

## **Freedom of Speech as the Antidote to Silence: Telling the *Good Side* of History**

Four years ago, in the black polyester seats of my high school best friend's Toyota, I remember the two of us discussing how we couldn't understand *how some people could ever choose to be on the "wrong" side of history*. In those days, after school, she would pull her car to a stop overlooking a two-lane road, a row of bushes, and then a line of trees after going through the coffee shop drive through. Nothing ordinary but made extraordinary by our proclivity for imagining a better world. Before us those trees transformed—perhaps because of our youth or because we found another person in our relatively conservative town who was passionate about challenging systems of hierarchy, education, and governance—into a limitless future. It strikes me as paradoxical that I saw more hope in a row of oak trees than living in New York City for the past four years, looking everyday at skyscrapers that supposedly represent dreams, creativity, capital and the future.

Although that statement still stands—it remains incredible to me that someone would purposely choose to be on the “wrong” side of history—it has become increasingly clear as a lived experience that while historical moments are happening all around me, many times I have remained silent when it is easier or more convenient. For example, as a tour guide for Columbia University, there is a part of the tour where I am supposed to say, “Columbia offers 500 different clubs and organizations on campus, including over 80 identity-based groups whether this be your sexual identity, religious identity, or ethnic identity”. I never gave much thought to this particular lofty assertion that I am paid \$16 an hour to robotically chirp with the excitement of a student-ventriloquized-by-school-brochure.

However, when Columbia decided to suspend two student organizations, Students for Justice in Palestine and Jewish Voices for Peace, abruptly and without consulting faculty for a vote, I began to reconsider the fragility of these statistics during strained circumstances; what happened when wars broke out, when financial records told more incriminating stories, and when certain voices were being silenced more than others? However, badly I wanted to addendum my tours—“well, 80 identity based clubs minus two... check out how we made headlines in *The New York Times* for limiting campus free speech”—I was also keenly aware that I was being employed by the university. Therefore, my opinions were only wanted so long as they were uniformly positive. During the on-campus protests, Columbia decided to respond by calling in the New York Police Department to surveil—though their carefully-worded emails argued they were there to “protect”—even though the criminal justice system has always favored the protection of some groups over others and often use tactics of threatening and intimidation.

Reflecting on this silence brought many feelings of sadness. Most notably because of the acute pain and dysphoria I felt my freshman year at Columbia University, where current events

intersected with my own identity. During that time, I felt the loudness of the silence around me—the silence of a school pretending everything was normal, that erased the anxiety and danger I felt every day. Asian women were facing hate crimes throughout New York City in a period of rising Sinophobia due to COVID-19, made worse by President Trump labeling the virus “Kung Flu”. I experienced the classic tactic of pointing fingers to the Other, this time the Other that looked like me. For the school newspaper, I remembered having a panic attack hyperventilating in the middle of the night at just eighteen. At the time, I was writing a story for the school newspaper in which I spent hours a day interviewing fellow classmates who had been followed home, spit on, and harassed. They described with vivid details the same street corners I frequented, my new home transformed by violence from the idealized New York City I once envisioned as a young teenager.

In those moments, there was no time for silence on my college campus, which remained eerily quiet. The school sent out emails about these attacks, but none of these emails ever explicitly included the word “racism”. This past semester, I began interning at the Manhattan District Attorney’s Office, which prosecutes all crimes that occur in Manhattan, a borough that forms one of the most economically and racially diverse cities in the world. I was astounded to learn that the Hate Crimes Unit was newly created in 2023, another moment of historical erasure in part because of the difficulty in proving that crimes are racially motivated.

In a political science class on sexuality and citizenship in the United States, my eyes widened in amazement late at night when confronted with a reading complete with the photographs from the first pride march in New York City in 1970 after the Stonewall Uprising. In a city often full of aggression, I am most interested in moments when communities form solidarity in the wake of brutality. When I was younger, I thought my English professor and the comics artist Alison Bechdel were joking, perhaps embellishing, when they spoke about what the Gay Liberation movement meant for them. Suddenly, I found myself crying similar tears of joy. This was an era—and some may argue there are still strong remnants of this era with the Don’t Say Gay bill and other legislation threatening gay rights—in which people were policed, fired from their jobs, and rejected from their families merely for *loving*. I could not stop thinking Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera are *just so beautiful* because finally, they could fight in the open, they could smile with pride.

Sometimes, when I am asked what brought me to the field of political science, I laugh. As if it were some autonomous decision. We are living in an era where bodies are made political through abortion debates, gay rights debates, and debates about the minority status, the immigrant status, and international female security. I cannot help but think of myself less as political and more as *politicized*. For some, life is a great political act and the body a fraught political place. When I am asked why I also chose to spend the last four years studying English literature, I have similar reflections. When voices are silenced, where is there to turn besides art and writing? Writing,

too, becomes a political act of its own. I feel its suppressed power when I peruse the growing number of banned books, where the real and visceral are labeled ‘too vulgar’ or ‘too violent’ when the vulgarity is ignorance and the violence is erasing lived experiences.

I think about the journalists who were killed in Gaza, the writers who were shunned by their community one moment and Nobel Prize winners the next, and those who re-fashion language, such as Tracy K. Smith with her found poems and Elena Ferrante with her invention of words simply *because the formal Italian language would not hold her Neapolitan people*. I think about marginalized authors and their literary forms as a practice of reminding myself about alternative histories, *the good side of history*. I stand aghast sometimes with the power of historical knowledge, staring at works in the literary archives, such as with the Renaissance cross-dresser Moll Cutpurse or the Renaissance Christian feminist Jane Anger. I think about how these histories are taken from public memory. For me, the power of free speech is to remember ourselves and to remember our pasts. The ability to assemble, to protest, to cry, to celebrate, and to be proud when the rest of the world is silent. To find community when we feel most alone and to stir the world like the wind stirred those oak trees in my hometown parking lot four years ago.