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## Free Speech, Safe Spaces, and Teaching in the Current US Political Climate

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### Abstract

The designation of “safe spaces” within the university classroom and campus as a whole has recently received a great deal of attention and criticism. Opponents of these spaces claim that they are a danger to free speech and critical academic thought in the university, and that they treat students like children rather than competent adults. In the current “Trump era,” it has become common for many people, including prominent public figures, to cite free speech as a justification for hate speech and repressive ideologies. I contend there is a war on free speech in the United States within and without the university and that the seeming promotion of free speech is actually a way to silence free speech and the discourses of marginalized groups. By designating our classroom as safe spaces, especially in diverse urban university settings, we are actually preserving our students’ free speech as well as our own academic freedom.

I believe that education is a regulation of the process of coming to share in the social consciousness; and that the adjustment of individual activity on the basis of this social consciousness is the only sure method of social reconstruction.

—John Dewey, *My Pedagogic Creed*

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In the United States, we are currently living in a historical moment during which many people, including students and instructors, may share a desire for thoughtful “social reconstruction.” In January 2017, Donald Trump was inaugurated as the forty-fifth president of the United States. He built his campaign upon showboating, hatred, misinformation, and fear—a trend he has continued as president. Many of our students, including women, queer people, people of color, and immigrants, are currently directly in danger due to Trump’s presidency; he has committed to ending Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) (a threat to which a number of states have responded with lawsuits) and repealed the Obama-era bathroom protections for transgender students.

The danger to our students includes physical danger (such as that of deportation) and a profound intellectual danger due to the current war upon free speech, epitomized by Trump’s presidency. In 2016, the Southern Law Poverty Center published *The Trump Effect: The Impact of the Presidential Election on Our Nation’s Schools*, in which the author, Maureen Costello, states, “[There is] an alarming level of fear and anxiety among children of color and inflaming racial and ethnic tensions in the classroom. Many students worry about being deported.”<sup>1</sup> These fears are created as much by Trump’s actual policies as by his rhetoric: hate speech “cowering” behind a shield of free speech. For example, following the Unite the Right march in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017, in the course of which a march supporter rammed his car into a crowd of antiracist counterprotesters, killing one woman, and members of the white supremacist League of the South were filmed beating an African American in a parking deck with a metal pipe and wooden boards, Trump said the white supremacist protestors included “very fine people” who had a right to protest, and asked if protestors involved with the Antifa (Anti-Fascist) movement and the “Alt-Left” had any sense of “guilt.” While Trump later “recanted” and more explicitly condemned racism and neo-Nazism, many people, including some of our students, will only remember his initial remarks. Thus, they may internalize a toxic ideology of discourse that equates hate speech with free speech, and bring that ideology with them into the classroom.

In this article, I will discuss how we as educators can create a culture of free speech within our classroom and promote academic freedom by establishing them as “safe spaces.” As an English professor, I will primarily address humanities pedagogy. I teach at the Borough of Manhattan Community College, a two-year college in the City University of New York system. This is the largest urban university in the United States, and we have a large population of international students, culturally and racially diverse students, as well as students from working-class households or who live below or near the poverty line. I will also address the

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<sup>1</sup> Maureen B. Costello, *The Trump Effect: The Impact of the Presidential Election on Our Nation’s Schools* (Montgomery, AL: Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016), 4.

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fact that students from these demographics are the very ones who suffer most from the recent attacks upon free speech.

It is not my intention to focus solely on criticism of President Trump. Rather, I want to analyze and unpack the toxic rhetoric surrounding free speech and hate speech that has become dominant in popular discourse in the United States. This will include investigating general attacks on free speech in the United States as well as within classrooms in order to contextualize the danger these assaults pose to free speech and academic freedom. How do our students experience and engage with that ideology? And how should we address that ideology in the classroom?

I find the nomenclature “Trump effect” useful in this discussion. This phenomenon predates Trump, however, and was a contributing factor to, not a result of, his election. As Ben Wofford has noted, this effect “encompasses a set of offenses that form the strange war cry of a new strain of politics—popular among the young and disinhibited—committed in the name of upending so-called PC culture.”<sup>2</sup> Joan W. Scott astutely addresses the contemporary problematization of free speech, observing that “these days, free speech is the mantra of the Right, its weapon in the new culture war,” and citing “bad boys” such as “[Milo] Yiannopoulos, [Richard] Spencer, Charles Murray, Donald Trump,” who continually cite their privilege of free speech to “say anything they want.”<sup>3</sup> The Trump effect and the gall of these “bad boys” continues a year and a half after Trump’s victory. In an April 2018 article, Laurie Essig notes that hate crimes on campus are normalized and supported by the contemporary “toxic ‘bro’ culture” and they are celebrated as “badge[s] of honor, proof that [‘bros’] won’t be defeated by ‘political correctness’ and the ‘feminazis’ who try to control them.”<sup>4</sup>

Our students are steeped in this rhetoric and these attacks on “PC culture.” It abounds on social media and on the Internet, the worldwide bastion of free speech. Many Internet users attack other users with insults, physical threats, and even “dox” them by finding and posting their personal information. Often the victims of these attacks openly identify as feminists, people of color, queer people, and other marginalized groups. For example, Anita Sarkeesian, the creator of the video webseries *Feminist Frequency* (which deconstructs representations of women in popular culture from a feminist perspective), has received online death threats. She has repeatedly had to disable comments on her videos because of the volume of threatening and harassing feedback she receives. These commenters frequently claim she is unfair for not allowing them to say whatever they like. The writer Ana Mardoll, who is outspoken on Twitter about “PC” topics like

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<sup>2</sup> Ben Wofford, “Inside the Trump Effect: How One District Is Fighting Hate at School,” *Rolling Stone*, March 23, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Joan W. Scott, “On Free Speech and Academic Freedom,” *Journal of Academic Freedom* 8 (2017): 3, 5.

<sup>4</sup> Laurie Essig, “Hate Crimes Won’t End until Toxic ‘Bro’ Culture is Reformed,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 8, 2018.

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awareness of transgender issues and ableism, frequently posts about the harassment to which other Twitter users have subjected her.

As Scott points out, these sorts of attacks are couched as a defense of the First Amendment.<sup>5</sup> For example, as Constance Grady reports, one of the original managers of the popular website Reddit publicly stated, “We’re a free speech site with very few exceptions . . . having to stomach occasional troll reddit like picsofdeadkids or morally questionable redds like jailbait are part of the price of free speech on a site like this.”<sup>6</sup> Last year Sarkeesian was on a panel at VidCon with Carl Benjamin (Boogie), a British YouTube celebrity who has regularly criticized her *Feminist Frequency* videos and whose YouTube channel is full of vitriol against feminism, political correctness, and liberalism. Benjamin’s fans packed the first few rows of seats and heckled Sarkeesian, leading to VidCon’s decision to mediate all of Sarkeesian’s future panels.<sup>7</sup> Many of Benjamin’s fans flocked to Reddit, posting comments such as, “The worst part about this sissified world we exist in is the fact that dialogue no longer exists . . . everyone is so fucking scared to say or do anything, and if you do, for the fucking cultist social justice warriors its like talking to a wall, its their view or no view [sic]” and “[Anita] can go fuck herself with a rake.” This is the “free speech” defended by Reddit and its members. Similarly, when victims of hate speech such as Mardoll speak out or ban the perpetrators from accessing their Facebook pages or Twitter accounts, the perpetrators claim they are “really” the ones being victimized because their right to free speech is being violated. This is how the current toxic ideology of discourse conflates hate speech with free speech.

It may appear paradoxical for me to say that free speech is under attack when it is seemingly being invoked now more than ever. Donald Trump’s supporters may admire how outspoken he is—which can mean calling Mexican immigrants “rapists” and mocking a differently able reporter on the 2016 campaign trail. However, beneath these seeming defenses of free speech is a very profound attack on free speech. Donald Trump has built his campaign and presidency on misinformation and flat-out lies, all the while attacking the “fake news” sources that fact-check him. (Numerous reputable media outlets, such as the *New York Times*, *CNN*, and *PolitiFact*, have published running tallies of Trump’s untrue statements.) These attacks on the press are attacks on free speech. Meanwhile Trump frequently tweets news stories from right-wing media outlets like *Fox News* and Breitbart. It is free speech only when it is a certain *kind* of speech espousing a

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<sup>5</sup> Scott, “On Free Speech and Academic Freedom.”

<sup>6</sup> Constance Grady, “Online Harassment Threatens Free Speech: Now There’s a Field Guide to Help Survive It,” *Vox*, May 2, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/culture/2018/5/2/17292258/pen-america-online-harassment-field-manual-take-back-the-net>.

<sup>7</sup> Colin Campbell, “Anita Sarkeesian’s Astounding ‘Garbage Human’ Moment,” *Polygon*, June 27, 2017, <https://www.polygon.com/features/2017/6/27/15880582/anita-sarkeesian-garbage-human-vidcon-interview>.

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certain agenda. Hate speech is defended as free speech, and discourse addressing hate speech is dismissed as censorship.

This is especially disturbing to me because, as an English professor, I make my living through words. I am intimately aware of the power of words and the power they have to hurt—no matter what the nursery rhyme says. The Trump effect has led to increasingly hateful words being used against some of the most disenfranchised members of US society by the most *powerful* members of our society. As I noted, a large proportion of my students come from these disenfranchised groups. The official BMCC website reports that our school enrolls more international students than any other community college in the Northeast. The most recent *BMCC Factbook* lists approximately 31 percent of our students as black, 41 percent as Hispanic, and 15 percent as Asian or Pacific Islander. Overall, nearly 6 percent of our students are “nonresident alien.”<sup>8</sup> Many of our students come from the less-wealthy neighborhoods of New York City. I have had homeless students and ones on public assistance. Students at other similarly diverse schools suffer much of the same disenfranchisement. These are precisely the ones who stand to suffer most under the Trump administration and the “Trumpian” definition of free speech.

For example, as Costello reports, “over two-thirds (67 percent) of educators reported that young people in their schools—most often immigrants, children of immigrants, Muslims, African Americans and other students of color—had expressed concern about what might happen to them or their families.”<sup>9</sup> Yale graduate student Karla Cornejo Villavicencio writes, “With [the Trump administration’s] aggressive hunt for undocumented people like my family—capped off by the announcement that the president plans to end the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program for the so-called Dreamers—the administration has placed new emotional and mental burdens on an already deeply stressed community.”<sup>10</sup> The US Department of Education reported that hate crimes increased by 25 percent on college campuses in 2016, while the Anti-defamation League reported that white supremacist propaganda increased 258 percent between the fall of 2016 (pre-Trump) and the fall of 2017. The current proposed 2019 US budget includes cuts of over 25 percent for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, or food stamps) and 20 percent for housing assistance. Our students, especially students who are disenfranchised, are in serious danger indeed.

This leads me to the concept of “safe space.” This term is succinctly defined by the Advocates for Youth website as “a place where anyone can relax and be fully self-expressed, without fear of being made to feel uncomfortable, unwelcome, or unsafe on account of biological sex, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender

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<sup>8</sup> Borough of Manhattan Community College, *BMCC Factbook*.

<sup>9</sup> Costello, *The Trump Effect*, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Karla Cornejo Villavicencio, “The Psychic Toll of Trump’s DACA Decision,” *New York Times*, September 8, 2017.

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identity or expression, cultural background, age, or physical or mental ability; a place where the rules guard each person's self-respect and dignity and strongly encourage everyone to respect others."<sup>11</sup> Many professors, myself included, have chosen to designate our classrooms as "safe spaces." Classroom safe spaces are especially important for classes that deal with nondominant ideologies and identities, such as queer literature. Any open and honest discourse in a course on queer literature is going to address and examine the current narrative privileging heteronormativity; for students to candidly challenge that established narrative, they need to feel safe to do so. Currently, the United States is "safe" primarily for privileged, cisgender, white (predominantly male) voices and bodies. These voices do not need additional safe spaces for their narratives and identities. The *world* is their safe space. The privileged voices calling for "free speech" over "safe spaces" seek to further silence the voices of those who, previously, have largely been voiceless. For example, even in the current #MeToo movement, there are voices desperately trying to silence the allegations. On May 7, 2018, the attorney general of New York, Anthony Schneiderman, resigned after four women accused him of physical assault. In the brief time since, the Internet has erupted with support for Schneiderman, including tweets saying he is "innocent until proven guilty," "[only] allegedly caught out," and "This is bullshit!!! I wonder whose on the chopping block next!! [*sic*]." More generally, the repeated attacks on #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, and other social justice movements clearly demonstrate how representatives of the dominant power structure are aggressively trying to make public space "unsafe" for anyone whose narrative challenges theirs.

Safe classroom spaces are particularly under attack. In a 2015 op-ed in the *New York Times*, Judith Shulevitz argues that "[safe spaces] are bad for [college students] and for everyone else." She continues by asking, "Why are students so eager to self-infantilize?"<sup>12</sup> The idea that it is "infantile" to want a space in which one can speak and learn without fear of attack, censure, or bullying (or worse) is problematic, at best. In a *New York Post* op-ed published the week after the 2016 election, Rich Lowry was even harsher: "Pity the anti-Trump protesters . . . he [Trump] has struck a unifying tone, while it is his adversaries who are unhinged. . . . [They] need to get out more."<sup>13</sup>

These attacks on safe spaces are attacks on free speech within the university. Those who decry safe spaces as censorship are actually promoting the repression of free speech. This is made clear through the number of discussions that belittle and dismiss students who genuinely need safe spaces. Following the tone of Shulevitz's article, Chez Paziienza wonders "how exactly so many from this new generation became so

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<sup>11</sup> Advocates for Youth, "Glossary," 2008, <http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/publications/607-glossary>.

<sup>12</sup> Judith Shulevitz, "In College and Hiding from Scary Ideas," *New York Times*, March 21, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Rich Lowry, "Sorry, Kids: America Isn't a Safe Space," November 14, 2016.

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skittish and feeble” and claims that the United States is becoming “a nation of scaredy kids.”<sup>14</sup> Yet hate speech and direct threats of violence can and do occur on campuses. In his *Rolling Stone* article, Wofford presents several anecdotes he gleaned from interviewing various Pennsylvania teachers. One reported a high school incident documented by racist Snapchat video: “In it, a white teenager harasses his black peer. . . . ‘This fucking nigger is taking his time!’ an unseen student jeers at a black student sitting before a plate of food. Days after the video, tensions culminated in a fistfight between the two students.”<sup>15</sup> This is an example of hate speech directly leading to violence. Providing a safe space where this incident might not have occurred is not “soft censorship” in schools, as Paziienza claims. Instead, it is the promotion of free speech over hate speech. Establishing clear rules against hate speech is one way to create a safe space in which such incidents are less likely to occur. However, in my opinion it is equally important to cultivate a tolerant and accepting campus environment. Presenting and discussing the dangers of hate speech and intolerance can act as a framework to explain and justify rules against it, as well as reinforcing the fact that safe spaces that prohibit hate speech are not “censorship spaces.”

How “free” will this black student feel to return to school the next day? His entire identity is being censored. He may not feel free to express his views on racism and racial discrimination, reasoning that if the school allowed the harassment to occur, it might be tacitly endorsing it. The article, in fact, reports that the school officials were unaware of the incident until it was brought to their attention by the students who observed it. Subsequently, police charged the black student with assault for instigating the fight. In return, the local district attorney’s office threatened to prosecute the white student for “ethnic intimidation.” The incident garnered significant local and wide-spread media attention. For example, the white supremacist *Daily Stormer* website “doxed” the Superintendent of Schools, posting her home address and telephone number and encouraging members to contact her about “mismanagement” of the incident. Superintendent Monica McHale-Small sent a letter to parents that defended the school’s actions, stating “this situation was handled promptly and appropriately by our building and district administration.”<sup>16</sup>

Scott writes, “Student free speech is appropriately limited in the university classroom, subject to the disciplinary tutelage of the professor in charge.”<sup>17</sup> I completely agree, but I would add that much of the “free speech” that the detractors of classroom safe spaces claim to support is not actually free speech. For a white

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<sup>14</sup> Chez Paziienza, “The World Isn’t a ‘Safe Space’: Why College Kids Need to Stop Hiding from Views That Upset Them,” *Daily Banter*, March 23, 2015, <https://thedailybanter.com/issues/2015/03/23/the-world-isnt-a-safe-space/>.

<sup>15</sup> Wofford, “Inside the Trump Effect.”

<sup>16</sup> Wofford, “Inside the Trump Effect.”

<sup>17</sup> Scott, “On Free Speech and Academic Freedom.”

student to call a black student a “fucking nigger” is not in any way worthy of free speech protections. Neo-Nazi groups protesting on or near college campuses are engaging in a kind of speech that is violently antifree and rooted in an ideology that continues to silence people of color.

In my view safe spaces promote, rather than silence, free speech in the classroom. For example, in response to the incident reported by Wofford, both of the students were punished and required to attend mediation sessions. The school developed a new Inclusion Committee for both teachers and students. They also instituted a professional development program in which teachers discussed research regarding racial bias and eventually received a visit from representatives of the federal government. For this school, instituting rules and policies about hate speech and tolerance directly led to a more equitable safe space in which such instances of racial violence are less likely to occur, and in which both teachers and students will be better-informed and more aware of the power of language and the importance of thoughtful speech.

These principles are widely applicable across different education levels and subjects, such as to my BMCC class on queer literature. As I have noted, in a queer literature class students may need to feel safe in the classroom in order to examine the dominant heteronormative narrative. This is borne out in my personal experience teaching such classes. While personal identity is, of course, not a requirement for taking the class, students have “come out” to me personally and sometimes even to the class as a whole. These students often talk and write about living with being targets of slurs both on and off the college campus, being physically and emotionally bullied, and even being kicked out of their homes. I include a “safe space” statement on my class syllabus saying, “Name-calling, insults, use of pejorative language, or harassment will not be tolerated in this course. Students are expected to demonstrate civility in regard to the different sexualities, gender identities, and behaviors we will be discussing over the course of the semester.” I am not infringing upon the free speech of any of my students with this statement. Instead I am actively *endorsing* free speech by providing my students with an environment in which they can speak freely.

This safe environment is especially important in a class like one on queer literature with the current administration’s attacks on queer people. For example, Trump has steadfastly sought to institute a ban on transgender people in the military, even after the original 2017 ban was struck down by the courts. Over the course of his political career, Vice President Mike Pence has taken several discriminatory positions, such as, while governor of Indiana, opposing the repeal of the military’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy and signing a “religious freedom” law that would have allowed businesses to discriminate against queer people. The queer students in my class are not “scaredy kids”—they are adults with very legitimate reasons to be scared. They have heard Pence say that same-sex marriage would lead to social collapse. They are harassed on social media



by people who claim they have a right to hate speech because of the First Amendment. The last thing they need is more of that fear within a learning environment.

Although I am concentrating on my experience as an English instructor, safe classroom spaces are important across a variety of disciplines. Part of a college education is developing critical thinking skills and taking part in critical academic discourse. Students will not be able to think critically and speak freely in the classroom if they feel unsafe. By extension, they will not benefit from a college education. Instead, what they will “learn” is the same thing they learn by going on Facebook or by watching the news: hate speech too often hides behind the label of free speech. Beau Ewan, a two-year instructor at the University of Hawaii, writes, “It’s no surprise that community-college professors, by definition, are intricately involved in our communities. Aside from teaching and serving our institutions, we write countless letters of recommendation for our students, connect them to college and community services, and use every tool to help them overcome difficult odds, including lack of college readiness, poverty, and family and work obligations. With hard work and patience, we prepare them to flourish in the ‘real world.’ What is our role as educators, though, in directly preparing our students for the more nefarious realities of that world?”<sup>18</sup> Right now that “nefarious reality” is a world that includes many people who want to silence their voices and bodies, who want them to conform to a narrative of oppression and hate by taking away what safe chances they may have to freely express their truth and lived experience.

A specific illustration, with which many of our students are likely familiar, is the popular phrase used among men’s rights groups: “take the red pill.” It originated in the film *The Matrix*, in which Neo (Keanu Reeves) is unknowingly enslaved in a digital simulation called “the matrix.” Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) offers Neo a choice of two pills, one blue and one red. If he takes the blue pill, he will return to blissful ignorance. If he takes the red pill, his eyes will be opened to the “real world.” Among some men’s rights groups, “taking the red pill” refers to men having their eyes “opened” to how much they have been “harmed” by women’s rights and feminism (there is a red pill sub-Reddit). As Dylan Love reports, “Those who ‘swallow the pill’ maintain that it’s *men* not women, who have been socially disenfranchised. Feminism is considered a damaging ideology and Red Pillers are quick to cite examples that bolster their points, some going so far as to argue that society is outright anti-male.”<sup>19</sup> This is a blatantly Orwellian attempt to rewrite the history of the women’s rights movement and the reality that the United States, as a whole, remains a patriarchy. Some Red Pill groups even offer advice on how to seduce and subjugate women by using “game”—specific language

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<sup>18</sup> Beau Ewan, “Duck and Cover: Teaching Survival in Donald Trump’s America,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 23, 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Dylan Love, “Inside Red Pill, the Weird New Cult for Men Who Don’t Understand Women,” *Business Insider*, September 15, 2013, <http://www.businessinsider.com/the-red-pill-reddit-2013-8>.

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calculated to silence and control women. Red Pill activists are not trying to make a safe space for themselves; they are trying to remove safe spaces for women. In the name of free speech, they perpetuate hate speech.

Cognitive scientist George Lakoff explains how hate speech affects the human mind: “All thought is carried out by neural circuitry—it does not float in air. Language neutrally activates thought. Language can thus change brains, both for the better and the worse. Hate speech changes the brains of those hated for the worse, creating toxic stress, fear and distrust—all physical, all in one’s neural circuitry active every day. This internal harm can be even more severe than an attack with a fist. It imposes on the freedom to think and therefore act free of fear, threats, and distrust.”<sup>20</sup>

As instructors, we would not tolerate a student physically attacking another student in the classroom. We must not tolerate other forms of violence and trauma posing as free speech. The Trumpian rhetoric of hate is a rhetoric of violence. “Locker room talk” is not an easily dismissible joke. In 2016 the American Philosophical Association released a “Statement on Bullying and Harassment” partially as a result of the response to the essay by APA member George Yancy, “Dear White America.” The statement says that Yancy, a professor at Emory University, “has received harassing emails, phone calls, and letters containing racist slurs and threats of violence. This is one very egregious example of bullying and harassment that philosophers who speak out publicly endure, and there are many more, often taking racist, sexist, homophobic, and/or ableist forms.” It continues, “The APA condemns the activities of those who seek to silence philosophers through bullying, abusive speech, intimidation, or threats of violence.”<sup>21</sup> Yancy’s attackers were not exercising their right of free speech and dissent; they were abusing him in order to silence him. The National Domestic Violence Hotline defines abuse as including such things as “calling . . . names,” “humiliating [someone,]” and “making . . . threats.”<sup>22</sup> Verbal abuse is no less abuse than physical abuse and may be even more effective at silencing unwanted voices. As Harvey Weinstein, Anthony Schneiderman, and others are currently discovering, physically abusing someone does not guarantee you have silenced them. However, using verbal abuse to set up an alternate discourse in which *their* voice is silenced and dismissed and *yours* is privileged may be far more effective. This is how the “toxic ideology of discourse that asserts hate speech is the same as free speech” is normalized. We can best fight that normalization by embracing the classroom safe space.

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<sup>20</sup> George Lakoff, “Why Free Speech Is Not Hate Speech,” September 8, 2017, <https://georgelakoff.com/2017/09/08/why-hate-speech-is-not-free-speech/>.

<sup>21</sup> APA Communications, “The APA Has Released a Statement on Bullying and Harassment,” February 12, 2016, *Blog of the APA*, <https://blog.apaonline.org/2016/02/12/the-apa-has-released-a-statement-on-bullying-and-harrasment/>. George Yancy, “Dear White America,” *New York Times*, December 24, 2015.

<sup>22</sup> National Domestic Violence Hotline, “What Is Domestic Violence?,” n.d., <http://www.thehotline.org/is-this-abuse/abuse-defined/>.

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Finally, attacks on safe spaces are attacks on our academic freedom as well. I mentioned Yancy's example as an illustration of how hate speech in the classroom translates into abuse for our students, and is condemned by the APA. However, Yancy's case also illustrates how faculty free speech and academic governance is under attack. Hans-Joerg Tiede, in a recent *Academe* article, cites Yancy as one of many faculty members responding to the "Professor Watchlist." As Tiede reports, the mission statement of the Professor Watchlist declares as the site's goal "to expose and document college professors who discriminate against conservative students and advance leftist propaganda in the classroom"; an earlier version of the statement, Tiede notes, referred to including professors who promoted "Anti-American values."<sup>23</sup> Tiede's article collects responses by several professors who have been listed by the site. One of them, University of Texas at Austin journalism professor Robert Jensen, states, "It would be easier to dismiss this rather silly project [the Professor Watchlist] if the U.S. had not just elected a president who shouts over attempts at rational discourse and reactionary majorities in both houses of Congress."

Tiede brilliantly likens the current situation to McCarthyism and the Hollywood blacklist. That was yet another time in history when those in positions of power attempted to privilege their own narrative and silence conflicting narratives. In the days of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), it was fine to speak freely as long as you were praising the US government or officially accusing your coworker of communist sympathies. However, it was *not* fine to be a communist, express any sympathy with communism, or, in some cases, to even discuss the subject of communism. During the Red Scare, all faculty at the City University of New York were forbidden to even speak the word *communism* in the classroom, let alone teach students about it. Since all CUNY faculty are employed by the New York City, they were (and are) technically considered government employees and thus were placed under the same gag rule as were members of Congress, and several *were* arrested and forced to defend themselves before HUAC. (This includes one City College music professor who, in his own defense, sang the entire Bill of Rights.) If we don't actively promote safe spaces and true free speech in the university, how long before we are right back there?

The public backlash against safe spaces has, at some colleges, extended to the administration. In 2016, John (Jay) Ellison, dean of students of the College of the University of Chicago, sent a letter to all incoming freshman about safe spaces. The letter states, "We do not support so-called 'trigger warnings.' . . . we do not condone the creation of intellectual 'safe spaces' where individuals can retreat." He asserts that this is due to a commitment to academic freedom and "the University's faculty report on freedom of expression."<sup>24</sup> Yet such

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<sup>23</sup> Hans-Joerg Tiede, "Exhuming McCarthy (Meet Me at the Book Burning): Faculty Members Respond to the Professor Watchlist," *Academe*, September–October 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Leonor Vivanco and Dawn Rhodes, "U. of C. Tells Incoming Freshmen It Does Not Support 'Trigger Warnings' or 'Safe Spaces,'" *Chicago Tribune*, August 25, 2016.

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a policy effectively strips instructors at this school of their right to designate their classrooms or other educational spaces “safe” if they wish to do so for legitimate pedagogical reasons. Once again, this reads as censorship and the silencing of certain narratives masquerading as a commitment to free speech. It strips faculty of agency in the classroom and on the campus by denying them the right to implement a particular positive learning atmosphere for students. According to the report that Ellison cites, “The Committee on Freedom of Expression at the University of Chicago was appointed in July 2014 by President Robert J. Zimmer and Provost Eric D. Isaacs ‘in light of recent events nationwide that have tested institutional commitments to free and open discourse.’”<sup>25</sup> Seven faculty members are listed as the authors of the report. The report does not reveal whether or not other faculty members were consulted in drafting the new policy or if they were aware of the committee’s mission.

To provide another example, as reported by Mythili Sampathkumar in the *Independent*, the conservative Christian university Sattler College, which is opening in Boston in the fall of 2018, will completely ban any safe spaces for students. Finny Kuruvilla, who contributed \$30 million for the school’s creation, is an alumnus of Harvard University. During an interview with *Fox News*, Kuruvilla discussed this campuswide ban not in terms of free speech but as a “revolution to get college back on track.”<sup>26</sup> Sattler College is planned as a very small, exclusive college with a projected student body numbering only in the hundreds and a correspondingly small faculty. Yet these relatively few faculty members, like the much more numerous faculty members at the University of Chicago, will not have the academic freedom to choose how to designate their classrooms. Moreover, that decision was not even nominally made by these faculty members—it was set by administration as school policy before the college even opened.

I am fortunate to teach at a college that permits and openly encourages safe spaces. For example, the LGBT Center at BMCC regularly offers a “Safe Zone training” after the completion of which professors are certified to officially denote their classrooms and offices safe spaces for students. BMCC campus has officially been declared a safe space/sanctuary campus for students who may be in danger of detention, deportation, or both. In January 2017, I joined the newly founded Free Sanctuary Group at BMCC. We are committed to preserving the rights and safety of our students and making sure that the administration clearly defines and supports those rights. Ewan writes, “If educators—especially those at community colleges, where students are more likely to be vulnerable to the vagaries of misguided public-policy decisions—can’t find the time [to address] these issues, especially those that threaten our students and their communities, then maybe

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<sup>25</sup> *Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression*, University of Chicago, January 2015, <https://freeexpression.uchicago.edu/page/report-committee-freedom-expression>.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Mythili Sampathkumar, “Christian University Where ‘Safe Spaces’ Are Banned Opens in Boston,” *Independent*, December 29, 2017.

we shouldn't be teaching in the first place."<sup>27</sup> Yet this is not only a duty to our students. It is a duty to our campuses, our profession, and ourselves. For every BMCC "Safe Space Training," there is a Jakub Zak wearing Patriot Front clothing on the campus of the College of Lake County in Illinois. For every Free Sanctuary Group, there is a dead student like Blaze Bernstein, a gay Jewish undergraduate at the University of Pennsylvania, whose murder is being investigated as a hate crime. For every professor who signed the "Stand Up and Speak Out" pledge to fight back against the current administration and "reporting" websites that target professors who speak out on racism, another professor's name appears on the Professor Watchlist.

We who teach in colleges and universities must not overlook how important promoting classroom safe spaces and the associated culture of student free speech is to our own struggle for academic freedom. We must have the freedom to designate our classrooms and educational spaces as safe spaces if we choose. The harassment of students in the name of "free speech" is directly linked to the harassment of faculty according to the same justification. I maintain we can best fight the Trump effect and preserve academic freedom by fighting repressive ideologies at all levels in the university—and that includes for our students. From safe spaces for students can come safe spaces for faculty as we make it known to our universities and to society as a whole that we do not tolerate hate speech, infringement of free speech, or challenges to our academic freedom on any level. The fight for our students is also the fight for institutional and social reconstruction.

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<sup>27</sup> Ewan, "Duck and Cover."