

Letter From the University of Pennsylvania

by Gregory P. Pavlik

On Buffalo and Bias



Sheldon Hackney, president of the University of Pennsylvania, was recently chosen to head the National Endowment for the Humanities. Dr. Hackney has been described by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* as something of a moderate with a passion for free expression. I won't rehash his credentials as a defender of free speech, except to say that he backed the public financing of Robert Mapplethorpe's homoerotic photo exhibition at the Institute for Contemporary Art at Penn in 1989. The president of the conservative National Association of Scholars, Stephen Balch, described Hackney as an "intelligent, open-minded man of integrity." With all this lavish praise, one can easily see how Dr. Hackney was so promptly confirmed.

But rhetoric and reality too frequently diverge, and Hackney's reputation for defending open expression is ill-deserved. Major national media attention has focused on the university's zealous prosecution of a young Jewish man for calling a group of black women "water buffalo." Although the charge of racial harassment was dropped by the women, the controversy lasted long enough to raise serious questions about the propriety of the university's "hate" speech code. This code has been flagrantly abused with some frequency, and has resulted in a climate of outright political intimidation. I speak now from personal experience, having been very nearly mauled by the Hackney administration for the high crime of insensitivity.

In the fall 1992 semester, two white students were placed under investigation by the university for racial harassment, a charge that can result in a range of repercussions, from a permanent mark on a student's transcript to expulsion. They had thrown water out of their dormitory window on a group of students

performing a ritual "tapping" exercise for initiation into a senior honor society. Never mind that this rather noisy ceremony occurred after two o'clock in the morning, that the two white students claim that members of the honor society had thrown eggs at their building, that the initiates were blindfolded in violation of university policy and state law, or that these "honor" students let loose a stream of violent and anti-white epithets after the soaking: the honor society is called Onyx, meaning black.

Because there was no real evidence of racial ill will on the part of the white students, the university's acting Judicial Inquiry Officer, Catherine Schifter, pressed for a settlement. The two students were essentially coerced into signing an agreement that involved expulsion from their rooms, writing a letter of apology, and community service to avoid the kangaroo court that would have followed the investigation. Predictably, the Onyx Society faced no consequence, only appeasement.

As an editorial columnist at the school paper, the *Daily Pennsylvanian*, I suggested in an opinion piece that somewhere the idea of justice had been lost and that a gross double standard was at work, not only in the university, but in the country at large. I cited the case of the Onyx Society in particular, and expected an angry response from some (particularly after an administrator threatened my life if I chose to run the column). But I hoped to draw attention to the real issue of the rot that has settled within the university system in multiculturalism's wake.

Six days passed when I received a call from Dr. Schifter. She rather happily informed me that 31 charges of racial harassment had been filed against me. When I queried her as to why, her response was, "You need to ask?" I asked Dr. Schifter if I was protected by the university's "Open Expression Guidelines," which explicitly state that speech critical of the university is protected, and was told that this was to be determined as part of her investigation. It was then intimated to me that if I sat down with the entire bulk of students that had filed the charges against me and opened a dialogue, all would be forgiven. Try to envision 31 angry black students placing the blame of hundreds of years of white

oppression on my head. I am sure that had I accepted this offer and eventually broken down in an admission of my insensitivity, I would have been railroaded straight through the campus court system: shot by my own confession, as it were.

Hackney did not live up to his reputation as a free-speech ideologue. Although he had full knowledge of the case, he nevertheless allowed an investigation to be launched against me, despite Penn's signed agreement with the newspaper stipulating that no judicial action will be taken against a student for anything written in the paper. The ordeal ended only when Alan Kors, a professor of intellectual history who serves on the NEH board, placed a personal call to Hackney. It seems that the prospect of a political spectacle was not on the Hackney agenda for the semester. Nevertheless, a month passed before I received written notice that I was not to be formally charged.

Apparently, the threat of permanently smearing my academic record was not enough for the militants in the campus black community. On April 15, they chose to seize and dispose of nearly all 14,200 copies of the *Daily Pennsylvanian*, in which my final column of the semester ran, from the distribution points on campus. In place of the newspapers was a note, claiming responsibility lay with the "Black Community," which was protesting the "blatant and voluntary perpetuation of institutional racism." A black student's remark to the *Philadelphia Inquirer* that day seems to reflect the attitude of the Hackney administration: "I really feel like I totally, absolutely agree with freedom of speech. But it's another thing when they're getting complaints from over a hundred people that they're feeling really harassed, and they don't do anything about it."

As is customary for campus minorities after committing a crime, the gaggle of thieves marched to Hackney's house with a list of demands, including the dismissal of a police officer who had the audacity to arrest one of the protesters. It seems the student, a black male, resisted and was poked with a police club. As it turns out, the young man is the great-grandson of Elijah Muhammad, founder of the Nation of Islam, a mili-

tant black organization that describes whites as “devils” created as a curse upon the world by an embittered black scientist.

That evening Hackney came out and met with the student militants, and the following day he refused to condemn the minority students for their theft of the paper. His statement reads like an apology. Hackney lamented that “two important university values, diversity and open expression, seem to be in conflict.” One wonders if Hackney regretted the conflict between the morals of normal Americans and the publicly-funded homosexual pornography in Mapplethorpe’s photographic exhibit in his past defense of free expression. Perhaps he would have been quick to come to my defense if I had been receiving federal subsidies for my work.

As of this writing, the theft of the paper has been deemed a violation of the open expression policy of the university. This cerebral realization represents something of a milestone in university life. Perhaps some backlash will crystallize against the previously unstoppable juggernaut of university thought control. However, the security officer who arrested the young Muhammad has been suspended for detaining two of the protesting thieves. Penn’s enforcers of the politically correct have apparently found another scapegoat on whom they can vent their bitter brand of sensitivity.

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Letter From the Lower Right

by John Shelton Reed

This and That From Here and There



It’s been a while since my last roundup of regional news, so some of these items have a little age on them, but you probably missed them anyway, so they’ll be news to you, right? An implicit theme (not implicit now that I’ve mentioned it, I guess) is that Southern culture is still

kicking, even if in some respects it’s on the skids.

Let’s start with the fact that here in Chapel Hill we have a local band called—Southern Culture on the Skids. (Their best song is “Eight-Piece Box.”) I ask you: Would anyone name a band, say, *New England Culture on the Skids*? I rest my case.

But not all of the musical news these days is, ah, upbeat. A recent marketing study, for instance, reveals that two-thirds of the country-music audience is now female. I have to say that we traditionalists suspected as much.

See, it used to be that country was a pretty masculine world. Most of the fans were male, and so were most of the singers, old boys who could tear your heart out with a sad song or make you grin with a lyric like “Her daddy calls her ‘angel,’ and her mama calls us three times a night.” That was the era of great country titles, like “Because of the Cathouse I’m in the Doghouse with You,” “Footprints on the Windshield Upside Down,” and, of course, “Take Your Tongue Out of My Mouth (I’m Kissing You Goodbye).” Women singers were a minority, but there were plenty of them. Many of them knew their place and sang songs like “I Want to be a Cowboy’s Sweetheart” or “Stand By Your Man,” but there was always room for a spunky, take-no-crap gal like Loretta (“Don’t Come Home A-Drinkin’ With Lovin’ on Your Mind”) Lynn.

But it seems that now women have quit telling their husbands and boyfriends to change the station, and I think the advent of the music video has something to do with that. It’s no accident that homely guys like George Jones, Johnny Paycheck, and Hank Williams Jr. are being replaced by studly hunks whose videos show their peccs. Ironically, this development hasn’t been good for female singers. New women singers are coming along, and they’ll have careers, but there are fewer Loretta’s and Dolly’s and Tammy’s these days—Reba McEntire is about the only female superstar—and the megahits are from guys with names like Vince and Garth and Clint. (A friend of a friend recently moved from Siler City, North Carolina, to Nashville and changed his name to “Brick”—watch for him.) It’s almost incidental that some of these boys can really sing: others can’t, and it hasn’t hurt them one bit. “Achy Breaky Heart” has a good beat and Lord knows you can

dance to it, but *I* could sing it as well as Billy Ray does.

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Speaking of music videos and Nashville, I find it almost touching that officials at David Lipscomb University in Music City banned MTV from television sets in dormitory lounges and the student center, objecting to both the noise level and the frequently suggestive content. Hard to believe, isn’t it, that these good souls live in the same world and century as the Netherlanders who (Reuters informs us) recently wrote a report recommending special fire-safety regulations for brothels catering to sado-masochists. (I hadn’t thought about it, but obviously it takes longer to escape from a burning building if you’re handcuffed to a bedpost.)

Yes, our world is made up of many diverse and mutually uncomprehending communities. It always has been, of course, but these days they can’t simply ignore each other. Forcing disparate cultures to *notice* one another is the great effect of the modern mass media. Communications gurus like to argue that the media are making us look more alike, too, but that’s less clearly so. As a recent article on “territorial television” in the broadcasting trade magazine *Channels* shows, different folks watch different programs—and region is one of the differences that makes a difference. *Designing Women*, for instance, used to be one of the best shows on television (even if it did get a little preachy sometimes) and it’s certainly one of the best ever set in the South (although that’s not saying much). Southerners seemed to appreciate that: at its peak the program had ratings in Atlanta and Little Rock nearly half again as high as the national average. That’s about the same regional bonus that *Newhart* and *Murder, She Wrote* enjoyed in Burlington, Vermont. Similarly, the relatively wholesome CBS miniseries *Lonesome Dove* was watched by 38 percent of all Houston households, but by only 19 percent of those in New York City (where it was outdrawn by *Full Exposure: The Sex Tapes Scandal*). *Miami Vice* got a bigger audience in, no surprise, Miami. And so forth.

This is nothing new. Twenty-odd years ago the Nielsen ratings showed only one program (the *Lucy Show*) in the top ten for both the South and the Northeast, and that was at a time when there were at most three channels for viewers to choose from. Now that cable