

A Black Professor Trapped in Anti- Racist Hell

Vincent Lloyd



On the sunny first day of seminar, I sat at the end of a pair of picnic tables with nervous, excited 17-year-olds. Twelve high-school students had been chosen by the Telluride Association through a rigorous application process—the acceptance rate is reportedly around 3 percent—to spend six weeks together taking a college-level course, all expenses paid.

The group reminded me of the heroes of the *Mysterious Benedict Society* books I was reading to my daughter: Each teenager, brought together for a common project, had some extraordinary ability and some quirk. One girl from California spoke and thought at machine-gun speed and started collecting pet snails during the pandemic; now she had more than 100. A girl from a provincial school in China had never traveled to the United States but had mastered un-accented English and was in love with E.M. Forster. In addition to the seminar, the students practiced democratic self-governance: They lived together and set their own rules. Those first few days, the students were exactly what you would expect, at turns bubbly and reserved, all of them curious, playful, figuring out how to relate to each other and to the seminar texts.

Four weeks later, I again sat in front of the

cold, their eyes down. Since the first week, I had not spotted one smile. Their number was reduced by two: The previous week, they had voted two classmates out of the house. And I was next.

Each student read from a prepared statement about how the seminar perpetuated anti-black violence in its content and form, how the black students had been harmed, how I was guilty of countless microaggressions, including through my body language, and how students didn't feel safe because I didn't immediately correct views that failed to treat anti-blackness as the cause of all the world's ills.

This might be just another lament about “woke” campus culture, and the loss of traditional educational virtues. But the seminar topic was “Race and the Limits of Law in America.” Four of the 6 weeks were focused on anti-black racism (the other two were on anti-immigrant and anti-indigenous racism). I am a black professor, I directed my university's black-studies program, I lead anti-racism and transformative-justice workshops, and I have published books on anti-black racism and prison abolition. I live in a predominantly black neighborhood of Philadelphia, my daughter went to an Afrocentric school, and I am on the board of our local black cultural organization.

“I was guilty of countless microaggressions.”

Like others on the left, I had been dismissive of criticisms of the current discourse on race in the United States. But now my thoughts turned to that moment in the 1970s when leftist organizations imploded, the need to match and raise the militancy of one's comrades leading to a toxic culture filled with dogmatism and disillusion. How did this happen to a group of bright-eyed high school students?

The Telluride Association maintains a low profile, even in higher-education circles, but it has played an important role in shaping the US elite. Its alumni are ideologically diverse: queer theorist Eve Sedgwick and postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak (its first female member), Georgia politician Stacey Abrams and journalist Walter Isaacson, neoconservatives Paul Wolfowitz and Francis Fukuyama (who served on Telluride's board). Launched by mining entrepreneur L.L. Nunn in 1911, a few years before he founded Deep Springs College, Telluride aims to cultivate democratic communities among high-school and college students. It runs houses near Cornell and the University of Michigan, where students receive scholarships, govern themselves, and incorporate intellectual life and service work into their residential communities. In 1954, Telluride started its high-school

Over the years, faculty from many leading US universities have taught for the program. Courses have changed with the times: “Conflicting Ideals of Communism and Democracy” was taught in 1956; the philosopher Robert Nozick taught “Philosophical Conceptions of Liberty” in 1965, and in more recent years topics have included “Gods and Heroes of the Celts and Vikings,” “Public Poetry in a Digital World,” “Literatures of the Security State,” and “Freedom Summer.”

In 2014, I taught “Race and the Limits of Law” for Telluride’s Ithaca location. The first few days were exactly like my 2022 seminar: Students came with extraordinary abilities; they asked probing questions; and they were sometimes awkward. Then, as the six weeks went by, I could see the students forming bonds with each other and with me, and I could see their commitment to the course. They always showed up on time. They always did the work. My daughter turned 1 during the seminar, and not knowing anyone in town, we had the students over to the house we were staying at for her birthday party.

I happened across the Telluride website six years later and was surprised to see my picture, from the birthday party, on the front page. With those fond memories—and with excitement at the prospect of revisiting thorny questions about race

“Telluride continued a pattern of tracking liberal values as they evolved.”

Matter—I reached out to Telluride to explore teaching the seminar again. (Telluride seminars are co-taught; my seminar was taught with my wife, a lawyer and indigenous-studies professor.)

In the wake of the George Floyd protests, a group of black Telluride alumni pressured the association to examine the racism that, they claimed, was baked into the organizational culture. “We have all experienced anti-blackness within the association and through its programs,” their open letter said. The result was a redesign of the summer seminars: Telluride would now offer only “Critical Black Studies” and “Anti-Oppressive Studies” seminars. The former would “seek to focus more specifically on the needs and interests of black students.” The seminar I taught—“Race and the Limits of Law”—would be classed with the latter.

In this, Telluride continued a pattern of tracking liberal values as they evolved. It offered courses on race since the 1950s, and the Ithaca house was known as “the most liberal living unit on campus” in the 1970s because of its relatively early acceptance of Jewish, black, and female students. In 1993, at the height of US multiculturalism, Telluride began offering a new stream of seminars focusing on race and difference and aimed at underrepresented students. But

centering blackness, tempts the US elite, and particularly US elite educational institutions, to take a step too far, a step into incoherence—or worse.

At the Cornell location, students live in the same house while participating in two different seminars. In 2014, participants in the two seminar groups lived their lives together seamlessly outside of the seminar, exploring Ithaca and the Cornell campus, eating and laughing together, and setting up a system to govern their community together. In 2022, however, I was told that the “Critical Black Studies” students would live and learn separately, creating a fully “black space.” My “Anti-Oppressive Studies” students were separated from them. Instead of participating in a summer community of 32 high-school students, my group was to be a community of 12 (that would dwindle to nine by the time of the mutiny).

Furthermore, in the 2022 community, afternoons and evenings would no longer be spent having fun and doing homework. Two college-age students called “factotums” (led by one I will call “Keisha”) were assigned to create anti-racism workshops to fill the afternoons. There were workshops on white supremacy, on privilege, on African independence movements, on the thought and activism of Angela Davis, and more, all of which followed an initial

justice.” Students described the workshops as emotionally draining, forcing the high schoolers to confront tough issues and to be challenged in ways they had never been challenged before.

I am no stranger to anti-racism workshops: I have participated in many of them, and I have facilitated them myself. But the Telluride workshops were being organized by two college-age students, filled with the spirit of the times. From what I gleaned, they involved crudely conveying certain dogmatic assertions, no matter what topic the workshops were ostensibly about:

- Experiencing hardship conveys authority.
- There is no hierarchy of oppressions —except for anti-black oppression, which is in a class of its own.
- Trust black women.
- Prison is never the answer.
- Black people need black space.
- Allyship is usually performative.
- All non-black people, and many black people, are guilty of anti-blackness.
- There is no way out of anti-blackness.

The seminar form pulls against the form of the anti-racism workshop, and Telluride was trying to have them both at once. By its nature, a seminar requires

**“The seminar
form pulls against
the form of the**

what another student overlooked, and as the professor guides the discussion toward the most important questions. All of this is grounded in a text: Specific words, phrases, arguments, and images from a text offer essential friction for conversation, holding seminar participants accountable to something concrete. The instructor gently—ideally, almost invisibly—guides discussion toward what matters.

The seminar assumes that each student has innate intelligence, even as we come from different backgrounds, have different amounts and sorts of knowledge, and different skills. We can each be formed best if we take advantage of our differing insights to push each other, over time, again and again. When this practice is occasioned by carefully curated texts—not exclusively “great books,” but texts that challenge each other and us as they probe issues of essential importance—a seminar succeeds.

A seminar takes time. The first day, you will be frustrated. The second and the third day, you will be frustrated. Even on the last day, you will be frustrated, though ideally now in a different way. Each intervention in a seminar is incomplete, and gets things wrong. Each subsequent intervention is also incomplete, and also gets things wrong. But there are plenty of insights and surprises, for each

It is tempting to add: Such is life. Such is democratic life. We each have different, partial knowledge. We each get things wrong, over and over. At our best, we enter the fray by listening to each other and complementing and challenging the insights of our fellows. In the process, over years, decades, we are oriented toward justice and truth.

If the seminar is slow food, the anti-racist workshop put on by college-age students is a sugar rush. All the hashtags are there, condensed, packaged, and delivered from a place of authority. The worst sort of anti-racist workshop simply offers a new language for participants to echo—to retweet out loud.

Students at Telluride experienced two styles of learning next to each other, but also two different cultures. From the initial “transformative-justice” workshop, students learned to snap their fingers when they agreed with what a classmate was saying. This practice immediately entered the seminar and was weaponized. One student would try out a controversial (or just unusual) view. Silence. Then another student would repeat a piece of anti-racist dogma, and the room would be filled with the click-clack of snapping fingers.

During the first week of the 2014 iteration of the seminar, focused on

“Two of the Asian-American students would be expelled from the program.”

white slave owners were providing food for the enslaved and suggested this showed there were two sides to the issue of slavery. Before I formulated a way to turn his intervention into a stepping-stone toward more sophisticated discussion, two students spoke up with other evidence from the text suggesting that slavery is a moral abomination unworthy of “both sides” discussion. By the end of the seminar, the initial student, who seemed like he might have a wavering moral compass, expressed a newfound commitment to justice.

In the 2022 anti-racism workshops, the non-black students learned that they needed to center black voices—and to shut up. Keisha reported that this was particularly difficult for the Asian-American students, but they were working on it. (Eventually, two of the Asian-American students would be expelled from the program for reasons that, Keisha said, couldn’t be shared with me.) The effects on the seminar were quick and dramatic. During the first week, participation was as you would expect: There were two or three shy students who only spoke in partner or small-group work, two or three outspoken students, and the rest in the middle. One of the black students was outspoken, one was in the middle, and one was shy. By the second week of the seminar, the two white students were effectively silent. Two of

active (the ones who would soon be expelled), but the vast majority of interventions were from the three black students. The two queer students, one Asian and one white, were entirely silent. The black students certainly had interesting things to say and important connections to make with their experiences and those of their family members, but a seminar succeeds when multiple perspectives clash into each other, grapple with each other, and develop—and that became impossible.

In their “transformative-justice” workshop, my students learned to name “harms.” This language, and the framework it expresses, come out of the prison-abolition movement. Instead of matching crimes with punishments, abolitionists encourage us to think about harms and how they can be made right, often through inviting a broader community to discern the impact of harms, the reasons they came about, and paths forward. In the language of the anti-racism workshop, a harm becomes anything that makes you feel not quite right. For a 17-year-old at a highly selective, all-expenses-paid summer program, newly empowered with the language of harm, there are relatively few sites at which to use this framework. My seminar became the site at which to try out—and weaponize—this language.

inmate demographics: About 60 percent of those incarcerated are white. The black students said they were harmed. They had learned, in one of their workshops, that objective facts are a tool of white supremacy. Outside of the seminar, I was told, the black students had to devote a great deal of time to making right the harm that was inflicted on them by hearing prison statistics that were not about blacks. A few days later, the Asian-American student was expelled from the program. Similarly, after a week focused on the horrific violence, death, and dispossession inflicted on Native Americans, Keisha reported to me that the black students and their allies were harmed because we hadn't focused sufficiently on anti-blackness. When I tried to explain that we had four weeks focused on anti-blackness coming soon, as indicated on the syllabus, she said the harm was urgent; it needed to be addressed immediately.

In a recent book, John McWhorter asserts that anti-racism is a new religion. It was an idea I quickly dismissed. Last summer, I found anti-racism to be a perversion of religion: I found a cult. From *Wild Wild Country* to the Nxivm shows to Scientology exposés, the features of cults have become familiar in popular culture. There is sleep deprivation. Ties to the outside world are severed. The sense of

Participants are emotionally battered. In this weakened state, participants learn about and cling to dogmatic beliefs. Any outsider becomes a threat.

The dozen participants in this summer program were spending almost every hour of every day together, I was almost the only outsider they were encountering, and I was marked as a threat.

The feature of a cult that seems to be missing from this story is a charismatic leader, enforcing the separation of followers from the world, creating emotional vulnerability, and implanting dogma. Enter Keisha. A recent graduate of an Ivy League university, mentored by a television-celebrity black intellectual, Keisha introduced herself as a black woman who grew up poor and “housing vulnerable,” whose grandmother’s limbs had been broken by white supremacists, and who had just spent four years of college teaching in prisons and advocating for prison abolition. She told the class that she had majored in black studies, had been nurtured by black feminists (though her famous mentor is a man), and she was planning to devote her life to transforming the academy in the direction of black justice.

Keisha was tasked by Telluride with serving as a teaching assistant in my class and organizing workshops for the

find some days when she could lead discussion or share her own research. Instead, she largely remained silent during class for the first three weeks, counter-programming the seminar in the afternoons. During a week on the racist background of the US immigration system, Keisha found one of our texts, the foundational Asian-American memoir *Nisei Daughter*, insufficiently radical, so she lectured to the students that afternoon about the supposedly more radical Yuri Kochiyama. Keisha was frustrated that our week on incarceration began with George Jackson and not a black feminist, so she lectured on Angela Davis that afternoon. I talked at length with both Keisha and the class about learning unfolding over time, about the need to wrestle with an idea before moving on to the next one, and about the overall direction of the course, but for her (and soon for the students), everything had to happen *now*.

Keisha and I were supposed to meet weekly, but she told me she couldn't schedule in advance, and she would let me know when she had availability. She never did. But Keisha did find time to intervene when a student was "harmed." During one class, when we discussed *Brown v. Board of Education*, my co-instructor explained what the "doll test" was that provided a psychological basis for the Supreme Court's decision. It involved showing

what language they would use to describe them, “colored,” “white,” or “negro.”

During the seminar break, a student had reported this to Keisha, and she rushed in to tell us that a student had been harmed by hearing the word “negro.”

The fourth week of the seminar examined theories of anti-blackness. It should have been predictable that the seminar would blow up during that week: Since the first days of the seminar, Keisha had been talking about how anti-blackness is qualitatively worse than every other system of oppression, so it made sense she would want us to be stuck on that week, unable to move forward—leaving anti-blackness as the course’s climax, and nadir. It happened that on the last day of the anti-blackness week, I had invited the students over to my home, where we would talk for a couple hours about the reading (a selection from Frank Wilderson’s *Afropessimism*) and then share a meal. By this time, the students’ faces were perpetually sullen—at least when Keisha was in the room. Occasionally, in one-on-one meetings, I could still kid around with them, or hear them chat among themselves about the mundane details of teenage life.

As I was beginning the seminar, sitting on the grass in my backyard, Keisha interrupted: “I think you should start with a lecture offering context for this

of the reasons for it, and of the snippets of pedagogical theory we had read and discussed together, exploring the value of the seminar. Keisha insisted: I needed to give a lecture—immediately. Eventually, I acceded. We had a productive couple hours discussing Wilderson’s evocative text, and then I pointed out to students, “All the things I said in the initial lecture, I would have said during the course of the seminar. Each day, I try to insert the relevant background information and emphasize key points in short interventions so that the seminar can be guided by your questions. There are two dozen lectures I could give about Wilderson, each putting this text in a different light, but I want to share with you the information you want, in dialogue with the insights that you bring.”

To use the idiom *du jour*, my comment was triggering to Keisha. She launched into a long speech about how I was ignoring the demands of a black woman, and how I had made the space unsafe for black students. She then announced that she would take the students back to their house without eating the lunch I had waiting for them.

It was clear to me the situation was getting out of control, and after the students left my house, I reached out to the Telluride Association to share my concerns. They promised to investigate.

on Monday. Tuesday morning, no one was in the seminar room. I waited 10 minutes, and Keisha entered. She said the students had something to say to me. Ten more minutes of waiting in silence. Then all nine remaining students entered, each carrying a piece of paper. One by one they read a paragraph. Out of their mouths came everything Keisha had said to me during the “urgent” meetings she had with me after classes when students had allegedly been harmed. The students had all of the dogma of anti-racism, but no actual racism to call out in their world, and Keisha had channeled all of the students’ desire to combat racism at me.

They alleged: I had used racist language. I had misgendered Brittney Griner. I had repeatedly confused the names of two black students. My body language harmed them. I hadn’t corrected facts that were harmful to hear when the (now-purged) students introduced them in class. I invited them to think about the reasoning of both sides of an argument, when only one side was correct. The students ended with a demand: In light of all the harms they had suffered, they could only continue in the class if I abandoned the seminar format and instead lectured each day about anti-blackness, correcting any of them who questioned orthodoxy. The only critical perspectives they were receiving during the summer, they claimed, were from Keisha. A white girl—

“I had used racist language. I had misgendered Brittney Griner.”

their point: “Keisha speaks for me: She says everything I think better than I ever could.”

Keisha is uniquely talented at performing her role, but she isn't the author of the play. Pushing anti-racism to its limits, what we reach isn't just hollow doctrine, but abuse: Pathological relationships that cut us off from the world, from the give-and-take of reasons and feelings unfolding over time that makes up life in the world. We see this crystal clear in the paradoxes that I encountered: The experience was supposed to be organized around a “transformative justice,” rather than a punitive model, yet the community managed to expel two of its members. Students continually voiced their desire to find practical actions to help change the world, but after four weeks, they had learned to say that anti-blackness is so foundational, the world could never change. The students wanted freedom, for themselves and for all, but they started to say that the only route to freedom is indoctrination: having me tell them what to think.

Saddest of all, for me, was hearing what the black students said. They needed extra help, they were struggling to understand anything from the readings, and they couldn't even know what questions to ask unless they had guidance —first Keisha said this, then the black

witnessed them learning. I heard them ask critical questions about difficult texts. I saw their writing improve. I saw them use complex concepts in thoughtful ways. They just didn't believe in themselves.

After noticing during the first week of the seminar that two or three students were relatively shy (one black, one Asian, and one white), I asked Keisha if she had any suggestions on how to engage them more fully. She said she thought the students didn't engage because they didn't feel like the issues discussed in the seminar mattered to them. As the weeks went by, fewer and fewer students turned in written reading responses, fewer and fewer students showed up on time. They fell asleep in class, and they would walk out for extended snack breaks in the middle of the class. The seminar can't be sustained, at Telluride or in the university itself, if we understand it as something you enter when you feel like it, stay in as long as your beliefs go unquestioned, and leave when you become uncomfortable.

After the students presented their complaints and their demands, I told them I would need time to reflect. Class ended. I decided that the only way to continue was if the Telluride leadership would intervene, reminding the students that the seminar was part of a larger organization with values and norms, and that I was contracted to teach a college-level

seminar, understood in the ordinary sense of that term.

Telluride is governed and largely run by program alumni who volunteer their time to further the goals of the association. The volunteer overseeing the summer programs explained to me that there were internal divisions within the loose, sprawling Telluride world over the direction of the summer programs, with some corners of that world zealously pursuing a singular focus on anti-blackness and other corners hoping to continue seminars as they had been conducted in the past. They realized this summer was bumpy not just in our seminar, but across the program. Because Telluride wanted to respect the democratic self-governance of the student community, the leadership didn't feel comfortable intervening. If the environment was too toxic to continue, I could suspend the seminar, offering a couple meetings where I would act as a "guest speaker," setting aside any pretense of continuing with the seminar format.

I emailed the students and Keisha with this decision, and with an offer to read and respond to any written work the students produced—and I never heard back. No one sent written work. None indicated a desire to attend a meeting where I would be a "guest speaker." The students had almost two weeks left. With

**"Belief in
democracy had
authorized
abuse."**

lecture to them all day? I don't know. I had extricated myself from the abusive relationship, but nine students remained captive. Belief in democracy had authorized abuse, and there was no way out.

At least not for most of the students. But the three students who had left (two expelled and one who had visa problems) individually reached out to me. They wanted to do the readings. They wanted to write papers. They wanted to meet virtually and continue the seminar. So we continued: a seminar in exile, reading the classics of black thought: C.L.R. James, Charles Chesnutt, Harriet Jacobs, James and Grace Lee Boggs—believers in democracy, fugitives from democracy.

Vincent Lloyd is professor and director of the Center for Political Theology at Villanova University and author of *Black Dignity: The Struggle Against Domination*.

More like this

#race

#education

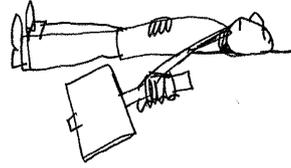
#academia

#cancel culture

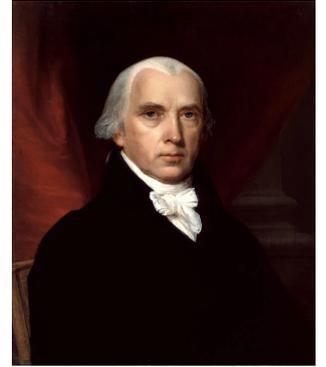
#wokeness

Related Articles

Woke-ism Is
Winding
Down
Musa al-
Gharbi



'Diversity' Is
a Ruling-
Class
Ideology
Christian
Parenti



Anatomy of
a Book
Cancellation
Nigel Biggar



A Cancel
Culture
Parallax
Slavoj Žižek



COMPACT

[Podcast](#)
[Sign in](#)

[Masthead](#)

[About](#)

[Subscribe](#)

Copyright © 2023 Compact Magazine. All rights reserved.