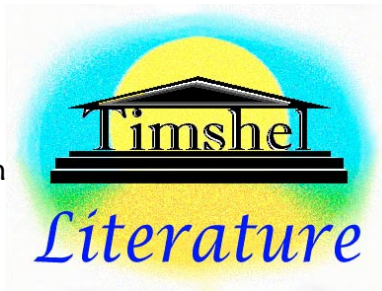


Justin Katz

Timshel Literature

jkatz@timshelarts.com



www.timshelarts.com

P.O. Box 751

Portsmouth, RI 02871

401-835-7156

**Just Thinking, 03/31/03:
Objectionably Simple Versus Simply Objectionable**
by Justin Katz

The teach-in crowd “was largely silent” when Columbia University Professor Nicholas De Genova said, “The only true heroes are those who find ways that help defeat the U.S. military... I personally would like to see a million Mogadishus.” But it applauded the exhortation “to believe in the victory of the Iraqi people and the defeat of the U.S. war machine.”¹

Presumably, many of those in attendance had seen the movie *Black Hawk Down*, or at least had heard of it. Based on the difference in reactions, it would seem that, when the “defeat” is no longer some abstract concept, when the necessary progression of which it would be the end result is described, the idea loses some of its appeal. As with the cause that the group ostensibly gathered to further, practicality and process are subordinate considerations, if considered at all. The difference is that no alternative strategy exists to reach the goals of the war being protested. In the case of U.S. military defeat, the process is unacceptable when made to seem real.

The missing description of strategy and consequence is not an oversight, but a complement to the emphasis that other speakers at the teach-in placed on language.² The “degraded” language of America must be “reclaimed,” with the supposedly proper definitions of such concepts as freedom, patriotism, and democracy affirmed. In this mentality, President Bush’s mispronunciations and malapropisms are mocked as viciously as the clarity of his specific word

choices. The intelligentsia sees the linguistic near-misses as proof that the President cannot grasp the full concept of “evil,” cannot understand that “evil” is merely a muddle of perspective.

Herein lies the seeming paradox: the smoke meant to prove false that which is objectionably simple also obscures that which is simply objectionable. Through academic jargon, an obscuring screen is erected, with patterns so complex — in the name of comprehension — that any who seek to follow them must either admit to mental inferiority or merely ignore gaps that they cannot explain away. The fairytale of *The Academy’s New Argot*.

While the expression is incoherent, the ideology beneath — what is really intended — is not. When put plainly, the words are nonsensical or offensive to such an extent that they appear as mistakes, or at least anomalies. Colleagues distancing themselves from De Genova attempt to conceal the fact that his were not disconnected words misspoken in the heat of the moment. They follow from his philosophy, all the way down to his approach to his studies.

This continuity can be seen by way of a letter to the college’s daily *Columbia Spectator* that represents De Genova’s only attempt at self-explanation.³ Far from a retraction, the missive seeks to explain that the reactions to his comments resulted from a media presentation of them in a “decontextualized and inflammatory manner.” The essence of what follows — “the perspective that framed that remark” — is that, in light of historical “truth,” De Genova is correct in his despicable hopes. Refuting “all forms of U.S. patriotism,” asserting the nation’s inherently racist nature, and calling on American troops to desert, the Ivy League professor concludes that, on top of his “million Mogadishus,” he’d like to see “something more like another Vietnam.”

As the professor’s description of his particular academic interests shows, these are conclusions rooted in his studies:⁴

My ethnographic research explores the social productions of racialized and spatialized difference in the experiences of transnational Mexican migrant workers within the space of

the U.S. nation-state. More specifically, I examine transnational urban conjunctural spaces that link the U.S. and Latin America as a standpoint of critique from which to interrogate U.S. nationalism, political economy, racialized citizenship, and immigration law. This work contributes to a reconceptualization of Latin American, Latino, and “American” (U.S.) Studies. Likewise, I am interested in the methodological problems of ethnographic research practice and the limits of anthropological disciplinary forms of knowledge and modes of representation.

Translation: he studies urban immigrant communities in order to show how bigoted, economically unfair, and racist the United States of America is, with the intention of shifting the emphasis of his academic discipline toward what can only be called anti-American advocacy. The language, from De Genova’s description of his professional focus to his hateful sound bite at the teach-in, is not discontinuous; it just represents different levels of obscuring what’s really intended. The turgid passage above is an “official” statement that faces the public – those who approach the school either from the perspective of clients or with the intention of distributing funds.

As David Horowitz masterfully puts it,⁵ De Genova’s approving reference to Mogadishu “was as if the devil had inadvertently exposed his horns.” That Professor Nick allowed that to happen suggests that he didn’t feel vulnerable in that forum. The partial extent to which he retreated into the scholarly mire in his letter to the editor reflects the comfort level of those in the Ivory Tower. Subsequent lines drawn by Eric Foner, perhaps the most visible of the Columbia professors who performed at the teach-in, suggest an effort to preserve the tower’s boundaries: De Genova’s slip was an “idiotic,” “flamboyant statement,” but it should not “professionally affect” the professor.⁶

But De Genova’s “political opinion” is directly related to the ideas that he pursues and promulgates *as a career*, particularly considering that he sees them as bearing on public policy. The danger, from Foner’s perspective, is that allowing investigation to penetrate the classroom and the journals would reveal that, far from being a deluded outlier, De Genova is pretty standard in his outlook. He merely failed to cloak his dementia sufficiently behind cant or indirect allusion,

such as history professor Barbara Field's comparison of President Bush to Hitler via comparison of the anti-Bush activists to "the 'good Germans'... who said, 'No,' " to the tyrant.

The intellectual fog can't obscure the lurking ideas for long, especially as public light is brought into the space. As it already has with politicians and pop culture "artists," the public is beginning to take notice. Being more visible, politicians and trendy famous folks who misjudge the popular sentiment have learned to be quick in their retractions. What is particularly dangerous for the professors is that they actually believe that what they say follows from intelligence and investigation, a conviction that has been unduly bolstered through insularity. The professors give every indication that they intend to defend their outrageous statements.

In doing so, they might indeed effect a revolution of sorts, only not the one that *they* desire. De Genova attempted to recover from attacks by *escalating* his statements, from Mogadishu to Vietnam. When enunciated clearly, the language of the professoriat is one in which "patriotism" becomes "hatred of country" and "democracy" becomes "submission to the intelligentsia."

The general public is smarter than the intellectuals allow themselves to admit. And it is not at all inclined to keep silent.

¹ <http://www.nynewsday.com/news/local/manhattan/nyc-prop0328,0,6281232.story?coll=nyc-topheadlines-right>

² <http://www.nationalreview.com/comment/comment-continetti032803.asp>

³ <http://www.columbiaspectator.com/vnews/display.v/ART/2003/03/31/3e881bf8297f2>

⁴ <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/anthropology/>

⁵ <http://frontpagemag.com/Articles/ReadArticle.asp?ID=6962>

⁶ http://www.columbiaspectator.com/vnews/display.v?TARGET=printable&article_id=3e8820b855697