

Doug Sprei:

Welcome to Higher Ed Now, ACTA's podcast on pivotal issues, trends, and leadership in higher education. I'm Doug Sprei, and today we'll run a far-reaching conversation with Erec Smith, cofounder and coeditor of Free Black Thought, a small group of citizens, scholars, technologists, and parents determined to amplify vital Black voices that are rarely heard on mainstream platforms.

By its own description, the Free Black Thought organization has no political agenda other than a commitment to free speech, civil rights, and a conviction that a pluralistic society committed to liberal democracy is nourished by the entire spectrum of Black thinking on matters of politics, society, and culture.

ACTA Paul and Karen Levy Fellow in Campus Freedom, Steve McGuire, sat down in conversation with Erec Smith, who by day is associate professor of Rhetoric at York College of Pennsylvania; and he's the author of the 2020 book, *A Critique of Anti-racism in Rhetoric and Composition: The Semblance of Empowerment*.

Steve McGuire

Erec Smith, thanks for joining us on the podcast today.

Erec Smith

Thanks for having me.

Steve McGuire

It's great to have this opportunity to talk to you. I want to talk to you really today about two things. Anti-racism and ideological diversity. Two things that I think you're personally very much involved in talking about in the academy. But let's start, there's this story, back in 2019, there was a keynote at a professional conference. I believe it was for writers or teachers in rhetoric in English departments. Maybe you can clarify who would be at this conference. But you responded with some thoughts about the keynote on a listserv and your response was not received well, I guess. And I've got to say, they've archived the listserv and I did go back and tried to look through some of it actually and yeah, I was blown away by some of the responses that you got. But I think you've characterized this as almost like a life changing event for you. So I thought that'd be a great place to start to just get a sense of where you're coming from personally in terms of anti-racism and ideological diversity.

Erec Smith

Can I just say that I am very happy that you found the archive?

Steve McGuire

Okay.

Erec Smith

I am so happy that archive exists. I remember during the infamous thread, somebody saying, "You know this is being archived? Everybody's going to see this." And I'm like, "I hope so. I want everybody to see how idiotic you people are. Thank God it's being archived." And that statement from that woman is

quite telling about the people I'm dealing with in my field. They were convinced that I was digging a hole for myself. And they had no idea that anybody could possibly see their behavior as-

Steve McGuire

No, I think when people go back and look at this, I think there's an article probably even to be written about it, or certainly this could be part of an article about these kinds of exchanges that people were subjected to.

Erec Smith

I tried to quote that thread in my last two books and the publisher put the kibosh on it at the last minute.

Steve McGuire

Oh, no.

Erec Smith

Yeah. It seemed too controversial. Both publishers said the same thing. "We don't want people to close the book and throw it against the wall. We want them to read it. And if you have that in there, that might be a bit much." So I've already tried to publish on that thread.

Steve McGuire

Wow. Yeah. That's surprising. People usually love the salacious details, but I guess if they get too controversial, people are afraid of the pushback or the blow back that they'll get.

Erec Smith

Right.

Steve McGuire

Anyways, maybe we start by just setting up what was the keynote about? What was your critique of it?

Erec Smith

Well, the keynote was at a conference called the Conference for College Composition and Communication. The keynote address, I'm forgetting the very long title, but it was, How Do We Use Language to Stop People from Shooting Us or something like that. And his overall argument was that white professors, white scholars are inherently problematic. He used terms like students of color feel suffocated by whiteness. And this idea that language is sold as something that will save our lives, but it won't. I don't know anybody who thought that language would make one bulletproof so I didn't really understand that either. I thought this did a little bit more harm than good. It didn't just demonize white people. It infantilized people of color. Scholars and students. So I went to the listserv and I asked, "Was this the best way to go about this? I think this was pretty problematic and we should talk about it."

Erec Smith

That was not met with agreement. It was not met with a desire to talk. It was met with a desire to yell at me and not listen to my responses. That's for sure. And I realized something then. I realized that there is a particular narrative that is heavily founded on victimhood, infantilization, the oppressor/oppressed dichotomy. And that if you don't abide by it, then you are a bit of a pariah. There are sacred texts. I mean, John McWhorter's characterization of this as a religion is apt. There are texts you cannot question. There are people you cannot question. There is a party line you cannot steer from. And that's that. It is somewhat cultish. I like to tell my students emotional intelligence is it about not ever getting angry, it's about channeling anger into something more productive.

So that's what I did. The initial anger, which eventually became just amusement, but we can talk about that a little bit later on. The initial anger resulted in two books, several articles about the misguided nature of contemporary anti-racism. And a website and online journal called Free Black Thought. I have other things in the works right now, but those are the solid things. And it's changed my career. I had no intention of doing this stuff before that listserv, before that thread. No intention. And here I am, and I'm speaking all over the country about these things. I'm being asked to moderate very popular panels. And this is all because I'm pushing back against the contemporary mode of anti-racism in academia.

Steve McGuire

Right. Right. So you're not yourself just against anti-racism in toto, you just have a critique of certain contemporary trends within anti-racist discourse and action, I guess.

Erec Smith

Right. Right. And a lot of people will mischaracterize me as being against fighting racism, which makes no sense whatsoever. And the people who say that, I mean, this is why nuance is kryptonite tonight to woke ideology. It's got to be either or, or else their ideas fall apart. So to critique this version of anti-racism comes off as I'm against fighting racism. Right?

It can't possibly be, I don't like this particular strategy. I want to do this strategy. No, that's not possible at all. So my critique of anti-racism is the fodder for my last two books. One called A Critique of Anti-racism in Rhetoric and Composition, and one called The Lure of Disempowerment. The first describes the contention and issues around anti-racism in academia. The second is more prescriptive in that it is trying to provide a possible alternative to a lot of DEI trainings, which again are based on a oppressor/oppressed dichotomy and a lot of guilt and victimhood. So, yeah.

Steve McGuire

Okay. And correct me if I'm wrong, but you were in an earlier incarnation yourself involved in DEI work in the academy. Is that right?

Erec Smith

Yes.

Steve McGuire

Okay. But no longer. Was that while you were a professor of rhetoric, concurrently, or was this a previous position that you held?

Erec Smith

No. Concurrently. I was professor of rhetoric, director of a writing center and "assistant to the provost on diversity".

Steve McGuire

I see.

Erec Smith

Okay. Which was the diversity officer basically. So I would do trainings and try to organize symposia and conferences and things like that. I will never do that again. You couldn't pay me a million bucks.

Steve McGuire

Why is that?

Erec Smith

Several reasons. First of all, this isn't how you change hearts and minds. It isn't. I mean, if somebody's racist and you give them information like stats and things like that, people are going to be like, "So what?" You can't really change hearts and minds that easily. And I realized that the hard way. Secondly, the president of the university, I don't think he had the best of attentions when he created this position. I think it was just all for show. I think it was theater. And that's telling by the fact that when I said, "Not all black people are the same. We don't all agree on things and stuff like that.", he looked at me like I was crazy. "No, that doesn't work. We have to essentialize all black people." He didn't say that, but his eyes did. So the combination of that and the fact that it really didn't work and couldn't possibly work the way it was being done. Yeah. That's why I wouldn't do it again. But it's also why I'm not as hard on some aspects of a DEI these days. Are we aware of the privilege walks?

Steve McGuire

Yeah, sure.

Erec Smith

Yeah. I used to do those.

Steve McGuire

Okay.

Erec Smith

And I thought it was valuable because people can see the disparities and how they correlate with race and things like that, and be aware of what's going on in society. There was no intention to guilt people or say, "See white people, this is what you did." There was nothing like that. I think there's a lot to be said about the spirit in which something is delivered.

There's a linguist called Stephen Krashen who calls this the effective filter. A high effective filter makes people feel guilty. It makes them feel insecure. It makes them feel like they're being judged. A low effective filter makes them feel like they're being respected. Like their thoughts are valuable and they feel safe to talk and have a conversation. I think if you can just do this stuff with a low effective filter,

then a lot of these things wouldn't be so bad. A privilege walk can be something that can spark interesting conversation. It doesn't have to be something that guilts some people and infantilizes others.

Steve McGuire

Interesting. Yeah. In the first of the two books that you mentioned, you propose an alternative approach to anti-racism that's based in empowerment theory. Could you maybe just describe how that is different from the current trends in anti-racism that you're critical of and what that is and why you think that could be a more productive approach?

Erec Smith

Well, I think current anti-racism, based in what I call, what others also call critical social justice, it necessitates victimhood, it necessitates infantilization, it necessitates disempowerment. The people in question have to be distinctly disempowered first and foremost. If they're not, then nothing else works. So you're already casting people in victim and oppressor roles before you even know them.

And that's wrong for obvious reasons, but it's also wildly disempowering. And so how do we do this in a way that doesn't infantilize some and demonize others, but empowers everyone? Because I do think that feeling empowered goes a long way in being able to accept other people. Because a lot of what's going on is that we project our insecurities onto other people. We project our fears on other people without even realizing we're doing that. So empowerment theory, what that does is help us be more self aware. It promotes metacognition, emotional self control, things like that. So that we can meet people where they are. And once we meet people where they are, we can have generative conversations about what needs to happen in ways that doesn't guilt people or patronize people or anything like that. And that's why I embrace empowerment theory. I dedicated a para ... I'm sorry, paragraph. A chapter to it in my book, A Critique of Anti-racism. And that chapter was expanded into an entire book called The Lure of Disempowerment. And so that's really what I'm driving these days.

Steve McGuire

Okay. Yeah. In the first book, The Critique of Anti-racism, in the introduction, you point to W.E.B. Du Bois as an example. And I was reading that and I was like, yeah, this is ... I mean, it's a really inspirational story. I wonder, is Du Bois ... He's an exceptional person. He's an exceptional intellect. He demonstrated exceptional courage. He clearly had a degree of self confidence. Is that the kind of thing that you're hoping for everybody to achieve? I can see somebody saying, needing to be like that just to get through the academy or something like that is a lot to ask somebody, if that makes sense.

Erec Smith

Well, you're not being like that to get through the academy. You're being like that to be like that.

Steve McGuire

Okay.

Erec Smith

And that's empowerment. The ability to not let somebody discourage you because of what their thoughts are about you. It doesn't matter. I often tell people, "Listen, if somebody calls me the N word in traffic, I don't care. I'm going to my tenured professorship to shape young minds and then research and write scholarship on topics I care about. And this guy is going to a bar at 8:00 AM. I win. I don't care

about that guy's opinion." But I know that is a very unpopular disposition. So with empowerment theory, what I'm doing is saying you can create a disposition that can't be toppled.

Erec Smith

You can do that. You can realize that somebody disagreeing with you isn't epistemic violence. You're not harmed. They just disagree with you. You can move on as long as people aren't in your way and blocking you. And if they are in your way and blocking you, then empowerment theory can help you better deal with that situation more strategically, more productively. In ways that don't indicate that your emotions are overpowering your ability to look at a situation for what it is. And I mean, that's what I see when I point to Du Bois and his attitude. I mean, he had that attitude in the 1880s. A black person in Harvard in the 1880s. If he could have that attitude then, then we cannot embrace victimhood now. Frederick Douglas had a similar disposition. When abolitionists would ask, "What should we do about black people?"

The black question. He said, "Don't do anything. Let them fall. That's how you learn how to get up." He was all about, "Just let us do this. We're adults. If you leave us alone, we'll handle it." And they didn't like that. They actually didn't like that. They liked the idea of minorities being the poster people for victimhood. I guess it helped them with their political aspirations as well. But Zora Neale Hurston's another one. She spoke out about this. She lamented the fact that the only role for black people was one of pity. And people were uncomfortable by the confident and successful black person. They didn't know what to do with that. They knew what to do with the downtrodden black person who needs white people to save them. And they knew what to do with that. And Zora Neale Hurston complained about it. In fact, she died in abject poverty because she had this position. And fought a lot, interestingly enough, with W.E.B. Du Bois. But that's fodder for a different conversation. But yeah. I point out Du Bois. I think he's a great model for dealing with things. He's a great model for what it looks like to be empowered. And I'm glad I put him in the book.

Steve McGuire

Yeah. That's great. Thanks. This emphasis on empowerment theory, I wonder how the other version of anti-racism might look at that and say, "Well, what about the systemic problems? What about the fact that we're living in an unfair system? They would certainly say it's an oppressive system. Is there a connection between your emphasis on empowerment, which could be characterized as teaching people to pick themselves up by their bootstraps, take care of themselves. Is there a connection between that though and recognizing that there is racism in society, that maybe things are structured in certain ways that are unfair, and that it's totally appropriate to address it on the level of social change as well?"

Erec Smith

Yeah. You can definitely fight for policy changes and you can point out that there is an issue with the criminal justice system right now that needs to be addressed. These things are real. The residual effects of redlining. These things are things that need to be addressed. But that doesn't mean that empowerment theory is just what ... Well, not empowerment theory, but social, emotional intelligence, which overlaps with empowerment theory. A lot of people call that "white supremacy with a hug". And they're saying that because this doesn't solve systemic racism. No. But this can empower you to better address systemic racism. A disempowered person who isn't self-aware who projects ideas of people onto others without even knowing those people, that person isn't going to be as productive with getting change done as somebody who is empowered, self-aware, is cognizant of organizational awareness,

who has empathy for other people, who listens actively, who understands that everybody has a certain values, attitudes and beliefs that are in common with others and not in common with others.

We emphasize certain things more than others, but we still have those values in common. Recognizing all those things can better help get things done. If you're disempowered, you tend to do things like lack reality testing. You're ignoring inconvenience statistics that you need to take a look at. You can't change reality if you refuse to acknowledge it in the first place. And empowerment can help you acknowledge that reality without it making you fall to the fetal position and weep. It can help you deal with that reality so that you can change it. So I'm not saying don't worry about the criminal justice system and housing and things like that. Just be empowered. No. I'm saying let's deal with that stuff, but we can deal with it more effectively if we're empowered. A disempowered person doesn't believe he truly has the power to change things.

Steve McGuire

Okay. Yeah. That's interesting. I want to keep talking about anti-racism, but I also want to go back to what you mentioned about the president thinking of DEI as theater, and also when you mentioned to him that not all black people think alike, and that seemed like a mind blowing idea to him. And I think that's a comment that we can use to maybe segue into the founding of Free Black Thought. But also even going back to the listserv dispute, I mean, was that part of it there as well, that you were a black man who was voicing a perspective on these things that was seen as not right for you to be voicing or that you had a view that was not correct?

Erec Smith

Yeah. Definitely. In fact, this is often called an ad hominem fallacy. They're not going to address what I'm saying as much as they're going to critique who I am or who I'm supposed to be and how that doesn't match what I'm saying. So it didn't matter what I was saying, the answer, the response was always, "Well, you're just doing this to please white people," or "You're an uncle Tom," or something like that. That's a distraction technique because they have no substantive response to what I'm actually saying.

That's what I was dealing with then. But also within this narrative that they're abiding by, there's a role for white people and a role for black people and if go outside of those boxes, you are looked at with suspicion. Which strongly suggest that the concept of viewpoint diversity is looked at as if it's a sin in these circles. All black people have to think like this or else they're not really black. That idea. And I've been dealing with that idea since I was a kid. So this listserv was the straw that broke the camel's back. There have been several straws throughout my life and this was just it. So I found some like-minded souls and we co-founded Free Black Thought, which is a website showcasing viewpoint diversity within the black community. I don't even like saying black community. That's too essentialist in my mind. But we can talk about that.

Steve McGuire

Yeah. No, that's an interesting question that I thought to ask. Yeah.

Erec Smith

Yeah. There's also a journal of Free Black Thought that people of all colors can write about what it means to be black but not towing the line. Different perspectives on the black experience. The erroneous nature of the stimulus response theory, basically meaning that all black people respond to stimuli the same. We all think the same term is a microaggression. No, not really. I'm not going to be up

in arms if somebody says that the most qualified person should get the job. I'm not going to crumble when I hear that. Some people do. So we don't all react to the world in the same way. We don't all interpret the world in the same way. And it's surprising how shocking of a statement that is to some people. It's surprising that it's such a common and accepted idea that our current president has expressed it on more than one occasion.

Steve McGuire

Yeah. Viewpoint diversity or intellectual diversity, a lot of people think that's a problem, say, in higher ed in general. I mean, you've got Heterodox Academy. And I think that probably a lot of people in various ways have found themselves in situations where they didn't think the way that people expected that they would think based on what they knew about them. Like I myself lean conservative, but I have a PhD, I've taught in the university. A lot of studies show there aren't that many conservatives in higher education. And so in terms of talking about politics, often I'll find myself in a minority viewpoint position. But I guess the question I'd like to ask you is how is it different or amplified when race is involved? And I could imagine it's a much bigger problem. Maybe one that is experienced on a more pervasive basis. I don't know. I'm just interested to know what your thoughts on that would be.

Erec Smith

Everybody thinks I'm a conservative because of these views. I wouldn't call myself that. I would say I'm left of center. I would say I'm somebody who embraces classical liberalism, which used to be something that both sides of the aisle could get around. I mean, it's the Venn diagram of Republican and Democrat, the center, what's classical liberalism. At least there was that. But that doesn't seem to be the case anymore. So people of all colors just assume I identify as a black conservative and I don't. That being said, at the college level ... And York College of Pennsylvania, where I teach, is not egregiously woke in any way. There are people here and there, but it's not a place that I feel uncomfortable walking onto. So there's that. But the field, the field of rhetoric and composition is a different story altogether. And yes ... Excuse me. I've been called a white supremacist by white people in the field. So that's how bad things are.

Steve McGuire

Okay. Yeah. Okay. So, outside of the pushback from the woke, do you get pushback at all from other voices inside the academy in terms of the views that you're staking out on anti-racism or something like the creation of Free Black Thought?

Erec Smith

What other views?

Steve McGuire

Okay. I guess, are there ... You don't, I guess, receive conservative critiques of what you're doing per se. Mostly people will just sort of identify you ... Maybe if they don't read enough or talk to you long enough, they'll just sort of say, "Oh, he's one of us," or something like that and they-

Erec Smith

I guess so.

Steve McGuire

I guess so. Okay.

Erec Smith

Yeah.

Steve McGuire

Interesting. You mentioned a few minutes ago that this has been something that you've dealt with your entire life, and I was just wondering if you'd say a little bit more about that. Is it that you've always had heterodox social and political views or interests, or what is it that put you in a position where you've had to contend with this so regularly?

Erec Smith

Well, I was always not being black correctly.

Steve McGuire

Okay.

Erec Smith

And I got this from white people as well as black people. So I've been dealing with this since I was a kid growing up in a predominantly white neighborhood and being reminded of that on a regular basis, several times a day. And then going to a more diverse high school and being shamed by the black students for being too white.

Steve McGuire

I see. Okay.

Erec Smith

So the combination of that, I didn't know it at the time, but that really set me on a path to where I am today, really, because I was very interested in why two people can come to the same conclusion for very different reasons, through very different values, attitudes and beliefs, very different ways of describing the world of using rhetoric on themselves and others who describe the world they see fit. A world in which I have to play a particular role. And that role can't be the smartest guy in the room, or that role can't be one of respect and virtue. It can't be one of optimism. An attitude of success. Wanting to follow your dreams and things like that. It was like both parties were saying, "How dare you like yourself? Don't you know you're black?"

They were both saying the same thing there. But they took different paths toward it. And that is something that can be addressed in rhetorical theory. How are we describing, what words are we using to describe this world? And how can we come to the same conclusion from apparently different places? Because we have similar ideas about ethos, about who we are in a grand meta narrative of society. And although we seem like we are fighting each other, we kind of abide by that narrative. We're all abiding by that narrative. So I was very interested in that. I didn't know the word rhetoric at the time. I didn't know the word discourse at the time. Ethos and things like that. But I would eventually discover it and realize this is where I belong.

Steve McGuire

Okay. So you're talking like, yeah, audiences have expectations of you right off the bat, just looking at you or hearing you speak or what they think they know about you and that sort of thing.

Erec Smith

Right.

Steve McGuire

Right. Yeah. So with the Free Black Thought, you mentioned the idea of a black community, and you said that almost sounds potentially too essentialist. And I was interested if you could say a little bit more about that, because you do, in your written work, talk about that as well in your critique of anti-racism that there's an almost ontological essentialism that they seem to be relying on or advocating for. Although, I guess you have to say almost because it's not quite clear, there's room for some equivocation there. But yeah, if you're talking about ideological or intellectual diversity, viewpoint diversity in the black community, why does that give you pause then to use the phrase black community?

Erec Smith

Because again, it's already a problem with essentialism. A term like black community just strengthens that erroneous idea. Black community. I mean, it's a nominalism anyway. It's what's called an idiographic in rhetorical theory. It's a term that doesn't really mean anything if you really think about it. It's an empty term. What the hell is a black community? What does that mean? Ben Carson and Kanye West aren't fishing buddies. I mean, maybe they are, but I doubt it.

Steve McGuire

That'd be a great fishing trip.

Eric Smith

Yeah. Not for the guy caught in the middle, but whatever. So yeah, I think that is an issue and we have to stop talking like that or talk about that less anyway. That being said, I do use the term black community because I know my audience and they're already familiar with that term and in certain situations when I'm making an argument for one thing, that's not the hill I want to die on.

Steve McGuire

Right. I see.

Erec Smith

So I do use the term. Reluctantly, but I use it. And I wish we could have a conversation about the emptiness of that term and why it's problematic.

Steve McGuire

Okay. Yeah. And the scholars and others who participate in Free Black Thought, write for the journal and that sort of thing, they must come from all different points of view then, politically, intellectually.

Erec Smith

Yeah.

Steve McGuire

Some are conservative, some are libertarian, progressive.

Erec Smith

That's right.

Steve McGuire

So the common thread though, is this idea that you shouldn't think that people believe certain things just because they're people of color and that people should be free to have different ideas and engage in intellectual exchange on the basis of argument and evidence.

Erec Smith

Yeah. You said it. That's exactly what we're doing. And obviously I'm not the only person who feels this way. There are other people who have joined me. We've all come together, really. I don't want to say joined me as if I'm the focal point. We all do this collaboratively and we couldn't do it without each other. So there's that, and there's viewpoint diversity within the co-founders of Free Black Thought, which is ideal. I mean, we don't always agree on what should be published and what shouldn't be published. We have to talk that out and we have our reasons. But we get through it, we have an understanding, and that's that. So I like the fact that we're practicing what we preach, but our main goal is to let people know that there is viewpoint diversity among black people.

And here are some writings to prove that. We have a compendium on the website as well, a list of authors based on topic and things like that, that have viewpoints that aren't really represented in the mainstream media, regarding being black or working with black people or what have you. So that's what we're trying to do. We would like to have people utilize that compendium in educational settings or things like that. We're working on that. But we definitely want to let people know that A, there is a place where you can hear these voices and B, there's a place where your voice can be heard if you feel silenced by the fact that you're not being black correctly. So that's the point.

Steve McGuire

Right. And this is something that this is an opportunity that you and the other co-founders felt you had to create because you couldn't find that in a place like a university?

Erec Smith

No. No, not at all.

Steve McGuire

Which is the one place of any place where you'd hope you could find people who would be prepared to engage in critical exchange just on the basis of argument and evidence, et cetera.

Erec Smith

Well, yeah. I mean, I'm the field of rhetoric. You can't have rhetoric without viewpoint diversity. If everybody thinks the same, there's no need to persuade them. Rhetoric is about, okay, you have your idea, I have mine. I'm going to learn the best tactics and strategies to make you see things my way to the best of my ability. That's the point of rhetoric, is persuasion. That implies a diversity of viewpoints. So if the field of rhetoric does not accept viewpoint diversity, I mean, what is that about? That's like a lifeguard who refuses to get wet. It doesn't really make sense. But there's that.

Steve McGuire

And so when it comes to your critique of anti-racism and your exchange with people who advocate these contemporary views on anti-racism, their response is they're not trying to persuade you otherwise, but they take offense to what you say. They accuse you of adopting the perspective of the oppressor or something like that, I guess.

Erec Smith

Yes.

Steve McGuire

It's like you were saying earlier, everything's binary. It's either-or. I'm wondering, what do you think is ultimately the source of that? It seems like it's just so crucially important that you agree, going back to this listserv debate, that students be taught or be allowed to express themselves in, say written assignments, I guess, through the African American vernacular English, as opposed to standard English. And the suggestion that it would be valuable to learn standard English is just instantly seen as anathema. You can't even debate that point because it would already be conceding too much even to consider it.

Erec Smith

Right. Yeah. They don't want to dignify it with a response.

Steve McGuire

Yeah. Right.

Erec Smith

Right. And the whole idea that expecting students of color to learn standardized English is inherently racist. That was also a part of the keynote address that sparked all this.

Steve McGuire

Okay. Yeah.

Erec Smith

So yes. That's part of it. Any kind of pushback will expose them for the flimsy ideas that they have. So they can't allow any kind of pushback. And so that's why you get the treatment that I got from the listserv. But there's something else going on as well. And this something else derives from what's called critical pedagogy, which derives from critical theory, which is something that derives from a Marxist

think tank called the Frankfurt School. And there is a very clear thread between that school and what's going on today. When I talk about it, I sound like a conspiracy theorist, but it's true. It's all there. And what's there is the idea that the point is to transform society. Society is bad. That's not an argument. Society's already bad. When it comes to cultural Marxism or race Marxism, society is racist. This situation is already racist. That's already decided. These students are downtrodden and they feel bad and they're victims and we need to liberate them. That's already decided. There's no conversation about that. If you want to have a conversation about that, you're a bad person who doesn't get it or you're suffering from false consciousness.

Steve McGuire

Right. Yeah. Right.

Erec Smith

And those students who want to learn standard English, but they're black, that's false consciousness.

Steve McGuire

Right, right. Right. So you're not offering a counterargument that deserves to be considered, you've just made an error that needs to be pointed out to you.

Erec Smith

Right.

Steve McGuire

Yeah.

Erec Smith

Right.

Steve McGuire

But it seems like at the end of the day then, it's motivated by something other than scholarly concern to know what's true. It's motivated by politics or you reference McWhorter and his idea that it's a religion, which would make it a kind of spiritual problem or theological problem, not just a political one. But that raises the existential stakes for people who adopt these views to such a level that it literally is harmful or even heretical to hear or consider other points of view. Does that seem fair to you to say?

Erec Smith

Well, yes. Because, as is true for many critical theorists and pedagogues, the point is to change society. The point is to transform it. And this comes straight from ... Marx said, "Philosophers have been describing the world, but the point is to change it." I mean, that sentiment is still alive and well and in various corners of academia. So when that's the main goal, what education becomes is a trojan horse for those ideas. So you have the equitable math whitepaper. Maybe I shouldn't say whitepaper. Recommendation report that basically turns a math class into social studies. You have questionable accounts of history that are formatted that way to support this narrative that supports the need to transform society. And Lenin gave this advice in the 1920s. He said, "It's not enough to just learn these ideas. You have to learn math in so far as it supports communism." History in so far as it supports

communism. And that's going on right now. There's a leader in my field who thinks that black students who want to write in standard English are immature and selfish. Because their success in acquiring standard English will help them go out and probably be better equipped for certain jobs and be happy and successful and therefore maintain the status quo.

Steve McGuire

Right.

Erec Smith

Right. Happy and successful people don't revolt.

Steve McGuire

Yeah. It's very similar to Marx. Yeah. You don't want people to be just materially satisfied enough that they're not going to go out into the streets. Interesting. You've said your career pivoted since 2019. You're tackling this stuff head on now. So you must at least have some small hope that pushing back and arguing against these ideas could have some positive impact in the academy. At the same time, it seems like this is the pretty strong wave or series of waves that's washing over a lot of places in higher education in the United States. And a lot of people don't have, I think, much hope at least for the immediate future that we can really successfully push back on some of these ideas. What are your thoughts on that?

Erec Smith

Well, I'm done convincing the wokest of the woke. Or trying to anyway. They are now a catalyst for my thoughts on viewpoint diversity. And they're also an opportunity to model what it means to push back on these people and why, and that we don't have to accept their absurd ideas. There are people out there who are listening to these things and saying to themselves, "I must be missing something. This makes no sense, but it's my positionality that keeps me from understanding what's going on." No, no. You're seeing it correctly. It's absurd. It makes no sense. You're seeing it correctly. And I want to confirm that. I don't just want to confirm it. I want to confirm it and meticulously explain why it's the truth. I just want to be that voice out there. I want people to know that not everybody's buying this crap. So long story short, I'm done trying to convince people. I am trying to "save" people who haven't fallen into the woke abyss yet or are still trying to figure out what's going on. That's what I'm trying to do. And I want them to know that there are people out there like them, like me, who they can reach out to.

Steve McGuire

Right. Yeah. Yeah. And you seem to have a bit of ... You mentioned earlier at the beginning, something about that you were angry, I think, earlier when you went through what you went through in 2019, but now you seem to be able to laugh about it, joke about it. It at least appears to me like you have no compunction about just calling it like you see it and saying it flat out with no apology. Is that the case and how did you get there?

Erec Smith

Yes. That is the case. And I got there from ... I mean, initially, the pushback, I was like, "Wow. They must not really understand what I'm trying to say. If they'd only listen to me." When I realized that they're just living in this world that makes no sense whatsoever, then they became jokes to me. And that's what

they remain. So when people try to call me out and mob me again like that, I get excited. I'm like, "Okay. Yay. All right, we're doing it again. All right. What idiocy are you going to say now? What absurd ideas are you going to throw at me now?" So I take that attitude about it now, and it makes all the difference. It really does. If you can point out their absurdities and do it in a way that is amusing and memorable, then you can probably get a little bit farther with these ideas instead of always being serious or stern all the time. I mean, that's important too. But I mean, when somebody says something ridiculous, point out the ridiculousness. Yeah.

Steve McGuire

Yeah. That's good. Well, I want to close by turning back to the discussion of DEI and anti-racism, specifically in the academy. Earlier talking about, say the prison system and that sort of thing. I myself have been a professor for a number of years and so I've participated in various faculty development type things that were centered around questions of diversity, anti-racism and that sort of thing. And I have to admit that in a lot of cases, I was a fairly unwilling participant because the kinds of things that we were being assigned to read, I just thought were not particularly helpful or engaging, for example. I remember one, we had to read a portion of Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility*, which I just think is a totally absurd book. And it was, I think, shocking to people that I and a few others thought that.

But as we've talked about, you're not denying that there's racism, obviously. You're not anti anti-racism in some more productive sense. And I'm just wondering if, first of all, maybe you could just say a few words about what your perspective is on the existence of racism, specifically in the academy. And then maybe we could talk about some ideas about how that could potentially be approached in a productive way, because at least in my experience, and I think in a lot of other people's experience, not everything, but a number of the things that you end up participating in or trying to do, they end up being somewhat unproductive and sometimes even absurd and just don't really lead to positive outcomes I think. So, yeah. Looking at the academy itself, how would you characterize the existence of racism in the academy?

Erec Smith

Well, there's racism everywhere to some degree on an individual basis. When it comes to the system of racism in the academy or something like that, it's pointed out that we need to decolonize the curriculum or something like that, which I think is fine when you see it as adding more people to the center. It's not just centralized around Eurocentric ideas and things like that. Other people are coming in and they're being taken seriously as well. That's not how it's manifesting though. It's manifesting as get rid of the classics. As don't make this certain British literature a requirement anymore. I think that's the wrong way to go. And things like that are being called racist. Expecting students of color to adequately write in standardized English. That's being called racist.

Where I see the problem is that there's no level of pragmatism going on at all in a lot of this anti-racism. It's all about what I call a dignity grab. Yeah. That makes no sense. It's actually going to do more harm than good, but it feels good right now. I feel empowered because I'm sticking it to white people. That seems to be what's going on. And I think that's a pretty, pretty absurd waste of time and energy. So I'm somebody who embraces the pragmatic, embraces the fact that we can help traditionally downtrodden people by giving them certain knowledge. I mean, it's not going to make everything perfect, but it's going to come in handy in some situations. It's not going to solve all the problems.

And that's another trope that's happening in the field. Teaching standardized English isn't going to stop people from getting shot by the cops. Yeah. Nobody ever said it would. Baking a cake is also not going to stop people from getting shot. Are you going to get rid of cakes? No. I mean, it's really absurd what

they're doing and what they're calling racism. There are racist people everywhere, including in the academy. So there's racist in that sense, but there's also the new racism that wasn't racist 10 years ago that now is. There are microaggressions that are racist that obviously aren't. So the window, the Overton Window, if you will, of racism has widened substantially. To the point where if you assign a certain thing and a black person feels uncomfortable about it, then they can accuse you of racism and get pretty far in that accusation. So there are two racisms in the academy. Actual racism and woke racism, which is another term for not racist.

Steve McGuire

Okay. Okay. So in terms of practice, you mentioned the curriculum. I'm a political theorist by training. I would often teach an intro survey course in the history of political thought. So you would say including diverse voices in a course like that, where possible, would be a productive and welcome thing to do, for example?

Erec Smith

Yes.

Steve McGuire

What about efforts to hire people of color onto the faculty or to matriculate students of color? Obviously one thing that comes up immediately, I think, when you start thinking about that is something like affirmative action. And of course, some people are totally in favor of that, others will be critical and say that ... This maybe even feeds back to what you're talking about in terms of your critique of anti-racism and the alternative of a kind of empowerment, because there's this suggestion that affirmative action at least leads other people to potentially accuse someone of saying, "Well, you didn't get this on the merits. You got this because of X, Y, or Z." Or something like that. And that could be unfair. Right?

Erec Smith

Yeah.

Steve McGuire

But it could potentially have a negative impact on people, I think as well. Right?

Erec Smith

Right.

Steve McGuire

What are your thoughts on ... Those seem like worthwhile things to do, but concretely, do you have thoughts on how to do that in the most productive way possible?

Erec Smith

To the best of our ability, we have to try to implement equality of opportunity. And that may necessitate providing resources for communities that don't have the proper resources to be at the starting line with everybody else. So we have to do our best to give them those resources so that they can have the opportunity to succeed. And I firmly believe in that. But there's a lot that can happen between having equal opportunity and the outcomes that come from it. A lot of things can happen. People can choose

not to use those resources. There could be things going on in one's personal life that are inevitable because that's how human life is. There are all kinds of things between the equality of opportunity and the equality of outcome that need to be considered. Yet, when people see a disparity in the equality in the outcomes ... When they see a disparity in the outcomes, they think, "Okay, racism." Automatically. It's the system automatically. Not necessarily. I mean, I understand affirmative action in that there are people who didn't have those resources, but they are smart and they can show you how smart they are. And you're like, "Okay, well, you got a raw deal so we'll get you in and you can be at the starting line with everybody else." I mean, I kind of get that. What I don't get is just having a quota system and saying, "We need a bunch of black people. Doesn't matter about their expertise or anything like that." I mean, that doesn't happen as much as people think it does, but it does happen. Especially in graduate school in certain fields, especially education and things like that. This is going to sound mean, but the qualifications have been lessened for getting into these spaces. And maybe the intentions were good, but it has some pretty negative effects as well. So it's a touchy subject obviously, but at the end of the day, I'm all for equality of opportunity and doing that to the best of our ability.

Steve McGuire

Okay. Yeah. Let me close by just asking you about your work as a teacher, which is a huge part of what a professor does. And I just wonder, since your pivot towards focusing on the critique of anti-racism and that sort of thing, has that had an impact on your teaching at all, and do you talk about these things in the classroom with your students? I assume you do when you're teaching rhetoric. And do you enjoy doing that? Is it fruitful?

Erec Smith

Yeah. Yeah. I enjoy it. I don't shy away from it. I mean, that would defeat the purpose in my mind. That would be somewhat hypocritical in my mind. So yes, we discuss it. In some classes more than others. There are classes where I do discuss empowerment theory and the emotional intelligence competencies therein without talking about race. And there are classes where we're talking explicitly about social justice and anti-racism and things like that and how it's manifesting, the pros and cons and things like that. I show at least five episodes of Benjamin Boyce's docuseries on Evergreen State College. And boy, does that spark some conversation. And I've been noticing this in the last couple of times I've been discussing it. The white students think, "Oh, I must be missing something." When they do something absurd, they're thinking, "Okay, there's a reason they're doing that. I'm just not seeing. I'm not missing. I'm not understanding." The black students are like, "These people are crazy."

Steve McGuire

Okay.

Erec Smith

The black students, "That's insane, that's absurd. That's illogical. They're acting like children." Yada, yada, yada. So there's this fear of being seen as a racist.

Steve McGuire

So you mean like the white students are assuming that there must be some justification for this behavior that they're just not seeing in the students protesting over Brett Weinstein and that sort of thing?

Erec Smith

Yes.

Steve McGuire

Yeah. I see. Okay.

Erec Smith

Yes.

Steve McGuire

Fascinating. Okay. Good. Well, you mentioned at the very beginning that you're working on some new things right now. Do you want to close by just telling us what you're up to right now, in terms of your research or other projects?

Erec Smith

Well, right now I'm just researching as much as possible. I'm diving into thoughts on classical liberalism. I'm diving into critical pedagogy. I'm diving into defenses of this thing people call hegemony. How are people justifying this? There's this idea that capitalism is just this evil economic system, and people don't realize that it comes out of moral philosophy. You know?

Steve McGuire

Yeah.

Erec Smith

People have elaborate explanations for why capitalism is good. It's not just something people do because they like money. People don't realize that and I want to dive into that and explore that and hope that other people can explore it with me and see that and engage with those arguments instead of just saying capitalism, bad. So that's what I'm doing right now. Am I writing anything in particular? Not a book at the moment. I'm really focusing on Free Black Thought and trying to build that into something more than it currently is. So that's what I'm doing right now.

Steve McGuire

Okay. Well that all sounds great. And thanks again for appearing on the podcast today. This has been a really enjoyable conversation.

Erec Smith

Thank you. Thank you.