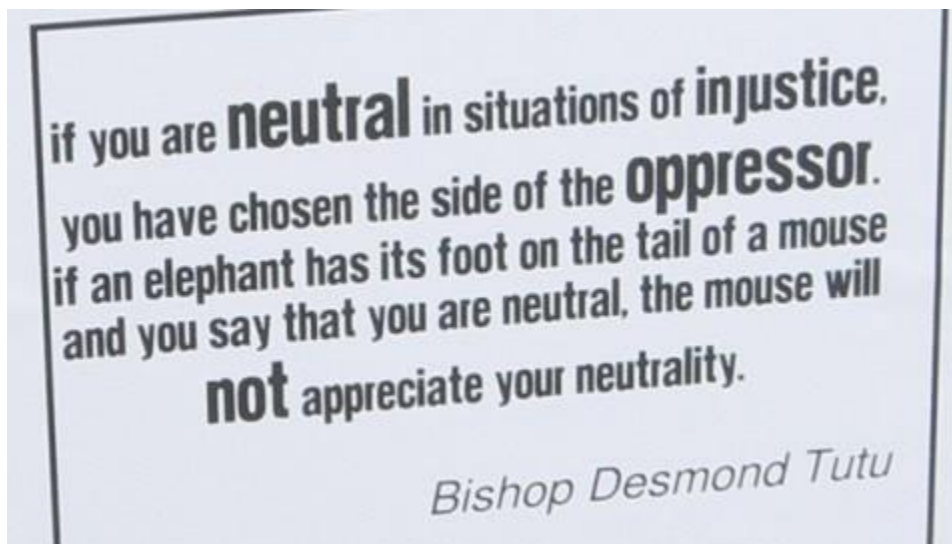


The problem with criticizing “call-out culture”
The Massachusetts Daily Collegian, October 14, 2015
Posted by Alisina Sae-Nazari on October 14, 2015



When I arrived at the University of Massachusetts from Los Angeles, I wasn't prepared to be one of the only students of color in the classroom. I wasn't prepared for the anxiety that would rise when topics about racism would be discussed in a class full of my white peers. Nor was I prepared to read textbooks that refer to my heritage as “exotic,” and to be in a classroom that has no problem with it. How a person navigates campus is influenced by the color of their skin, their gender, their sexuality, their class, their mental and physical ability and more. When a white student tells me there isn't any racism at UMass, they are unknowingly invalidating the experiences I have endured due to the color of my skin, and are doing so through a privileged lens. I would call that student out to explain to them how what they're saying is oppressive, and shouldn't have to do that alone.

Addressing oppression and privilege requires people to hold one another accountable, referred to as “calling out.” I don't call out because I'm being oversensitive, but because oppressive behavior has been historically enforced and campus culture is reflective of our society's. Calling out should be considered a method of learning from another student with different experiences than yours, but calling it a “culture” avoids accountability and tone-polices those who have a right to speak out about their oppression. Marginalized people are demonized by the branding of “call out culture” as an aggressive display of moral superiority. Its replacement, calling in, requires appealing to the empathy of those who aren't marginalized and centers their privileged understanding at the expense of those who are being oppressed (Ziyad, BlackGirlDangerous). This established alternative has dichotomized the process of confronting oppression, rather than allowing both to be accepted as rational means to building community and learning.

There have been many critics of call out culture. For example, writer Asin Ahmad goes so far as to say that call-out culture “can end up mirroring what the prison industrial complex teaches us

about crime and punishment: to banish and dispose of individuals rather than to engage with them as people with complicated stories and histories.” Ahmad continues to call this culture toxic and the act of calling someone out to be “a public performance where people can demonstrate their wit or how pure their politics are.” Calling out is correlated with aggression, shaming and establishing power, and coining the act to be a culture insinuates these correlations to be characteristic of those who call out: marginalized people. Micro-aggressions occur frequently in the classroom and might be unintentional, but that’s not what is heard. When a white student dismisses me for bringing up race on campus, that’s pathologizing my experiences. I’d confront the student for what he or she had said and unless I felt safe calling the student in, I shouldn’t have to. Immediately disrupting oppressive behavior should be prioritized when the safety of a person is in question, rather than focus on the discomfort caused by confrontation. Confronting aspects of your identity is uncomfortable, but is also a valuable learning experience. When examining call out culture’s critique, we should not only evaluate how discomfort is prioritized, but how straying away from the orthodox classroom structure is discouraged.

“Calling in” was introduced as an alternative to calling out, “means speaking privately with an individual who has done some wrong, in order to address the behaviour without making a spectacle of the address itself,” The “spectacle” Ahmad is referring to is calling out in a public context, for instance a classroom. Calling out another student in a classroom shouldn’t be a performance of wit and pure politics for others, but rather a space where a community can hold one another responsible to what they say. Calling in relies on the responsibility of the marginalized student and disrupting this behavior in a public setting allows spectators to learn from the experience as well.

Calling in can be useful in building relationships, but should not be the only method to address problematic statements. Nor should those who favor calling in tone-police those who call out. Neither calling in nor calling out are simply telling someone “you’re racist,” but explaining to the oppressor how they’re being racist, sexist, cissexist, homophobic, or ableist in relation to your life. These means of accountability attack ideas, not people. Whether in a public or private setting, the oppression of marginalized people should not be confused with the discomfort of those with privilege.

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