

“Instead of talking about what they were owed by Princeton, they should have talked about what they were willing to give up. Generosity mixed with orthodoxy. I am giving up my place at one of the world’s great universities in order to save it from itself certainly has a better shot than a sleepover in the President’s office.”

In the ninth episode of Malcolm Gladwell’s podcast, Revisionist History, he argues for “Generous Orthodoxy.” Gladwell venerates Mennonite pastor Chester Wegner’s sacrifice of officiating his gay son’s wedding at the cost of losing his credentials as a pastor. He then criticizes Princeton’s Black Justice League (BJL) for not sacrificing enough in their fight for racial equality on campus, stating that the students should have put their education on the line to display their commitment to racial justice.

As the primary case study in Gladwell’s argument against the BJL’s approach, I find his argument extremely flawed.

I was shocked to hear my voice used this way in discourse about generous orthodoxy. During our sit-in, members of the BJL were made aware that there were definitive risks associated with our action. We were told during our protest that some of us would risk academic probation and even expulsion. Some of our parents called us crying, concerned about the future of our education. A bomb threat was made immediately following our negotiations. A community member vowed to line BJL members up and shoot them in the head if she encountered us. Many BJL members lost ‘friends’ who felt that they could no longer associate with someone with such strong opinions. BJL members were victims of both verbal and anonymous attacks directed towards our intellect and our legitimacy as students on Princeton’s campus.

We risked a lot.

And I don’t believe that that same risk is on par with Chester Wegner’s.

Wegner’s actions, standing in solidarity with gay rights, took great courage and faith. But considering our vast age difference, the comparison is completely misleading. At the time his opinion letter was written, Wegner was 96 years old. When I participated in the sit-in, I was 19 years old. Wegner had already lived a great majority of his life. I had just embarked on one of the biggest chapters of my own. The stakes are much higher when you have the rest of your life ahead of you.

To say that I did not sacrifice as much as a 96 year old retired pastor is to completely dismiss the very real sacrifices I made to help make Princeton’s campus a more welcoming environment.

In this episode, Gladwell provides a grandiose background about Chester Wenger. He humanizes him, making it easier for listeners to sympathize with Wegner. For me, he only provides information about my class year at Princeton. In failing to humanize me, Gladwell instead reduces me to the “angry black woman” stereotype as recordings of me screaming are played on the podcast.

Gladwell says, “She chose to go to Princeton. Ground zero for white guys.” Gladwell’s arguments largely ignore that nearly every American university was built on the exclusion of minorities and women. And that HBCUs and women*s colleges, are only a product of this exclusion. Regardless of where black bodies enroll, racism on university campuses is inescapable.

Gladwell has no knowledge of who I am or why I made the decision to enroll at Princeton. But he will now.

I am the product of two immigrants who came to America seeking to attain the “American Dream.” And while the dream escaped my parents, I quickly realized I could be the bearer of this dream for my family. When I was 8 years old, my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. For the last 12 years of my life, I have watched my mother battle a disease that has been determined to claim her life. I will never forget the day my mother said to me, “Sweetie, the only thing you can give me in this world is a good education. That is all I want.” My mother knew that education was the key to success. The only thing I knew was that I was willing to do anything to make my mother smile again. Throughout my life, I have remained relentless in acquiring the highest level of education possible. And when I showed my mother my acceptance letter to Princeton, she beamed with pride. I knew my life was certainly on the right track.

Gladwell argues that the BJI should have said they were willing to withdraw themselves from the university. But what Gladwell does not understand is that I cannot give up something that does not belong to me alone. I am not who I am today simply because I worked hard. I am a combined effort of many people who could not make it, but gave their last so that I could. My degree is not my own. It is for my mother, my family, the organizations that helped me, the teachers that guided me, the black bodies that paved the way, and the black and brown kids across the world who are told that they cannot achieve higher. I am an embodiment of the fact that they can. To withdraw myself from the university is to rob all those who impacted me and those who I will undoubtedly use my diploma to impact. Furthermore, I would never willingly give up my position at Princeton. Which in fact, would undoubtedly make many students, administrators and alumni beam with happiness. It would instead allow those made uncomfortable by my actions to remain complicit in their racism. My very presence forces the university to continue confronting the issues BJI has brought forward.

Gladwell’s argument reveals a much larger issue with the perception of black commitment. Black people are constantly expected to sacrifice twice as much as a white person for access to the same rights and norms. As black people, the sacrifices we make are often ignored and dismissed. To say that sitting in the President’s office was simply a ‘sleepover’ completely dismisses the importance sit-ins have had not only on college campuses, but also the wider civil rights movements. And despite the trauma, the harassment, and spells of depression some members fell into, BJI members still submitted their assignments, took exams, maintained campus jobs, attended classes, and led campus organizations. And our juniors, successfully wrote 40 page plus junior papers and our seniors, wrote 100 page plus senior thesis (some even wrote two). And after all this, they graduated.

When I said that “I owe Princeton nothing, Princeton owes me everything,” I was referring to the fact that the literal foundation of Princeton was built by slaves, slaves whom some members of BJI are descendents of. My statement encapsulated a very real sentiment about black exploitation and the lack of reparations. Georgetown University recently agreed to memorialize the 272 slaves that were sold in their name that kept the university afloat. Institutions do not deserve a pat on the back for basic human dignity. They have a duty to confront their embattled histories and do their best to repair them. To say that I and my fellow students did not do enough is a slap in the face to a community that still suffers from the society that keeps us oppressed.

As student activists we are expected to excel in academia, while sacrificing and convincing our universities that our experiences should be valued at the same level as our white peers. We are criticized by intellectuals like Gladwell who, intentionally or not, have done the task of stripping us of our humanity, our pain, our struggles, and deemed our efforts not enough or misled. Yet these same critics,

refuse to pose the question: why, in the 21st century, are students still fighting for their humanity to be validated?

As the recording of me screaming at the top of my lungs towards my university president played, Gladwell then suggests “she probably regrets her words.” As I listened to the podcast, I felt that Gladwell could not be more wrong.

In the words of Beyoncé, “I ain’t sorry.”

I ain’t sorry for being human.

I ain’t sorry for having emotions and channeling them the best way I knew how.

& I definitely ain’t sorry for standing strong and unshaken in my truth.

I ain’t sorry.

I ain’t sorry.

I ain’t sorry.

In solidarity,

Wilglory Tanjong