing "extremist" about that.

6. I'm puzzled by Eklof's need to denounce every word of the FB writer's post, especially since they stress that free speech has value:

"That is a fallacy created by white supremacist hierarchy to use the *value of free speech* to spread hate and oppression." (Eklof, *The Gadfly Papers*)

Emphasis mine. In other words, the writer believes—just like Eklof!—that free speech is valuable, but he refuses to give them any credit for this.

Overall, Rev. Eklof's attack on the FB writer's post is paradoxical: the latter is straight-up free speech, something Eklof emphatically supports. Yet he wildly overreacts to it and reads far more into it than is actually there. He's relentlessly and uncharacteristically harsh: it's as if he feels that even acknowledging a down-

side to free speech is a path to the dark side. It seems Eklof believes there should be robust free speech about anything and everything... except free speech itself. That's off-limits!

Frederick Schauer—the David and Mary Harrison Distinguished Professor of Law at the University of Virginia and Frank Stanton Professor (Emeritus) of the First Amendment at the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University—does not agree. In his paper, [The First Amendment as Ideology](#), he explicitly calls out people like Eklof:

“Without allowing as much free speech about free speech as free speech advocates urge about everything else, those advocates risk creating the impression that they are themselves unwilling to confront the close hand assaults on their own belief systems that they demand be confronted by others. Even putting aside the question of the extent to which scholarship and advocacy are compatible, advocates whose own actions betray the very cause they advocate are likely in the long run to be less effective.” (p.869)

Professor Schauer thinks that treating the current US conception of free speech as an “ideology” that can never be questioned or challenged, even by a random person venting on Facebook, “...is a phenomenon to be bemoaned and resisted rather than accepted or celebrated.” Fortunately, there are scholars who’ve resisted the ideological trap Eklof’s fallen into. A number of legal theorists, such as [Mary Anne Franks](#), [Jeremy Waldron](#), [Steven Shiffrin](#), [Mari Matsuda](#), [Abigail Levin](#), [Richard Delgado](#), [Jean Stefanik](#) and [Cass Sunstein](#), have written extensively on the tension between free speech and the democratic goals of equality. Having read some of their books and papers, I feel confident in reporting they’re not attempting to justify extremist thinking or behavior. [As journalist Noah Berlatsky observes in his article for NBC](#) (which is hardly a bastion of extremism):

“The First Amendment is a crucial right, and one which, used thoughtfully and with good will, can help to make our society both more free and more equal. But currently free speech legislation, and free speech ideology, is backward-looking and reactionary. ‘Free speech!’ is a battle cry that has been picked up by neo-Nazis and white supremacists. They see First Amendment advocates as allies —and it’s not because they love freedom.”

My point is not that Berlatsky, nor any of the legal scholars linked above are correct; it’s that we, as a society can, and should, be able to discuss the downsides of free speech without being denounced as extremists. It may be, [as legal philosopher Brian Leiter points out](#), that our current conception of speech, imperfect though it is, is probably better than the alternatives because “capitalist democracies” lack the “requisite competence” to properly regulate public speech in ways that will be “welfare-enhancing.” But we can still talk about it.

In sum, the Facebook writer’s lament that the WBC uses free speech to “spread hate and oppression” is not “extremist;” nor is it an example of “a value system that stands in opposition to free speech.” Rather, it IS free speech. It’s also a simple and obvious fact that should be engaged with rather than attacked, as [Professor Gregory P. Magarian recommends](#):

“Some people on the left, generally young people of color and young sexual identity minorities, do increasingly reject liberal norms of free speech. Those of us who care about free speech should, in keeping

with our own liberal values, hear what those critics have to say. I think they make a lot of painfully sound points. They see the failings of present free speech law, and they see themselves getting the bad end of the free speech bargain. Too many free speech advocates essentially tell those critics to shut up and get with the program. Instead, we should engage with the critics to find, together, pathways to a free speech ethos that promotes every speaker's, audience's, and community's part in a robust public discourse.”

Magarian’s message of engagement is also echoed in [the PEN America report, Crisis in the Classroom: Campus Free Speech in a Divided America](#):

“Hiding behind the First Amendment in response to students’ deeper demands to reckon with growing hate, intimidation, and racism risks alienating a rising generation of activists, leaders, and scholars from the fundamental tenets of free expression.” (p.27)

To my mind, being open to dialog and, yes, listening compassionately to complaints, is a more productive approach than the one Eklof takes in *Gadfly*. Beyond being more constructive, it would also keep readers from confusing his uncompromising stance on free speech with tolerance for “hate and oppression.” As it currently stands, his defense of free speech is disproportionate: he has harsher words for a frustrated person on Facebook than he does for the WBC, even though the latter is an [ADL](#) and [SPLC](#) designated hate group, whereas the FB writer is just... someone with a Facebook account. Since [the protests against the WBC in Spokane were peaceful](#), Eklof’s accusations that the writer “further justifies extremist thinking and behavior,” and is “denying the freedoms of those who disagree with the writer’s morally absolute side” are absurd: they didn’t do anything beyond engage in a little free speech of their own.

II. Emails are NOT Linguicide

The section in *Gadfly* on “Linguicide” starts out with an extended digression on the suppression of speech and ideas throughout history, beginning with the Stoic philosophers exiled from ancient Rome. Rev. Eklof writes:

“From exile and ostracism practiced in ancient Rome, to the Crusades, Inquisitions, heresy trials, and McCarthyism, those responsible have considered it their religious and moral responsibility to suppress the ‘dangerous’ voices of those with whom they and their communities disagree.” (Eklof, *The Gadfly Papers*)

This segues into a riff on linguicide as a tool of empire, as practiced by the Spanish, Roman, and British Empires, and the Japanese, Chinese, Canadian, Australian, Brazilian, American and South African governments. He concludes:

“This ‘linguistic genocide,’ or, ‘linguicide,’ as it’s sometimes called, is defined as, ‘the systematic replacement of an indigenous language with the language of an outside, dominant group, resulting in a permanent

language shift and the death of the indigenous language.'

Linguicide and Linguistic colonialism, however, haven't been the only ways dominant cultures have worked to control speech. The Catholic Inquisition, for instance, was responsible for the persecution and executions of unknown thousands for heresy." (Eklof, *The Gadfly Papers*)

Eklof follows this with additional examples of suppression by "dominant cultures": the burning of Michael Servetus, and, of course, McCarthyism.

As an aside, this history contains some factual errors. For example:

"Stoic philosophers like Seneca and Musonius Rufus, for instance, were exiled to the Island of Gyaros, south of Greece, by Emperor Nero..." (Eklof, *The Gadfly Papers*)

Nope: Nero did not banish Seneca. That was Nero's adoptive father, Cladius, who banished Seneca to Corsica—not Gyaros—for an (alleged) affair with Julia Livilla, Cladius's niece. Nero did, however, **order Seneca to commit suicide** in AD 65. That's arguably worse than exile, but it didn't have anything to do with Seneca's ideas: he was accused of complicity in the "Pisonian Conspiracy" to assassinate the emperor.

Then there's this:

"A shorter time ago, McCarthyism in the U.S. effectively made it illegal to talk about socialism and workers' rights. Those convicted of doing so by the House Un-American Activities Committee could be imprisoned, and those suspected of being communist sympathizers were put on a list that made them ineligible to work." (Eklof, *The Gadfly Papers*)

Nope again. Yes, McCarthyism was bad, but a) "Tailgunner Joe" **McCarthy was a Senator**, so was not a member of the House Un-American Activities Committee, aka HUAC (he was the chair of the United States Senate's Subcommittee on Investigations); and b) no one was ever "convicted" or "imprisoned" by HUAC for talking "about socialism and worker's rights." House committees—then or now—are not trial courts. **Alger Hiss**, for example, was tried and convicted in Federal Court on charges that he lied in his testimony before the Committee. The famed, "**Hollywood 10**" refused to cooperate with HUAC and were later convicted—again in Federal Court—of contempt of Congress.

In other words, HUAC's most prominent victims were not convicted by HUAC for "talking about socialism or worker's rights"—they were convicted in Federal court for defying HUAC (however morally justified). HUAC may have been a star chamber of sorts, but it didn't have the direct power to convict or imprison anyone.

Ok, I'm being kinda nit-picky, but my issue with these gaffes is simple: this stuff is easy to look up. That Eklof didn't bother to do so before publishing/distributing *Gadfly* does not speak well for his priorities. This is unfortunate, as careless research erodes trust in an author's account.

A second, and more important issue, is Eklof's conflation of "linguicide" with things—like exile/banishment, the Crusades, heresy trials, the aforementioned McCarthyism, and the Inquisition—that are not linguicide. Cruel and suppressive, yes; linguicide, no.

Errors aside, though, Eklof provides a decent, if somewhat scattershot, summary of Western colonial

oppression and government overreach. I was initially puzzled by it, however, because it didn't seem to have anything to do with Unitarian Universalism, or what Eklof feels has gone wrong within the UUA.

Then again, just because I can't see the connection doesn't mean that Eklof can't. So strap in tight kids, 'cause we're about to go careening down the Mother of All Slippery Slopes:

“It is difficult to imagine those claiming to be liberals engaging in such suppression, given that liberal comes from the Latin word meaning ‘freedom,’ let alone members of the Unitarian Universalist Association, representing the world’s most liberal religion. Yet, with regard to the article mentioned in the previous section, a UUA staff member sent an almost immediate email addressed to its Pacific Western Region’s board presidents and ministers with the subject, “A note about the *UU World* article ‘After L, G and B.’” The email explained, ‘As the article was being planned and written, multiple transgender people asked that the article not be run, that an article written by someone who is actually transgender would be more appropriate.’” (Eklof, *The Gadfly Papers*)

I... just... can't... even.

No joke: my jaw dropped when I read this bit in *Gadfly*, and I still can't quite wrap my brain around the fact that an allegedly serious book contains an accusation this untethered from reality. Unfortunately, I can't unsee the words or the thought behind them: Eklof really believes that emailing the “Pacific Western Region’s board presidents and ministers” to complain about a *UUWorld* article is analogous to using state power to murder, banish, imprison, persecute and/or crush the wills of colonized individuals, groups or entire nations. In the previous section of *Gadfly*, he even refers to the debate over the article as “linguicidal in nature,” which is utterly ludicrous.

Suggesting that an article should not have been published is NOT LINGUICIDE. Or even “linguicidal in nature,” whatever that means. The fact that it WAS published, and is—as of this writing—**STILL AVAILABLE FOR EVERYONE TO READ** on the *UUWorld* site puts the lie to this claim (or other “claims of this nature”) Trans/genderqueer UUs and their allies simply don’t have that kind of power. If they did, then the article would have been retracted immediately or never even run in the first place.

This is over-the-top, dialed-up-to-eleven, melodramatic nonsense. Does Eklof believe that nasty film and book reviews that he doesn’t agree with are the Inquisition, too? Do bad Yelp reviews represent a new Reign of Terror? Am I the reincarnation of Torquemada, because I think Eklof is seriously beclowning himself here?

The email Eklof so strenuously objects to isn’t even a weak attempt to suppress speech; rather, it represents what **First Amendment scholar Greg Magarian** calls “preemptive protest.” He defines it as follows:

“Preemptive protest is nonviolent, nonobstructive action that makes a case for why a speaker shouldn’t be heard. Telling white supremacists not only ‘you’re wrong’ but also ‘go away’ is preemptive protest. Urging people not to buy a forthcoming book because its publication will have undesirable consequences is preemptive protest.” (p.563)

He goes on to point out:

“Preemptive protest doesn’t betray or undermine a system of free expression. Rather, preemptive protest works squarely within and honorably serves a system of free expression... Argument is exactly what First Amendment law and free speech norms are supposed to protect and promote. To be sure, preemptive protest argues bluntly and harshly that certain speech isn’t worth hearing and doesn’t deserve a platform. But challenging the value or legitimacy of an opponent’s ideas, or even the opponent’s character or integrity, is a valid, familiar, and often highly persuasive mode of argument.

The molten core of First Amendment law grants constitutional protection even to the most extreme form of preemptive protest: speech that rejects the liberal democratic preconditions for free speech altogether. In a First Amendment passage both foundational and deeply radical, Justice Holmes wrote of Leninist communism: ‘If in the long run the beliefs expressed in proletarian dictatorship are destined to be accepted by the dominant forces of the community, the only meaning of free speech is that they should be given their chance and have their way.’⁴⁹ (p.564)

News flash: mean letters and emails, even ones stating an article should not have been published, are FREE SPEECH; and criticism, however harsh, is not equivalent to colonialist subjugation, banishment, burning at the stake or McCarthyism. To even make the comparison is deeply insulting to actual victims of violent political and religious repression. The kerfuffle over “After L, G and B” wasn’t pretty, but everyone who wanted to speak up about it felt free to do so, and the published article, warts and all, stayed up.

I think some perspective is in order here. Linguicide and other violent forms of speech suppression are horrible, but it’s a complete abdication of responsibility (not to mention covenant) to insist that this is what the Unitarian-Univeralists (or liberals in general) are up to.

III. The “Principle of Charity” is Uncharitable

While we’re on the subject of “After L, G and B,” I feel it’s important to call out what Rev. Eklof gets wrong in his attempt to use the “principle of charity,” from *Coddling of the American Mind*, to delegitimize the article’s critics. Whether he realizes it or not, he’s trying to have it both ways: he wants liberals to be tolerant of speakers that offend *them*, like the Westboro Baptist Church, while reserving the right to be intolerant of liberal speech that offends *him*. Thus, it becomes necessary to move the goalposts from “free speech” to **tone policing**. He writes:

“There is a principle in philosophy and rhetoric called the principle of charity,’ *Coddling* further reminds us, ‘which says that one should interpret other people’s statements in their best, most reasonable form, not in the worst or most offensive way possible.’[47] Although this principle has long been practiced among Unitarian Universalists, part of the covenantal relationships we agree to in many of our congregations, at least one individual was angry enough to insist the magazine’s editor tender his immediate resignation over the matter.

The main issue with it, for those troubled by it, is that it was written by a nontrans woman. As one post stated, ‘the cis-white gaze is strong in UU world.’ Another said, ‘As the mother of a trans person, I must

say I was appalled. You are right; we can do better. Let's make sure that when we make space for people's voices, that they are speaking for themselves.' (This comment, ironically, seems to violate the writer's own mandate.)" (Eklof, *The Gadfly Papers*)

This take is wrong on several different levels:

1. Whether Eklof likes it or not, *UUWorld* is a national publication that has **a circulation of nearly 120,000 people**. The implication that its authors and editors should be immune from the criticism—even harsh criticism—that other mass media authors and editors often receive is preposterous.
2. Comments like “the cis-white gaze is strong in UU world” and “As the mother of a trans person, I must say I was appalled” are... pretty damn tame. And demands for resignations are staples of comments sections and “letters to the editor” everywhere. I can say without reservation that the authors I follow online would be ecstatic if the criticism they received was this civil.
3. As Lukianoff and Haidt (and Eklof) define it, the “principle” is potentially abusive: it blames victims for failing to interpret problematic “statements in their best, most reasonable form,” while it absolves offenders of responsibility. Women/WOC in particular feel constant social pressure **to be pleasant** and **perform emotional labor for others**, which **can be exhausting**. Marginalized people are constantly having to center other people’s comfort over their own. For them, the “principle” is an additional burden.
4. The article deserved to be criticized. Eklof’s wording and tone make it clear he believes that only those in thrall to “identity liberalism,” could possibly have had any problem with it. Not so: I, for example, had issues with the article beyond how it hurt trans UUs. As a parent myself, I’ve always treated my knowledge of intimate details of my children’s personal lives (including the personal lives of their friends and partners) as confidences. That information isn’t mine to share with others as I please, let alone use as fodder for an article in a national magazine. As such, I was aghast at the author’s breezy sharing of intimate details about her adult daughter and her daughter’s friends. That the author changed their names was the smallest of fig leaves that failed to cover the violations of their privacy. I would NEVER do that to my adult children/their friends without their explicit consent and approval of the final draft. Yet there’s no hint in the article that consent was sought or given.
5. It’s uncharitable: Eklof invokes the “principle of charity” to criticize the critics, but refuses to offer it to them. For Eklof, the “principle” is a one-way street: he treats it as a weapon, not a reciprocal obligation.

Since this is an essay that’s focused on free speech, I’d like to discuss that last point a little more, as—wittingly or not—Eklof’s unidirectional application of the “principle of charity” effectively silences the people he’s criticizing. Eklof cherry-picks quotes from social media posts to support his case and ignores more substantive and gracious critiques that don’t so he can portray ALL critics as dogmatic, hypersensitive, grievance junkies who lashed out at the article’s author and editor because they’re “...incapable of relating to those outside their tribal identity.”

I didn’t have to spend very much time searching to find some excellent critiques of the *UUWorld* article that would be well worth Eklof’s time to read. For example, **C.B. Beal wrote:**

“I do not doubt the intention of the author and the editor of *UU World* to do good. But the impact is far from that. I’ll mention again for clarity that I do not doubt the intention of the author and the editor of

UU World to do good.

... So how is it that this well-meaning article caused so much heartbreak and harm?

This article contains inaccurate definitions, errors of language, even slurs. It had an opportunity to talk about the experiences of transgender people in our midst and chose not to. The statement by Alex Kapitan indicates just how much choice was involved. I spent the day with my religious professional colleagues (virtually.) We have once again found ourselves in a position of having to bear the burden of educating people—even educating people who themselves were paid to do this work.”

Alex Kapitan—a UU minister and former UUA staffer—[had this to say](#):

I’m speechless about the title (for so many reasons). I’m stunned at the casual dropping of the f-slur. I’m angry at the conflation of trans and intersex identities and experiences, the over-emphasis on surgeries and hormones and genitalia, the way in which people of color and disabled people (many of whom are also trans) are also ignorantly diminished. I’m frustrated by the lack of actual spiritual content or connection to faith. But mostly I’m bone tired of cis people holding out their good intentions as progress. At the end of the piece when Kimberly writes ‘...this is about building relationships. It’s about being respectful and about listening and about helping fight when asked’ it feels like a slap in the face. She and Chris heard me, but they chose not to listen, to respect me and hundreds of other trans UUs, or to help fight when asked.”

Other transUUs and their allies also weighed in with their analyses (examples: [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)), so Eklof’s summary judgment, “The main issue with it, for those troubled by it, is that it was written by a nontrans woman,” simply doesn’t fly—it’s clear that these writers disagreed with the *content*, not just the identity of the author. And the curt dismissal of “identity liberalism” that follows is just as blinkered. Eklof writes:

“‘What replaces argument, then, is taboo...’ Lilla says. ‘Only those with an approved identity status are, like shamans, allowed to speak on certain matters.’[48] Yet even if this were so, as Kwame Anthony Appiah writes in *The Lies that Bind*, ‘Having an identity doesn’t, by itself, authorize you to speak on behalf of everyone of that identity.’” (Eklof, *The Gadfly Papers*)

Problem is, arguments—perfectly understandable arguments—were made by critics of the “After L, G and B” article, so in this case, Eklof’s citation of Lilla’s “What replaces argument, then, is taboo...” doesn’t apply. And Eklof denies his readers Kwame Anthony Appiah’s more nuanced thoughts on identity by isolating his quote from its original context. Here’s the context in question:

“Say that Joe, who’s a white man, claims to speak as a man, or as a white person. What does that mean, beyond the fact that he’s speaking and he’s male or white? Having an identity doesn’t, by itself, authorize you to speak on behalf of everyone of that identity. The privilege of representing a group has to be granted somehow. So, absent evidence that he’s somehow been given or otherwise earned the authority, it can’t mean that Joe is speaking for all white people or for all men. You might think that he has at least the authority of experience to speak about what it’s like to live as a white man. Is that something that a white

man can discuss with special knowledge, just because he's been through it? Not if we take the point about intersectionality. For, to the extent that how people treat you affects your experience, intersectionality makes it likely that there will be differences in the experience of, say, gay white men and straight white men; and, if Joe had grown up in Northern Ireland, as a gay white Catholic man, his gay white Protestant male friends might well have rather different experiences, too..." (Appiah, p.19)

It's notable that Appiah leads with the example of "Joe," who represents two very broad and intersectionally dominant identities: white and male. And then he drills down to less broadly shared identities, like "gay white Protestant male from Northern Ireland" vs. "gay white Catholic male from Northern Ireland" to illustrate how intersectionality complicates Joe's authority to speak on behalf of white people, men, or even white men.

Appiah's use of sexual orientation (gay), country-of-origin (Northern Ireland) and religion as modifiers is significant: it's a tacit admission that, the narrower and more specific the identities, the more likely it is that experiences will be shared, especially when one (or more?) marginalized identities are added to the mix. I'd be surprised if Appiah thought that a white, gay Catholic man from Northern Ireland lacked "the authority of experience" to speak about what it's like to be a white, gay Catholic man from Northern Ireland.

Thus, it doesn't necessarily follow that those from smaller, marginalized identity groups—like trans UUs—are in the same situation as "Joe." Appiah stresses that "[t]he privilege of representing a group has to be granted somehow." Fair enough. The existence of the [TRUUsT report](#)—which also appeared in the same *UUWorld* issue at Alex Kapitan's request—implicitly grants that privilege, at least when it comes to the issue of inclusivity:

"[a]s a whole, only a little more than a quarter (28%) of trans Unitarian Universalists feel as though their congregation is completely inclusive of them as trans people." (p.7)

The *UUWorld* editor of the "After L, G and B" article, Chris Walton, frankly admitted that it was written "... for the majority of our readers to engage respectfully with trans and nonbinary people." Well-intentioned, sure, but by publishing an article centering the majority's perspective over that of a minority struggling with inclusion in UU spaces, *UUWorld* created yet-another-instance of the problem highlighted in the TRUUsT report. The article failed to be inclusive, in addition to being insensitive in ways enumerated by Alex Kapitan, C. B. Beal and others.

It's also important to note that Eklof's rendering of Appiah's quote, "Having an identity doesn't, by itself, authorize you to speak on behalf of everyone of that identity" is also extremely misleading, in light of [Alex Kapitan's pre-publication suggestion to UUWorld](#):

"I suggested doing, instead, a feature story of profiles that showcased the diversity of trans UUs, in their own words. I offered to provide a list of folks who could be contacted for such a piece."

In other words, Alex was waaaay ahead of Eklof. Ze wanted the article to feature "the diversity of trans UUs, in their own words" all along. Ze never demanded *UUWorld* use a single trans author "to speak on behalf of everyone of that identity." [As C. B. Beal similarly expressed](#):

“A story about transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming people by transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming people would have been best. Many stories in fact. We are not monolith, we are glorious and strong, resilient and brave. We bear privilege in some ways, are marginalized and oppressed in others. We live in complexity.”

I think it's appropriate to close this essay with another quote by Kwame Anthony Appiah:

“The modes of identity we've considered can all become forms of confinement, conceptual mistakes underwriting moral ones. But they can also give contours to our freedom, as working-class and LGBTQ and national and religious identities have done in struggles all around the world. Women, negotiating intersectionality, have worked together across class and language and religion and nation in the global struggle against oppression and inequality. Social identities connect the small scale where we live our lives alongside our kith and kin with larger movements, causes, and concerns.” (Appiah, p.218)

As Appiah asserts, identities “...give contours to our freedom, as working-class and LGBTQ and national and religious identities have done in struggles all around the world.” It’s important to stress the word “struggles,” as the advances in rights and dignity gained by marginalized identity groups weren’t achieved by asking nicely. Even well-intentioned oppression (ex: “**benevolent sexism**”) is still oppression.

Rev. Eklof is wrong to silence and denigrate the complaints about the “After L, G, and B” article by trans/genderqueer UUs—angry though some of them undoubtedly were—because they reflect a desire to be included in the larger “we” represented by Unitarian Universalism, which is itself striving to be included and heard in the larger national and global conversations about human rights and dignity.

If Eklof really cares about the “principle of charity” he should read the posts from Alex Kapitan, C. B. Beal and others linked above and try to understand where they’re coming from. As it stands, his one-sided application of the “principle” is deeply uncharitable.

IV. The Violence at UC Berkeley

This series of essays on free speech began with a reference to the violence at UC Berkeley, so it’s perhaps fitting to return to that issue before moving on to other topics. Rev. Eklof’s focus on this incident is... telling, since *Gadfly* is ostensibly about problems within Unitarian-Universalism and, to my knowledge, violence is not one of them. Yet Eklof refers to this incident 3 times in his book, as if he feels its important to link it to his “J’Accuse!” against the UUA. This is a point also made by [Rev. Dennis McCarty in his own review of *Gadfly*](#):

“The rub is, I’m not aware of any Unitarian Universalists being violent at any church or in General Assembly, or anywhere else. But there’s a continual implication-by-association in this essay that such (overstated) campus violence is actually, somehow, related to what Unitarian Universalists do.” (p.1)

I'll go farther than Rev. McCarty: this, along with all Rev. Eklof's other overwrought references to McCarthyism, Hitler, the Inquisition, etc. is nonsense. It's straight up "guilt by association," and it's wearisome.

I'm not sure there's anything more that needs to be said on this particular topic.

But... there is something that I *want* to say about it, because there's... something in Lukianoff's, Haidt's, and—yes—Eklof's self-righteous conviction that they're 1000% on the side of the angels when it comes to this particular incident that just... irritates me. I'm not pro-violence, and I think it would have been better if Yiannopolous had been ignored (particularly in light of his defenestration a few weeks after the Berkeley event). But just because I don't approve of the mayhem, doesn't mean I can let smug, censorious, moral posturing like this slide:

"Since disagreeable ideas are, thus, considered harmful and injurious in a culture of safetyism, many of its adherents feel justified in using violence to protect themselves and others against dangerous beliefs. As a UC Berkeley Op-ed claimed after a violent protest there, physically violent actions, if used to shut down speech that is deemed hateful, are 'not acts of violence,' but, rather, 'acts of self-defense.'" (Eklof, *The Gadfly Papers*)

The quote from the "UC Berkeley Op-ed" was lifted from a similar account of the incident from *Coddling of the American Mind*. I wonder, however, if Eklof ever bothered to read that op-ed vs. simply taking Lukianoff's and Haidt's word that it supports their definition of "safetyism?" Certainly Lukianoff's and Haidt's rendering was a bright red flag to me: in a book about "free speech," they couldn't even grant the author of the quote a complete sentence!

I suspected some serious context was being elided there, and I was right. And that context is NOT consistent with the "culture of safetyism" that Lukianoff and Haidt (and Eklof) piously diagnose, so I'm not surprised that it was censored. It didn't fit the story they wanted to tell.

Meet [Neil Lawrence](#), the author of the quote Lukianoff and Haidt decided to neuter:

"Behind those bandanas and black T-shirts were the faces of your fellow UC Berkeley and Berkeley City College students, of women, of people of color, of queer and trans people.

The bloc was made up of people with the most to fight for and the most to lose.

To those who defend free speech: I spent a semester in this very newspaper yelling about Grindr hook-ups and advocating rioting. My constitutional right to be outrageous and offensive in the press is very precious to me. But when I exercised my freedom of speech and called Yiannopoulos a pathetic mother-fucker with ugly roots, many liberals told me I should be quiet and ignore him, and all his fans told me they were going to kill me. I expect this will happen again."

Emphasis mine. Neil Lawrence was a Berkeley student who received a slew of death threats from Milo Yiannopolous' fanbois for a previous op-ed, wherein he pulled Yiannopolous' "gay card" for publicly outing, ridiculing and humiliating a trans student, Adelaide Kramer, during a previous speech at the University of Wisconsin that she attended. [It was a devastating experience for her](#) and she withdrew from the university as a result. [As Lawrence wrote to Yiannopolous in response to her experience](#):

“If you’d like a transgender Berkeley student to direct your firehose of impotent rage at, I offer myself. Here’s the target on my back, so go ahead and take aim. I’m a Jewish anarchist drag queen with no eyebrows. The jokes write themselves. I dare you to put up pictures of me — it’s a matter of public record that I look fantastic. Tell that crowd to laugh at me. I’m not ashamed of my face or my body or my politics or my life choices.

Don’t you want to find something original to say? You can’t cut me down to size, I’m five foot two and chronically depressed. I dare you to say something about me that I haven’t already said about myself.”

Trans? Jewish anarchist drag queen? Chronically depressed? Threatened with death by alt-righters? Maybe it’s just me, but this doesn’t seem like a description of a student who’s been “coddled” by helicopter parents and is lashing out to avoid hearing Milo’s “dangerous beliefs.” Seems to me that a marginalized person who’s been on the receiving end of an onslaught of death threats...

just...

might...

maybe... feel some justification for equating violence with self-defense. This is doubly true in the case of Milo Yiannopolous, who is utterly undeserving of the free speech martyr status that Eklof implicitly bestows on him.

So, let’s talk about Milo and what he—until recently—represented. Rev. Eklof presents him in isolation and describes him merely as a “right-wing provocateur,” but as the saying goes: you don’t know the half of it.

Journalist Laurie Penny of the New Statesman knows Milo well: **she’s covered him quite a bit over the last several years:**

“I knew Yiannopoulos before he was Yiannopoulos, and we are still not friends, because I’m not friends with anyone who puts my real friends in danger for fun and fortune...”

Penny’s article, “On the Milo Bus with the Lost Boys of America’s New Right,” is a brilliant bit of journalism and I would encourage everyone to click the link above and read it in full. But I want to focus for now on her statement about Milo putting her “real friends in danger for fun and fortune.” What did she mean by that?

She didn’t spell it out in the article, but then again, for anyone paying attention at the time, she didn’t need to. **“Everyone” knew about Gamergate, and what happened to the people who were targeted by it:**

“The similarities between Gamergate and the far-right online movement, the “alt-right”, are huge, startling and in no way a coincidence. After all, the culture war that began in games now has a senior representative in The White House. As a founder member and former executive chair of Breitbart News, Steve Bannon had a hand in creating media monster Milo Yiannopoulos, who built his fame and Twitter following by supporting and cheerleading Gamergate. This hashtag was the canary in the coalmine, and we ignored it.

Lest we forget, Gamergate was an online movement that effectively began because a man wanted to punish his ex-girlfriend. Its most notable achievement was harassing a large number of progressive figures—mostly women—to the point where they felt unsafe or considered leaving the industry. Game developer Zoe Quinn was the original target. Anita Sarkeesian’s videos applying basic feminist theory to video games

had already made her a target (because so many people have a difficulty differentiating cultural criticism from censorship) but this hate was powerfully amplified by Gamergate—leading to death threats, rape threats, and the public leaking of personal information. Other notable targets included developer Brianna Wu, actor Felicia Day, and prominent tech-culture writer Leigh Alexander, whose provocative article on the tyranny of ‘game culture’ offered stark warnings that still resonate powerfully: ‘When you decline to create or to curate a culture in your spaces, you’re responsible for what spawns in the vacuum.’”

Here’s how one profile of Gamergate target Anita Sarkeesian begins:

“Anita Sarkeesian doesn’t give me the address of her San Francisco apartment over email. Instead, she texts it to me a few hours before we’re set to meet. After thousands of rape and death threats, a bomb scare and an email promising a mass shooting at one of her speaking events, a woman can’t be too careful.”

Milo was hip-deep in Gamergate. Even today, the damage he caused festers:

“Yiannopoulos was a prime example of a rabble-rouser who manipulated Gamergate toward his own ends. He benefited from the mayhem and chaos his rabble-rousing caused, whether he was making campus tour stops that inspired increases in hate speech as well as acts of serious violence, or just egging on the racist harassment of a public figure.

Yiannopoulos constantly exacerbated his followers and their anger. The danger posed to marginalized members of the communities he visited was immediate and real. Yet even into 2018 he would explicitly encourage violence and then claim he was ‘just trolling.’ Just as Evans noted, the merest suggestion that none of his extremist rhetoric was sincere allowed him to continue spreading it.

Understanding this concept is crucial to understanding why Gamergate was able to morph into the alt-right. Gamergate simultaneously masqueraded as legitimate concern about ethics that demanded audiences take it seriously, and as total trolling that demanded audiences dismiss it entirely. Both these claims served to obfuscate its real aim — misogyny, and, increasingly, racist white supremacy. By the time Yiannopoulos joined Breitbart, and Breitbart’s Steve Bannon joined the Trump campaign, the links between Gamergate and the national political machine should have been clear.”

Let’s not mince words here: Milo Yiannopolous was much more than a “right wing provocateur.” He was an alt-right recruiter and enthusiastic cheerleader of cyberterrorism and harassment that had serious impacts on the lives and well-being of its targets, not to mention our increasingly fragile political institutions. Yet Eklof is apparently cool with this—you will search *Gadfly* in vain for even a word of reproach. It’s sad, but perhaps predictable that Eklof would choose to minimize the destructive actions of a man who explicitly, maliciously and gleefully sought to terrorize others—mostly women—into silence, because he already knows who the *real* enemies of free speech are.

As my kids used to say, “how meta.”

This is what Neil Lawrence chose to fight back against. Not Milo’s “disagreeable ideas,” but the broader hate movement Milo helped to build and—at that time—still represented. I don’t agree with Lawrence’s tactics,

but I can have some sympathy for their position: they're hardly the first person to feel that those "...with the most to fight for and the most to lose" have a duty to shut down hate movements, violently if necessary, when civil society refuses to protect them.

World-famous hairdresser **Vidal Sassoon was one such person**. At the age of 17, he was the youngest member of "43 Group," an anti-fascist organization founded by Jewish ex-servicemen to fight back against the resurgent fascism in the UK after WWII, led by Oswald Mosley and the "Blackshirts."

The word, "fight," is literal.

"Having watched the Nazis rise from a small fringe party to become the authors of the Holocaust and after encountering official indifference (James Chuter Ede, the Home Secretary in Labour's post-war reforming government, conspicuously failed to order a crackdown), here were individuals who took the view that fire had to be fought with fire. As Sassoon later put it from his Hollywood mansion: 'After Auschwitz, there were no laws.'

Where Mosleyites turned up to bait and persecute Jewish tailors in Hackney or Dalston, they found themselves confronted by former Commandos and Royal Marines well versed in mortal combat.

Julius Konopinsky, one of the 43 Group's founding members, had more reason than many to see the virtues of such an approach. Having arrived in Hackney from Poland in 1939, he learnt in 1945 that his nine maternal uncles and aunts had been murdered by the Nazis. A year later, another uncle, who had survived Auschwitz, came to live with him.

Now 85, Mr Konopinsky said: 'Call them fascists, call them Nazis, they only seemed to understand one thing—to hurt you or to be hurt. And we believed in hurting them first before they hurt us. I still believe that.'"

Of course, that's the UK. Here in the US, even literal Nazis have free speech rights that cannot be denied, right? Everyone knows the story about how the ACLU went to bat for Frank Collin and his National Socialists of America Party, in their fight for the right to march in Skokie, Ill. The case was fought all the way to the Supreme Court, **but the ACLU won**:

"In 1978, the ACLU took a controversial stand for free speech by defending a neo-Nazi group that wanted to march through the Chicago suburb of Skokie, where many Holocaust survivors lived. The notoriety of the case caused some ACLU members to resign, but to many others the case has come to represent the ACLU's unwavering commitment to principle. In fact, many of the laws the ACLU cited to defend the group's right to free speech and assembly were the same laws it had invoked during the Civil Rights era, when Southern cities tried to shut down civil rights marches with similar claims about the violence and disruption the protests would cause. Although the ACLU prevailed in its free speech arguments, the neo-Nazi group never marched through Skokie, instead agreeing to stage a rally at Federal Plaza in downtown Chicago."

Wait... what? Let's go over that last sentence again:

"Although the ACLU prevailed in its free speech arguments, the neo-Nazi group never marched through

Skokie, instead agreeing to stage a rally at Federal Plaza in downtown Chicago.”

So after an extensive legal battle to win the right to march in Skokie; after taunting the large Jewish population there with “We’re coming,” leaflets and other threats; after publicly salivating over the chance to trigger the estimated 5,000–7,000 Holocaust victims living there... they moved their march to Chicago instead?

While Collin claimed his group preferred to march in Chicago, there was likely another reason they took a pass on Skokie: the Jewish Defense League (JDL). The JDL made it clear that **if the law couldn’t keep Collin and his Nazis out of Skokie, it would.**

“Meanwhile, the militant Jewish Defense League claims that 4,000 of its members from 48 states will be in Skokie on Sunday to stop the march with violence if necessary.

...Bonnie Pechter, national director of the JDL declared, ‘It’s going to be suicide for the Nazis to come to Skokie—the most fatal mistake they’re going to make. If we responded with a peaceful demonstration, it would show that we learned nothing from the Holocaust. You can’t deal with Nazis on the nice Jewish intellectual level. Nazism is synonymous with death for the Jews.’”

P.E. Moskowitz, author of *The Case Against Free Speech*, later confirmed this was no bluff in his interview with former members of the JDL:

“That’s why the Nazis didn’t come to Skokie, according to Alpert and Kandelman. ‘Collin knew he was coming into, so to speak, our territory,’ Kandelman said. ‘It wasn’t the ACLU. The ACLU was in his corner. It wasn’t the Anti-Defamation League that stopped him. It wasn’t all the demonstrations or the letters or anything else. He knew that if he came in, he would be carried out.’” (Moskowitz, p.94)

That was then. Now, attitudes around Skokie are different, as Moskowitz discovered:

“Fred Huss’s parents had been ready to use violence to stop the Nazis in Skokie, and Fred said that while he understood the desire, he has come around to believing in free speech for all. Fred’s son similarly thought without a doubt that all speech, including that of Nazis, needs to be protected. How had this family’s views on free speech evolved so completely over three generations? It’s not to belittle the legitimate differences in their opinions, but I wondered if the imminence of threat had something to do with it: Skokie happened when most survivors of the Holocaust were still alive, and still trying to adjust to American life. Today, white Jews still face threats, but we are also assimilated into whiteness, and therefore granted the protection of state powers more than other groups Nazis march against. Recent history has shown us that black and Latino people, for example, cannot rely on the police to protect them from hate as much as Jews can.

So maybe that’s where the Huss’s differing opinions come from, and maybe that’s what accounts for much of the differing opinion on free speech, from college campuses to living rooms in Chicago and beyond: those who see speech, even in its most hateful forms, as an abstract moral issue are willing to defend it. And those who regard that speech as a potentially deadly threat are willing to put their lives on the line to

push back against it.” (Moskowitz, p.95)

Which brings us full circle back to Neil Lawrence’s equation of “violence” with “self defense.” For the Neil Lawrences of the world, the threat posed by Milo Yiannopolous isn’t such an abstract moral issue as it is for Rev. Eklof, or even me. What happened at Berkeley was never about refusing to tolerate the “disagreeable ideas” of one disagreeable man: it was about refusing to tolerate the *threatening presence* of a prominent representative of a hate movement that had targeted them and others for harassment and threats of violence. This is why I have a hard time accepting Rev. Eklof’s moral certainty or his claim that what happened at Berkeley is evidence of a disturbing trend of “safetyism.” There’s a history that can’t be ignored for the sake of pushing a simplistic, black/white narrative. When people feel that speech constitutes a direct threat to their lives and well-being, some will resort to violence. Marginalized people are society’s proverbial “canaries in the coal mine” and when they resort to violence, it’s often because they feel there’s no other alternative... it’s the only remaining way to be heard. **As Lawrence wrote:**

“To those who hate Yiannopoulos and the alt-right but have a hard time condoning black bloc tactics and property damage, I understand that these tactics are extreme. But when you consider everything that activists already tried — when mass call-ins, faculty and student objections, letter-writing campaigns, numerous op-eds (including mine), union grievances and peaceful demonstrations don’t work, when the nonviolent tactics have been exhausted — what is left?

Of all the objections and cancellation requests presented to the administration, local government and local police, the only one that was listened to was the sound of shattering glass.”

As I stated before, I don’t agree with Lawrence’s tactics, but I think I can understand why they feel the way they do. And given a choice between the two free speech “villains” at UC Berkeley, I’d take them in a heartbeat over Milo Yiannopoulos. The damage Lawrence helped to inflict cost only a few hundred thousand dollars. The damage Milo helped to inflict may ultimately cost an entire country.

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WHAT THE GADFLY PAPERS GETS WRONG

POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

Given the primacy that Rev. Eklof gives to *Coddling of the American Mind* in *Gadfly*, I was rather surprised to see him go all in on trashing “political correctness,” as “a suppressive cultural phenomenon.” In contrast, Lukianoff and Haidt barely mention it in *Coddling*, and when they do, they begin by acknowledging an upside:

“A portion of what is derided as ‘political correctness’ is just an effort to promote polite and respectful interactions by discouraging the use of terms that are reasonably taken to be demeaning.” (Lukianoff and Haidt, p.46)

Eklof refuses to acknowledge *any* upsides to political correctness (PC), however, so he quote-mines Catholic philosopher Philip E. Devine’s book, *Human Diversity and the Culture Wars*, to affirm PC stands for “a militant, intolerant relativism.” He further quotes Devine as follows:

“For the central strategy of relativistic liberals is to impose silence on positions and arguments that transgress the limitations liberals impose on public discourse.” (Eklof, *The Gadfly Papers*)

Sounds dire. That liberals have a “central strategy” is news to me, but that’s an issue for another day. Eklof’s point here is to convince readers that Devine agrees with him that PC is a sinister, suppressive force.

That’s the point of cherry-picking quotes, I suppose, but Devine’s take is much more nuanced than Eklof portrays. In truth, Devine seems more contemptuously amused than perturbed by PC. For him, it’s more of an intellectually inconsistent and self-defeating tactic than a menace:

“PC advocates characteristically hold that there is no such thing as political correctness, but only women and men united against entrenched social evils. A party that (half-) denies its own existence is something of a novelty. In response, we should neither deny the existence of PC nor overestimate its power. Politics has always had an impact on high culture. The attempts made in the contemporary academy to silence conservatives (by whatever definition) have had relatively little practical success in the academy and have met with utter disaster elsewhere.” (Devine, p.28)

So, according to Devine, PC has “had relatively little practical success.” In other words, He sees “PC” as pretty toothless. It exists, but it isn’t very effective—“we shouldn’t overestimate its power,” he claims. Why is that? What is this “utter disaster” he alludes to?

Devine doesn't say directly, but the fact that his book was published in 1996 provides a whopping clue. I suspect he's referring to the overwhelming success that far-right conservatives like Bill Bennett, Allan Bloom, Dinesh D'Souza, Lynne Cheney, Brent Bozell III and others had in stoking a moral panic over affirmative action and the expansion of college/university curricula to include class, race and gender studies, all of which were lumped under the term "PC." Thanks to the massive amounts of money that the right-wing Olin, Scaife and Bradley foundations poured into anti-PC projects and propaganda, political correctness rapidly became a dirty word. For example, here's President H. W. Bush on the subject at a commencement address in 1991:

"The notion of political correctness has ignited controversy across the land. And although the movement arises from the laudable desire to sweep away the debris of racism, sexism and hatred, it replaces old prejudices with new ones. It declares certain topics off-limits, even certain expressions off-limits. What began as a cause for civility has soured into a cause of conflict and even censorship. Disputants treat sheer force—getting their foes punished or expelled, for instance—as a substitute for the power of ideas. Throughout history, attempts to micromanage casual conversation have only incited distrust. They've invited people to look for insult in every word, gesture, action. And in their own Orwellian way, crusades that demand correct behavior crush diversity in the name of diversity." (Wilson, p.8)

For the record, I was an employee of the University of California in 1991, and an undergrad/grad student/teaching assistant before that. I don't recall encountering *anything* like what then-President Bush described on my campus (Davis).

Neither did John K. Wilson, who was a college undergraduate/grad student in the 1990s. As the current National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement Fellow documented in his 1995 book, *The Myth of Political Correctness*:

"The attacks on political correctness did not arise from a grassroots movement of noble individuals resisting leftist totalitarians; instead they were carefully developed over many years by well-funded conservative groups. The conservative movement against the universities has been organizing since the early 1980s, working to create the institutional framework and compiling stories of oppression by radicals to be used in their attack on political correctness." (Wilson, p.26)

Wilson points out that many of these "stories of oppression," were heavily distorted and embellished, if not fabricated outright by conservatives to generate outrage. The irony of Eklof's definition of political correctness as a liberal silencing tactic, is that it succeeded primarily as a *conservative* silencing tactic. Wilson notes:

"The refusal of conservatives to see anything but a conspiracy of malicious leftists in recent efforts to broaden the college curriculum has created the very atmosphere of intellectual intimidation that critics blame on the Left. Although the attacks on political correctness have helped to stimulate some debates about higher education, they have mostly silenced discussion. Critics frequently make no effort to argue about the ideas they deride, and opposing views are mocked rather than refuted—with 'PC' itself being an unanswerable form of ridicule." (Wilson, p.3)

Nor were conservative attacks confined to higher education. As novelist and Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison observed in a 1994 interview in the New York Times:

“You know, the term ‘political correctness’ has become a shorthand for discrediting ideas. I believe that powerful, sharp, incisive, critical, bloody, dramatic, theatrical language is not dependent on injurious language, on curses. Or hierarchy. You’re not stripping language by requiring people to be sensitive to other people’s pain. I can’t just go around saying, “Kill whitey.” What does that mean? It may satisfy something, but there’s no information there. I can’t think through that. And I have to use language that’s better than that. What I think the political correctness debate is really about is the power to be able to define. The definers want the power to name. And the defined are now taking that power away from them.”

What Morrison is describing is the use of PC as a propaganda tool in service to a status quo threatened by... writers like Morrison. As Devine wrote:

“It is now, however, generally used by its opponents, and generally though not invariably resisted by those to whom it is applied. In fact, the emergence of the word PC signaled a significant decline in the power of PC itself.” (Devine, p.x-xi)

Let's just say that Devine's assessment doesn't exactly support Eklof's characterization of PC as a "suppressive cultural phenomenon."

Of course, we're not in the 1990s anymore. Surely Eklof's attack suggests that PC has been reclaimed by the liberal "thought police," right?

Wrong. After a hiatus during the aughts, overwrought attacks on PC returned with a vengeance, as part of the backlash to the election of Barack Obama, the emergence of Black Lives Matter, transgender rights/marriage equality movements and various high-profile clashes between "Social Justice Warriors" and pre-alt-right trolls in science fiction ("Sad/Rabid Puppies"), organized Atheism/skepticism ("Elevatorgate"), and tech/video games ("Gamergate"). The only real difference between then and now is that conservative framing is being amplified by "bothsiderist" liberals anxious to appear objective and non-partisan.

As author Moira Donegan reports in the Guardian, everything old is new again:

“In January 2015, the writer Jonathan Chait published one of the first new, high-profile anti-PC think-pieces in New York magazine. ‘Not a Very PC Thing to Say’ followed the blueprint provided by the anti-PC thinkpieces that the New York Times, Newsweek, and indeed New York magazine had published in the early 1990s.

... Chait's article launched a spate of replies about campus and social media 'cry bullies'. On the cover of their September 2015 issue, the Atlantic published an article by Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff. The title, 'The Coddling Of the American Mind', nodded to the godfather of anti-PC, Allan Bloom. (Lukianoff is the head of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, another organisation funded by the Olin and Scaife families.).

... These pieces committed many of the same fallacies that their predecessors from the 1990s had.

They cherry-picked anecdotes and caricatured the subjects of their criticism. They complained that other people were creating and enforcing speech codes, while at the same time attempting to enforce their own speech codes. Their writers designated themselves the arbiters of what conversations or political demands deserved to be taken seriously, and which did not. They contradicted themselves in the same way: their authors continually complained, in highly visible publications, that they were being silenced.”

Unfortunately, this revival of anti-PC propaganda played right into the hands of Donald Trump, who exploited the term to deflect questions about his long history of sexist and racist behavior. Thanks to useful idiots like Chait and other centrist pundits, Trump was able to dismiss complaints about his conduct as motivated by “political correctness,” a tactic that Donegan describes in meticulous detail in her article.

And Donegan isn’t the only one who’s noticed. [Here’s Wesleyan University President Michael S. Roth on the subject:](#)

As the school year gets underway and we get further into the presidential election season, whenever a commentator complains about college campuses or a politician needs a boogeyman to attack, we can be pretty sure that the words “politically correct” will get tossed around.

Call for more diversity in casting movies and television shows? You’ll get labeled politically correct. Describe how the rhetoric of white nationalism incites violence? You’ll be told you’re being “PC.” The phrase has long been a free pass for avoiding serious issues, and nothing seems easier for self-proclaimed individualists than joining in with others who reject PC conformism.

Donald Trump realized the power of being anti-PC somewhere between his guest appearances on the Howard Stern radio show and his run for the presidency: No matter what he said or did, he could earn credit for rejecting the politically correct. It’s always a response available to a president who uses his Twitter feed as a weapon against the marginalized.”

Even one of Eklof’s primary sources in *Gadfly*, Francis Fukuyama, acknowledges anti-PC as conservative/Trumpian propaganda. In his book, *Identity*, Fukuyama writes:

“The more extreme forms of political correctness are in the end the province of relatively small numbers of writers, artists, students, and intellectuals on the left. But they are picked up by the conservative media and amplified as representative of the left as a whole. This may then explain one of the extraordinary aspects of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, which is Donald Trump’s continuing popularity among a core group of supporters despite behavior that would have ended the career of any other politician. In his campaign he mocked a disabled journalist; he was revealed to have bragged that he had groped women; and he characterized Mexicans as rapists and criminals. While many of his supporters may not have approved of each individual statement, they liked the fact that he was not intimidated by the pressure to be politically correct.” (Fukuyama, *Identity*)

Under the circumstances, I’m astounded that Eklof stooped to using PC to attack the UUA, as it’s currently a Trump-branded tactic that reeked of conservative bad faith even before the Orange One appropriated it for

his own purposes. The kindest thing I can say about it is that it's tone deaf.

Eklof's problem is that he can't see the forest for the trees. Overly zealous, intolerant people can be found wherever you go, on all parts of the political spectrum. **As English professor Susan Drain wrote back in the 1990s:**

“In their attacks on ‘illiberal education’ (D’Sousa), the voices of the orthodox backlash have seized upon this well-tempered, double-edged blade, and turned it into a clumsy cudgel. Clumsy, but brutally effective, I fear, as caricature however crude often is. For the backlash is managing the attack on two fronts at once. The central technique is publicly to discredit the efforts of many by the association with the excesses of a few.” (p.3-4)

I have no doubt that Devine had those “excesses of a few” in mind when he wrote the sentence that Eklof only *partially* quoted in *Gadfly*:

“In this book, political correctness will be used in the narrow sense of a militant and intolerant relativism, not (for example) as a general word for orthodoxies and party lines of all sorts.” (Devine, p.xi)

Note the caveats: “narrow sense” and “not... as a general word.” It’s revealing that Eklof chose to omit these when he cited Devine’s “definition” of PC in *Gadfly*.

But I digress. The existence of an obnoxious fringe on elite college campuses, social media or even within the UUA hardly justifies Eklof’s melodramatic, Trump-tainted framing of PC as a totalitarian menace to free speech. Sure, overzealous libs can be annoying, but it’s possible to clap back. **As Michael S. Roth advises:**

Conversations about race, the economy, bias, sexual assault, climate change, or the winner-take-all economy all tend to involve strong emotions, intense language, and sometimes, bruised feelings. People do get called out for their supposed racism or privilege, and this can seem to them unfair or just painful. As a result, some people will complain that they don’t want to speak up because they fear being criticized or stigmatized. But they should recognize that their fear isn’t a sign of the environment’s political correctness or hostility toward free expression; it’s just a sign that they need more courage — for it requires courage to stay engaged with difference.

To my mind, staying engaged is a much better approach to resolving conflict than insulting those you disagree with. Eklof has claimed that he wrote *Gadfly* to begin a conversation. But accusing liberals of being too PC is a conversation *killer*, if ever there was one. There’s too much bad-faith associated with it to incorporate it into any sort of productive dialogue.

Postscript: Who in the Hell is “John William Murray?”

Rev. Eklof’s determination to make Devine agree with him on the sinister nature of PC leads him to make an interesting (and rather revealing) factual error. Several factual errors, actually. He writes:

“It is precisely this absence of objective criteria that leads to the kind of relativism Philip Devine refers to when defining political correctness. Since its adherents’ admonishments are as random and subjective as they are relative, furthermore, those accused of violating their erratic expectations are often left feeling as bewildered as they are unduly chastised. As John William Murray, a former U.S. Representative and U.S. District Judge, once complained of postmodernism in general, the tendency, that is, to reject empirical data in favor of relativistic whims; ‘postmodernists do not aspire to bask in the pure light of reality, but rather wallow in the mire of opinion. They work with slimy concepts, rather than the rigorous axioms of logic.’[69]” (Eklof, *The Gadfly Papers*)

There are some very troubling issues hidden within this paragraph (beyond that syntactically dreadful second sentence). Footnote #69 refers to p. 29 of Phillip E. Devine’s book, *Human Diversity and the Culture Wars*. Reading p. 28–29 of Devine’s book makes it clear that Eklof has misread/misinterpreted Devine, in ways that are hard for me to justify as innocent. Here is the text from Devine surrounding the “slimy concepts” quote that Eklof attributes to “John William Murray, a former U.S. Representative and U.S. District Judge”:

“Jung Min Choi and John W. Murphy provide a rare explicit defense of political correctness (especially chs. 2 and 3).²⁸ ... Thus Choi and Murphy write: ‘While the critics of PC charge that it is totalitarian, they are the ones that adhere to a central tenet of dogmatism’ (p. 155).

...Choi and Murphy attempt to reassure us that ‘the adverse reaction of PC’ers is not simply to unpopular speech, but to language that is inflammatory and harmful’ (p. 131)—neither attending to the problems involved in drawing a line between what is protected and what is not. And Murphy at least holds a view of language designed to make such lines permeable. As he writes elsewhere, **‘postmodernists do not aspire to bask in the pure light of reality, but rather to wallow in the mire of opinion. They work with slimy concepts, rather than the rigorous axioms of logic.’**³⁰ The result is sophism of the crudest sort: I can call for the suppression of my opponents as ‘racists,’ while claiming to be a champion of free speech.” (Devine, p.28–29)

I bolded the quote that Eklof cites in *Gadfly*, so it can be more easily picked out from the rest of Devine’s text. As you can see, Eklof reproduces it accurately.

That’s about all he gets right, however. Sorry to drag you down the rabbit hole with me, but here’s what Eklof gets wrong:

1. As noted, Eklof attributes the “slimy concepts” quote about “postmodernists,” to “John William Murray, a former U.S. Representative and U.S. District Judge.” But this isn’t what Devine wrote: he clearly notes that John W. Murphy—NOT “Murray”—is the author of the quote. Nor does Devine include any occupational information (let alone what the “W” in his name stands for)—this is Eklof’s own contribution. I imagine

he included it to establish that “Murray” is an authoritative source.

2. “Murray” vs. “Murphy” is more than a simple misspelling, however, as checking Devine’s footnotes reveals that *his* John W. Murphy is the author of a book, *Postmodern Social Analysis and Criticism*—the “slimy concepts” quote is on p.15. As it turns out, Devine’s John W. Murphy is a Professor of Sociology at the University of Miami—not a former congressman or judge. And I’m quite sure about that, because the book title is listed on p. 4 of Professor Murphy’s CV. I also tracked down the book itself. The “About the Author” page at the back of his book states:

“JOHN W. MURPHY is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Miami, Coral Gables, Florida. He received his Ph.D. from Ohio State University. His present interests include social philosophy and sociological theory.”

Nope, he’s definitely NOT a congressman or judge. Or a “Murray,” for that matter. Eklof clearly read the relevant page in Devine’s book, since he got the quote correct. So how did he manage to screw up Murphy’s name and occupations?

I’ll be blunt: if this is an accident, it’s a very strange kind of accident to have.

I can take a flying guess about how Eklof managed it, though, since there is a Wikipedia entry for a “John William Murphy” (not “Murray”) who really was a former U.S. Representative and U.S. District Judge. His bio notes, however, that he died in 1962—26 years before *Postmodern Social Analysis and Criticism* was published (1988).

The existence of this other “John W. Murphy” suggests that Eklof didn’t bother to check Devine’s references: he just grabbed the quote without checking where it came from. He did a Google search instead, grabbed the top result and called it good.

That still doesn’t explain how he came up with “Murray” instead of Murphy... it may have been badly scribbled notes or possibly a brain fart, based on the similarity to the name of Universalist minister John Murray, who also makes an appearance in *Gadfly*.

However he ended up with “Murray” vs. “Murphy,” however, this is Scholarship 101 FAIL. Eklof never bothered to check to see if he had the right guy.

But the misattribution is just the tip of the iceberg! In Devine’s account, John W. Murphy is a *defender* of PC, not a detractor. He co-authored an entire book about it! So why is Eklof using Murphy’s words to imply the opposite? Devine is crystal clear here: there is no way to misread him on this particular point.

In addition, Eklof characterizes the “Murray” (Murphy) quote as a complaint about postmodernism, probably because it contains the word “slimy,” which is often used as a pejorative—a “slimy” person is dishonest and cannot be trusted, for example. But he didn’t get that interpretation from Devine, either—it’s his own invention.

Even worse, that’s not at all how Murphy meant it, since he’s a postmodernist himself (or was, at least in 1988). Here’s the context from Murphy’s own book, which contrasts the rigid objective/subjective “dualism” of modernism to the “wild” nature of postmodernism, which is “not restricted by scientific protocol”:

“Postmodernism is thus ‘pagan’ according to Lyotard.⁵² Postmodernists do not aspire to bask in the pure light of truth, but rather to wallow in the mire of opinion. They work with slimy concepts, rather than rigorous axioms of logic. In this sense, truth, knowledge, and morality are not founded on themes that are immune to evolution. For example, the primitive mind is considered by Levy-Bruhl to be illogical, simply because the cognitive style of so-called primitive persons does not fit neatly into the scheme outlined by modern psychologists.

...The aim of this book is not only to introduce the main tenets of postmodernism, but to answer the critics of this philosophy. The question is: Why does reality have to be sanitized, instead of poetic? Also, is a poetic reality synonymous with chaos? As will be shown, the usual renditions of knowledge and order are defiled by postmodernism, yet culture is not destroyed. (Murphy, p.15)

The “slimy concepts” quote is not a “complaint” about postmodernism. Murphy isn’t using “slimy” in a negative sense (as in “immoral or dishonest”); he’s using it in a “poetic” sense of being “messy” or even “primordial.” This is in contrast to the “sanitized” worldview of modernism, which Murphy claims, “seeks order at the expense of creativity.” (Murphy, p. 14)

This also explains why Devine used the quote to criticize Murphy’s “view of language,” which he evidently feels is imprecise. Devine—not Murphy—is the one who has “complaints” about postmodernism (as the next 4 pages of his book attest), which is why he uses the “slimy concepts” quote to dismiss Murphy’s (and Choi’s) opinion of PC.

All-in-all, the paragraph from *Gadfly* analyzed in this section is a total mess. There’s no excuse for grabbing a quote out of context and interpreting its meaning in a way that’s contrary to the actual view of the author. It’s deceptive.

On reflection, maybe *that’s* how Professor John W. Murphy became “John William Murray, a former U.S. Representative and U.S. District Judge” since it’s at least consistent to attribute a non-existent “complaint” to a non-existent critic of postmodernism. Talk about “reject[ing] empirical data in favor of relativistic whims!”

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WHAT THE GADFLY PAPERS GETS WRONG

IDENTITY POLITICS

Rev. Eklof uses the term “Identitarianism” to refer to the “identity politics” practiced by racial/gender/sexual minorities in *Gadfly*. It’s a deeply unfortunate choice of words, as the following excerpts from a 2017 Mother Jones report about Identity Evropa “star” Nathan Damigo make clear:

“Damigo is a product of the rapidly growing right-wing ideology known loosely as ‘identitarianism,’ and his current 15-minutes of fame has, in turn, made him one of its newly anointed popularizers.

...Damigo’s activism started after he was released in 2014. He became enamored with the French nationalist movement Bloc Identitaire, whose so-called identitarian ideology aims to extend the insights of identity politics to white people in order to preserve and promote ‘white’ culture. Identitarianism was a far-right, anti-immigration movement, but it was influenced in part by socialist ideas.”

As the SPLC notes, the term “identitarianism” has become the term of choice for certain violent white nationalists in the US:

“Spencer and Casey’s efforts to back away from explicit white nationalist appeals and instead focus on a sympathetic victim like Steinle and innocuous-sounding ‘identitarianism’ come straight from the playbook of a larger attempt by the international far right to obscure the genocidal implications of white separatism, which remains at the core of these movements.”

“Identitarianism” even has its own Wikipedia page.

“The Identitarian movement or Identitarianism is a post-WWII European far-right[2] political ideology asserting the right of peoples of European descent to culture and territory which are claimed to belong exclusively to people defined as ‘European’. Originating in France and building on ontological ideas of modern German philosophy, its ideology was formulated from the 1960s onward by essayists such as Alain de Benoist, Dominique Venner, Guillaume Faye and Renaud Camus, considered the movement’s intellectual leaders.”

Is the use of the term “identitarianism” in *Gadfly* a “dog whistle” attempt to equate violent white nationalists with left/liberal students protesting (certain) conservative speakers? Or is it simply cultural ignorance on Eklof’s part, combined with the desire to imitate Lukianoff’s and Haidt’s conversion of “safe spaces” to “safetyism?”

Personally, I prefer the latter to the former. For the present, let's assume that, for purposes of this discussion, "identitarianism" really is synonymous with "identity politics" as practiced by liberal POC/LGBTQ+/etc. folks, so we can move on.

At any rate, Rev. Eklof starts his discussion of the topic by citing Mark Lilla's definition of identity politics, which he sources from Lilla's book, *The Once and Future Liberal*:

Identity politics, or, 'identity liberalism,' as Lilla more broadly calls it, and what I mean by, identitarianism, refer to the promotion of the interests of certain marginalized or oppressed groups without regard for broader issues than their own, or for the greater concerns of the larger political party or society to which such groups belong." (Eklof, *The Gadfly Papers*)

This is, suffice it to say, NOT AT ALL how most liberals define it.

"Lilla's argument has nothing to do with identity politics. At least, not as the Combahee River Collective, which coined the term and theorized its meaning, originally laid out. In fact, Lilla spends very little time engaging the collective's meaning of the term, instead devoting his energy to his own interpretation of identity politics. The one time he does mention their work he is dismissive.

... Lilla's spin on this statement would make identity politics sound like a selfish political theory. But his bad interpretation is not the same as a bad theory. When the collective writes that the 'most radical politics come directly out of our own identity,' Lilla reads this as applying to each individual group's identity when the Combahee River Collective meant 'our own' to apply specifically to black women. It is a result of their belief, as they write later in the statement, that, 'If Black women were free, it would mean that **everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.**'"

Emphasis mine. The idea that identity politics is invariably narrow and selfish is Lilla's, rather than something inherent in its conception, which is why historian Samuel Moyn refers to Lilla's attack on it as an "**ill-conceived and unpersuasive indictment**." But—coming from Lilla—this is hardly a surprise, as he's a former neocon mentored by none other than **Irving Kristol, aka "The Godfather of Neoconservatism."** His nostalgia is such **that he managed to express this sentiment in 2009**, shortly after the launching of the Tea Party:

"But mainstream American conservatism, which pretty much is all there is to the American right, shares nothing meaningful with those protofascist figures. Our conservatives accept the legitimacy of constitutional self-government, even when they hate the legislation and court decisions resulting from it; they play by the rules."

"They play by the rules?" Really? Author and historian of conservatism **Rick Perlstein would beg to differ.** Something tells me that Lilla just isn't a very good judge of modern conservatism.

Lilla's also not particularly subtle about his disdain for grassroots, minority-led political movements in general. For example, this is what Lilla had to say about "Black Lives Matter" to the **New Yorker's David**

Remnick:

Remnick: So what did Black Lives Matter do that you're, at best, ambivalent about—and very critical, really?

Lilla: And then I say, “But there's no denying that the movement's decision to use this mistreatment to build a general indictment of American society and its law-enforcement institutions and to use Mau Mau tactics to put down dissent and demand a confession of sins and public penitence played into the hands of the Republican right.”

Remnick: But, Mark. “Mau Mau tactics.” Are you familiar with—

Lilla: Of course I remember it. What was that confrontation they had with Hillary Clinton, if not that? They were shouting down people at various venues. No, those were Mau Mau tactics, sure.

Remnick: You're comfortable with that phrase?

It was, I think, a huge mistake on Eklof's part to use Lilla's book, *The Once and Future Liberal*, as a primary resource for his own. Lilla's arguments are unpersuasive because his rejection of identity politics seems more visceral than evidence-based. In addition, he's not the sort of authoritative source that the liberals Eklof wants to persuade are likely to respect. Lilla may think of himself as a liberal, **but that's not how many, if not most, liberals think of him.** That includes one of Lilla's Columbia University colleagues, **Katherine Franke**, who described Lilla's “liberalism” thusly:

“Let me be blunt: this kind of liberalism is a liberalism of white supremacy. It is a liberalism that regards the efforts of people of color and women to call out forms of power that sustain white supremacy and patriarchy as a distraction. It is a liberalism that figures the lives and interests of white men as the neutral, unmarked terrain around which a politics of ‘common interest’ can and should be built. And it is a liberalism that regards the protests of people of color and women as a complaint or a feeling, ignoring the facts upon which those protests are based — facts about real dead, tortured, raped, and starved bodies. The liberalism Lilla espouses reduces these facts of human suffering and the systems of power that produce that suffering as beside the point.”

Harsh? Not really. Here's a perfect example of Franke's point from *The Once and Future Liberal*:

“An example. I am an absolutist on abortion. It is the social issue I most care about, and I believe it should be safe and legal virtually without condition on every square inch of American soil. But not all my fellow citizens agree (though in certain cases an enormous majority does). So what should my strategy be? Drive pro-life voters out of the garden and into the waiting arms of the radical right? Or should I find a civil way to agree to disagree and make a few compromises in order to keep the liberal ones in my own party and voting with me on other issues?” (Lilla, p.116)

So, Lilla—a man who can never become pregnant—is willing to make “a few compromises” on abortion!
My Hero!!!

Snark aside, I'm aghast at Lilla's stunning ignorance about “the social issue” he claims to “most care about.”

His declaration completely ignores a long history of attempts to compromise with implacable pro-life activists and legislators. All that “compromise” accomplished was an increase in the burdens that pregnant people had to bear. [This nearly 20-year-old article by Duke University Law Professor Walter Dellinger](#) eviscerates the pretensions of would-be compromisers like Lilla, who were just as obtuse then as he is now:

“The widespread desire that some kind of compromise be found for the divisive abortion issue is understandable: our public law should not appear wholly indifferent to the values that underlie the deeply held moral beliefs of large numbers of Americans. Even though I am naturally inclined to welcome suggestions for ameliorating contentious issues, I want to argue here that proposed ‘compromise’ restrictions on abortion are unacceptable. What is proposed as compromise simply does not satisfy the concerns of those who find abortions morally troublesome. But the ‘moderate’ restrictions in force and those now being introduced do impose real harm on many women and fall with such disproportionate force upon the less fortunate that they offend fundamental principles of equality.

The kinds of abortion legislation being advanced in the sheep’s clothing of compromise fail to take into account the social and economic reality of abortion in America. Some ‘intermediate’ restrictions now being proposed are coercive laws that would seriously curtail all women’s autonomy. Other proposals would retain access to safe and legal abortion for affluent urban women while compromising away the rights of young, poor, uneducated, and rural women. Many compromise legislative proposals are disguised trades that would enable those who are affluent to retain access to abortion (for now at least) in exchange for ‘moderate’ restrictions that place abortion out of the reach of less fortunate women. It is a devil’s bargain, and it must be rejected.”

I’d love for Mark Lilla to read [the amici brief filed by 368 legal professionals who’ve had abortions](#) and consider just how *his* willingness to compromise on *their* reproductive rights might have changed their lives for the worse.

Ok, this is a discussion about identity politics, not abortion. But the above validates Professor Franke’s take: Lilla’s perfectly happy to compromise on issues that have zero impact on him personally, without even considering what sort of suffering his compromises might inflict on others. He’s so high on his own supply, he can barely sympathize, let alone empathize, with someone who isn’t named “Mark Lilla.”

Not convinced? Ok, let’s return to Lilla’s bête noire, Black Lives Matter:

“Given the segregation in American society white families have little chance of seeing and therefore understanding the lives of black Americans. I am not a black male motorist and never will be. All the more reason, then, that I need some way to identify with one if I am going to be affected by his experience. And citizenship is the only thing I know we share. The more differences between us are emphasized, the less likely I will be to feel outrage at his mistreatment.” (Lilla, p.126)

I’m not sure I even know where to begin with this. Even in the lily-whitest of towns, white families have seen Black people, if not as neighbors then as workers, visitors and sports/media figures. And then there’s the internet, for god’s sake! They could, if they so desired, see the many videos and news stories document-

ing the continued abuse of Black male motorists at the hands of law enforcement.

If white families are really as blind as Lilla believes, it's by choice...much like the choice to live in a segregated community in the first place. It's amazing to me that Lilla treats segregation as a "given" that... just happened, apparently, and that he believes its influence can be overcome with the right (Lilla-Approved™) messaging. His blithe dismissal of the massive, multigenerational effort by Black activists to be accepted as fellow citizens by whites is yet another history FAIL. [As journalist Adam Serwer recently wrote in The Atlantic:](#)

"Black Americans did not abandon liberal democracy because of slavery, Jim Crow, and the systematic destruction of whatever wealth they managed to accumulate; instead they took up arms in two world wars to defend it. ... The American creed has no more devoted adherents than those who have been historically denied its promises, and no more fair-weather friends than those who have taken them for granted."

I guess 150 years of post-Civil War effort by Black Americans to be accepted as full citizens still isn't enough for Lilla. It's just like his stance on abortion; he's oblivious to, or else utterly indifferent to the [history of civil rights in the US](#), wherein pleas for equal citizenship fell on deaf ears.

And is Lilla serious when he claims that "citizenship is the only thing" he knows he shares with a Black male motorist who's been mistreated (if not seriously injured or killed outright) by the police?

W...T...F...!???

What happened to "male" and "motorist," much less "human being?" What about the shared fear of "being pulled over by a cop?" It's rarely a pleasant experience, no matter how professionally the officer behaves. I have even less in common with a Black male motorist than Lilla does, and I have no trouble feeling outrage when one is "mistreated" (which is itself a peculiarly, emotionally distant term to use for the racist harassment, exploitation, brutalization and/or summary execution protested by BLM).

Lilla is clearly suffering from an empathy deficit. I completely understand why Professor Franke is repelled by his "liberalism." I also understand why NYT reviewer (and Yale History Professor) Beverly Gage described *Once and Future Liberal* as "...trolling disguised as erudition." The degree of detachment from normal human emotions he displays in his writing is unsettling.

For what it's worth, none of this—disturbing as it is—means Lilla must be wrong in his diagnosis of progressive/Democratic electoral woes. But "Just So" stories don't cut it with me: Lilla doesn't cite a single shred of data to make his case. It's true because he says it is. Or rather feels it is, because *Once and Future Liberal* is a romance masquerading as a polemic. Compare, for example, Lilla's account of Pilgrim settlement in New England to that of [Humanities Professor Sarah Churchwell in the NYRB](#):

Lilla: "The Pilgrims and other religious dissenters who fled England for our shores did not speak in terms of personal identities; they had souls back then. What they were seeking in America, though, was a place where they could fully identify with the country, while still fully identifying with whatever church they chose. The consensus in Europe, especially after the Wars of Religion, was that such dual identification was a psychological impossibility, given Christianity's ambiguous relation to political life. But it turned out not to be impossible in America, because the principles the country was founded on gave Christians reasons to identify with the state because the state guaranteed their right to identify with their churches. That

proved the trick. And so, in a sense, to become an American you had to identify with only one thing: the American system of religious liberty. The citizenship bond took logical precedence because without it the Christian bond could not be protected.” (Lilla, p.60)

Churchwell: “Virtually every major event in the long and troubled history of the United States was a direct consequence of identity politics. Start whenever you think America begins, and power struggles based on identity will be staring you in the face, starting with the genocide and forced resettlement of indigenous peoples by European migrants. A handful of those migrants, traveling on the Mayflower, called themselves ‘Separatists’ and decided to start a new society based on their religious beliefs, in which church membership would be a requirement of political representation. That’s identity politics.”

Lilla’s account of Pilgrim motivation is simply a warmed-over recitation of **a long-debunked myth**. His version of early American history erases indigenous people and African slaves and rhapsodizes about noble, white, English (not Irish!) Christians seeking religious liberty on “our shores” (which weren’t “ours” at all in the late 16th/early 17th centuries when they arrived). By contrast, Churchwell’s account is a blunt summary of the often cruel reality.

As someone who prefers facts to fairy tales, I score this as: Churchwell: 1/Lilla: 0.

Unfortunately, the identity politics Lilla decries just aren’t that easy to wish away, because what he perceives as a “marginalized people” problem is actually a “dominant group” problem. The reality is that **a clear majority of white voters have voted for Republicans over Democrats in every presidential election for the last 50 years**. In other words, it was a pattern established well before the concept of “identity liberalism” emerged to disturb Mark Lilla’s sleep. As Rick Perlstein, one of the premier historians of modern conservatism, **wrote about the political motivations of white voters**:

“At the beginning of the 20th century, millions of impoverished immigrants, mostly Catholic and Jewish, entered an overwhelmingly Protestant country. It was only when that demographic transformation was suspended by the 1924 Immigration Act that majorities of Americans proved willing to vote for many liberal policies. In 1965, Congress once more allowed large-scale immigration to the United States — and it is no accident that this date coincides with the increasing conservative backlash against liberalism itself, now that its spoils would be more widely distributed among nonwhites.”

In his recent book, *Dying of Whiteness*, physician and sociologist Jonathan Metzl documents a reality that Lilla fails to see: there are white Americans who would rather die than share resources with “undeserving” minorities. Using an ailing Tennessee man, Trevor, as an example, Metzl writes:

“Yet I could not help but think that Trevor’s deteriorating condition resulted also from the toxic effects of dogma. Dogma that told him that governmental assistance in any form was evil and not to be trusted, even when the assistance came in the form of federal contracts with private health insurance or pharmaceutical companies, or from expanded communal safety nets. Dogma that, as he made abundantly clear, aligned with beliefs about a racial hierarchy that overtly and implicitly aimed to keep white Americans

hovering above Mexicans, welfare queens and other nonwhite others. Dogma suggesting to Trevor that minority groups received lavish benefits from the state, even though he himself lived and died on a low-income budget with state assistance. Trevor voiced a literal willingness to die for his place in this hierarchy, rather than participate in a system that might put him on the same plane as immigrants or racial minorities.” (Metzl, p.4)

Simply put, appeals to common citizenship aren’t likely to change the attitudes of people with **a psychological investment in the racial hierarchy Metzl identifies**. There’s also little that liberal activists can say to sway a demographic that’s been primed for decades to hate and fear them. As journalist David Nierwert observed in his 2009 book, *The Eliminationists: How Hate Talk Radicalized the American Right*:

“The kind of incident Timothy Burke experienced is becoming commonplace because it’s being openly encouraged by major figures in the conservative movement, both in the media and officialdom.

A brief sampling:

Rush Limbaugh: ‘I tell people don’t kill all the liberals. Leave enough so we can have two on every campus—living fossils—so we will never forget what these people stood for.’

Ann Coulter: ‘My only regret with Timothy McVeigh is he did not go to the New York Times Building.’

Bill O’Reilly: ‘Everybody got it? Dissent: fine; undermining, you’re a traitor. So, all those clowns over at the liberal radio network, we could incarcerate them immediately. Will you have that done, please? Send over the FBI and just put them in chains, because they, you know, they’re undermining everything and they don’t care, couldn’t care less.’

...these are examples of nationally broadcast instances of the rhetoric of elimination, sometimes under the guise of ‘humor.’ Through such statements, underlying attitudes are transmitted to a wide audience and the generally passive acceptance with which they are received sends a powerful message: that such talk, and its accompanying hateful worldview, is acceptable.” (Nierwert, p.19)

“Trevor” is the outcome of a calculated, decades-long, right-wing political project to make liberalism/liberal ideas toxic. It was amazingly effective at poisoning conservative minds, as **this 2011 article about the demise of “The Civility Project” attests**:

“Mr. DeMoss, a former aide to Moral Majority founder Rev. Jerry Falwell and an unpaid adviser to Republican Gov. Mitt Romney in the 2008 presidential campaign, said that he was particularly surprised by the hostility to the civility pledge from conservatives.

‘The worst e-mails I received about the civility project were from conservatives with just unbelievable language about communists, and some words I wouldn’t use in this phone call,’ he said. ‘This political divide has become so sharp that everything is black and white, and too many conservatives can see no redeeming value in any liberal or Democrat.’”

The Trevors of this country are deserving of our concern and care, whether they vote for liberals or not. But should the Democratic Party devote finite resources to courting their votes? **As Lilla declaimed to inter-**

viewer Sean Illing, “The bottom line is that we can’t win without these people.” But he doesn’t even attempt to prove it in his book: it’s as if it’s beneath him to even argue the point. But what if Wake Forest University professors Hana Brown and Melissa Harris-Perry are correct, and that Hilary Clinton lost in 2016 because she failed to mobilize Obama-era numbers of Black female voters? Perhaps we need more Combahee River Collective-style identity politics at the state and national level, not less.

It doesn’t seem to occur to Lilla that the Democrats might be better off attracting new and disenfranchised voters, rather than recalcitrant ones. This is a model being successfully implemented by grassroots Latino organizers in Arizona:

“If the Democratic Party’s old guard learns nothing else, it must stop using a majority of its resources to chase white swing voters and instead pay more attention to the millions of voters of color. For too long, they have treated us like cheap laborers who can knock on doors to deliver them 51 percent of the vote. In exchange, they run candidates who are out of touch with Latinos. In Tucson’s mayoral primary, the old boys’ club endorsed a white man over Regina Romero, a popular and highly qualified Latina who eventually won, even though the city is almost half Latino.”

It was what helped turn Virginia from a red state to blue in 2019:

“Tram Nguyen, the co-executive director of the voter-mobilization and power-building organization New Virginia Majority, is one of the key architects of the change in the state over the past decade. In a recent op-ed, she identified three factors that were essential to their success: sustained, multiyear, paid political organizing; staff who can talk to and organize their neighbors year-round; and the concentration of resources in communities of color, in order to turn population shifts into political power.”

And this is the approach being taken by politicians like Stacey Abrams, who is investing the political capital she earned during her recent GA gubernatorial run in the multiracial PAC Fair Fight. Politicians like Abrams represent the future, and for the Democratic Party to snub the voters she and other activists are mobilizing would be electoral suicide.

The Abrams connection brings me to the second naysayer Eklof enlists in his war on “identity politics”: Francis Fukuyama. Like Lilla, Fukuyama is an author, professor of political science and a former neocon. His thesis, as laid out in his recent book, *Identity*, is also similar to Lilla’s, albeit better written and more extensive (he discusses identity as a global phenomenon, while Lilla is more parochial). Not surprisingly, Fukuyama shares Lilla’s blind spots. He believes that—despite his admission that the right has become far more extreme and irrational—it’s primarily the responsibility of the political left to shift gears.

Abrams isn’t having it, and her response to Fukuyama in Foreign Affairs is worth reading in full. A taste:

“... Fukuyama’s criticism relies on a number of misjudgments. First, Fukuyama complains that ‘again and again, groups have come to believe that their identities—whether national, religious, ethnic, sexual, gender, or otherwise—are not receiving adequate recognition.’ In the United States, marginalized groups have indeed come to believe this—because it is true. Fukuyama also warns that Americans are fragmenting

'into segments based on ever-narrower identities, threatening the possibility of deliberation and collective action by society as a whole.' But what Fukuyama laments as 'fracturing' is in reality the result of marginalized groups finally overcoming centuries-long efforts to erase them from the American polity—activism that will strengthen democratic rule, not threaten it.

... My campaign built an unprecedented coalition of people of color, rural whites, suburban dwellers, and young people in the Deep South by articulating an understanding of each group's unique concerns instead of trying to create a false image of universality. As a result, in a midterm contest with a record-high turnout of nearly four million voters, I received more votes than any Democrat in Georgia's history, falling a scant 54,000 votes shy of victory in a contest riddled with voting irregularities that benefited my opponent.

... Beyond electoral politics, Fukuyama and others argue that by calling out ethnic, cultural, gender, or sexual differences, marginalized groups harm themselves and their causes. By enumerating and celebrating distinctions, the argument goes, they give their opponents reasons for further excluding them. But minorities and the marginalized have little choice but to fight against the particular methods of discrimination employed against them. The marginalized did not create identity politics: their identities have been forced on them by dominant groups, and politics is the most effective method of revolt."

The point is that Fukuyama and Lilla are academic theorists who talk the talk; people like Tram Nguyen and Stacey Abrams are grassroots political activists who walk the walk. It's a pity that Eklof chose to be influenced by the timidity of the former, rather than intrigued by the dedication, courage, experience and vision of the latter. Understanding the arguments for identity politics made by Abrams et al would have made *Gadfly* a much better book.

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WHAT THE GADFLY PAPERS GETS WRONG

CONCEPT CREEP

In *Coddling of the American Mind*, authors Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt introduce the term “concept creep” thusly:

“To understand how an Oberlin administrator could have used the word ‘safety,’ we turn to an article published in 2016 by the Australian psychologist Nick Haslam, titled ‘Concept Creep: Psychology’s Expanding Concepts of Harm and Pathology.’ Haslam examined a variety of key concepts in clinical and social psychology – including abuse, bullying, trauma and prejudice – to determine how their usage had changed since the 1980s. He found that their scope had expanded in two directions: the concepts had crept ‘downward,’ to apply to less severe situations, and ‘outward,’ to encompass new but conceptually related phenomena.” (Lukianoff and Haidt, p.25)

FYI: I’ve read Haslam’s paper, and—apart from the swipe Lukianoff and Haidt take at “an Oberlin administrator” (more on this below)—this is a reasonable summary of it. I have some issues, however, with where they take it:

“As with trauma, a key change for most of the concepts Haslam examined was the shift to a subjective standard. It was not for anyone else to decide what counted as trauma, bullying or abuse; if it felt like that to you, trust your feelings. If a person reported that an event was traumatic (or bullying or abusive), his or her subjective assessment was increasingly taken as sufficient evidence.” (Lukianoff and Haidt, p.26)

Haslam says nothing about “trust your feelings,” but by shoehorning their second “great untruth” into their interpretation of Haslam’s paper, Lukianoff and Haidt set the stage for their discussion of “safetyism.” In their view, safetyism warps students’ minds so they perceive mere emotional discomfort—such as having their beliefs challenged by a speaker—as harmful.

In other words, “concept creep” == “bad.” They don’t say it directly, but the dog whistle is unmistakable. Rev. Eklof obviously heard it, since his description of it is relentlessly negative. Here’s an example from *Gadfly*, which echoes *Coddling*’s disapproving tone:

“Since one’s subjective experience of words is now enough to deem them harmful, harmful, and, therefore, dangerous, those who speak are pressured to consider the ‘safety’ of those they communicate with their top priority. ‘... the notion of ‘safety’ underwent a process of ‘concept creep’ and expanded to include ‘emotional safety,’ ” *Coddling* says, as exemplified in a 2014 memo Oberlin College administrators posted

requesting their faculty use trigger warnings to ‘show students that you care about their safety,’ and that simply using the wrong pronoun ‘prevents or impairs their safety in the classroom.’[46] This explanation of concept creep, particularly regarding notions of what it means to be ‘harmed’ and to be ‘safe,’ helps explain the angry and defensive reaction to the well-intended UU World article.” (Eklof, *The Gadfly Papers*)

The problem is that both *Coddling* and *Gadfly* go well beyond what Haslam wrote. As Lukianoff’s and Haidt’s summary at the very top goes, Haslam set out to document a phenomenon in *psychology*. He explicitly rejects value judgments:

“I am at pains not to present concept creep as unambiguously desirable or undesirable, or to write it off as arbitrary or unwarranted. Conceptual revision is to be expected in view of changing scientific and social realities, and it may be appropriately responsive to those changes.” (Haslam, p.2)

In addition, Haslam also points out potential upsides to concept creep—it’s not all gloom and doom:

“Those drawn to a pessimistic assessment of these changes might argue that the expanding meaning of concepts such as abuse, bullying, and mental disorder is creating a culture of weakness, fragility, and excuse-making, in which everyone is a victim and no one is responsible for their predicament. Those drawn to a more optimistic assessment might applaud the growing sensitivity to suffering and maltreatment. A balanced evaluation of concept creep would be more ambivalent, falling somewhere between conservative reaction and liberal celebration.” (Haslam, p.13–14)

In other words, Haslam’s treatment acknowledges pros as well as cons, but you’d never learn this from reading *Coddling* or *Gadfly*.

More importantly, Haslam says nothing about “safety”—he offers 6 “case studies” and safety isn’t one of them. In fact, the words “safety” or “safe” don’t appear in the paper at all. It’s Lukianoff’s and Haidt’s (and Eklof’s) contention that it’s undergone concept creep. And perhaps it has, but the deceptive method they use to demonstrate it undermines their case.

This brings us back to “the swipe they take at ‘an Oberlin administrator’” I noted above. It’s a reference to an Oberlin College faculty guidance memo that was released, (and then **withdrawn for additional faculty input**) in 2014. In both *Coddling* and *Gadfly*, the Oberlin memo is used to illustrate how the definition of “safety” has metastasized beyond reasonable bounds. Here’s how it’s described in *Coddling*:

“...in 2014, Oberlin College posted guidelines for faculty, urging them to use trigger warnings to ‘show students you care about their safety.’ The rest of the memo makes it clear that what the college was really telling its faculty was: show students you care about their feelings. You can see the conflation of safety and feelings in another part of the memo, which urged faculty to use each student’s preferred gender pronoun (for example, ‘zhe’ or ‘they’ for students who don’t want to be referred to as ‘he’ or ‘she’), not because it was respectful or appropriately sensitive but because a professor who uses an incorrect pronoun ‘prevents or impairs their safety in a classroom.’” (Lukianoff and Haidt, p.24)

In other words, the memo is “Exhibit A” in their indictment of overprotective administrators bending over backwards to make sure students—all students—feel safe ‘n snug in the classroom.

Problem is, the document itself doesn’t support this reading. **The Oberlin memo** was actually written to address a serious concern: the presence of both the victims and perpetrators of sexual assault in the classroom. There’s nothing warm-and-fuzzy about it:

“According to a 2013 AAUP report, “Faculty members may thus find themselves in the role of ‘first responders’ to reports of sexual assault, yet few consider themselves adequately equipped for the role—in part because they are the least likely campus constituency to receive information about sexual assault and guidance about reporting and responding to it (7).

As part of the guidelines suggested by the federal government, the College is required to provide training for all of its community members, including faculty. The Task Force will be recommending training for all faculty that address how to identify and report sexual harassment and assault, the College’s policies and procedures, and the requirement to report any incident of sexual harassment or misconduct to the Title IX Coordinator. In the interim, this section will provide some additional resources to guide faculty.

...In an Oberlin class that contains 20 students, we estimate that there may be about 2 to 3 students in the class who have experienced some form of sexualized violence. If 1 in 3 women and 1 in 4 men have experienced IPV [note: Intimate Partner Violence], there can be at least 5–6 survivors of IPV in the class. In other words, you may have taught and may continue to teach individuals who have experienced significant trauma.

You may also face a number of students of all genders in your classes who have committed some form of sexual misconduct, or who hold views that may contribute to a culture and climate where sexualized violence is more likely to occur.

Oberlin’s community cannot afford to ignore sexualized violence, including intimate partner abuse and stalking. Faculty can make a serious impact on students’ lives by standing against sexual misconduct and making classrooms safer.”

Does this sound like “the college was really telling its faculty: show students you care about their feelings”? Feel free to click the link above and judge for yourself.

The quotes Lukianoff and Haidt extract about trigger warnings—which many educators feel is a **valid pedagogical concept**—appear far down in the memo, under the heading, “How can I make my classroom more inclusive for survivors of sexualized violence?”

Now, we can **agree** or **disagree** on the utility of trigger warnings for victims of sexual violence (or other personal traumas). The concept **triggered lively debate within the Oberlin student community** itself at the time. But Lukianoff and Haidt deceive their readers by depicting a handful of cherry-picked sentences as representative of the memo’s intent and content. **Sexual assault on college campuses is a common occurrence** and the Oberlin administrators were right in attempting to offer guidance to their faculty. That Lukianoff and Haidt ignore this context in order to push a narrative about overly fragile students is... actually pretty vile, in my opinion.

They’re also deceptive about the memo’s discussion on pronouns. Once again, Lukianoff and Haidt leave

out some crucial context:

"The Sexual Offense Policy defines sexual offense as "a behavior, which calls attention to gender, sexuality, gender identity or sexual orientation in a manner which prevents or impairs an individual's full enjoyment of educational or occupational benefits or opportunities." For many, use of incorrect pronouns calls attention to gender in a very inappropriate way, and prevents or impairs their safety in a classroom."

If you compare this to the *Coddling* excerpt above, you'll note that they omitted the part about calling "attention to gender in a very inappropriate way." That's a rather important thing to leave out.

The authors' focus on "zhe" or "they" for students who don't want to be referred to as 'he' or 'she'" is also manipulative, particularly since "he" and "she" are important when it comes to the well-being of trans students, both in and out of the classroom. Calling a trans man "she," or a trans woman "he" is a form of harassment when done intentionally (something [Oberlin's current Sexual Misconduct Policy](#) recognizes), and misgendering can add to the substantial burdens that trans people already face. For example, "[Injustice at Every Turn](#), a Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey," notes that 63% of survey participants experienced "a serious act of discrimination" (defined as "events that would have a major impact on a person's quality of life and ability to sustain themselves financially or emotionally").

Physical, and yes, emotional safety are serious concerns for trans people, sexual assault victims and other marginalized or traumatized folks. Yet Lukianoff and Haidt trivialize this in order to advance a narrative of overprotective administrators responding to generic mass of coddled and fragile students hobbled by an inflated definition of "safety."

It's revealing that Lukianoff and Haidt felt they had to... curate the information they provide about the memo in order to prove their point. A fair reading of the full memo does not support their contention that "concept creep" has warped student notions of safety; nor does it support Eklof's adoption of their framing to "explain" "...the angry and defensive reaction to the well-intended *UU World* article."

Of course, that still leaves us with the question: has the definition of "safety" undergone concept creep on college campuses (or within the UUA)? I suppose it's possible, although the fact that Lukianoff and Haidt (and Eklof) feel the need to "spin" their supporting evidence undercuts their claim, not to mention their status as objective reporters who are documenting troubling trends.

Postscript: Trying to Have it Both Ways

As an aside, Rev. Eklof's discussion of concept creep offers a vivid example of his inconsistency. In his discussion of microaggressions, for example, he writes this:

"Today 'microaggression' has gone through concept creep and been misappropriated by the suppressive cultural phenomenon known as political correctness. Although it is not a stretch to apply the term to any marginalized group that is negatively portrayed in the mainstream media, it's a colossal leap to think the concept can easily be used by anyone to spontaneously psychoanalyze the unconscious minds and

motives of others. Pierce coined the term in a professional journal to inform psychiatrists of the phenomenon. It was not meant to be used with abandon by novices who presume it gives them the spontaneous power to immediately know the subconscious intentions of others.” (Eklof, *The Gadfly Papers*)

So, in Eklof’s view here, “novices” are NOT to appropriate psychiatric terms (a category that encompasses the field of psychology) from professional journals and use them with “abandon” to “immediately know the subconscious intentions of others.”

Yet, that’s exactly what Eklof does here with concept creep:

“This explanation of concept creep, particularly regarding notions of what it means to be ‘harmed’ and to be ‘safe,’ helps explain the angry and defensive reaction to the well-intended UU World article.” (Eklof, *The Gadfly Papers*)

In this case, he’s also a novice. He appropriated the term from “a professional journal” and is now using it “with abandon” in his book to claim he knows why critics of the UU World article (discussed previously) were “angry and defensive.” In other words, he presumes it gives him the “power to immediately know the subconscious intentions of others.”

This is similar to the inconsistency I flagged in Eklof’s selective application of the “Principle of Charity.” It underscores the unprofessional, slapdash quality of the writing and argumentation in *Gadfly*.

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WHAT THE GADFLY PAPERS GETS WRONG

MICROAGGRESSIONS

In *Gadfly*, Eklof lifts a sentence from the allegedly “linguicidal” email protesting the *UUWorld* “After L, G, and B” article to introduce his next topic, microaggressions:

“If your gender identity matches the gender you were born into (cisgender) and the article seems fine to you even after reading the links above, please do not ask transgender people in your life to explain it to you. That’s a microaggression and it causes harm and exhaustion.” (Eklof, *The Gadfly Papers*)

He continues:

“The term “micro-aggression” was coined in 1974 by Harvard Medical School professor of psychiatry Chester M. Pierce, in reference to the degrading ways African Americans are portrayed in the mass media ‘and copied in white-black real life encounters.’[56]

In naming this troubling and disturbing social reality, Pierce hoped psychiatry could be used to help African Americans impacted by negative images of themselves to, indeed, change the negative cultural narrative that often gets stuck in their own heads.

Today “microaggression” has gone through concept creep and been misappropriated by the suppressive cultural phenomenon known as political correctness. Although it is not a stretch to apply the term to any marginalized group that is negatively portrayed in the mainstream media, it’s a colossal leap to think the concept can easily be used by anyone to spontaneously psychoanalyze the unconscious minds and motives of others. Pierce coined the term in a professional journal to inform psychiatrists of the phenomenon. It was not meant to be used with abandon by novices who presume it gives them the spontaneous power to immediately know the subconscious intentions of others. ‘... it is not a good idea to start by assuming the worst about people and reading their actions as uncharitably as possible,’ Lukianoff and Haidt tell us, ‘This is a [cognitive] distortion known as mind reading.’[59].” (Eklof, *The Gadfly Papers*)

There’s a lot of wrong packed into Eklof’s explanation, so I might as well give it to you straight.

Let’s start with Eklof’s claim about the origin of the term “microaggression.” Yes, Dr. Pierce did coin the term “micro-aggression,” but his first use of it (insofar as I’ve been able to discover) predates the “professional journal” Eklof cites by 4 years: it first appeared in an anthology, *The Black Seventies*, which was published in 1970. *The Black Seventies* was not a medical book or journal; rather it was a collection of essays by a range of prominent black authors that covered topics such as art, Black Nationalism and religion. Dr. Pierce’s contribution was called “Offensive Mechanisms,” and used football as a metaphor for describing racialized interac-

tions between white and Black Americans. The lesson he drew from football was simple: he wanted to “coach” Black Americans in defensive techniques to help them more effectively respond to offensive white racism:

“It is my fondest hope that the day is not far remote when every black child will recognize and defend promptly and adequately against every offensive micro-aggression. In this way, the toll that is registered after accumulation of such insults should be markedly reduced.

What this is saying that the final clinical application of the knowledge of offensive mechanisms should be to help make each black child an expert in propaganda. That is, he must see what is in his own best interest and decide for himself while detecting and deflecting the considerable white effort, via offensive maneuvers, to make him feel unsure, unwanted, useless, disunited, disaffected, and helpless. In short he must use his knowledge of offensive mechanisms, taught to him by such creatures as street therapists, to feel himself a respectable, dignified, worthwhile human being, despite the murderous social pressures which conspire to make him feel otherwise, and at the same time, invite his early demise.” (Pierce, “Offensive Mechanisms”)

Contra Eklof’s insistence that Dr. Pierce never meant for “novices” to use the term “micro-aggression,” Pierce’s clear intent was for black children—the ultimate novices—to do so. As for using the term “with abandon,” it’s also quite clear that Dr. Pierce wanted children to feel empowered to make these decisions for themselves, without worrying about whether they’d be judged for presuming that “...it gives them the spontaneous power to immediately know the subconscious intentions of others.”

Nor did Dr. Pierce feel it would be necessary for Black children to be taught to defend themselves by clinicians like himself. The “street therapists” he mentions are an undefined “group of health workers,” who “might or might not be the holders of high academic degrees,” who will “be at home in neighborhood meetings, in bars and barbershops and playgrounds.”

In other words, Pierce envisioned taking knowledge of “micro-aggressions” directly into communities. Teaching novices to defend themselves against microaggressions was Pierce’s desire from the start, and there is nothing in the “[professional journal](#)” Eklof cites to suggest that, by 1974, Pierce had changed his mind about that. It’s ironic that Eklof condemns “mind reading” while engaging in it himself!

Even if Eklof was correct about Dr. Pierce’s intentions, however, his ban on “novices” using the term still wouldn’t make any sense. Pierce never trademarked the word “micro-aggression,” so—once it was introduced in the literature—other professionals were free to communicate it to others.

Like [Dr. Derald Wing Sue](#), a psychologist and professor at Teachers College at Columbia University.

Since Eklof is a fan of *Coddling of the American Mind*, I’m a bit surprised he ran with Dr. Pierce rather than Dr. Sue for his discussion of microaggressions in *Gadfly*, since the latter is discussed in *Coddling* and the former is not. [Dr. Sue even has a relationship with the UUA](#). But no matter: [Dr. Sue has published research on micro-aggressions](#) and is one of the media’s “go-to” experts on the topic, so Eklof’s point about Dr. Pierce’s intent is moot. Not only has Dr. Sue been [interviewed about his work](#) and [quoted in the mainstream press](#), he’s also contributed to [a series of articles on microaggressions in the magazine, “Psychology Today”](#)—a publication geared to the general public.

Thus, Eklof’s admonishment is more than a little presumptuous. Beyond the fact that he’s a novice himself,

“novices” use the term because it was placed into the public domain by experts like Dr. Pierce and Dr. Sue for them to use.

Since I’ve already covered Eklof’s distortion of the concept of “concept creep,” let’s move on to his quote from Lukianoff and Haidt:

“...it is not a good idea to start by assuming the worst about people and reading their actions as uncharitably as possible,’ Lukianoff and Haidt tell us, ‘This is a [cognitive] distortion known as mind reading.’[59].” (Eklof, *The Gadfly Papers*)

This is basically a negative rephrasing of the “principle of charity” discussed in a previous essay as the idea “...that one should interpret other people’s statements in their best, most reasonable form, not in the worst or most offensive way possible.”

The trouble with relying on Lukianoff and Haidt is that they’re slippery. They use rhetorical sleight-of-hand repeatedly in *Coddling* in order to misdirect their readers. When discussing microaggressions, for example, they toss out a general acknowledgement that many microaggressions represent—as Dr. Pierce lamented—“subtle blows” that are “delivered incessantly” (Black Seventies, p. 266). Lukianoff and Haidt write:

“It is undeniable that some members of various identity groups encounter repeated indignities because of their group memberships. Even if none of the offenders harbored a trace of ill will, their clueless or ignorant questions could become burdensome and hard to tolerate.” (Lukianoff and Haidt, p.44)

Then they pull a switcheroo by presenting a detailed anecdote about a unique, unlikely-to-be-repeated incident in which the Black wife of a white victim of a “nearly fatal motorcycle accident” had to deal with racially insensitive hospital ER staff. She “took a deep breath,” and reminded herself that she “needed to keep the lines of communication open,” to help save her husband’s life. And of course, her decision to view the staff more charitably helped to resolve her situation.

That’s nice, except that most of the microaggressions identified by Dr. Pierce and Dr. Sue are of the “repeated indignities” that are “burdensome and hard to tolerate” kind, not the “I have to get over my anger to help save my husband’s life” kind. Yet all Lukianoff and Haidt offer to deal with the former are bland and generic responses:

“A charitable approach might be to say, ‘I’m guessing you didn’t mean any harm when you said that, but you should know that some people might interpret that to mean...’” (Lukianoff and Haidt, p.42)

They also offer up an anecdotal role model, Shadi Hamid, a senior fellow at the Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World at Brookings Institution, **who doesn’t mind being constantly mistaken for an immigrant**:

“As an Arab and a Muslim, I get the questions “Where are you from?”—by which people usually mean ‘Where are you really from?’—and ‘Were you born here?’ quite often. It doesn’t usually occur to me to get offended.”

So that settles it! If Hamid isn't offended by such questions, then nobody should be, right? The fact that Hamid was waaay out over his skis with respect to the incident (a tweet from NYT columnist Bari Weiss referring to LA-born skater Mirai Nagasu as an immigrant) that prompted his remarks doesn't matter to Lukianoff and Haidt. Or Eklof, who parrots their take on Hamid without acknowledging the criticism linked above:

"Weiss's supporters, like Shadi Hamid at The Atlantic, have caricatured this simple distinction as an 'infatuation with being offended' in the 'identitarian age,' distracting from more pressing issues. Hamid is confused, among other things, about the basis of the complaint, hijacking, and distorting it for his own personal crusade against excesses of modern identity politics... Many Japanese-Americans have been calmly and respectfully fighting the perception of perpetual foreigner for more than a century now, long predating the recent rise of multiculturalism and modern identity politics. And let's not forget that the internment itself was based on a particularly pernicious strain of identity politics, as well as the idea that there were more pressing issues at stake—a war—than a simple truthful distinction. It's bizarre to witness journalists in the age of Trump ferociously arguing that a factual untruth shouldn't be corrected. But the anti-identity-politics mob has their own form of senseless virtue signaling."

Indeed. I really wonder what advice Lukianoff and Haidt would give to Afroculinaria chef and author Michael Twitty, on how to respond to [the microaggressions he has to deal with when working as a plantation interpreter?](#)

"Thanks to a viral tweet the whole country sees what me and my colleagues have seen for quite some time. We get it. You want romance, Moonlight and Magnolias, big Greek Revival columns, prancing belles in crinoline, perhaps a distinguished hoary headed white dude with a Van Dyke beard in a white suit with a black bow tie that looks like he's about to bring you some hot and fresh chicken some faithful Mammy sculpture magically brought to life has prepared for you out back.

... While your gall and nerve anonymously preserved for eternity online is cute, I thought you might want to be further disturbed not by the actions of the dead, but by those of the living:

... How about that time you asked me if I lived in that kitchen with the dirt floor. Or when you said I was 'well fed' and had 'nothing to complain about.' 'This isn't sooo bad. White poor people had it just as bad if not worse.' I do so love it when folks like you ask me 'What are you making me for dinner?"'

Somehow, I don't think that "I'm guessing you didn't mean any harm when you said that..." would work for Mr. Twitty. Based on the interactions he describes in the linked post, I doubt that he's suffering from the "cognitive distortion known as mind reading."

There's nothing wrong with being charitable; and if you're someone, like Shadi Hamid, who sees no offense in "where are you *really* from" questions, that's great (I imagine that it helps that Hamid is a member of an academic elite). But it's offensive to imply Hamid is a role model that everyone on the receiving end of micro-aggressions should emulate. For some people, it's a bridge too far:



Gail
@gailgirl66

Follow



My brother Jake and I were in a home improvement store earlier today. We were helped by a guy wearing a MAGA hat. I was in shorts, so my prosthesis was obvious. While I stood right there the guy said, "Your girl is a beauty, but no leg, man how do you deal..." Jake punched him.

9:05 PM - 12 Dec 2019

6,210 Retweets 53,571 Likes



2.8K 6.2K 54K

I have a feeling Dr. Pierce would agree:

"After the Black Psychiatrists organized a year ago, and I was elected the first national chairman, a white psychoanalyst—a dear friend—spoke to me on the phone. I timed his 'lecture' to me. For twenty-one minutes he harangued about such things as what did I know about poverty since I was never really poor (he has never had schizophrenia but it is all right for him to treat schizophrenia!). He told me in essence that my life was not subjected to racial abuse. I cited the most raw abuses to him, which he conceded he hadn't imagined (since some took place in his home town). I indicated that as I grew older and into greater access to things, the more sad and angry I became. This was especially true when I saw the way decisions are made. Further, I would never presume to tell him how it is to be white or what he should do. The rules of our society, however, allowed him to tell me in what must be described as a patronizing lecture, what I should or should not be doing and what was in my own best interest. I presumably should have reacted to such psychotherapeutic intervention by doing what he said, or in essence, being controlled." (Pierce, "Offensive Mechanisms")

I will say one thing for Lukianoff and Haidt though: their book is concerned with college students, so an obvious defense is that they're the concerned grownups offering the kids some friendly advice. But Eklof doesn't have that excuse: the folks in the UUA he's criticizing are mature adults. When he insists that trans UUs aren't the best judges of their own experiences and that they were wrong to protest the "After L, G, and B" article, he comes off sounding a lot more like Dr. Pierce's white psychoanalyst friend than an LGBTQ+ ally.

References:

1. Eklof, Todd. *The Gadfly Papers*. Kindle ed., 2019.
2. Lukianoff, Greg and Jonathan Haidt. *Coddling of the American Mind*. Penguin Books, 2018.
3. Pierce, Chester. "Offensive Mechanisms." *The Black Seventies*, edited by Floyd B. Barbour, Porter Sargent Publisher, 1970, p.265–282.

WHAT THE GADFLY PAPERS GETS WRONG SAFE SPACES/SAFETYISM

As author Scott Lemieux points out in his review of *Coddling*, one of the biggest problems with the book is the authors' "... tendency to draw the very broad conclusions laid out at the book's outset from a series of cherry-picked anecdotes." Lukianoff's and Haidt's discussion of safe spaces and "safetyism" is no exception. Unfortunately, Rev. Eklof doesn't seem to see this as a problem. In *Gadfly*, he declaims:

“Safetyism,” they say, ‘refers to a culture or belief system in which safety has become a sacred value, which means people become unwilling to make trade-offs demanded by other practical or moral concerns.’ Safetyism, additionally, extends the traditional understanding of what being safe means. ‘Their focus on ‘emotional safety’ leads many of them to believe that... ‘one should be safe from not just car accidents and sexual assault but from people who disagree with you.’” (Eklof, *The Gadfly Papers*)

We've already seen Lukianoff and Haidt misuse the Oberlin memo to "prove" that concept creep has expanded students' definition of safety. Since Eklof finds their explanation of "safetyism" so compelling, however, it's worth taking a closer look at the "cherry-picked anecdote" they use to support it.

In *Coddling*, they begin with a report in the New York Times by Judith Shulevitz, about a debate on rape culture at Brown University in 2015. Shulevitz's column is tailor-made for Lukianoff and Haidt, since she's openly contemptuous of the students she's covering. Nonetheless, she does include some details in her article that don't... quite... fit the story the authors want to tell, so—as you'll see—they end up on the cutting room floor. Again.

One of the two speakers invited to Brown was Wendy McElroy, a Libertarian, anarcho-capitalist writer, and the author of a book disputing the existence of rape culture in the US. The invitation to McElroy was controversial, so a student petition was sent to Brown University President Christina Paxton, asking her to cancel the debate. In response, Paxton refused to do this, but she did release an email announcing that she disagreed with McElroy, and would be setting up an alternative event.

As an aside, both of Paxton's actions are recommended in PEN America's "Principles on Campus Free Speech" in its (far superior to *Coddling*) report, *Chasm in the Classroom: Campus Free-Speech in a Divided America*. The PEN report notes:

“When a university provides a platform to a figure who contradicts its values, leaders should strenuously and unequivocally affirm their values, explaining their position in considerable detail, while still permitting the speaker to speak.” (p.93)

...When an invited speaker is likely to be controversial, those issuing the invitation should consider

whether outreach to other stakeholders, facilitating counter-speech or other measures are appropriate to ensure that the speech is aired without negative repercussions.” (p.92)

Paxton affirmed the university’s values and offered an alternative to ensure that McElroy could speak “without negative repercussions.” So far, so good: Lukianoff and Haidt care about free speech, and at Brown, free speech principles were being respected. Shulevitz reported that the debate was packed, and **everything went smoothly**.

So what’s their problem with this event?

Two words: “safe space.” Students from Brown’s Sexual Assault Task Force also set up a **BWell Safe Space** for “[s]tudents who may feel attacked by the viewpoints expressed at the forum or feel the speakers will dismiss their experiences.”

It was the safe space that got Shulevitz’s, Lukianoff’s and Haidt’s knickers in a twist. In her article, Shulevitz waxed indignant over the presence of cookies, puppy videos and Play Doh in the safe space; decrying it as part of a trend of “self-infantilization” (despite the popularity of squeezable stress balls, coloring books, fidget spinners, cute animal videos and **other stress-relieving “toys” with adults Shulevitz’s age and up**). Lukianoff and Haidt see Shulevitz and raise her: they expand the part of her column devoted to the debate to 2½ pages. They spill a lot of words on this one.

So what did they leave out? For starters, the fact that only “a couple of dozen people” actually used the safe space. This didn’t matter to Shulevitz—for her, I imagine even one student would have been one too many—but it’s a pretty paltry number for *Coddling*’s purposes. **Nearly 9,000 students attended Brown University in 2015**: a couple dozen students is slightly over ¼ of 1% of the total population—hardly evidence of a pernicious trend that the authors claim is dooming **an entire generation**.

So they just skip that part. And they skip another detail from Shulevitz’s article, too. They write:

“But the threat [of McElroy’s presence] wasn’t just the reactivation of painful personal memories; it was also the threat to students’ beliefs. One student who sought out the safe space put it this way: ‘I was feeling bombarded by a lot of viewpoints that really go against my dearly and closely held beliefs.’” (Lukianoff and Haidt, p.28)

Setting aside the fact that their evidence of “a threat to students’ beliefs” consists of a quote from just **ONE** student, the student in question also happened to be a rape survivor who actually attended part of the debate. In other words, she “challenged her beliefs” but didn’t find McElroy persuasive. Awkward!

Then again, maybe not. Lukianoff and Haidt are the authors, after all, so they have the power to decide who gets to be heard. It’s **THEIR** story, so they have the right to turn her into their “poster child” for “safetyism” if they want to. They don’t even use her name, all the better to make “one student” stand in for many.

And that’s probably the most interesting detail they leave out, because it bears directly on the claims they make about “safetyism,” as well as the other cognitive distortions they claim liberal students are struggling with. According to Shulevitz, the student’s name is Emma Hall. Feel free [to click this link and check out this interview with her](#). Turns out she’s a pretty amazing person. While you’re at it, check out Katherine Byron, the student who organized the safe space—**her CV is pretty damn impressive too**. In Lukianoff’s and Haidt’s

view, these former Brown students exemplify a mindset that's harmful to themselves and others. They're supposed to be flailing and failing to cope with the real world... and yet, they're not. By the looks of it, they're high achievers who are doing quite well.

And this is why I have a big problem with *Coddling*, and Eklof's use of it as a primary source for *Gadfly*. Lukianoff and Haidt build their case largely by spinning media reports (like Shulevitz's) and cherry-picking quotes to fit their thesis. They do a fantastic job of building mountains out of molehills. Or as reviewer Lemieux puts it, *Coddling* "...ultimately tries to claim too much with too little support."

Sadly, Eklof follows their lead: in *Gadfly*, he's constantly erasing nuance, cherry-picking quotes and ignoring contrary evidence in order to fit the stories he tells about UUs or the UUA into their framework. And, like Lukianoff and Haidt, he seems unable to treat the people he writes about as *people*, with their own frames of reference. He turns them into caricatures instead, just like Lukianoff and Haidt did to Emma Hall and Katherine Byron.

This brings us back to "safe spaces" and "safetyism." For the vast majority of the UUs Eklof complains about in *Gadfly*, "emotional safety" isn't a "culture" or "belief system"—it's a basic human need. Marginalized people have to confront "dangerous ideas" all the time: it's part of daily life in a world that's optimized for the wants and needs of dominant groups.

That's why safe spaces exist. As with "political correctness," there's a history behind the term, that's distinct from Lukianoff's and Haidt's largely invented "trend" of safetyism.

As noted in this [open letter signed by 150 faculty members of the University of Chicago](#):

"The history of "safe spaces" goes back to gay, civil rights, and feminist efforts of the mid-20th century to create places protected from quite real forces of violence and intimidation. They also served as incubators of new ideas away from the censure of the very authorities threatened by these movements."

To say that the "quite real forces of violence and intimidation" have disappeared would be naïve. The PEN America report, [*Chasm in the Classroom: Free Speech in a Divided America*](#), devotes more than a dozen pages to a discussion of incidents of hate and intimidation in the US:

"In the words of the NAACP, Trump's campaign 'regularized racism, standardized anti-Semitism, de-exceptionalized xenophobia and mainstreamed misogyny.'⁶⁹ His election contributed to a heightened feeling of vulnerability among marginalized groups and people of color. This perception has been underlined by findings from anti-extremist monitors and the FBI that in the days after Election Day, reported hate crimes and other acts of hate rose significantly.⁷⁰ The SPLC documented nearly 900 hate crime reports in November and December of 2016, most occurring after the election.⁷¹ Education Week, in collaboration with ProPublica, found that from 2015 to 2017, the largest number of hate and bias incidents in K-through-12 schools took place on the day after the election—from a Latina student finding a note in her backpack reading "Go back to Mexico" to a rise in swastikas and slurs.⁷²" (p.14)

It would be lovely indeed if all that marginalized and vulnerable people had to endure was exposure to controversial ideas. Unfortunately, some also face disrespect, harassment and overt hostility. Safe spaces make

it easier to exist in a world that many experience as indifferent at best, and dangerous at worst.

In other words, a safe space is a place where participants can not only feel physically safe, but also emotionally *supported* by those you share common bonds with. It's a space free from the stigmatization, hostility, predation and/or rejection many people experience in their day-to-day lives. The people who use safe spaces aren't hiding away from "ideas" they're emotionally unequipped to deal with, except perhaps the "idea" that they're undeserving of decent, equitable treatment because they're not white, male, cis-het, able-bodied, conventionally attractive, etc.

A safe space is a form of self-care.

Not surprisingly, the availability of safe spaces is increasing, both **online** and off: the concept has expanded to **comic, fan & sci-fi** cons, the **fitness industry**, and other **political** and **social** venues, and why not? A safe space is one where participants can relax and feel free to be themselves, secure in the knowledge that they'll be treated with dignity and respect.

UUCS is also a place that, until recently, many saw as a "safe space" in the classic meaning of the term. That's changed, now that Lukianoff and Haidt have moved in and are living rent-free in Rev. Eklof's head. Eklof seems to have forgotten there's a difference between disagreeing with someone, and dismissing their perspectives by flattening them into caricatures who suffer from cognitive distortions like "safetyism." And the latter is precisely what he's using his book and pulpit—positions of power—to do. Sure, disagreement is still "officially" ok because "freeze peach," but the terms are unequal: the power differential is palpable and insuperable.

Under the circumstances, I can understand why some say they no longer feel "safe" at UUCS. And it ain't because of "safetyism," either.

References:

1. Eklof, Todd. *The Gadfly Papers*. Kindle ed., 2019.
2. Lukianoff, Greg and Jonathan Haidt. *Coddling of the American Mind*. Penguin Books, 2018.

WHAT THE GADFLY PAPERS GETS WRONG

REASON & LOGIC

When I set out to write down my thoughts on *Gadfly*, I focused primarily on the first section. For one thing, it seemed that it was the one that upset people the most. Plus, it was a target-rich environment: I still haven't written about everything I've learned. So I mostly skimmed through the other two sections.

Knowing my interest in checking footnotes and sources, however, my partner-in-crime drew my attention to footnote #167 (Kindle edition), which was sourced, he said, from The Washington Times.

That immediately raised a red flag, since the Washington Times is also known as the "Moonie Times"—it's the right-wing newspaper founded by the Unification Church. Over the years, the WaTimes has earned considerable notoriety for advancing conspiracy theories, pushing anti-Muslim content, and—of course—promoting Donald Trump. So I had to take a closer look, if for no other reason than to find out why Rev. Eklof would be citing the WaTimes for... well, anything.

And wow. Just wow.

In the last section, I mentioned my dislike of the way Rev. Eklof turns people into caricatures. This is a particularly blatant example.

It's a logic lesson, of course. That's what the third section of *Gadfly* is all about. But this one isn't about rainbows, "Alex," "Chris," or the KKK or any of the other generic examples he uses to demonstrate logical fallacies. This one concerns a person. A real, named person: Preston Mitchum.

I'm gonna fisk the surrounding text to highlight the problems. Eklof writes:

"When, for example, Georgetown University law professor, Preston Mitchum asserted, "All white people are racist,"[167]..." (Eklof, *The Gadfly Papers*)

Ok, we haven't even finished the first sentence, and there's already a problem. Three problems, in fact.

1. Sourcing: the Washington Times isn't a trustworthy source. That doesn't mean "wrong," but it does mean it should be verified first. Preston Mitchum is a real person, after all: it would be inappropriate to attribute a doctored, invented or inaccurate "assertion" to him.
2. Scholarship 101: The Washington Times article is based on a Campus Reform article on Professor Mitchum's "assertion," which, as it turns out, is a [tweet he posted on his Twitter account](#). I found Professor Mitchum's tweet quite easily, so the tweet, instead of the Washington Times, would have been the better source to cite.
3. Cherry-Picking—big time: for the record, both the Washington Times and Campus Reform report Professor Mitchum's tweet accurately. The kicker is, Rev. Eklof does not: he quotes only the first sentence. The full tweet is: "Yes, ALL white people are racist. Yes, ALL men are sexist. Yes, ALL cis people are transpho-

bic. We have to unpack that. That's the work!"

For a right-wing propaganda outlet, the Campus Reform article is actually pretty decent: it includes comments from Professor Mitchum as well as multiple tweets. Since the mission of Campus Reform is to "expose liberal bias on America's campuses," a young, black, gay, activist and professor from an elite institution is outrageous by default. From Campus Reform's point of view, the more material they could get from Mitchum, the better.

So, Eklof cherry-picks a single sentence, while the Washington Times gives us the entire tweet AND Campus Reform gives us multiple tweets and comments. It's frankly bizarre to me that two unabashedly conservative publications treat Prof. Mitchum more fairly (by providing more context) than someone like Rev. Eklof, who regards himself as an ally.

Back to Eklof's account:

"...he used a categorical statement that's universal in its quantity ('All'), and affirmative in its quality ("are"). The opposite of this statement, therefore, must be particular ('some') in its quantity, and negative in its quality ('are not'); 'Some white people are not racist.' These two statements are considered contradictories because they cannot both be true or false. If one is true, the other must be false. Thus, if Mitchum's categorical assertion is true, each person considered part of the class, 'white people,' must be racist." (Eklof, *The Gadfly Papers*)

This is painfully literalist and pedantic. It may be "logical" in a technical sense, but no one uses words with this kind of precision in conversations—particularly on social media. "All" can also mean, "nearly all," "all I know," or "for all practical purposes."

On a more serious note, it's disturbing to me that Eklof has targeted a named, real life person for his little exercise in erudition. To my knowledge, Preston Mitchum has nothing to do with the UUA or any of Rev. Eklof's issues with it, so why is he in *Gadfly*? And why is he being used in this way? It's frankly disrespectful: it looks like Eklof is trying to prove that he's smarter than Preston Mitchum is. This sort of "selective editing" gotcha tactic is the kind of thing that James O'Keefe does. It's not a good look. And it gets worse:

"Since he doesn't clarify what he means by 'racist,' it's reasonable to presume he accepts a common definition. If so, we must infer he means every white person, without exception, has a belief in white superiority, and/or supports discriminatory social systems, and/or is prejudiced against nonwhites." (Eklof, *The Gadfly Papers*)

WTF?! We are soooo off the deep end here. Why would Eklof expect Prof. Mitchum to "clarify what he means by racist" in the source Eklof cited? Preston Mitchum had no control over how his tweet was covered by the WaTimes. How is it Prof. Mitchum's responsibility to "clarify" this? [The WaTimes reporter didn't interview him.](#)

Even worse, since Eklof arbitrarily rules that the lack of clarity is Mitchum's fault, he announces that "it's reasonable to presume" that Mitchum accepts Eklof's "common definition." And that definition reeks of intentionality: there is no room for unconscious bias in the definition Eklof "reasonably" "infers" that Preston Mitchum holds. There's zero ambiguity about words like "has," "supports," and "is."

So, to recap: it's "reasonable" to put words in Prof. Mitchum's mouth, so to speak. In fact, Eklof implies, by his use of the term "must," that we are *required* to do so.

Except we're not required to do so. At all. Preston Mitchum isn't hard to find online: [click here for his web site](#). There's even a link in the menubar for "[Articles](#)." He's written articles for [ThinkProgress](#), [the Grio](#), [Slate](#) and [the Root](#), among other online media outlets. [He's been interviewed by Mother Jones](#). [He's on Twitter](#).

Eklof could even have asked him via [the Contact Form on Mitchum's website](#).

To reiterate: Preston Mitchum is a real person. And a pretty impressive real person with a substantial body of education, work and activism to his credit. Eklof owes him a good faith effort to ascertain what "he means by racist." Instead, Eklof turns him into a cut out.

Moving on...

"Disproving this claim requires only one exception. That is, the existence of one person in the class of 'white people' who does not believe in white superiority, doesn't support racist systems, and isn't prejudiced against nonwhites, makes this proposition false. This, then, would make its contradictory necessarily true, that some white people are not racist." (Eklof, *The Gadfly Papers*)

Nope. Eklof's "one exception" disproof might be "logical" in a formal sense but it's otherwise ridiculous. There are millions of white people in the US. The existence of one non-racist white person out of millions wouldn't make a damn bit of difference to a POC. Preston Mitchum would be just as oppressed; he'd still have plenty of justification for writing that "ALL white people are racist."

In addition, Rev. Eklof's "logic" elides an interesting distinction between "not racist" and "anti-racist." For the sake of argument, I may not "believe in white supremacy," "support racist systems," or am not "prejudiced against nonwhites," but that just speaks to my *attitude*, not my actions or behaviors. If I don't exert myself to help correct these wrongs, I'm complicit in maintaining the status quo. So, it could fairly be argued that yes, despite my beliefs, I'm still racist, because on some level, I'm ok with the status quo... it doesn't hurt me. I may flatter myself that I can't possibly be racist, but as the saying goes, "actions speak louder than words."

Next up...

"Presuming there are many exceptions to Mitchum's rule..." (Eklof, *The Gadfly Papers*)

Whoa Nellie! Where did THAT presumption come from? It just materialized out of thin air, based on the definition of racism that Eklof hung around Prof. Mitchum's neck like the proverbial albatross. Not to mention, he refers to his own cherry picking as "Mitchum's rule"—which is kinda insulting.

Just to keep score here: we now have 1 cherry-picked quote + 2 evidence-free presumptions, which equals...

"...he seems to have committed the fallacy of composition by attributing what is true of some of its members to the entire class of 'white people.' This mistake is the same as asserting all felines are tigers because some felines are tigers, or that cars are made of rubber because they have rubber tires." (Eklof, *The Gadfly Papers*)

"Seems" seems like a "tell" here. It's a rather indeterminate word, for such a precise exercise in logic, no? Perhaps that's because Eklof's definition of racism ISN'T the one Preston Mitchum holds after all. [Take it away, Campus Reform](#):

"Mitchum, expanding on his statements to Campus Reform, reiterated that 'any person [who is] a part of any dominant group when it comes to race, gender, sexuality, etc. contributes to the oppression of other groups,' and noting that 'it doesn't matter if they choose to do so consciously/subconsciously, knowingly/unknowingly, or with bad/good intentions.'

'What makes something racist, sexist, transphobic, homophobic, etc. is when 'power' and the ability to effectuate said power is added,' he explained, saying 'we must stop using this textbook definition of 'racism' because it doesn't take into account real world experiences of those who are on the receiving end of racism: people of color.'"

It's important to note that Prof. Mitchum explicitly allows for unconscious bias and good intentions, which are ruled out of the definition of racism Eklof assigns to him.

It's also pretty clear that Mitchum sees racism (not to mention other "isms") as something that comes with the territory if you're a member of a dominant group. It's built into the structures and assumptions that underlie that dominance. It's like the water that fish swim in: it's so omnipresent that it's difficult to see. "Unpacking" that is work: it requires education, self-awareness and the willingness to consciously change one's attitude and behaviors. But it never completely goes away because it's part of what shaped you as a person.

Thus, Preston Mitchum's conclusion, "ALL white people are racist" is true, even by Eklof's "logic," based on his "clarification" of what he means by racist. I don't have a problem with it either, because, I know I internalized a lot of racism growing up, which I've had to unpack and own. It's the truth, and there's no point in being defensive about it. And it's not for me to say that my transformation into a not-racist (or anti-racist!) person is complete, either... in a real sense, "I am not a racist" is not my judgment to make.

And I know I have internalized biases: for example, I tend to gravitate towards the wisdom of white men and view their words as authoritative when I'm choosing books and articles to read. To counter this, I make a conscious effort to read articles and books by non-whites, esp. WOC. That doesn't mean that I refuse to read the works of white men altogether, but it does mean I have to remind myself to not rely exclusively on them when deciding what's important (or entertaining!) for me to read and consider. It's part of the "work" I have to do.

I'd like to think that Rev. Eklof would be honest enough to admit he has internalized biases too. Certainly Preston Mitchum doesn't have a problem admitting his. His remarks to Campus Reform include a caveat that "he himself has "been fed sexist and transphobic thoughts from society." [He made similar remarks on Twitter](#):



Preston Mitchum @PrestonMitchum · Jul 23, 2017

Yes, ALL white people are racist. Yes, ALL men are sexist. Yes, ALL cis people are transphobic. We have to unpack that. That's the work!

1.5K

252

403





Ronin @RONIN · Jul 23, 2017

Hmm... just a coincidence that you don't consider yourself as belonging to any of these evil groups, or ?

3

2

263



Preston Mitchum ✅

@PrestonMitchum

Replying to @RONIN

That's ironic considering that I'm a man and cisgender. And yes, I realize I also have work to do to unpack what I've called out.

3:37 AM · Jul 24, 2017 · Twitter for iPhone

He's blunt and I'm sure that bothers a lot of "wypipo" (hat tip to Michael Harriot of The Root for that one, lol). But, just as Eklof claims the right to speak his truth, Preston Mitchum has the right to speak his.

Speaking of "wypipo"... I'd like to think that if Eklof had done his homework, he would have moved on to another target, as Prof. Mitchum is also quoted in the Campus Reform article as saying this:

"Mitchum went on to note that he was 'a little troubled, but not surprised, about the conservative outrage' provoked by his initial tweet, since most commenters took issue with his remarks about white racism.

'Most of the commentators didn't push back on the idea of men being sexist and cis people being transphobic as untrue; only that all white people are not racist. And that's likely because many of them saw themselves in my tweet and went on the defense immediately,' he said, noting that he himself has 'been fed sexist and transphobic thoughts from society,' while 'white people writ large have been fed racist thoughts.'

'Because of that, there's unlearning to do. Everyone must do this—which is why I said, 'that's the work,' he concluded. 'The problem is that people in dominant groups are so used to being defensive, that they aren't even taking a step back to even consider that maybe, just maybe the marginalized community is right.'"

LOL—and jumping on the "white racism" part *is exactly what Rev. Eklof did*. Since Prof. Mitchum sees this as "defensive" behavior, it's highly likely others do too.

I'm sorry, but this is just sad. It's sad because—no matter how hard he tries—Rev. Eklof just can't "logic" accusations of racism in the UUA away, as he tries to do in this section of *Gadfly*. It's sad because—in his determination to try—he (once again) turned a complex human being into caricature for didactic purposes. It's sad because Eklof had no obvious reason to target Preston Mitchum in the first place. You don't have to agree with Preston Mitchum, or the UUA's efforts at anti-racism either, to see this is the wrong approach,

References:

1. Eklof, Todd. *The Gadfly Papers*. Kindle ed., 2019.
2. @PrestonMitchum. "Yes, ALL white people are racist, Yes, ALL men are sexist..." Twitter, July 23, 2017, 9:49 a.m., <https://twitter.com/prestonmitchum/status/889165691529637888?lang=en>

EPILOGUE

I know that this critique will not be well-received in some quarters. That's ok. I've already seen how the new commitment to "free speech" has played out for other *Gadfly* critics. I didn't do this to win a popularity contest. But, at the very least, I thought I'd use this space to create a "Q & A," to head off the most common questions and comments.

1. Why did you write this?

I'll be blunt: because somebody within UUCS had to. I didn't want to. At-fucking-all. For several weeks after GA, I did my best to ignore the controversy over *Gadfly*, because a) I had other priorities (still do); b) I figured it would all blow over (it didn't); and c) I knew what it would cost me to do what I just finished doing. I have standards. Lord knows they're incompletely realized here, but I've had enough of this. I had to stop typing at some point and get back to living my life.

If you believe nothing else I say, believe this: there was no joy in this for me.

2. Rev. Eklof is already hurting. Why do you want to add to his pain?

I know he's hurting and I DON'T want to add to his pain. Even though I think he's going off the rails in his quest to be the Unitarian-Universalist answer to Martin Luther, I still like the man. He has many gifts: he's extremely personable; he's a good speaker; he radiates sincerity... in other words, he's a charismatic guy. Insofar as I can tell, he's also a perfectly capable administrator. Up until now, he's been good for UUCS.

He's just not as deep a thinker or writer as he thinks he is. Which is ok, too. We can't all be Erich Fromm, no matter how much we admire and try to emulate him.

But his actions surrounding GA have forced me to seriously question his judgment and motives. In the past, Rev. Eklof has deferred decisions that might impact the church as a whole to the congregation. For example, when it became clear that a public showing of the film, "Occupation of the American Mind" might put UUCS at odds with local Jewish groups, **he postponed it, pending a congregational vote**. I believe he acted rightly in this.

And yet, when it came to *Gadfly*, which he KNEW would be controversial, he not only concealed his plans from us, he used the UUCS booth at GA to help distribute it, thus linking the church to his crusade to "restore" UUism. And he has used his pulpit and position as minister to continue to promote it, without the kind of congregational approval he felt was important for the simple showing of a documentary.

It may well be that the majority of the congregation at UUCS wishes to follow his lead. And that's their prerogative. But I'm not going there. Personally, I prefer a minister who's "first among equals." Rev. Eklof is behaving like an autocrat.

Sure, I could have opted to leave quietly. But there are those with much deeper roots in the church than I have, who don't like what they (and I) see happening. I feel their pain, so silence just wasn't an option.

3. Rev. Eklof has the right of FREE SPEECH! It's not right to criticize him for using it.

I'm going to let **noted author and Professor Roxane Gay** speak to this one:

“As a writer, I believe the First Amendment is sacred. The freedom of speech, however, does not guarantee freedom from consequence. You can speak your mind, but you can also be shunned. You can be criticized. You can be ignored or ridiculed. You can lose your job. The freedom of speech does not exist in a vacuum.”

Like Professor Gay, I'm quite fond of free speech. But I'm also a realist who's seen and read plenty about the damage it can do. Criticism—even harsh criticism—is vitally important. “Free speech” isn't a “Get Out of Jail Free” card, nor should it be. Robust criticism is important for developing critical thinking skills. Everyone needs to have a functioning bullshit detector. Whenever someone wraps themselves in the First Amendment, I immediately think of legal scholar and author Stanley Fish's dictum: “Nowadays, the First Amendment is the First Refuge of Scoundrels.”

Free speech is also a much thornier issue than you think. Professor Mary Anne Franks' book, **The Cult of the Constitution** is an excellent and sobering antidote to the kind of free speech triumphalism Rev. Eklof and his new bffs, Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt espouse. Highly recommended.

3. But overall, Eklof is right—the UUA needs to change! Who cares if he didn't get all his facts perfectly straight?

I care and I know I'm not the only one. But if you don't, that's fine. As the “cool kids” sometimes say, “you do you.”

It comes down to professional standards and norms. I care about them because they help to ensure integrity and credibility. As far as I'm concerned, those values are not negotiable.

In addition—like I said in the intro—there was a good book that could have been written about the issues within the UUA. It would take time and careful research, but it could have been done. Instead, Rev. Eklof ran with a pre-fabricated frame picked up from a pair of flawed, clickbait-y popular books (*Coddling of the American Mind & The Once and Future Liberal*) and tried to jam a hodgepodge of disparate incidents into it. Even worse, he couldn't resist dragging the Inquisition, McCarthyism, the Red Army and other irrelevant boogymen into the discussion.

There's a difference between acknowledging that the UUA needs to change, and using that to justify a slapdash, poorly-written manifesto lobbed like a hand grenade into the middle of GA. There's a massive dichotomy between the goal and the method he chose to (try to) achieve it.

I was hugely disappointed in his hostile, one-sided take on the issues raised in *Gadfly*. It took me by surprise: I honestly thought he was better than that. This is why, when I was staffing the UUCS booth on the day he started handing the books out, I was happy to help. I trusted him.

I was wrong.

4. "I found mistakes in one/some of your essays."

Duly noted. As careful as I tried to be, I got pretty damn sick of looking at the thing (not to mention *Gadfly*), so it wouldn't surprise me if there was something I got wrong/missed the nuances of/failed to discover. It happens.

For the record, this is why there's peer review in academia. Even geniuses screw up, fail to take things into account, etc., so docs pass through multiple hands before being submitted to journals, and then are reviewed again by gatekeepers before acceptance and publication. That's the problem with self-publishing: very little of that overview happens and the quality of many, if not most, manuscripts suffers for it.

Which is, of course, another reason why Rev. Eklof blew it by being secretive. If reforming UUism is as important as he imagines it is, then it's too important to NOT get comments and feedback from as wide a range of people with relevant expertise as possible.

I mean seriously: have you never looked at the "Acknowledgements" section of a serious non-fiction book? Dozens of people are typically involved in offering feedback and corrections. As the saying goes: "if it's worth doing, it's worth doing well."

5. You covered only a fraction of the book, so that must mean the rest is fine.

Oh dear lord, no. I once quipped to a friend that I could write my own book pointing out the problems in this one. But 60 pages in, I decided enough was enough. I'm tired of looking at bad writing (which includes my own, lol—I have no illusions about my own pedestrian talents).

6. I read your essays but don't agree with them.

Okey doke.

7. I want to argue with you about it.

No.