

July 19, 2019

Dear Members of PACBIC,

RE: On Freedom, Voice, Protest and Dissent

As I end my appointment as Chair (2016-2018) and Co-Chair (2018-2019) of the President's Advisory Committee on Building an Inclusive Community (PACBIC) at McMaster University, I wanted to share some of my exiting thoughts and reflections. These were difficult years to take on this role. I am proud of the work of PACBIC. PACBIC has and continues to serve as a beacon, internally and externally, that signals and demonstrates to people that there is a dedicated commitment to addressing systems of exclusion.

For some time now, I have been wondering how to express how historically entrenched forms of systemic, social and institutional disrespect and operations of power reproduce themselves while impacting the lives of equity-seeking, marginalized groups. This is something I also do in my teaching, research and community work.

I think about this because I all too often experience (alongside activists, organizers, leaders who are students, faculty and staff) that we repeatedly raise issues of racism, ableism, gender-based violence, exclusion, erasure and tokenism, humiliation and disrespect and these issues are discursively managed, then processes are carried out that reproduce the same insulting, harmful or discriminatory outcomes. This experience often feels like an appropriation of voice without freedom or liberation.

In the last 3 years, we have seen a rise in hatred and bigotry on University campuses: white supremacist posters, emails and recruitments; rooms being booked ostensibly for meetings of hate groups; swastikas etched around campus; vandalism to Pride and Trans flag crosswalks; and, other forms of anti-Semitism, transphobic hatred; widespread, documented Islamophobia; open misogyny; sanism and ableism. All of this is very overt, very conscious. Almost all of these that were widely observed and experienced have been reported - so are known to McMaster. We have held vigils here on campus for those murdered in anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic and colonial, gender-based violence. In May of 2019, we all found out that a long-time leader of a neo-Nazi organization has been working for Hamilton City Hall for some 14 years. Now, we have xenophobic and racist white nationalist groups gathering outside of City Hall in Hamilton, and an unwavering top 3 or higher ranking for the most police-reported hate crimes in Canada. In 2019, we also have seen the report released on missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, naming the ongoing genocide in Canada.

We have seen white supremacist organizing and organizations pressure, influence and produce their desired outcomes at Universities, which are actively and openly responding to these organizations' social and political demands while targeted groups are frequently not acknowledged or responded to. The recent and more frequent statements around freedom of speech, expression and academic freedom in response to issues around hatred and bigotry are now too abundant to name.

We have seen those who engage in the work called "inclusion" or "equity" being targeted with death threats, threats to property, and threats to the very knowledge, research, and disciplines that take this terribly important work head-on. Specifically, gender studies and feminist studies and research, disability studies, critical theory, studies on racism, Indigenous studies, have all been targets of public attack and denigration including organized work to have people, professors, students and entire fields removed from the University. These public attacks do not represent any kind of experience of freedom of expression for these groups, fields, disciplines, people. These groups are currently the overwhelming targets of white supremacist movements that weaponize freedom of expression to carry out their work.

Instead, time and time again, these particular problems are raised and are often met with responses that directly state or indirectly imply that the burden of hate is ours to bear when we put ourselves "out there" in the public domain, that statements written by us that speak out on injustice will not be supported, and that equity and inclusion and free expression and "tolerance" are foundational to the mission of the university.

I then often find myself translating the institutional responses back to the individuals and groups I work with, belonging to equity-seeking groups, taking on much of the institutional work of inclusion voluntarily. Usually, people feel defeated, disrespected, disappointed, and sometimes humiliated. They feel that what they bravely spoke about and experienced was basically invalidated. They were told that hate is so obviously not permitted, so nothing need be done. Many of us experience these efforts as exhausting.

People share experiences of asking for representation and inclusion of equity-seeking groups so that there may be an attention to critical perspectives, experiences and analyses of 2S-LGBTIQ+ people, Indigenous people, people living with disabilities, racialized people, people living in poverty, those who experience exclusion based on their religion, spirituality or faith, women and women-identified people. They then also share almost identical kinds of examples of a tokenistic, superficial form of representation that signifies usually one or two bodies of difference specifically selected outside of groups who engage in political activism or critical studies and research with equity-seeking and marginalized groups.

The products are policy items, statements and guidelines that inadequately respond to the needs of equity-seeking and marginalized groups because they did not listen to those needs to begin with. In 2017, a guest speaker came to McMaster and a group from PACBIC and others helped to support a letter that spoke out in opposition to the event. They opposed the speaker because the speaker had taken positions that deny the existence and rights of Trans people. Many professed dismay and opposition to the spread of these dehumanizing ideas as they can and do result in harm while signaling others to do the same. The letter was drafted and supported by 2S-LGBTIQ+ students, faculty and staff, a student union representative, Trans students, and particularly some faculty members who were invited to "participate" at the event because they were 2S-LGBTIQ+ identified or people of colour (also known as the targets of "free speech" when it is now all too often wielded for attacks). The letter was prepared and sent out the day of the event and sent the day before to the President of the University. The PACBIC Priorities and Planning Working Group met with some contributors who discussed with some students their plans for protest and leafletting outside of the event as well.

The protesters arrived at the event to find the other panelists had declined participation. The visiting speaker posted a video of the protesters to exemplify their right to free speech being shut down, rather than any sort of recognition that they left the event and began speaking outside or that security did not attempt any intervention (although undesirable).

The letter was found by a follower of the speaker and the visiting speaker posted a video on YouTube entitled, "*Go Ahead Make My Day*". The video displays pictures of PACBIC members taken from our website and they state, "Why don't you come out and face me". They show clips from the film, "*The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*", with Clint Eastwood in a gun fight with two others, lengthy stare-downs, and eventually Clint Eastwood shooting Lee Van Cleef multiple times and shooting his body as it fell and landed in an open grave.

The video has been viewed hundreds of thousands of times.

Over the next few weeks, there were comments on the video, social media, emails to people identified in the photo, threats of death, taunts telling us to dig our own graves, threats to burn our houses down, suggestions that people should arm themselves and come to McMaster to shoot us.

The video has a link to the speaker's Patreon fundraising page and a link to purchase the movie, "*The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*".

Shortly after the event, McMaster issued a statement about academic freedom and has since, because of the incident, posted guidelines on freedom of expression, protest and dissent. The statement said nothing about the concerns raised by students, faculty and staff regarding the transphobic positions being protested. However, it did state:

“Taking the opportunity to listen to a speaker, even one with whom one may vehemently disagree, is an important aspect of education and a cornerstone of academic debate. It has not, therefore, been my approach, nor that of this University, to intervene to shut down events, exclude speakers, or prevent discussion of issues, even where controversial topics are under discussion.”

An ad-hoc committee was struck after the incident without representation from PACBIC, Indigenous representation, representation from the McMaster Accessibility Council, the Equity and Inclusion Office, representation from student groups like the Queer Student Community Centre (now, the Pride Community Centre), Women and Gender Equity Network (WGEN) and many others who were directly affected by the hate speech endorsing ideas and dehumanizing discourses promoted by the speaker. Protesters, students, faculty and staff who received messages of hate, death threats and threats to property continued for weeks and some still do. The institution received criticism for not permitting free speech and has been attempting ever since to respond to that. The issues of managing room capacity, intervening with problematic individuals at the University event, care and follow up for those affected, security concerns, online bullying and harassment were not responded to.

The most targeted and effected groups were not asked to be on this ad-hoc committee or told it existed. When word spread of its existence, we were told there would be an opportunity for feedback for "everyone".

When feedback was solicited on the guidelines being developed on protest, freedom of expression and dissent, many asked, what do the guidelines permit when someone has breached what is acceptable? Security intervention? What are they allowed to do if this is not a policy?

If certain kinds of speakers that suggest racist, transphobic, anti-2S-LGBTIQ+, anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim, anti-Indigenous or gender-based violence do not catalyze or require guidelines or statements, who decides what does? What warrants a response like this? Why not the video and torrents of hate and threats of violence to students, faculty and staff?

In May 2019, student protesters assembled a peaceful protest at *May at Mac* on campus. The protesters were intending to raise concerns about sexual violence, carding, securitization, racism, and inadequate mental health services. They were pursued, carded, ticketed and at least one of the protesters was grabbed by security. After this incident there was no committee struck, nor any statement from the President. A statement was released that acknowledged the situation as “regrettable and unfortunate”. What is regrettable and unfortunate is that this could have been prevented.

In June of 2019, hate groups attacked members of the Hamilton 2S-LGBTIQ+ community at Hamilton PRIDE. There and since we have seen an outpouring of support across Hamilton. We have also seen institutions proceed without the inclusion of the marginalized, attacked and affected parties and communities.

This horrible example has me thinking about the warning that protesters at McMaster were trying to share in 2017, and in 2019. Words matter, rhetoric matters, discourse matters, statements matter, and institutions making them also matters. Protest and dissent too matter because even though some are less noticed, less respected, less heard, our lives matter. We cannot continue to disrespect, refuse and criminalize those most affected by the rising hatred in our world who are carrying the burden of this work to speak out and resist. We could do all of this better, we have to do this differently, but it cannot continue to be done in ways that colonize voices for more of the same. This has been and will continue to be resisted as many are re/un-writing and disrupting the technologies of erasure. To write us out of this present is to continue to participate in the writing us out of history.

These kinds of experiences are not new. Attention to matters of "equity" and "inclusion" - which are often the only open avenues we can use to talk about exclusion based on race, disability, sexual orientation, gender, Indigeneity and immigration status and other *Othered* issues - were the very reasons we recommended a senior level administrative position attentive to these concerns, the AVP, Equity and Inclusion. We recommended this as a systemic response to historically entrenched inequities that cannot be remedied with intentional tokenism that avoids critical analyses and feedback from marginalized groups. Important campus efforts towards E&I are undermined by the lack of inclusion of key campus stakeholders in their creation.

Free expression and democracy are experienced as differentially applied and experienced. The idea that laws and policies are neutral and fair is false. These examples here should make that clear. If the University is a place for free expression and this is vital to democracy, this has to be acknowledged in a way that does not promote a colourblind mentality that fails to name anti-Blackness within institutions,

gender injustices, sexual violence, the exclusion of people with disabilities, systemic racism broadly and the erasure of Indigenous people, knowledge and histories.

These practices and the relations they reveal replicate a history of not including the affected in institutional decision-making, not valuing the experiences of marginalized groups and the systemic erasure and silencing of their speech. Communities need to hear that they are not without support, that we oppose hatred and bigotry. In these times, we do not need a lecture about the rights and privileges that dominant groups feel entitled to, have enjoyed and continue to enjoy. We also need to be able to listen and support one another without invalidation, or the gaslighting of our experiences.

Is there a means by which we can think about this that is attentive to the facts of historically established conditions that have been less than inclusive to the voices and perspectives of marginalized people? Is there a way we can include their evidence, concerns, fears and perspectives in the process, a way that considers how free speech discourses are enlisted by white supremacist groups and organizations and far right groups wanting to further subjugate these groups and voices?

We could attend to those who already feel over-criminalized, surveilled and regulated. This process could engage an inclusive, research driven, process of inquiry and reflection. It could rely on our excellent institutional research capacities to do so, to develop a comprehensive, thoughtful, data driven and respectful response that looks to support students who speak out from the margins and faculty and staff engaged in already targeted fields. In order for this to occur in a legitimate way, it has to begin from a place of honesty, transparency and inclusion. We have to let those affected name it, have institutions reflect their identities and experiences and respond with respect and validation so that people feel what belonging might mean. Freedom and voice need protest and dissent. Until we respect this in ways that people can feel, see and trust, our efforts toward inclusion will continue to be undermined.

With respect,



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