

WSP HillTV Forum Talk
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In the early 90s, right-wing forces, led by Sen. Jesse Helms of North Carolina mounted a vicious attack on writers and artists who had received grants from the National Endowment of the Arts. Many of those attacked had included material on lesbian, gay, or feminist issues in their work. I was one of those targeted. I was living in Washington, DC, at the time, and every morning I opened my front door with great apprehension to pick the Post up off the porch, wondering if I would find that my name had been denounced on the Senate floor.

The right-wing American Family Association did feature me in their monthly newspaper as someone whose work was morally reprehensible and whose writing should be suppressed. I was named on a “hit list” compiled by Helms as people who had received government money but were really “pornographers.” That definition was applied to me simply because I had written about my life as a lesbian mother. I had written about losing custody of my children in North Carolina, because of the existence of the so-called “crime against nature” statute, the sodomy statute, making lesbian and gay sexuality illegal. I had written a poem that included the legal language of that statute that had condemned me to lose my children. And what was the language that Sen. Helms actually picked out from my poetry to denounced as pornographic? Not my words, but the legal language of the sodomy statute that I had quoted.

This was a very difficult time in my life. In fact, for six months after this targeting, I was not able to write at all, I was unable to generate creative work. The attack

was an onslaught of censorship on a national level, no doubt about it. In this attack I can say I experienced the forces of censorship at first hand. And as a writer who has been censored, I can say, in the context of the debate about censorship currently raging on this campus, that I wholeheartedly support Chancellor Cantor's decisions in the matter of the HillTV programs.

The forces that targeted me and other artists targeted us because we were voicing and embodying an alternative vision of how the world might be, and how life might be lived differently. We were creating a critique of the status quo, and specifically of systems of oppression within that status quo. We were targeted because we were seen as a threat to a system of oppression and bigotry.

The material put forward in the HillTV series had no redeeming function as a critique, even as satire. Instead, the images and language on the HillTV program simply repeated the most time-worn, discredited, vicious stereotypes that have been purveyed for centuries by social, economic, and political forces attempting to maintain a repressive status quo in the face of forces seeking to democratize this country.

I believe I found the attack on me and my writing particularly terrifying because Sen. Helms and his ideological current were in a direct lineage from the racists and demagogues of my segregated Southern upbringing—I knew what could happen when the power of the state united with racism and woman-hating and queer-hating, I knew in dreadful detail the kind of violence and death that had been dealt to people in the South who differed from the so-called norm. And one tactic of this violence was a determination to limit the human imagination, to limit access to people's experience of

other ways to experience life, to limit our ability to identify and connect with people other than ourselves, people leading different kinds of lives.

In fact, the words and images put forward by HillTV have exactly the same effect—their violence beats us back from our attempts to forge a truly diverse community on this campus and in the world. The blows of these words and images undermine and mock any attempts of men to bridge to a connection to women, any desires of white people to understand their connection to the lives of people of color, and any belief on the part of heterosexual people that they may share common concerns to lesbian/gay/bisexual and transgender people

During my segregated upbringing, the major media outlets—the press, the TV stations, the radios stations, not just locally, but nationally—were owned by interests that purveyed racist points of view. In the early part of the 20th century it was common for there to be public lynchings of African American people attended by white people who then bought souvenir pictures of the atrocity to mail to their friends, making the U.S. Postal Service a purveyor of racist images. It took a mighty up-swelling, a mass political movement to make it *unacceptable* for these kinds of images to be circulated publicly. Until various mass struggles in the South won this liberation of public space from bigotry, “freedom of the press,” “freedom of speech” meant simply the freedom of owning interests to freely demean, humiliate, stereotype, and whip up hatred against people of color. This was not a press that was critically examining multiple sides of some public issues in an even-handed way.

In fact, it was a press, that Deep South press, which had a perspective and behavior very similar to the HillTV programs that ran on this campus. And the lineage of

repression represented by Sen. Jesse Helms had some actual similarity in terms of woman-hating to HillTV. Helms is the man, after all, who said on the public record that he believed that a woman who had “really” been raped would never get pregnant—revealing the depth of an inability to understand the truth of violence against women.

Freedom of speech does not exist in an abstract sense. It exists within the context of history, within the context of struggle. Since the beginning of this country there has been a continuous struggle to liberate public space so that within it people would not be trivialized, humiliated, vilified, and even murdered because they belonged to a stigmatized group. When we consider free speech we can only understand it within that history of struggle.