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On Rage

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On Rage

Abstract

“Honestly [Flight] was written out of rage. I wrote it immediately after Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian, in a matter of months. It was in the aftermath of 9/11. I was upset with the way people were acting, People on the Left and the Right, Muslims and Christians were justifying violence towards the other side. And everyone believed they were correct. I was thinking ‘What if Everybody is wrong?’” — Sherman Alexie in *The Gettysburgian*. [excerpt]

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, Sherman Alexie, Flight, genocide, reactionary, Gettysburg YAF, oppression

Disciplines

American Politics | Indigenous Studies | Other Arts and Humanities | Other Languages, Societies, and Cultures | Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies

Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](#) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at [surgegettysburg.wordpress.com](#) Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that –isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

ON RAGE.

September 28, 2015

“Honestly [Flight] was written out of rage. I wrote it immediately after Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian, in a matter of months. It was in the aftermath of 9/11. I was upset with the way people were acting, People on the Left and the Right, Muslims and

Christians were justifying violence towards the other side. And everyone believed they were correct. I was thinking ‘What if Everybody is wrong?’” —Sherman Alexie in *The Gettysburgian*



People are reactionary. People get defensive when you call them out. If I had a psych major on hand, I'd ask them to back up those statements with some evidence. However, I'm sure you can think of a recent moment when you acted without much thought. Oftentimes, we look back on these moments of defensiveness with shame. Sherman Alexie was reactionary. He wrote this year's First-Year Common Reading book, *Flight*, out of a reactionary shame for his fellow American.

In *Flight*, Alexie refuses to assign the quality of “good guy” or “bad guy” to any particular character or group of people. The morality of the protagonist, Zits, is both ambiguous and shifting throughout the novel. Likewise, the characters of Elk and Horse of Indigenous Rights Now! (IRON) are treacherous figureheads of a civil rights group. *Flight* succeeds in complicating how we canonize and demonize individuals and groups.

One reason why moral assignment is not sufficient is its historical contingency. At one point in time, Christopher Columbus was almost universally revered by Americans. Nowadays, more people might view him with a critical lens. New information we receive might change our entire outlook on a person. In this instance, the actual writings of Columbus proves that his “discovery” of the Americas was absurdly shameful. A modern example is Bill Cosby. Four years ago, if you asked someone if they liked Bill Cosby, they would've either said “who?” or “yeah, I guess.” Nowadays, Cosby is almost universally hated for his morally reprehensible and inhumane behavior.

Earlier this month, Alexie visited our campus and spoke to the first years in the CUB Ballroom. It must have been amazing for the new Gettysburgians to see and hear the writer of what they read.

Unfortunately, the definitive moment of this event was when a student spoke up to deny the genocide of the Native American peoples, and Alexie, in response, reacted emotionally. What kind of emotion did Alexie feel? Imagine if someone said that the mass killing, enslavement, and displacement of your people was both not that big of a deal and the fault of those oppressed. Similar emotions are provoked by Holocaust deniers and folks who validate Black American slavery. Alexie likely felt a unique unease, shared by Native Americans struggling to bring attention to their past for centuries. He was livid. The National Book Award winner proceeded to roast the student, and the student left the Ballroom to the applause of several in the audience.

From what I know, none of the faculty or administrators followed the student to check up on him, and some might say that that is not their responsibility. Despite the student being an adult and speaking in place of a position of power (i.e. American denial of its genocidal origins), there is definitely a power differential between Sherman Alexie and this first year. From what I've heard, Alexie has since apologized and consulted the student, and our college has personally followed up with that student.

The immediate consensus from those in the audience was that Alexie was in the right, which is totally defensible. People sympathized with the writer's emotional reaction, and people will continue to sympathize with the emotional reaction that is Alexie's book. However, in retrospect, many question whether or not Alexie could have handled the situation better. He's a nationally known voice on these issues, so he must have gotten some pushback on this situation before, no? Furthermore, what about everyone who clapped and the faculty who stood by? They are not blameworthy, per se, but aren't they a little complicit to that morally ambiguous situation? Couldn't they have been more pragmatic? More constructive?

Last Friday, Dean Ramsey wrote a mass e-mail regarding the recent controversies on campus related to the Gettysburg chapter of the Young Americans for Freedom (YAF). The letter touched upon the general unease and anxiety regarding YAF's posters and sidewalk messages. It then proceeded to champion "rational," "productive," and "respectful" debate as the cornerstone of a liberal arts education. This was a call for pragmatism without ad hominem and censorship. Dean Ramsey wrote in response not only to YAF's messaging but also to the vandalism, satire, and defacement of YAF's messaging.

I'm all for debate, but I believe that retrospective calls for pragmatism delegitimize rage and emotional response. I find it very hard to believe that there are no elements of truth, productivity, and progression in Alexie's emotional response and in students' reaction to YAF. Sure, these situations are morally grey. Sure, in these situations, everyone is a bit complicit. Sure, things could be better, more constructive, more productive, and more black-and-white. However, that does not discount the rich wealth of expression in Alexie's rage. It does not discount the rich wealth of expression in students' rage.

There are no pure heroes or villains. Instead of canonizing and demonizing folks, we might need to focus more on how behaviors participate in systems of oppression (e.g. anti-native racism, xenophobic racism, etc.). For example, in my opinion the term "anchor baby" is derogatory, and using it when discussing immigration policy can only be characterized as oppressive speech. Passionately, Alexie and students were countering such systems of oppression by being reactionary. Sometimes we do not need to look back on moments of emotional defensiveness with shame, especially when we're defending justice and the truth.

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