**<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/30/opinion/i-am-a-dangerous-professor.html?_r=0>**

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**I Am a Dangerous Professor**



George Yancy

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Credit Leigh Wells

Those familiar with George Orwell’s “1984” will recall that “Newspeak was designed not to extend but to *diminish* the range of thought.” I recently felt the weight of this Orwellian ethos when many of my students sent emails to inform me, and perhaps warn me, that my name appears on the Professor Watchlist, a new website created by a conservative youth group known as Turning Point USA.

I could sense the gravity in those email messages, a sense of relaying what is to come. The Professor Watchlist’s mission, among other things, is to sound an alarm about those of us within academia who “advance leftist propaganda in the classroom.” It names and includes photographs of some 200 professors.

The Watchlist appears to be consistent with a nostalgic desire “to make America great again” and to expose and oppose those voices in academia that are anti-Republican or express anti-Republican values. For many black people, making America “great again” is especially threatening, as it signals a return to a more explicit and unapologetic racial dystopia. For us, dreaming of yesterday is not a privilege, not a desire, but a nightmare.

The new “watchlist” is essentially a new species of McCarthyism, especially in terms of its overtones of “disloyalty” to the American republic. And it is reminiscent of Cointelpro, the secret F.B.I. program that spied on, infiltrated and discredited American political organizations in the ’50s and ’60s. Its goal of “outing” professors for their views helps to create the appearance of something secretly subversive. It is a form of exposure designed to mark, shame and silence.

[](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/28/us/professor-watchlist-is-seen-as-threat-to-academic-freedom.html)

**[Professor Watchlist Is Seen as Threat to Academic Freedom NOV. 28, 2016](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/28/us/professor-watchlist-is-seen-as-threat-to-academic-freedom.html)**

So when I first confirmed my students’ concerns, I was engulfed by a feeling of righteous indignation, even anger. The list maker would rather that we run in shame after having been called out. Yet I was reminded of the novel “The Bluest Eye” in which Toni Morrison wrote that anger was better than shame: “There is a sense of being in anger. A reality and presence. An awareness of worth.” The anger I experienced was also — in the words the poet and theorist Audre Lorde used to describe the erotic — “a reminder of my capacity for feeling.” It is that feeling that is disruptive of the Orwellian gestures embedded in the Professor Watchlist. Its devotees would rather I become numb, afraid and silent. However, it is the anger that I feel that functions as a saving grace, a place of being.

If we are not careful, a watchlist like this can have the impact of the philosopher Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon — a theoretical prison designed to create a form of self-censorship among those imprisoned. The list is not simply designed to get others to spy on us, to out us, but to install forms of psychological self-policing to eliminate thoughts, pedagogical approaches and theoretical orientations that it defines as subversive.

Honestly, being a black man, I had thought that I had been marked enough — as bestial, as criminal, as inferior. I have always known of the existence of that racialized scarlet letter. It marks me as I enter stores; the white security guard never fails to see it. It follows me around at predominantly white philosophy conferences; I am marked as “different” within that space not because I *am* different, but because the conference space is filled with whiteness. It follows me as white police officers pull me over for no other reason than because I’m black. As Frantz Fanon writes, “I am overdetermined from without.”

But now I feel the multiple markings; I am now “un-American” because of my ideas, my desires and passion to undo injustice where I see it, my engagement in a form of pedagogy that can cause my students to become angry or resistant in their newfound awareness of the magnitude of suffering that exists in the world. Yet I reject this marking. I refuse to be philosophically and pedagogically adjusted.

adjusted” is to belie what I see as one major aim of philosophy — to speak to the multiple ways in which we suffer, to be a voice through which suffering might speak and be heard, and to offer a gift to my students that will leave them maladjusted and profoundly unhappy with the world as it is. Bringing them to that state is what I call doing “high stakes philosophy.” It is a form of practicing philosophy that refuses to ignore the horrible realities of people who suffer and that rejects ideal theory, which functions to obfuscate such realities. It is a form of philosophizing that refuses to be seduced by what Friedrich Nietzsche called “conceptual mummies.” Nietzsche notes that for many philosophers, “nothing actual has escaped from their hands alive.”

In my courses, which the watchlist would like to flag as “un-American” and as “leftist propaganda,” I refuse to entertain my students with mummified ideas and abstract forms of philosophical self-stimulation. What leaves their hands is always philosophically alive, vibrant and filled with urgency. I want them to engage in the process of freeing ideas, freeing their philosophical imaginations. I want them to lose sleep over the pain and suffering of so many lives that many of us deem disposable. I want them to become conceptually unhinged, to leave my classes discontented and maladjusted.

Bear in mind that it was in 1963 that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. raised his voice and said: “I say very honestly that I never intend to become adjusted to segregation and discrimination. I never intend to become adjusted to religious bigotry. I never intend to adjust myself to economic conditions that will take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few. I never intend to adjust myself to the madness of militarism, to self‐defeating effects of physical violence.”

I also recall the words Plato attributed to Socrates during his trial: “As long as I draw breath and am able, I shall not cease to practice philosophy.” By that Socrates meant that he would not cease to exhort Athenians to care more for justice than they did for wealth or reputation.

So, in my classrooms, I refuse to remain silent in the face of racism, its subtle and systemic structure. I refuse to remain silent in the face of patriarchal and sexist hegemony and the denigration of women’s bodies, or about the ways in which women have internalized male assumptions of how they should look and what they should feel and desire.

I refuse to be silent about forms of militarism in which innocent civilians are murdered in the name of “democracy.” I refuse to remain silent when it comes to acknowledging the existential and psychic dread and chaos experienced by those who are targets of xenophobia and homophobia.

I refuse to remain silent in a world where children become targets of sexual violence, and where unarmed black bodies are shot dead by the state and its proxies, where those with disabilities are mocked and still rendered “[monstrous](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/26/opinion/mental-illness-is-not-a-horror-show.html),” and where the earth suffers because some of us refuse to hear its suffering, where my ideas are marked as “un-American,” and apparently “dangerous.”

Well, if it is dangerous to teach my students to love their neighbors, to think and rethink constructively and ethically about who their neighbors are, and how they have been taught to see themselves as disconnected and neoliberal subjects, then, yes, I am dangerous, and what I teach is dangerous.

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**Now in print**: “[The Stone Reader: Modern Philosophy in 133 Arguments](http://bit.ly/1MW2kN3),” an anthology of essays from The Times’s philosophy series, edited by Peter Catapano and Simon Critchley, published by Liveright Books.

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