

Pol and Humanities ep 12

[00:00:00.09] TOM MERRILL: Welcome back, everybody. This is Politics and the Humanities, a podcast from American University. I'm Tom Merrill. I'm a professor of government at American University. And I'm here with my colleague and co-host, Sarah Marsh, who's also on the faculty at American University. Hello, Sarah.

[00:00:15.03] SARAH MARSH: Hello, everyone. Thanks for tuning in again.

[00:00:18.24] TOM MERRILL: Our guest today is Amna Khalid, who is an associate professor in the Department of History at Carleton College. Her academic research is on modern South Asian history and the history of medicine, and I understand that she's working on a manuscript called Pilgrimage, Place and Public Health-- Sanitary Regulation of Sacred Space in British India. Many of us academics put our work off in a corner, so I felt I had to say the name of the manuscript.

[00:00:44.29] AMNA KHALID: [INAUDIBLE]

[00:00:47.11] TOM MERRILL: But she's not here to talk to us today about that. She's here to talk to us about her fine essay that was just published in The Chronicle of Higher Education. The title of which was "Demands for Diversity Lead to Corporatization; Students are Empowering Administrators at Faculty Expense."

[00:01:06.36] And it's an article about anti-racism training and about the kinds of programs that are being instituted at many universities across the country. I should also say that she has a great track record of other articles and op eds on all kinds of related topics that you can find on her website if you just search her. We'll put that in the description for the episode. But welcome, Amna. We're very glad to have you here, and we're really looking forward to this conversation.

[00:01:32.98] AMNA KHALID: Thank you for having me. I'm looking forward to it, too.

[00:01:36.21] TOM MERRILL: And so maybe the right way to begin is just to ask you, what's the argument of your op ed?

[00:01:42.57] AMNA KHALID: The argument of my op ed is-- part of it is not new at all. It's the idea that there is administrative blight or bloat in higher education. So that part is not new. But what I'm saying is that in this current moment, the ways in which student demands are playing into a pre-existing trend are worsening that kind of bloat, and it's really encroaching on faculty territory.

[00:02:07.17] But it's not even a territorial argument. The argument is this is to the detriment of everyone. So it's an anti-educational move that these kinds of demands are inadvertently furthering. And what we have is the rise of trainings on campus, which are indicative of how deeply institutions of higher education at this moment seem to have moved away from their core mission of education.

[00:02:35.82] TOM MERRILL: Right, so if I understand you correctly-- so you are talking about the kinds of anti-racism classes and trainings that one finds in many institutions, including American University. And Sarah, perhaps you and I will talk about that. But you're not criticizing the anti-racism part. You're making a structural argument about what kinds of classes are being offered. Is that correct?

[00:02:58.21] AMNA KHALID: Well, I'm making I'm making two points over there. One is that I don't think training is the way forward to address the issue of racism. So I'm critiquing the approach, the institutional responses that we see, which have been plentiful in response to student demands. So I'm not denying the fact that there are problems around issues of race which need to be addressed.

[00:03:21.90] But I'm saying that the institutional responses to student demands have, almost across the board, been to bring in consultants and trainers from the outside to train faculty and staff about these issues. And what I'm saying is that what we need at a moment like this to deal with issues of race is genuine education. Instead, we're turning to these box-checking exercises put out by trainers and at the cost of the real work that needs to be done.

[00:03:52.75] SARAH MARSH: And so, Amna, for folks who are not familiar with what these trainings look like on college campuses, can you describe what they tend to look like?

[00:04:02.73] AMNA KHALID: Right, so I will describe them, and I'll also say to you that, recently, I wrote a piece with a colleague of mine, which is "Don't Confuse Training with Education." And when that came out, a few colleagues from across the country emailed, and they were like, I'm really not sure what you're saying is actually quite fair, because how you're characterizing these trainings seem to be a caricature.

[00:04:27.48] And then, shortly thereafter, the same colleagues emailed saying, we just went to a training that was exactly like that, so we take that back. So as I say this, I share this to say what I am going to present really is not a caricature. And I've actually sat through a few of these, so I am speaking from experience and have spent a lot of time talking to colleagues at other institutions.

[00:04:50.61] Most of these trainings begin with a conversation about what race is and a discussion about white supremacy. And what's often said is that white supremacy is woven into the very fabric of everything in the United States. And then, from there, you will move on to a conversation about, how do BIPOC people see the world?

[00:05:15.41] So one of the things that stands out is that BIPOC people see everything through a racial lens, is one of the statements that is often asserted in these trainings, which I contest and have problems with. But this is just to give you the framework. And then, often, they move along the lines of dividing people into racial affinity groups where you do all kinds of exercises to uncover your biases, to find out ways in which you may have micro-aggressed your colleagues or people, totally unaware of it.

[00:05:47.39] What's also often reiterated over and over is that intent is of no consequence when looking and thinking about microaggressions. What matters is impact. So there's a way of discounting completely why someone would be doing something or taking into consideration the fact that they may not have intended any kind of hurt, or harm, as it's called.

[00:06:14.35] What else? Then, there's ways of learning what your privilege is. You do exercises like-- the Privilege Walk is well known. And there's some degree of, I believe, self-flagellation amongst the white affinity groups about how they've been so privileged and have taken advantage of the white supremacist frameworks to-- unknowingly, of course, but there's still kind of a discussion about how they've been complicit and not calling it out.

[00:06:46.36] And finally, the bottom line is that they are deeply essentialist about their approach to race. In their attempt to deal with racism, what they're doing is reinforcing racial categories, which we all know are social constructs, which is not to say that they don't have real implications. But to actually undo racism, you need to start breaking apart these categories. And what they're doing is reinforcing them. So that's just a broad overview of what these trainings look like.

[00:07:21.13] TOM MERRILL: So Amna, you said a mouthful there. So this is a very familiar debate from anyone who follows issues of race in the media or online. And so I think a lot-- there's been a lot of discussion about this. And I guess I want to say, I have complicated feelings about this, right? And I have complicated feelings about the teaching of race.

[00:07:42.80] And one of the reasons that I have complicated feelings is that it's pretty clear to me from my institution that the institution, for a long time, until relatively recently-- so three or four years ago, five years ago maybe-- was in what I would call the defensive crouch about race, that they would say they wanted to talk about race, but only enough so they could move on to some other topic, right?

[00:08:07.03] So it does seem to me that there was a real absence in the discussion, at least in the institutions that I saw. So part of me is sympathetic to this kind of movement and some of thee-- at least the impetus behind these kinds of things. Now, that said, I do have a lot of problems with the way that these classes get taught or that these trainings happen. And maybe we can just dig in a little bit.

[00:08:34.84] So I mean, American University has a class like this. It's a mandatory class for freshmen called American University Experience II. And it might help for us to talk about-- just to get some of the complexities out about-- because, as I say, I have mixed feelings, but just to talk about that a little bit to try to think about, what is this like for students, and what is this like for the institution, which is the thing that I most care about? So Sarah, do you want to talk about-- you and I have had lots of conversations about this, along with many of our colleagues on campus.

[00:09:09.85] SARAH MARSH: Yeah, and I should say that I came to AU after AUx2 was on the books in its original incarnation, and then it was revised about 18 months ago. And that's the

phase of the class that I know the most about. And I think, like Tom, I have hard feelings about this. I'm jointly appointed in the Department of Critical Race and Gender Studies.

[00:09:41.25] And so I've committed my professional life to teaching students about the history of race in the 17th and 18th centuries and the beginning of the 19th. And so I think that no work is more important than this work right now. I want it to be done well. And I really applaud the people at the University who are seeing the need for this, who are responding to the students' just demands for this kind of material in the curriculum.

[00:10:20.01] And I think the thing that I became concerned about was, as Tom was saying, the way that the class was put together, and mostly the kinds of resources that were given to the project of teaching this most important thing, I think. So Tom, do you want to talk a little bit about the structure?

[00:10:47.49] TOM MERRILL: I mean, so this is a class that's for all freshmen. It has two parts, American University Experience I, which is the first semester, American University Experience II, which is the second semester. The first semester-- so I don't know. I've never taught this class. I've never been in the room when people were talking about planning the class.

[00:11:04.77] But from everything that I have heard, the first half of the class-- and these are only one and a half credits, so it's not like a full class. But the first half of the class is about how to go to college. And it's the kinds of things that one-- in years past, one would have heard in orientation, right? What are the different offices on campus? Where is the library? How do I get help if I have a problem of this kind? The kind of noncontroversial advice that all college students need.

[00:11:33.48] The second half in the second semester is all about race and historical injustice and structural inequality. And I think I'm presenting this correctly, that the main instructors for these classes are also the people who are in the first-year advisor's office, right? So they're not faculty. They're not in a department, but they're advisors. And then, oftentimes, the same people who are in the class are the people who are being advised in which classes to take. And so that's the basic setup.

[00:12:08.40] AMNA KHALID: Let me just ask a point of clarification. So you're saying these classes are actually being taught by people who are not professors. Is that correct?

[00:12:15.27] TOM MERRILL: Yes. Yes, this is, in some way, the key fact, yeah.

[00:12:20.16] AMNA KHALID: Wow. OK.

[00:12:24.39] TOM MERRILL: I want to be careful here, right? Because we're, in part, having this conversation with you, Amna, because we think the public conversation over these classes at AU has been anemic. And so we want to say these things in a place where other people can hear them, including, one hopes, provosts and presidents and deans, right?

[00:12:44.88] And I think the thing to be said is that, number one, it's not at all wrong to require people to read hard books about race, right? It's not wrong to make conservative students read Ibram Kendi. I mean, that's what the university is supposed to do, for crying out loud, on some level. But it just seems to me that a class that is not being taught by faculty on this thing that the university says is-- in all of its branding, this is the thing that we're most worried about. This is the big problem in the country today, right?

[00:13:16.76] And I want to say this in the right way. I don't mean to be criticizing the actual first-year advisors who teach these classes, many of whom I know and respect and are sensitive to student needs. I don't think this is an indoctrination thing. I think that the Fox News narrative of students coming in and being told what to think-- I think that's almost entirely false. So I think in a classroom that the advisors who are teaching the class are often sensitive to all the different things that are happening, but on some level, I mean, is this a university or what, right? I mean, why are we asking these people to teach this class and not faculty?

[00:13:53.76] AMNA KHALID: Yeah, see, there is a tension over here that I'm picking up. And I think it's present on all campuses, which is this-- what can I call them, administrators? These advisors, right, are concerned with student welfare. They're well aware of student needs. And that's great and wonderful. And I don't think their intentions are bad, and I don't think they're out to willfully indoctrinate people. So this is not a vilification of people in those roles. I think they do their job well on the whole. But I don't think they're qualified to do the work they're being asked to do in this case, which is--

[00:14:31.46] TOM MERRILL: Right, and in many cases, they know that, right? And it's not a criticism. It's something they will say if you ask.

[00:14:37.14] AMNA KHALID: Yeah, and the whole point for an educational institution is that we-- our bread and butter is expertise which has been cultivated over years of educational training, frankly, but not the kind of training that I'm critiquing. But I'm talking about educational training, which is where you go through undergrad. You go through postgrad. You do deep study in your PhD. You earn the qualifications that you are out there then professing.

[00:15:06.36] So what's troubling about this moment is that this is arguably one of the biggest social issues we have right now to contend with in the United States, which is, how do we deal with the issue of race, and how do we deal with making our campuses more inclusive and diverse and more equitable? And these are really valuable questions to be focusing on.

[00:15:31.29] TOM MERRILL: Absolutely.

[00:15:31.89] AMNA KHALID: The tragedy of this moment-- so I'm very much like you, Tom. I am in favor of the attention that is being brought to these topics by student protests, by the kinds of actions being taken on campuses in terms of drawing attention to them.

[00:15:48.15] What I am critical of is the ways in which institutions are responding to them. And why I'm critical of them is that they are fundamentally turning to nonexperts to deal with the deepest problem that we have, just like you said. So tell me more about the course, and tell me

more about what are the kinds of topics that are covered in them. Do faculty have any say in the creation of the curriculum?

[00:16:15.04] SARAH MARSH: So my understanding is that there were faculty advisors to the first-year advisors as they constructed the course. And after the syllabus was produced, they did-- they made the class publicly available-- well, available to the faculty at AU, who were invited to opine on the structure of the class, on the readings, and so forth. And I have to say, I did not read all of the materials for the class. I just focused on the very early history, the 17th, 18th century, 19th century history, because that is--

[00:16:51.57] AMNA KHALID: How dare you focus on your area of expertise?

[00:16:53.41] SARAH MARSH: Right, and the thing that is so important for students in my classes is this realization that chattel slavery and racism are not the same thing in the 17th century as they become, right? It is an evolving system that is responding to all sorts of pressures and internal dynamics and so forth that are available to us in the historical record. We can read about them, right? We can study the stories of people who were enslaved, who, in my view, know the most about what happened because they lived it.

[00:17:37.12] So anyway, I had a look at the materials for the early history. And they seem to be largely an excerpt. There were, as far as I saw, no primary sources from that period. But it was a high school-style textbook about major points, which, in the main, are historically accurate, except for a few of the interpretations of the period that were being offered not as interpretations but as true historical facts about what happened.

[00:18:17.82] And those were the points on which I raised objections. And I can go into the particularities. I thought they were damaging. I thought that African-American students should not be reading books that characterize their ancestors as helpless. I don't think that we should be reading texts that characterize the institution of slavery as natural. It was anything but natural. It had to be made by people.

[00:18:47.55] And I should be clear here. I'm in favor of reading a book like that alongside a book with a different interpretation of the history, and then giving it to the students to reckon with and to use their own critical faculties in order to arrive at deeper understanding and maybe even a position, at some point, on how they understand the history. And so that was the nature of the objections that I raised.

[00:19:17.06] And I have to say that as a teacher, I am more of a listener than I am a lecturer. I like to really dig in and pay attention to what students are saying. And the thing that causes me to stand up and take notice is when my African-American students are coming to me privately and saying, Professor, it's really hard to always be told that you are a victim. And in fact, nothing is further from the truth.

[00:19:52.16] African-Americans survived one of the most horrible tragedies of modernity, and that is part of the story. It has to be told that way. And if we look at the stories of people who were enslaved, like Olaudah Equiano, Mary Prince, Frederick Douglass, all these folks who have

written it down, you hear the story coming through very clearly. And again, in my experience teaching these primary texts, the students thrive when they can engage with that textual material from the period itself.

[00:20:32.36] And my hope in making these criticisms of the curriculum is that as the institution goes forward and continues to change and continues to reckon with these issues, we can very deliberately bring in these historical voices so that we can engage them, in all their human complexity, and really enrich the discussion about race. And that's the spirit in which I offered my criticisms to the administration and in which I repeat them here, because we have to build, right? This practice of just saying, well, that's the wrong way, we're going to tear it down-- I think we have to stop that.

[00:21:17.89] TOM MERRILL: And we should say, none of the things that we're saying here are things that have not been said many times in private.

[00:21:24.60] AMNA KHALID: So if you'll indulge me a little bit, I mean, I love the example you gave. And as a historian, of course, it appeals immensely. But what I would like to say, and maybe bring the listeners in a little bit into why I'm making this case for faculty doing this work-- it's stunning that we're in a moment where we have to make the case that we should have faculty, but just to explain, and this is a great example, which is, as historians, we are well aware that any historical narrative is coming from a particular position.

[00:21:56.77] And we can assess how much the writer has paid attention to their own position and how that's shaping their narrative. And we do that. We learn ways of decoding how you can get to what is an agenda-driven argument, what is taking a more balanced and taking a more open approach to evidence, what is cherry picking evidence.

[00:22:25.28] And then what we can do is take-- let's say we get these three kinds of narratives. We can put them side by side for students and show them that there is no definitive narrative, that these things are always in tension. And then we teach them the skills of, how do you find the different little moments in these narratives which can be fruitful, or how do you assess how a narrative is not really honest and sincere? It's agenda driven.

[00:22:54.25] And so part, a big part-- historians are trained-- we look at historiography. We also know that the writing of history itself is interpretive and has been interpreted over a period of time. And so one of the key things that I think we as experts bring to the table is the knowledge that we are not going to provide you with a definitive version of what happened. And this, I think, is the fundamental leap that happens often between school and college.

[00:23:23.92] Because in school, you learn these things as facts, right? I often have students who come to college who don't want to do history because they think it's deadly boring because it's the cination of facts. And then they come to one class, and they realize that it's actually a lot of negotiation about what goes into the making of facts and how facts can be constructed differently by different people. So in my mind, here is the primary distinction between education and training.

[00:23:50.95] So I was recently in a training, and they decided-- this was a many, many session training. And the amount of time that they devoted to history was less than 10 minutes. And that was a YouTube flyby video of-- one of those sped-up videos where someone is narrating the history of the United States and the role of African-Americans in it. And it is the most dogmatic narrative you can have.

[00:24:18.91] This is what happened, right? It's not like, this is a version of what happened-- totally refracted through the dominant framework that we have right now. And as a consequence of that, here you've set the tone of what the past is, and then you're setting the tone of what the reality today is, whereas you don't even have to-- and I concur with you. I love reading primary texts precisely because they give you a sense of the texture of the time, of the feel of the time, and they show you how individuals are so much more than the categories that we impose on them, right? That's where the agency comes in.

[00:24:53.55] And it also gives you an appreciation for-- oppression doesn't exist in totality. There is resistance, and there is agency. And these things are in conversation. None of them is totalizing. And what is that dance between these two things? So my point is, it's-- not only do we give an anemic and, as you said, Tom, anemic and a distorted, frankly, version of what happened historically.

[00:25:23.61] We are also giving a distorted set of guardrails for conducting the conversation about race today. Because then we've set the tone, and we say, this is the right way to talk about it. And why I worry about these things is it's-- it's one thing if all these trainings were happening, or these classes by advisors took place, and they were actually going to have no effect. I would still not be behind it because I think resources are being poured into it, but I think this is a step more dangerous because we're setting the tone on campus for how to have conversations about these in a prescriptive way, which is antithetical to open inquiry, which is fundamentally the mission of higher education.

[00:26:07.87] So I think the history example is a really good example to showcase what the problem with this kind of narrative is. And the tragedy is that those people, not for any fault of their own but by dint of the fact that they are not faculty and they have not had the educational background in this, are unable to present that. These are complex ideas that you need an expert to disentangle, to put out and explain to you, and then re-entangle and show you how they're woven together. So yeah, thank you.

[00:26:42.35] SARAH MARSH: And to me, it seems that it's a way of managing a conversation in which one becomes a conduit for critical engagement with whatever text is under consideration, right? There has to be a way in which one is-- and I'm talking about teachers of record, professors in university classes who have spent years in Socratic discussion and understand the moves that one makes in order to not tell the class what they think about race in America, but rather to be a conduit for a productive discussion that is open to many perspectives and, at the same time, is never calling into question the humanity of anybody in the room. That, to me, is the special expertise that we bring.

[00:27:32.07] AMNA KHALID: If I may be build on that, actually-- yes, absolutely. And I think the problem with the training model is it's got that banking model of knowledge as the premise, right? It's like, we know, and we're going to pass on the sacred knowledge to you. You will imbibe it, and then you will go and be this perfect person in the world. And the point is that higher education is not a place of knowledge transmission. It's simultaneously a place of knowledge production.

[00:27:56.67] So many of the times in class discussions, I am actually testing the limits of what I think I know with my students. And we're challenging my assumptions, and we're challenging long-seated historical narratives that have been accepted. And that's how knowledge moves forward. So we're actually in a space of production. We're not in a space of just this transaction that is taking place.

[00:28:20.11] TOM MERRILL: Where it's knowledge consumption.

[00:28:21.60] AMNA KHALID: Knowledge consumption, exactly. And this is where I think the wider critique that I was making in my piece is also relevant, which is that how we're thinking about education is becoming so deeply neoliberal and corporatized. It is becoming this transaction that we are engaged in. And if we go with that model, it comes as no surprise, then, that we are ending up where we're ending up, where we're hiring cronies, and it's-- just to be a little doom and gloom.

[00:28:53.49] But frankly, I don't even think it's doom and gloom because many of the things that I thought would never happen are actually taking place on campuses today. So I say this, in part, genuinely dreading that there will come a time-- and in fact, the time has arrived-- when consultants will start doing teaching. And this is where I take deep issue with institutional responses, because they've farmed out teaching to nonexperts.

[00:29:28.05] And I think the biggest problem I have is with tenured faculty who are not speaking up at this moment and saying, they have no business hiring consultants to do the work we do every day, and we do it fairly well. I agree, there are professors who may be insensitive. I agree, there is bad teaching. There is bad professionals in every category. That is a separate problem. But on the whole, faculty know how to do this work, and we've been doing it for centuries. And there is a reason why we do it.

[00:30:00.51] TOM MERRILL: So I think that in the interest of higher education, what you just said has to be strong endorsed, right? And I think doom and gloom is not an illegitimate or incorrect feeling at the moment. But let me put a pin in that and hold on to that for a second. I just want to go back and underline something that Sarah said in just thinking about the particulars of our circumstances at American University.

[00:30:24.30] One does hear from Black students that classes like AUx2 often feel like it's a long list of horrible things that happen to Black people. And it's depressing, right? How could it not be depressing? Why do we have to keep listening to the-- right? That's the kind of response that one hears. And I should say, I don't actually know what happens in these classes, right? And I'm

aware that the people are doing it are smart people who know well some of the things that I'm saying.

[00:30:53.20] So I want to make it clear that this is not an attack on anyone. I'm just trying to report what I've heard. But the other thing that one hears-- and there was an op ed in the AU student newspaper about the bead exercise where you have to-- it's one of these Privilege Walk kinds of things. And I guess the thing-- so you have to put a bead in for each kind of privilege that you have, right? And so by the end of the exercise, the kids with the most privilege have got a ton of beads, and the kids with least-- I think is what happens.

[00:31:21.81] But the thing to be said about that is that model is-- it's a very intrusive, personal model of what education is. We're going to ask you to fess up, was your grandfather a war criminal, or something, right? And it just seems to me that that's counterproductive, not because people shouldn't be called out for things that they've done, but the things that they're talking about are not things that individuals did. But you are making individuals feel bad about them.

[00:31:47.41] But I think that it raises the emotional stakes of the classroom in such a way that, guaranteed, there's going to be some kid who feels that they're being attacked because of something that they didn't have any responsibility over. I suspect that the Black students who express dissatisfaction with classes like AUx are picking up on that unhappiness in the classroom, right? Because people feel personally attacked, and it's about race, and there's a person of the different race sitting there. And so this is like a lightning rod.

[00:32:17.85] And I just think that that's not what we're supposed to be doing. This is not a therapy session. I don't have the credentials to do a therapy session. And sure as heck, a first-year advisor does not have the credentials to do that, right? I'm not sure that anybody knows how to do that well. And what we set ourselves up is like, well, this is the thing we're supposed to be doing. We're setting ourselves up for unhappiness, right?

[00:32:39.36] Now, I do think that a college class is meant to get people to think about things like their privilege, right? That's what know thyself means in the Socratic sense, is you're supposed to be investigating your own privilege. But we can't do that personal work in the classroom. It just doesn't work.

[00:32:54.21] We can give them the materials. We can hope that they're going to go home and do this work themselves. But when we require it of them, what we are doing is we're asking them to give us a prescribed set of answers. Oh, I just know that this is what I need to say to get this person off my back. And it's just wrong. It's just wrong to the mission of trying to get people to think deeply about their own lives.

[00:33:18.76] AMNA KHALID: So I have so many thoughts that I want to share. One is, this model of thinking-- privileging race in this fashion for analysis over everything else, and to the exclusion of everything else, is deeply divisive.

[00:33:43.32] And I think what you're saying about the classroom and how students feel personally attacked-- how can you not feel personally attacked when you are being reduced to

the color of your skin and therefore being-- and even though they try to be all intersectional because the bead of class is going to come in, and then the bead of gender will come in, it still does not show you the complex interplay between these different things. And at the core of it, right at this moment, we are just thinking about race. Race is the thing that defines you.

[00:34:18.66] And I've seen this happen in trainings, and I've read about this happening in trainings, where what is meant to be an anti-racist training ends up being more divisive because it reinforces these kind of categories in a very unhelpful way and an unsophisticated, crass way which produces more tribalism. So that's one thing I wanted to say.

[00:34:39.04] The second thing I wanted to say is-- and again, in line with what you said-- and I feel like we feel the need to say this again and again because of the ways in which often these comments are misconstrued-- this is not a personal attack either on advisors or administrators or presidents. This is not personal. These are bigger issues that we are talking about, right?

[00:35:01.54] And over here, I would like to say that in many ways, I think the institutional logic is that by instituting these trainings, a-- let me give them the benefit of the doubt-- a positive side effect is that it obscures the actual places where inequity is being produced in policies and procedures. So you are seen to be checking off the box of doing the work, right? Because you've got all these trainings.

[00:35:31.83] So then nobody can come to you and say, hey, you've got policies which are producing inequity. Simultaneously, by making it an interpersonal thing-- right now it's about attitudes that faculty have, it's about attitudes that students have towards each other-- you're focusing and making it into a personal endeavor and a personal journey that you have to be on to become the ideal anti-racist, which eludes us all and eludes all the trainers as well.

[00:35:58.06] And so any failure in that process is part of the process. The success of the process is precisely that you're constantly being failing at it, at an investment level. And it's unfalsifiable. But I think what that's accomplishing in the process is it obscures policies and procedures which are problematic. And here, let me, allow me, indulge me once more to build on something that I'm beginning to see happening in certain institutions now. The next step after instituting these trainings and bringing in these consultants is, let's make DEI work a requirement in our review and tenure processes, [INAUDIBLE].

[00:36:42.39] TOM MERRILL: We just had this discussion.

[00:36:43.98] AMNA KHALID: Every college and institution is having it. And there's some dreadful pitfalls that you can see if you just think two minutes ahead, right? And you can avoid them. But here is what's happening. What's happening is that many institutions are being lured into requiring diversity statements as part of the tenure review or hiring process.

[00:37:08.84] It's no coincidence that Inside Higher Ed-- for a long time, one of the topics was how to write a diversity statement over the last year for job applications, because nobody knows how to do that. And everyone is looking for the formula. And the formula will be provided, and what you end up with is hours spent writing formulaic statements and reading formulaic

statements that, frankly, ring hollow and do a disservice and make a farce out of the actual, real thing that we want to be doing, which is engaging with diversity. So that's one thing. Now, what is happening is I feel that--

[00:37:45.69] TOM MERRILL: Assent in part and dissent in part?

[00:37:49.07] AMNA KHALID: Yes.

[00:37:49.57] TOM MERRILL: I only hear it at the end of your statement, but yeah.

[00:37:52.62] AMNA KHALID: So I think what's going to happen next is many people are going to tack this on to their existing tenure policies or procedures or review procedures. And then, instead of actually guiding their procedures and looking at what are the facts of the review process which are producing inequities, or how can we address them, how can we deal with academic pedigree bias or things like that, instead, we just have an added layer for junior faculty and anyone under review that produces more work that is onerous and, frankly, meaningless. So I know that I'm being very blunt in how I'm presenting this doom-and-gloom picture, but I do think we are headed in that direction. So go ahead, assent and descent.

[00:38:33.51] TOM MERRILL: So first of all, it has to be said, the worries that you just raised are absolutely the worries that administrators and faculty should be worried about. And the people who are promoting the DEI statements as part of the tenure review should have to respond to those. So in a certain level, I completely agree.

[00:38:50.34] But I also want to say-- and this is, in a way, not to justify the American University experience or the other kinds of things, but to just try to say that I think I understand where they're coming from and even share some of their concerns that-- I just think that a lot of these issues have been sidelined for a long time. And I think that faculty-- look, I mean, I'm ashamed at the number of faculty of color that we have in my school and my department, right? That's a fact.

[00:39:21.78] So I feel like in this day and age, and given-- let me put it this way. Given the centrality of the African-American experience to the American experience, that's the kind of thing that we should be working on. For crying out loud, are you kidding me? Of course we should be doing that. But yeah, the concern that rather than doing the hard work of persuading departments to change, which they do need to change, absolutely-- rather than doing that hard work, we're being satisfied, or the administration, the larger culture is allowing itself to be satisfied with the box-checking thing, right?

[00:39:59.07] Sometimes, we have these discussions, like, if only we could go back to this conservative utopia of 10 years ago. I don't believe that at all. I don't think that was a utopia. I think that there were serious problems. And I guess maybe one way to put this would be, it's not wrong to ask students to wrestle with issues of race in their freshman year. It's not wrong to force them to do that with texts that they're not going to want to read.

[00:40:25.86] What you should want, if you really care about this, is to get the faculty, in their regular classes, to be integrating the race work at the same time, not setting it off. I mean, how long is it going to take before students of color think, wait a minute. You've given me the advisors to talk about this, right? That's an expression of disrespect.

[00:40:46.71] SARAH MARSH: I have a question about this, right? Because there's always a lead-up to the decision for the first-year advisors to take on this work, which, again, it has to be said. These folks have undertaken this in good faith with faculty advisors who are trying to do the best they can with the resources they've got, right? We have to say that again and again.

[00:41:08.27] TOM MERRILL: Fully endorsed.

[00:41:10.20] SARAH MARSH: And how did it get to that? How did it get to the point where we said, we're not going to diversify our syllabi in broad ways from the first year to the 400 level? How did we get from tasking the faculty with doing the work of educating students to this other model? That's a genuine question. And maybe I was not at AU when that happened.

[00:41:38.69] TOM MERRILL: That's a can of worms.

[00:41:40.74] SARAH MARSH: But I think the point is that we should not lose sight of the fact that some of the most vulnerable people at American University are the first-year advisors. They are the people who do not have employment security.

[00:41:56.76] TOM MERRILL: Absolutely.

[00:41:58.12] SARAH MARSH: I don't believe that they make a lot of money. And again, I don't the numbers exactly, right? But we should be serious about the-- again, not the-- as you were saying, Amna, not the individual human beings who have made these choices, but why we as an institution, and maybe even as a country, are moving in this particular direction, where this most important thing is being not treated in an organic way. Is this a good time for us to talk about the model at the University of Pittsburgh? Because you point that out as a step in the right direction.

[00:42:44.82] AMNA KHALID: Yeah, and I'm happy to talk about that but. Just before we do, I'd actually like to address some of what you were saying. Of course, I don't know the particularities of AU, and those are not what I'm going to talk about. But I do think that there is something over here that is universal in terms of institutional responses, which is they want to do the quickest thing possible, right?

[00:43:05.48] Incentivizing departments to change, which is what we should be doing-- it takes time, It takes energy, and you do not seem to be doing anything in this moment. And the ways in which student demands are articulated-- this is where I am critical of student demands in a way that I want them to see the leaps of logic that they're making and help them refine how they ask for what they ask for, which serves them best.

[00:43:30.84] I mean, if there was a quick solution to racism, god knows we would have had it. It's been such a long time. The fact that we are unable to deal with this issue, and that it is

pernicious and insidious in so many ways, indicates how hard it is. And this is also as an outsider immigrant who's come to the US. This is a very American problem, wanting a quick fix to everything. You want the drive-through version of diversity.

[00:43:57.25] This is just incredible. And I both find it tragic and comedic in equal measure when I'm looking at it from a distance, but it's deeply disastrous. And universities feel like they're making-- they're putting their money where their mouth is by hiring consultants. And I'm like, no, no, no, you put your money where your mouth is by saying to departments, here's \$10,000, or here is-- we will do this. How can we support you to take a course release? Come up with something that is going to be-- let's give you time. Time is gold for faculty. We all know that. Take this time to develop a course.

[00:44:40.17] Now, why the Pitt model? The course at Pitt-- I haven't actually taken the course, but why I can see it as a very, very appealing option is because they bring together the intellectual capital on their own campus first. So they bring together the genuine experts in their area, so their professors. Then, they bring them across disciplines, and they get them to talk to each other and offer a multidisciplinary course which is specific to the context.

[00:45:12.02] The local context of your own institution matters so much because that can really help you frame the conversations in a helpful and productive way to address the problems that you are facing, which are not going to be the same that another institution is facing, right? So I find that model really alluring because it is multidisciplinary. It pulls in people from STEM, and it pulls in people from the humanities. It gets a genuine conversation on campus going that is consistent and will last.

[00:45:41.63] And if all your freshmen go through it, then, over a period of time, you will build some common bank of conversation that will continue on your campus. To my mind, now that is a model that can work. And it has the fidelity of intellectual heft, right? It has the fidelity of context. It really does have the power to transform how you're going to talk about these things on your campus.

[00:46:17.05] TOM MERRILL: So I want to say something about that. So that's a great model. It would be an improvement, and it would allow us to do-- to pursue what I think is a genuine desire to talk about anti-racism in a helpful way with the institutional virtues. If the university is not the faculty, I'm not sure what it is, right? I mean, it's a gym. It's a cruise ship for rich kids, which is often how it feels.

[00:46:47.16] But I want to say something impartial. Again, not a defense but an explanation of why I think places like AU are the way that they are is that it's hard to get faculty to agree, right? And especially tenured faculty are often like, you can't touch me. I'm going to keep doing the same thing. I'm in the rut that I've been doing for 30 years. I'm not going to change anything. You can say all this stuff about race, but I'm just going to keep on sailing.

[00:47:15.57] And I do think that that's-- these issues are often a lot more complicated than they seem. It's not just anti-racism versus something else. It's actually part of this ongoing conflict between different parts of the university, and that some of the responsibility of this, in the long

run-- so let's say 20 years rather than the last two years-- definitely sits on the shoulders of the tenured faculty who are not really interested in doing general education.

[00:47:44.22] They're not willing to compromise to do a class like the one that you're talking about. They think that they want to be teaching graduate students. My version of the doom-and-gloom scenario is that the tenure-line faculty are becoming more and more like a think tank, where maybe they have students who are apprentices, PhD students who are going to be becoming mini-mes.

[00:48:03.45] And the rest of the institution is going to be run by people who have no connection to the main part of academic life, right? And so that trend that you see with the advisors, it works out in other ways, maybe not as dramatic, but in all kinds of other ways. And what we're seeing is the institution really coming apart at the seams, that there is no center anymore. And that's a very sad thing to me.

[00:48:26.85] SARAH MARSH: Can I offer something less doom and gloom? I thought about what we would do if we wanted to-- if we wanted to use what we have to get what we need, or what we think that we need, which would be to take this model where we have the course taught by the first-year advisors and infuse it with faculty expertise without-- I mean, let's be honest about this-- without getting rid of the people who are already at our institution, who are working in these roles as first-year advisors and who have stepped up to undertake the project of anti-racist education, I think, without the right kinds of resources.

[00:49:14.52] What would it look like for the faculty to come in and create a syllabus that could then be taught by the first-year advisors in a model of discussion sections, that there would be lectures, and then there would be these discussion sections? I mean, does that work, or does that just further corporate ties, the model that we've got but by pulling in the faculty expertise and fitting it to the corporate model instead of the other way around?

[00:49:46.83] TOM MERRILL: I mean, the administration would have to actually consult faculty, which is-- so far as I can tell, there are many things the administration does because they do not want to ask faculty to do something. Now, in fairness, the faculty are pains in the butt to deal with, right? But I don't know how else you can revitalize an institution like this without going through that conversation.

[00:50:11.16] I mean, I would say, Sarah, just if you were thinking about trying to do a slightly different class, there are African-American conservatives in the world. You could teach a class with intellectual diversity without having to bring in the actual, honest-to-god racists. But I don't think that the people teaching AUx have any idea that there is diversity of opinion within the African-American community.

[00:50:34.19] SARAH MARSH: Well, Anna, you've written about this in your piece on critical race theory. I don't need to steer the conversation in that direction, right? But I've been working in what I understood to be critical race theory for about a decade. And it is understood as a different thing from what I understand myself to be doing. The public discourse around critical

race theory is very different from what I understand my own work to be in the history of the law. So this is another can of worms, right? But it is adjacent to what we're talking about.

[00:51:07.44] AMNA KHALID: It is adjacent. And I'd say the public discourse about critical race theory isn't really about critical race theory. It's about critical race theory lite, how it's been-- how what is, I think, a pretty valuable theory has been bastardized through application into these-- and operationalized. And that is what is standing in.

[00:51:28.72] Now, my problem is-- anyhow, the point is that in public discourse, that's what critical race theory means now. That is the new meaning of it. And we can keep trying to change the conversation about what genuine critical race theory is, and I think that's worth doing. But currently, the dominant understanding of it is critical race theory lite.

[00:51:53.02] My response to that is-- I mean, I think critical race theory is way more than that, and that this is a misrepresentation and mischaracterization of it. But you still don't ban things. Banning things has never led to good outcomes. You don't ban things, and you also don't do dogma training.

[00:52:14.26] Banning it isn't going to do anything, and presenting it as the only truth isn't going to do anything, either. I think a much better thing to do is to present it as one framework amongst others when you teach and do this work. So this is going into a slightly different direction, but I did want to say-- sorry, Sarah, you were saying something that-- what were you saying before that, before the critical race theory that made me--

[00:52:39.66] SARAH MARSH: Oh, about how to change what we've got. If we do have these criticisms, and if they're just critiques of how this is happening right now, what--

[00:52:51.10] TOM MERRILL: But you also can't just-- have a blank slate, right? I mean, that's not really an option, yeah.

[00:52:56.20] SARAH MARSH: It's not, because they're human beings in these jobs who are doing work, and they have relationships with students, and they are--

[00:53:04.96] AMNA KHALID: They weren't hired to teach this course. They were hired to do advising. So no one's taking their-- nor should their job be taken away from them. This is an additional thing that's been put upon them and that they've taken.

[00:53:17.73] SARAH MARSH: And that whole institutional history, I think, would be very instructive of how we have gotten to this particular point. And I don't know if the move of the faculty advisors into these roles is in response to at least the perception that the faculty were not going to do anything, which is, I think, what Tom's pointing out, that there just wasn't going to be any movement on this from the faculty in a widespread or organic way.

[00:53:45.37] So that part of the history is lost on me. But my question, Amna, is, how do we take-- if we wanted to change this, if we could somehow magically wave a wand and get the

collective will to be in favor of faculty involvement in this course, how could we do it in a way that would not just be more technocratic output?

[00:54:12.00] AMNA KHALID: Yeah, I mean, I think the model is pretty clear, in my mind, of how you can do this. The first thing is you never change hearts and minds, whether it's on the issue of race or anything else, anything else being like, should I change my course by diktat-- right? If those things are done, you need to incentivize these things, is how I think about it.

[00:54:31.21] I do not think a compromise solution is good where faculty come in, yet these first-year advisors who are not faculty continue training-- or continue teaching this course. The reason I don't think that's a good idea is because I think that's a compromise which sets a very bad precedent for what's going to come next for faculty. Teaching is our business, and we know how to do it. And I do not think there is a compromise on that.

[00:54:53.25] Yet, how can we do this in a university or an institution can genuinely incentivize this work? And yes, not everyone will do it, because not everyone can be forced. But a lot of people will. There is the goodwill right now, and you can capture that and really harness it and build something more on that, right?

[00:55:17.79] Faculty do a lot of hidden work a lot of the time. But if you want them to change, you've got to incentivize it. If you give someone a course release and tell them, this is our expectation of what you do after that, many will take it. That is how a lot of stuff on campus gets done. If you give someone, hey, you're off committee work this year, instead you're going to do this-- I mean, tell me--

[00:55:42.06] TOM MERRILL: Sign me up. Sign me up. No committee work? I'm ready, whatever.

[00:55:45.30] AMNA KHALID: I'd say more than 50% of the-- you've got to put some skin in the game, and that's how you do that. So there are ways to incentivize faculty. I think it can be done, and I think it should be done. And the teaching of the course should be in the hands-- teaching should always be in the hands of faculty.

[00:56:02.05] So it can be a stop-gap measure for a little while, but I don't think it sets a good precedent. And I don't think we should-- I think we play into the-- in the long run, we play into more corporatization. Because it's like, oh, this model is here. Advisors can clearly do some teaching. So it'll even lead to more adjunctification and more disposable scholars, et cetera.

[00:56:27.07] TOM MERRILL: [INAUDIBLE] so, I mean, one should, of course, have concern for the human beings that are part of your institution that have been doing the work, whether you like it or not, right? But one shouldn't make the pedagogical decision about what your teaching program looks like simply on the basis of sunk costs. That just seems to me that that's a mistake.

[00:56:50.16] But yeah, no, I mean, there are many things that, in a better world, I mean, the faculty-- and let's say it; I mean, tenure is being undermined in many institutions-- but the

tenured faculty should be in charge of, that you're not going to move directly to that world in any immediate future that I can see.

[00:57:08.59] SARAH MARSH: So Amna, I'm not well enough red in the Pitt class to know how they run discussion sections, if any. Because I know that they're the MOOC-style lectures that are available online. And then, ostensibly, there's more to the class than that. Do you know how they run group discussion?

[00:57:30.09] AMNA KHALID: I don't the details of it, but I do believe that discussions are part of how the course is conducted. I think that's the heart of how they envision having genuine conversations.

[00:57:41.60] TOM MERRILL: We used to have people who did this. They were called graduate students.

[00:57:47.15] SARAH MARSH: So that's the model I was thinking of, right? If the first-year advisors would continue in this role of teaching AUx2, they would undertake the role that the graduate students traditionally take. But again, as you point out, Amna, there's a structural problem there that makes a side door to letting the teaching leak out from the professoriate into other groups.

[00:58:16.01] AMNA KHALID: See, I can get on board with something like-- of course, I don't know your context. So I'm just coming up with a vision of my own. But I can imagine something like graduate students leading the discussion groups and faculty coming in and teaching it, because that's part of their training as educators. And we do that. We have that model. Graduate students teach all the time.

[00:58:41.60] So why are we not, especially for-- OK, my kind of college, which is just an undergrad institution-- it has to be the faculty. But for universities that have a graduate student population, it's doubly galling that we should be bringing in trainers or we should be farming out this work to advisors. It also, in my mind, does something else. It signals that this is not a genuine priority.

[00:59:10.65] TOM MERRILL: Yeah, definitely [INAUDIBLE], yeah. anyone

[00:59:16.76] AMNA KHALID: It'll just take a little while, but people will begin to see that, that you're not really putting the experts where they need to be. But by that point, the mold is cast, and then it's easy to go and operate inside the group. And that's what I worry about. And here's the moment-- I agree with you, Tom. This is a moment where there's a lot of energy. I don't want to go back to the model that there was 10 years ago. That model was not right.

[00:59:42.71] But my problem is that this is a moment when we can really think, put our heads together, take the time, and think about a genuine path forward. Instead, I worry what we're doing is we're doing a superficial treatment of things, which is actually creating more problems, and then we're going to hire more administrators to deal with the problems that we're creating. Bureaucracy has its own logic, and it perpetuates itself in a certain way.

[01:00:13.39] This is not a personal statement of people who are in those individual roles. I don't think they're ill intentioned. I think their hearts are in the right places. I don't even think this is necessarily part of-- but it's the framework that they're taught to work in. They work with trying to fix a problem and not thinking of it as part of a bigger whole. And as a result of that, there is this overproduction of bureaucracy that happens down the line.

[01:00:40.39] Now, the bigger question for me that I'm wrestling with is, can there be a genuine interaction or conversation or consolation between how administrative models work and how faculty thinking works? That is where-- I don't know. I used to think there is. Sometimes, I get more despondent about it. I haven't figured it out yet. I don't know that it's figureoutable. But at this point, I'm feeling like we're at a bit of an impasse, and we're not being able to translate our visions of the future to each other.

[01:01:19.43] TOM MERRILL: Yeah, and so I think that's right. But I think that part of it is that faculty often have what I think is, in the long run, a misguided understanding of themselves. And I think what we've seen is a devaluation of teaching, that you don't think of teaching as a core part of what you do. You think of producing research that will be published in top journals or something.

[01:01:41.71] But the teaching really is the heart and soul of the institution. And that's been deserted by the tenure-line faculty. And all kinds of other people with different kinds of credentials have rushed in to do it because the institution needed it. But unless you have that conversation about how you put the two parts of the university back together into some kind of conversation, I just don't see how anything really changes in the long run.

[01:02:08.18] So Amna, I think we're almost at the end of our time. I want to ask you one more question, which is, would you recommend a book for us that helps-- when you think about anti-racism or good things to read with undergraduates-- I'll try to leave it as broad as possible-- would you recommend a book that you think that we or our listeners should read?

[01:02:27.40] AMNA KHALID: So I think a good book to read-- it's a little bit older, but is Walter Benn Michaels' *The Trouble With Diversity*.

[01:02:36.22] TOM MERRILL: So Sarah has been lobbying for a long time. Is Walter Benn Michaels even still alive?

[01:02:41.26] AMNA KHALID: Yes.

[01:02:41.47] TOM MERRILL: That's what I want to know.

[01:02:42.12] AMNA KHALID: Yes, and he is speaking. And I think that book is definitely-- it's become even more relevant, I would argue, in this moment.

[01:02:54.44] TOM MERRILL: It's 15 years old now, or 25 years old or something.

[01:02:57.02] AMNA KHALID: Yeah, but it really is-- I mean, I feel like it was portending the problems that we are dealing with now. And it remains deeply incisive and relevant. So that's the one thing I would say. And then the other--

[01:03:10.57] TOM MERRILL: He's a socialist. Can we say that? He's a socialist.

[01:03:15.20] AMNA KHALID: Well, he has socialist leanings, is what I would say. I don't know. Yeah, but also, I think regardless, his analysis remains very pertinent to the blind spots that we are actively cultivating right now.

[01:03:34.13] SARAH MARSH: And is grounded in the study of American literature.

[01:03:37.19] AMNA KHALID: There you go.

[01:03:37.82] SARAH MARSH: [INAUDIBLE]

[01:03:41.42] TOM MERRILL: One of the mottos of liberal education is that even bad men sometimes tell the truth. And this is the most that I can hope for myself.

[01:03:50.78] AMNA KHALID: And the other book that I would recommend, which is not an academic book but I think is very well versed in these conversations and is very readable, is Irshad Manji's Don't Label Me. It's written in a peculiar style, which is a conversation with her dog, which makes it really fun to read as well. And it may not be someone's cup of tea, that style.

[01:04:19.81] But I think it's worth persisting with because the points that she's making are, sadly, not at the core of how we're having these conversations, which is how we as individuals are so much more than the labels that are attached to us, and how, in order to have genuine human connection, we need to rise above the labels.

[01:04:44.84] TOM MERRILL: She would be a good person to bring on to campus for a talk.

[01:04:47.73] AMNA KHALID: She would be fantastic to bring onto campus. And I think the other person who, if you were thinking of bringing people onto campus-- and if you are thinking of training, I think-- much as I stand against training, I think there are better models. And someone who is doing this with some intellectual grounding that is different and offers something that I think will be more productive is Chloe Valdary. She has a theory of enchantment. And I think that is-- that's interesting. That's offering something new and novel to engage with.

[01:05:31.03] TOM MERRILL: Well, that's great. Well, Amna, I just want to say for myself, thank you for this. It's been wonderful. And we just really appreciate the role that you're playing in the public sphere and in your ability to get us talking about these things that are complicated. More could be said, right? There might be responses to things that we've said, so we want to keep ourselves open to that.

[01:05:51.04] SARAH MARSH: Amna, I really appreciated in the article that we're talking about now, but in all of the articles you've written recently, the clarity about what it is that we're talking about. I think that one of the troubles we have is not saying exactly what we mean because we are afraid of what will happen if we put words to the things that we are thinking and feeling inside. So I admire that really deeply in your writing and will strive to emulate it with students.

[01:06:21.23] AMNA KHALID: Thank you. I've never thought of myself as a good writer, so this flattering, and I'm blushing. And thank you for having me on. I really, really enjoyed the conversations.

[01:06:31.78] TOM MERRILL: Good. Thank you so much.

[01:06:33.14] SARAH MARSH: Thank you.