

When a Woman Academic is Under Attack, Little is Said

Fear & Loathing at the University

Starla

2005

BOULDER, COLO. Walking by the student center of the University of Colorado at Boulder (CU) one late winter day early this year, I saw campus Republicans swarming around several seven-foot tall poster boards. Usually, they fill these poster boards with meaningless—and largely ignored—right-wing slogans. But this day was different because the press also crowded the area, and a throng of onlookers had gathered. At the cost of being late to my next class, I cut through the mob to read the garish, neon-colored posters.

A CU professor, Ward Churchill, was accused of comparing hard working Americans killed on 9/11 to Nazis in an essay he wrote following the attack. The Young Republicans, along with a gaggle of state legislators and right-wing talk show hosts, were demanding that the professor be dismissed for expressing his unpopular views.

I began to feel angry and confused. Doesn't a tenured professor have the academic freedom to write without fear of censure? Why were some people blowing one article's perspective so entirely out of proportion? And, why did the campus Republicans, with their bullhorns, automatically become the source of objective truth that so few were willing to question?

As the days went on, and the media spectacle unfolded, I understood just how relative academic freedom is in a post-9/11 world, as well as how easily a lynch mob mentality is created.

A few days later, by chance, I spotted a flyer calling for a protest in response to the firing of another academic, Adrienne Anderson. It related how Anderson had been fired for comments in her classroom and in research deemed offensive. The comments and research secretly upset the Coors and Lockheed Martin corporations, two major contributors to the university.

After talking with Lovetree, a woman leading the fight to get Anderson rehired, I learned that CU's official position was that Anderson had been fired due to lack of financial resources. This instructor, who only made \$25,000 a year, could not find a place in the Environmental Studies budget, but it is strange to know that she is the only instructor doing any research aimed at the pollution of major corporations.

According to Lovetree, Anderson is almost finished with a project called the White Papers, in which she details her observations of local neighborhoods polluted by runoff from Coors and Lockheed Martin. Lovetree said that Anderson discovered women in these affected zones that had given birth to boneless babies and tumors, among many other tragic results. The CU Environmental Studies Club is quietly fighting the dismissal of their beloved Adrienne Anderson by raising the \$25,000 that the Environmental Studies Department says it does not have for her salary. (Donations can be sent to: Environmental Studies Club, University of Colorado, UMC 330, UCB 207, Boulder, Colorado 80309).

Anderson's battle is more important and easier to resolve than the Churchill scandal. It is somewhat disappointing that Anderson says she does not want any part in exposing her plight to media coverage. Lovetree explains this is Anderson's choice because she fears being falsely quoted or misrepresented by reporters. She would rather fight

her battles quietly, unlike Churchill who gets covered by every national news outlet. Anderson's stance is double edged as she could easily get support from many people, but does not because she fears the repercussions of reaching out to the three ring media circus.

Anderson's story is sadly not a new tale in academia. There are many professors, instructors, and students that are quietly disposed of each year for expressing themselves in ways deemed unacceptable by some almighty Censor. Each one of these muted disposals chips away at every individual's right to originality and freedom.

As a woman, anarchist, autonomy-loving college student, I have found that protecting academic freedom in the university is a complicated process that constantly tests the quality of my creativity, beliefs, and ability to override the norms of society. I want to point out the conflicts and problems of society in a radical way in my classes, but it is hard to be completely open and involved in classroom discussions and assignments due to the present hostile and fear-based environment at CU. This is compounded by the fact that I am a woman in a classroom setting where men are called on more often and are assumed to be more credible.

This is not to say that I am afraid, because I promise to do my part and rise up against those who are attempting to break down academic freedom and destroy the central purpose of the university—the acquisition of truth.

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