

Watchlisted

A conservative group put UM historian Tobin Miller Shearer on 'Professor Watchlist.' To Shearer, the threat sounds awfully familiar.

By Tobin Miller Shearer

In the weeks since I was put on an academic watchlist, I have thought often about one of the biggest bastards that I know. I only talked to him once and that was by phone. Even then, the conversation was short, truncated. He told me a story and then we hung up. He recently passed away. Up to the end, he was apparently a full-fledged s.o.b.

I'll tell you who he was shortly. And I'll get around to explaining what he has to do with being watchlisted, but first I have to let you in on a secret.

The watchlist is not the problem.

More on that later.

First, the context. Since its appearance early in the week of Thanksgiving, Professor Watchlist—a website sponsored by conservative student advocacy group Turning Point USA—has accused a shortlist of professors of discriminating "against conservative students" and advancing "leftist propaganda in the classroom" and a "radical agenda in lecture halls."

Although the list has been widely criticized for inaccurate information, false representation and the reintroduction of McCarthy-era scare tactics, the group's instigator, Charlie Kirk, claims his site is nothing more than a "tool that students can use in determining where to go to colleges... ." Montana gubernatorial candidate Greg Gianforte provided financial support to Kirk and his organization, and white supremacist news site Breitbart.com has publicly defended the list.

As of the second week of December, I have the dubious distinction of being the only professor in the state of Montana to be included on this watchlist of about 150 professors.

By way of additional context, let me tell you a bit of my backstory. I am a history professor at the University of Montana. I've had the gig for going on nine years. During that time I have directed the African-American Studies program, the country's third oldest. And, yes, I'm white. As I frequently tell my students, "As a white man I can demonstrate that African-American history is at the very center of our nation's story—that it is one we all should know."

Before I switched careers to attend graduate school, I worked for nine years as an anti-racism educator and organizer. Along with a cherished friend, an African-American woman from Cleveland, Ohio, I co-founded a training program focused on dismantling racism in white Mennonite institutions. Together we crisscrossed the country to consult with colleges, universities, mission agencies and denominational offices. During those years I led or co-facilitated more than 400 workshops. It was a heady time.

I made the decision to enter graduate school after falling in love with teaching and realizing that, due to my anti-racism work, I had been pushed to the margins of my religious community. I was no longer welcome to write for our national church magazine, work in our church institutions or preach at our congregations. Although Mennonites have a reputation for being peacemakers, they can be really passive-aggressive. In essence, this was the first time I was put on a watchlist.

By the time I arrived in Missoula in 2008, I was ready for a change. People did not know me. Few Mennonites lived in the area. I could start with a clean slate. Although teaching African-American studies in one of the whitest states in the union presented its own challenges, the program grew five-fold in as many years. I found a host of supportive colleagues in the history department and throughout the university. I engaged and challenged my students even as I learned much from them.

I was happy to be off the radar, no longer on a watchlist.

Then I gave a talk in Bozeman in January 2014 on the history of white privilege. The content was not new. I'd discussed similar ideas thousands of times. I described our country's history of genocide and appropriation of Native lands. I explained how white people—and specifically white men—designed institutions to serve themselves. I discussed the history of U.S. apartheid. I argued that white power was at the very center of the American project and needed to be dismantled for our multicultural democratic experiment to succeed. As I do in almost every public talk that I give, I invited strong criticism.

At the workshop's end, a group of student journalists interviewed me. They asked some easy questions. I recapped my argument. It was a congenial exchange, although I remember feeling really tired. My responses had gotten long-winded.

A couple of weeks later, Campus Reform, a self-described "watchdog to the nation's higher education system," re-posted the video interview. On their site, they excerpted my densest, foggiest, most convoluted quotation: "To be white in America is to claim an identity that attempts to be de-racialized and is predicated upon the receipt of power and privilege simply on one's appearance: a racialized appearance from the fundamental equations that whiteness equals access to power and privilege based on one's racial identity." Frankly, I am surprised that they didn't just shake their heads and walk away.

But that's where my second watchlisting started. More than 5,000 Campus Reform readers viewed the video. In response, I received several threatening emails. One said, "Kill Yourself!!!" Another: "If you're so overwrought about your 'whiteness' suicide is an option and it's painless."

The theme continued in subsequent posts:

"Maybe this guy should take a walk through the average trailer park and spew his crap about 'white privilege.' I want to see how far he gets in relation to how much popcorn I ate prior to his beating."

"I hate looking at the photo's [sic] he's posted on facebook of hmslf [sic] sitting and smiling with the students who are white. This guy is more like a snake and an enemy to white people. Can't wait to see this joker called out."

"I know a neighborhood in Oakland where he can get his guilt trip fixed. 'Coordinator' of African-American Studies? So is he responsible for buying the malt liquor, or the crack?"

Even though the missives were more ugly and anemic than truly menacing, I was encouraged to treat them as legitimate death threats.

Nonetheless, I was not too worried.

At the behest of my life partner, I informed campus security. With time the comments dissipated. I continued working with some of the best students and colleagues that you'll find anywhere.

Then, on the evening of Monday, Nov. 21, 2016, I came home from teaching a three-hour graduate seminar to find an email from one of my colleagues in the Women's, Gender, and Sexuality program at UM. She wrote, "You are on a 'professor watch list' compiled by a right-wing group ... Sorry to be the bearer of bad news ..."

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