



The University of Vermont

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Dear Working Group on the Status of Vermont Libraries,

Thank you for the opportunity to share my testimony about intellectual freedom. I am Professor of Cultural Anthropology and Chair of the Anthropology Department at the University of Vermont. My research and teaching focus on the cultural and political dimensions of sustainability-related social movements. This work is ethnographic, historical, artistic, and often public facing. I am very much on the humanities end of the spectrum within the social sciences, as I am deeply interested in questions of cultural meaning, values, sense-making, and the relationship between knowledge and power. This orientation has led to my active involvement and leadership in humanities spaces, including serving as Director of the UVM Humanities Center for eight years, as a current board member of Vermont Humanities, and as co-founder of the New England Humanities Consortium, a network of sixteen regional university-based humanities institutes that works to facilitate collaborations across campuses and in the public sphere.

As a tenured professor, I can take for granted two things: the special privilege of a high level of intellectual freedom to pursue consequential and at times controversial research and teaching, but also the necessity of constant vigilance against political-economic interests and agendas that seek ideological suppression and conformity, increasingly in the name of narrowly-construed—if not also cynically deployed—notions of “intellectual diversity,” but also in efforts to reduce the range of those who are entitled to represent cultural dynamics and other peoples’ lives in our highly polarized moment.

The work of cultural anthropology tends to be inconvenient to such agendas, and we push much harder than other fields I know in our demands for intellectual freedom. As the great 20<sup>th</sup> century anthropologist Clifford Geertz once asserted, we are “merchants of astonishment” and he declared:

“Looking into dragons, not domesticating or abominating them, nor drowning them in vats of theory, is what anthropology has been all about. ... We have, with no little success, sought to keep the world off balance; pulling out rugs, upsetting tea tables, setting off firecrackers. It has been the office of others to reassure; ours to unsettle.”

These words could serve as, in contemporary parlance, a trigger warning, because the goal here is to challenge comfortable truisms and universalisms about what it means to be human in order to forge deeper appreciation of the fundamental plasticity, variability, and plurality of the human

condition. In this regard, Anthropology can be inconvenient to all kinds of political agendas, conservative *and* progressive.

I recognize that libraries would have a harder time making a similar declaration of their own, because they straddle complicated lines here. On the one hand we expect them to occupy positions of civilizational reassurance in their collections and programming. We count on them as repositories of important historical, intellectual, and cultural benchmarks foundational to American life that extend back thousands of years before this country's foundation.

But at the same time, it is clear they are also close allies in my discipline's efforts to unsettle taken-for-granted assumptions, challenge ethnocentrism, address blatant injustices, and promote cultural diversity. Librarians are deeply involved in efforts to decolonize collections and archives, and to incorporate anti-racist pedagogies into their programming. Through these practices, they play a critical role in legitimating more complicated—and disquieting—stories of that civilizational past that claims exceptional status and minimizes or outright excludes cultural others who also shaped that past.

My own career has been deeply bound up with libraries—one could even say totally dependent on them—as a habitual user of academic libraries and special collections archives, and as a participant in Vermont Humanities Speaker's Bureau and its First Wednesdays series, through which I am a regular presenter at town libraries throughout our State. And increasingly I find myself called to help defend librarians against modern-day challenges to their cultural diversity-related programming and collections. These challenges overwhelmingly target works about and by BIPOC community members and others from traditionally marginalized groups. These challenges are based on pernicious and contradictory ideologies that invoke rhetorical claims of defending “intellectual freedom” as they radically reduce the range of those who are deemed eligible—authors, creators, readers, and other interested parties—to actually exercise that freedom.

In higher education we see these attacks increasingly couched within broader efforts to delegitimize and eliminate Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice initiatives and offices. In numerous states, we are seeing Orwellian proposals emerge under the banner of “Intellectual Freedom and Viewpoint Diversity” that require campuswide surveys to ensure “competing ideas and perspectives” are represented in classrooms. I chuckle at the very basic misunderstanding of the yawning epistemological gaps that exist in universities and colleges that I navigate all the time, not to mention how, as extremely conservative institutions, universities and colleges perpetuate structures of power and privilege. But that, of course, is not their point. It is, quite simply, to insert narrow ideological and political agendas into classrooms.

We also are seeing the chilling effects of a form of academic vigilantism, in which students are empowered and encouraged to make audio recordings of professors' lectures without permission to ensure “fair and balanced” coverage. This practice undermines not only the intellectual property rights of faculty, but also their discretion to shape and control the academic environment where one of our central goals is often to deliberately cultivate the very practices of respectful and compassionate discourse on which intellectual freedom, not to mention our country's democratic aspirations, greatly depend.

Of course, these are matters of tremendous consequence to librarians as well, as their collection and archiving practices are—or soon will—come under increased scrutiny from politicians and their allies seeking ways to eliminate freedom of thought in the name of “intellectual diversity.” I would simply say that librarians have natural allies in my discipline where—trigger warning!—we’re ready, and well-trained, to upset tea tables and set off firecrackers.

But I did also say that anthropologists can be inconvenient to other agendas that limit intellectual freedom. An area of concern for me emerges from within the very communities fighting for a more inclusive and just society, often expressed through the practice of “calling out,” or public shaming for words or behaviors deemed unacceptable or harmful in the midst of discomfiting conversations about privilege, race, identity, and other sensitive matters of culture and politics. If you’ve ever been called out you will know it has an alienating effect, but this is more than just a form of communication: embedded in it are often essentialisms and problematic purities about who is entitled to talk about or represent the social worlds and experiences of others. As a middle-class American male, descendant of a Chilean immigrant, what right do I have to represent the lives of rural Zapotec Indians from southern Mexico?—something I’ve been called out on. Calling out can be justified to challenge provocateurs and those who hold the levers of political power, but when divorced from context and complexity, and the often rich collaborations and compassionate relationships, encompassed in cultural research and work, they narrow the kinds of explorations that are possible. They make people hesitant to speak up, ask questions, test their learning. “Calling in,” as the great social justice activist Loretta Ross calls the alternative, is not about policing and weaponizing suffering, but about bringing people in to create space for listening and dialogue across differences. This, of course, is another place where libraries straddle a difficult line, no less challenging given the political polarization affecting our country. But libraries, in their best form, have always been spaces for calling in, and I hope they remain that way.

In conclusion I’d like to share with you a summary of how I think about culture after 30 years of thinking, research, writing, and teaching about it, and it is this: Across the world, different societies have variable levels of tolerance for change and ideas about what makes them thrive. These ideas are influenced by many factors, involving their belief systems, how they organize social relationships, how their institutions work, among others. When I think about it, the notion many of us have about what makes our culture thrive is the freedom we have as individuals and as members of social groups to explore worlds, lives, experiences, and ideas that include our individuality but also transcend it, a freedom that libraries play a central role in protecting. I can tell you that my own ability to set off firecrackers completely depends on it.

Thank you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the initials 'JA' followed by a flourish.