University of Michigan officials defend their right-wing attack on composer Bright Sheng

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University of Michigan (UM) officials responded Thursday to an open letter from some 740 faculty members protesting the witch-hunt organized against composer and Leonard Bernstein Distinguished University Professor of Composition Bright Sheng.

Sheng was forced to give up his class in musical composition last month after certain students condemned him for screening the 1965 film version of William Shakespeare's *Othello*, featuring actor Laurence Olivier, in a class on Giuseppe Verdi's opera *Otello* (1887). A number of students complained about Olivier, a white performer, playing a black character in dark make-up. They ignorantly referred to this as "blackface."

The university took immediate action against Sheng, without the pretense of due process of any kind. The dean of the School of Music, Theater and Dance (SMTD), David Gier, sent out an e-mail claiming that "Professor Sheng's actions do not align with our school's commitment to anti-racist action, diversity, equity and inclusion." The professor who replaced him, acting as judge and jury, declared that the showing of the 1965 film was "in itself a racist act."

UM officials announced they were referring the matter to the university's inquisitorial Equity, Civil Rights and Title IX office for investigation of discriminatory practices on the part of Sheng. Two weeks later, they privately informed Sheng's lawyer that there would be no such investigation.

In their open letter, dated October 21 and still accumulating signatures, the faculty members deplore the university's conduct. They note that certain students and faculty had attempted "to portray the showing of Olivier's *Othello* in class without content warnings as an inherently racist act that made the classroom an unsafe space and to demand administrative sanctions against Professor Sheng."

They continue, "We have seen this play out on other campuses. The assertion of creating an unsafe environment is used to silence, intimidate, and to justify administrative sanctions. While claiming safe space for themselves, Professor Sheng's detractors deprive him of it and are willing to go as far as to disrupt his livelihood and teaching process." As concerned faculty members, the open letter explains, "we deplore the treatment meted out to Professor Sheng and the denial of due process. We further decry the efforts to besmirch his reputation."

The administration's November 3 reply is a model of deceit and hypocrisy. In spirit, if not in intellectual depth, it is worthy of Shakespeare's "honest" Iago, the Machiavellian character who deliberately sets about—through craft, two-facedness and open treachery—the destruction of the Moorish-Venetian general, Othello.

Having been caught red-handed in the midst of an anti-democratic smear campaign, and now facing substantial opposition, university officials are clearly on the defensive.

Their statement begins with an obvious, provable lie, that the "University of Michigan strongly supports free speech and academic freedom." Officials can repeat this all they like, but their actions have just demonstrated the opposite, that they are enemies of both free speech and academic freedom.

Their next contention, "We also work hard to establish an inclusive and supportive learning environment for all students," is meant as a qualifier: we support free speech and academic freedom *unless* it detracts from such an environment. But how does the screening of a well-known version of a 400-year-old play do that? That's the thing the university has to prove, and, of course, cannot prove.

In fact, the administration gave in, at the drop of a hat, to the identity politics hysteria infecting a portion of the student body and faculty. It immediately took the side of those demanding Sheng's head, denounced him and supported his replacement, and then referred the matter to the campus thought police for possible retribution (something to which Wednesday's statement does not refer).

The university's new statement pays belated tribute to Sheng as "a highly valued member" of the UM faculty. "He continues," it asserts, "to teach composition lessons this semester in SMTD and is scheduled to teach a regular course load during the upcoming winter term. No sanctions have been imposed on him." A few weeks ago, Sheng was a pariah, essentially dismissed by officials as a racist and the issue of sanctions was very much in the air. He has been treated shabbily, shamefully. There is no retraction or apology here, simply bullying by other means.

On the central question of Sheng's reinstatement to his class, the university states: "A different instructor in Undergraduate

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Seminar allowed students to best continue their studies while working through the complexities of these circumstances." That is, there will be no reversal of course.

When the statement argues that the university's "approach was developed after discussions with Professor Sheng," the image that comes to mind involves police interrogators "developing" their "approach" during "discussions" with an unfortunate prisoner in the backroom of the local precinct house.

The November 3 press statement repeats one of the falsehoods at the center of the attack on Sheng, and Olivier. "The depiction of a white actor in blackface is deeply offensive. Such imagery must include proper context and be presented with care and sensitivity." Again, Olivier is not in "blackface," he appears in make-up, in an attempt to represent a black man. (A pro-censorship open letter now circulating and signed by 100 faculty members simply solves the issue by referring ad nauseam to "racist content" in Sheng's classroom.)

The university is so nervous and cowardly that its missive cannot refer to Olivier by name. The whole thing would fall apart on contact, so to speak. It is well known, or, in any case, any honest inquirer could discover, that the famed Shakespearean actor was attempting to add realism to his performance. He was consciously rejecting a tradition that had presented Othello, in his own words, as a "coffee-colored compromise," out of fear of offending those appalled by the sight on a public stage of a black man (Othello) and a white woman (Desdemona) passionately in love with one another.

What Oliver did, in putting on black make-up, is commonly referred to as *acting*, the imitation by performers of other people's behavior in front of audiences for the conscious purpose of shedding light on human conduct and psychology. In this case, Iago's definition of his own position in the course of the play stands positively as an explanation of the acting profession as a whole: "I am not what I am." Olivier clearly intended to bring out Othello's contradictions, as a dignified, courageous and larger-than-life personality, someone with great gifts as a military strategist, but also an individual with serious flaws, especially vulnerable to social and personal insecurity as a black man isolated in an alien setting.

This sort of "play-acting" has been going on for several thousand years. The Greek actors who portrayed gods, goddesses and other creatures were not themselves gods, goddesses and other creatures. The Elizabethan and Jacobean performers who played Romans, Greeks, Trojans, Mongols, ancient Britons, "Illyrians," "Tyrians" and the rest did not belong to those nationalities, regions or epochs, real or imagined. Australian and British actors today who remarkably emulate American accents are not doing anything offensive, they are merely seeking employment.

The administration letter, in its mealy-mouthed fashion, goes on to explain that the 1965 film's "disturbing" content "provides teachable moments to address complex issues and to deepen understandings."

Like the villainous Iago, administration officials must regard the readers of their miserable press release to be "of a free and open nature," who think "men honest that but seem to be so, and will as tenderly be led by the nose as asses are."

First of all, that Shakespeare, his *Othello*, Olivier's performance and Sheng's class present "disturbing" and "complex" issues should be heartily welcomed. University students are not infants, or are not supposed to be. As we noted in our original statement, "students crying about 'safe spaces' and a 'harmful environment' created by the showing of *Othello* should grow up and actually learn something."

In the second place, there would not have been any "teachable moment" if the university had had its way. Very likely, Professor Sheng would have been on his way out the door, like his counterparts in similar circumstances on other campuses, in the media and in the arts.

One of the critical differences here has been the presence of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) on the UM campus, which took the lead by denouncing the attack on Sheng, intervening with an open letter and helping mobilize opposition.

In its unprincipled response, the university ignores the calls of faculty and students to restore Sheng to the undergraduate course, if he so desires, and issue a public apology. The university does neither. It is acting on behalf of powerful political and economic forces of a deeply reactionary character, bound up with the Democratic Party and its upper middle class orbit.

This is a classic witch hunt. It must be rejected. The university must apologize to Sheng and restore him to the class. More, the entire apparatus of racialist and gender identity politics intimidation and thought policing must be dismantled.

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