Started from the Barnard
A Conversation with Maria Hinojosa

Columbia Behind Bars
The Justice-in-Education Initiative brings professors and students to NYC prisons

Also Inside: Hunger Studies and The Hardest Beat
Supported in part by the Arts Initiative at Columbia University
THE BLUE AND WHITE

Vol. XXV

FAMAM EXTENDIMUS FACTIS

No. VI

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Ah, there it is, silly old Columbia. The more I write about it, the more it messes up. It’s a treadmill. As much as superficial things have changed since I’ve enrolled, from Barnard’s restored lawn to Columbia’s online culture, too much has stayed the same, and the biggest story I’ve missed has always been why.

There was a moment one Fireside Chat that always stuck to me. A student had asked how could she regain her curiosity at Columbia, her desire to read outside the curriculum. And to a certain extent I can understand why President Bollinger was confused, because that’s what the Core Curriculum, and the ~very expensive~ study abroad programs, and college in general, are supposed to do.

If we’re not curious why things the way they are, or how we can change things, nothing will change. I bet that thought comforts the amoral executives and the Twitter trolls. But to be honest, first it bores me, and then it offends. $280,000 either financed by you or granted by an amalgamation of endowments and scholarships, and you can’t even be asked to care?

You wait one moment, Editor. If this is my last note, let’s get it right. I have a couple things to say to you. Easy stuff first.

Never be cruel, never be cowardly, and never ever read Foucault unironically. Remember, solitude is always foolish, but empathy is always wise.

Always try to be nice, but never fail to be kind. Oh, and you mustn’t ever lose faith that the right words can change things. No one will help you with this. Except, first-years, sometimes, if their hearts are in the right place, and if their classes are too. A dedicated first year will help. But no one else, ever.

Laugh hard. Run fast. Be fair. Editor, I let this volume go.

—Ufonobong Umanah

Columbia Confessions
Extinction Columbia
Heat
Tree Lighting

“Anyone under 5’9” shouldn’t be allowed to carry an umbrella. I keep getting stabbed in the neck and/or boob by short people not looking where the fuck they’re going. Wear platforms or be wet bitches”

-484, Columbia Confessions, 11/19/19

It's officially winter-time at Columbia, and you know what that means: sipping sweet apple cider by the dorm radiator, building snowdicks in front of Butler, and utterly losing the skill of having casual conversation with your peers. Yes, the winter isolation bug is on the prowl again, about to creep into your life before you know it. But not for the lucky few of you who just opened to this page of the Blue and White. This year, I provide you with an official step-by-step guide for maintaining friendly conversation with your peers whenever you feel the faculty has deserted you.
Location A: Hamilton Elevator
You: Wow, I hate the Hamilton Elevator. It totally sucks balls!
Acquaintance X: Yeah, it totally sucks!
You: It’s so slow. Almost as slow as the wifi in the basement of the International Affairs Building.
Acquaintance X: Wow, this was a really relatable and awesome conversation. I was really sad three seconds ago but now I’m not.
You: I know. Good thing we had this amazing guide with us.

Location B: Mail Center
You: Hello, Acquaintance Y.
Acquaintance Y: My name is not Acquaintance Y.
You: I’m pretty sure it says right here your name is Acquaintance Y.
Acquaintance Y: My name is Steven.
You: That’s hilarious. Well, time to go. I can’t wait to have another guided conversation with you again sometime soon, Acquaintance Y.

Location C: Laundry Room
You: Oh hello there. Ugh, laundry.
Acquaintance Z: Yeah, so true. Anyway, this conversation guide is awesome.
You: Yeah, we should be friends with the author of it.
Acquaintance Z: That’s such a good idea!
You: Yeah! She definitely has a ton of friends already and doesn’t need any more, but we should be friends with her anyway because we want to out of our own free will.
Acquaintance Z: Totally.
You: I heard somewhere her email is ms5753@columbia.edu if anyone ever wants to talk to her and be friends.
Acquaintance Z: That’s awesome. Let’s email her immediately.
The New York Water Taxi offers daily ferry rides from Pier 11, at Wall Street, to the IKEA in Red Hook, Brooklyn. The fare, a mere $5, is even waived if you spend at least $10 at the famed furniture store. And the trip across the East River is picturesque. Freed from weekday obligations for Fall Break, it felt practically obligatory to board the ship and float, without a care in the world, to that promised land of northern European descent.

Upon exiting the South Ferry station, a trio of ticket-peddlers bombarded my friends and me with questions about where we were headed and where we came from. As long-time Manhattanites—we had lived in this town for two and a half months!—we were undeterred, and continued apace.

Our confidence waned, however, upon reaching Pier 11, where we found that the boat had already departed for Brooklyn. Rather than wait an hour and a half for the next ride, we elected to take a Via, and we took comfort in the knowledge that our return trip on the ferry could and would provide an equally stimulating experience.

Walking into IKEA felt like entering Jurassic Park, except instead of dinosaurs, we found cheap furniture and funky lampshades. We stocked up on chocolate and Christmas decorations, and we shared Swedish meatballs and pear cider. We then had no choice but to take another Via to L Train Vintage, where we purchased some fine winter sweaters to don on the chilly ride home.

When the R train pulled into Times Square, we realized we had completely forgotten about the ferry. We shrugged.

—Chase Cutarelli

The Roosevelt Island Tramway was built in 1976 as the first commuter aerial tramway in North America. Today, it is one of only two in the United States. Despite these facts (and its brief cameo in the 2002 movie Spiderman), the tramway remains largely unknown even to long-time residents of New York City. Once the only mode of transportation from Manhattan to Roosevelt Island, the tramway now seems to serve as more of a tourist attraction for adventurous New York City visitors. It costs a $2.75 MetroCard swipe one way, making it much more affordable than most excursions in the city. Most riders left the tram at Roosevelt Island only to swipe right back in for the ride back. Of course, the tramway isn’t exclusive to tourists. One man, wearing the hoodie and weathered backpack of a comfortable New York native, laughed at the excited groups by the windows. “Look how amazed they are,” he said amusedly to a nearby passenger. And he was right. There was not a person in sight without a cell phone or camera in hand to capture the view. But it’s not hard to see why. The tramway escorts riders over the East River, where they come face-to-face with the Ed Koch Queensboro Bridge. Stepping onto the tramway at 4:40 pm ensures sunset views on the way to Roosevelt Island and the lighting-up of Manhattan on the way back. The tracks go just near enough to buildings to offer a peek into a
few luxury apartments. If you look toward downtown, you can even spot the top of the Empire State Building. Two swipes of a MetroCard and about ten minutes round trip makes for a quick, cheap detour from the flashiness of Columbus Circle. The station at 59th Street and 2nd Avenue is hard to miss. And as if the view isn’t incentive enough, how many people can say they’ve stood in the same tram as Tobey Maguire?

—Raquel Turner

On a cold, sunny November morning, I journeyed from Van Cortlandt Park-242nd in the Bronx to South Ferry in Lower Manhattan—the entirety of the 1 line. While I expected to find myself impressed with the breadth of the New York City subway system, I was pleasantly surprised to find that this trek constructs a timeline for the Metropolitan Transit Authority’s (MTA) fascinating history.

The station at Van Cortlandt Park-242nd, designed by the architectural firm responsible for St. John the Divine, is the only Victorian Gothic elevated station left in the city. Little of its appearance has changed since it opened in 1908 during a city beautification movement. I particularly appreciated the ornate scrolled station sign—the only one that remains in the city.

From there, it’s only a short walk to the park itself, which truly feels like the woods compared to the bustle of the city. After fighting my way past a large high school cross-country meet, I found myself in the colorful depths of a surprisingly dense deciduous forest. Only after climbing to the top of a large rock could I glimpse the skyscrapers of Midtown.

There are several landmarks tucked away in these 1146 acres, but the most notable was the Van Cortlandt House Museum, the oldest building in the Bronx. Built in 1748, you can see the bedrooms and sitting rooms of this famed revolutionary war family elegantly restored to their colonial roots. “The floors are entirely original!” declared the museum attendant enthusiastically. However, the house museum also invokes darker side of this history, as it was built by enslaved Africans who worked on the family’s surrounding plantation. This is acknowledged briefly on the tour only in an unheated attic room described as a “possible sleeping chamber for enslaved servants who worked in the house.” It seems that these details were glossed over in favor of a legendary depiction of the man who remains the namesake of the house—and the park—to this day.

I hopped back on the train to South Ferry, traversing part of the Bronx and the entirety of Manhattan in just under an hour. Though there have been various stations in this location since the early 20th century, the present-day iteration opened in 2009—just over a century after the one I had just visited up north. After its post-Hurricane Sandy 2016 renovation, it’s obviously not one of the MTA’s many neglected stations, but its metallic sheen doesn’t boast quite the same charm as 242nd street.

Though I ride the 1 several times a week, there’s something oddly satisfying about traversing the entire length of a line, like reading a book from beginning to end in one sitting—just one story line in the impossibly large library of New York’s history.

—Grace Adee

Illustrations by Sahra Denner and Brooke McCormick
The Blue and White

CarolyN FriedmaN

“Open hands, open hands,” said Carolyn Friedman at the conclusion of our hour-long breakfast interview, still reeling from the closing night of The Bacchae 2.1. She had directed the smash production with King’s Crown Shakespeare Troupe (KCST), Columbia’s premier Shakespearean theater group. I had asked her to talk about the theater community she built at Columbia: “fucking extraordinary,” she had answered instantly, eyes alight. From them, she told me, she had learned that if you “walk through the world with open hands, be vulnerable, dare to suck, remain open to even the oddest offers, you will catch so much good.”

Friedman has adapted this philosophy of “open hands” and carried it with her throughout her time as a student and director at Columbia. In building a creative team, she has worked to “dissolve” the typical hierarchies in show business into “as horizontal a creative power structure as possible.” Blushing, she humbly insisted that she couldn’t be sure had succeeded as director, but sincerely hoped so.

No matter how lavishly I praised her work directing The Bacchae 2.1, which I maintain was truly extraordinary, she insisted emphatically that I should direct my praise elsewhere. “If you’re going to make really beautiful art,” she told me, “you have to have a team of people that is smarter, better, more creative in almost every way than you are. You can be good at one little thing, but bring in people who are far smarter than you in everything else. That’s how good theater gets made.” She raved about the other students involved in the show, aglow with admiration, describing actor Kristoff Smith as “beautifully captivating,” dramaturg Aditi Rao as possessing “such a brilliant mind ... when we talk to her, our IQs go up 25 points,” costume designer Lexis Rangell-Onwuegbuzia as “a genius,” and so on. “I had, maybe, like, three percent of the job to do,” she told me. For the other 97, she refused to take credit, instead directing my admiration toward the talents of the rest of the creative team.

After walking me through the show’s evolution from proposal to performance, she finally began speaking about herself. The Bacchae 2.1 was not Carolyn’s first rodeo. She began directing in high school after reading a play called A Public Reading of an Unproduced Play about the Death of Walt Disney by Lucas Hnath. She remembered thinking to herself: “I have to be in this play or do something with this play and nobody’s ever going to direct it here in Atlanta so I’ll just have to direct it..."
myself because it needs to exist.” And that was that. But the department refused, citing lack of funding and considerable logistical obstacles. Her response: “What are the things that I have to do for you to let me direct this show?” They provided a list of Herculean tasks, confident she would fail. She didn’t.

Carolyn told me she began acting as a young girl at the behest of her parents, who, she mimed, said, “She likes to be dramatic, let’s put her in the theater class.” She soon took up dancing, years later, aerial silks, and finally directing. I asked what the future holds. Next semester, three months in Kenya studying environmental biology; next summer, working as an au pair in Spain and attending the British Academy of Dramatic Arts in London; after graduation, hopefully a few years of acting in the city and, one day, an MFA; long-term, forging “a creative space where I get to perform and I get to direct and I get to help create in a collaborative team space.”

As soon as I stopped recording, Carolyn broke into laughter and told me she felt so guilty just talking about herself all that time—“can we talk about you?” Half an hour of chatter about the New York City arts scene later, she gathered her things and gave me a hug, told me her seminar had started twenty minutes ago and she was starting to feel guilty, promised to connect me with opportunities to dabble in playwriting, and whisked away.

In the last moments before she disappeared, we talked about making participation in the dramatic arts more open and accessible to students. Aglow, she told me, “Acting is ... literally just playing pretend. If you give people the space to play pretend they will play pretend all day, and they will do it beautifully in a way that other people are able to empathize and emote with.” I hope we can all find even a fraction of Carolyn’s open and imaginative spirit in ourselves, and play a little pretend.

—Dominy Gallo

**Tommy Song**

Tommy Song, CC ’20, is kind and low-key, but this demeanor hardly stirs his passion for knowledge and justice. His mantra in life—“always assume a position of humility, and always be vigilant”—manifests in every aspect of his life, from his self-deprecating humor to his passion for improving his community.

Song hails from South Korea, and he attended boarding school in the U.S. starting in sixth grade. He remembers loving an American summer program and begging his parents to let him start middle school here. He described his desire to study abroad with the Korean proverb “a frog in a well.”—in other words, remaining in a bubble prevents us from understanding the world and ourselves, an idea which drove him to broaden his perspective. He compared it Plato’s allegory of the cave, before clarifying that he does not wish to endorse the Core.

Song’s love of making friends from different backgrounds is directly rooted in his firm belief that diversity is necessary to achieve truth. Studying history has taught him how subjective the field truly is. Despite historians’ best efforts to remain factual, Song said, he understands that individuals write history and that individuals are flawed. “That’s why we need different perspectives to arrive at truth,” he told me. “History should be about bringing out narratives that have been hidden on and between the margins.” Committed to this belief, Tommy has taken every opportunity he can to seek out diversity and encourage it in his communities.

Music has been a lifelong love of Song’s, and while it has taken somewhat of a backseat to his passion for history, it’s still a key part of his life. He’s a member of Notes and Keys, and is also signed to a recording label back in Seoul. His work is available on multiple platforms, including Spotify, and he even released a music video for his original song Riverside, which was filmed in Morningside Heights. His band, previously known as Horticulture, is reuniting soon, and he will perform solo at Postcrypt on December 7.

Matriculate, a non-profit which connects college students to underprivileged high schoolers to mentor them throughout the college application process, has also been important to Song. All three of his mentees got full rides, and he is still in touch with them. He even dug through his messages to show me sweet texts that they sent him after getting into college. He also has self-proclaimed other “unusual” hobbies including bird-watching and gardening stemming from his love of plants and animals. “When you’re walking through a forest, you don’t notice all the sounds right away, bird watching helps me learn to be silent.” This lesson in humility and observation helps him to stay grounded. For prospective bird watchers in New York’s concrete jungle, “you can’t beat Central Park,” he recommends.

Song’s true passion is history. A key project in Song’s time at Columbia is the walking tour of Columbia he created that addresses the history of the university’s ties to slavery. He spent the summer and fall of 2018 researching and creating the tour, which is available as a mobile app. Song is also
working on a project about coeducation at college prep schools, and his passion for history extends beyond campus, too: he researches at the Gilder Institution of American History, part of the New-York Historical Society. “I just love being in archives,” he told me. He credits the Columbia University and Slavery seminar, which he took during his freshman year, as kickstarting his work researching.

Understanding and believing in the importance of history has shaped Tommy’s perspective on his Columbia Experience™. He argues that everyone should know the history of the institutions and communities of which they are a part. He views history as a series of points that make up a line moving forward.

While we are not the most important points on this line by any means, he believes that we need to understand the points that come before us so that we can be mindful about the direction we take our small part of history. He recalled his first academic experience at Columbia — the first Lit Hum lecture that every freshman attends during NSOP. At the time, the experience seemed to him to just be an opportunity for prep school kids to ask ‘questions’ that only really served to demonstrate how much they knew before classes had even started. “What is the practical effects of reading the Iliad during NSOP?” he asked, questioning whether this introduction to academia sets a positive precedent for the following four years. Instead of learning about Plato and Homer, Song proposed that the shared education of Columbia freshmen should be centered on gaining an understanding of the institution in which they are about to participate.

This criticism of the first Lit Hum lecture morphed into a firm stance against the Core Curriculum. In line with his belief that diversity is necessary for truth, he argues that the narrow perspective presented in the Core limits its pedagogical effectiveness. While he states that “the language of the core is something I have a lot of problems with,” he qualifies this statement by saying that the Core has the potential to become beneficial, citing instances where students used protest to reform the outdated curriculum. He also made sure to note that while he has published several criticisms of the core, the Core is not very relevant outside of the Columbia bubble — there are a lot of other things that deserve our attention more.

Nearing the end of our conversation, Song granted me some of his hard-earned senior advice. “Everything you do, say, study, touch, positively or negatively affects other people.” His advice to care for ourselves and for others felt like a subtle dig at a recent Spec op-ed: “It’s not emotional labor, it’s having some compassion.” And while he noted that CPS can “suck ass sometimes,” he also declared that “it’s free! Take advantage of that shit!”

After graduation, Song hopes to combine his love of history with his interest in law. His childhood plan was to become a civil rights lawyer, a plan which has been complicated in the last four years. He now questions whether he still believes the legal system is in line with his abolitionist ethical standards. He is also considering going into education after completing a joint PhD program in history and law. As he contemplated the different paths he could take after graduation, he told me, half-jokingly, “maybe I’ll just drop everything and be an activist.”

In the last moments before she disappeared, we talked about making participation in the dramatic arts more open and accessible to students. Aglow, she told me, “Acting is … literally just playing pretend. If you give people the space to play pretend they will play pretend all day, and they will do it beautifully in a way that other people are able to empathize and emote with.” I hope we can all find even a fraction of Carolyn’s open and imaginative spirit in ourselves, and play a little pretend.

—Billie Forester
When Peter Gado, CC ’22, applied to Columbia, he had two fields of study in mind: linguistics and international relations. The fact that neither major existed here is a testament to Gado’s peculiar blend of optimism and denialism; the fact that he knows, some two years later, that he can now pursue both interests is a testament to his mental tenacity.

The latter discipline, of course, was easier to mold: political science students can specialize in international relations. But the linguistics major was discontinued in 1983, and until last month, the only academic measure to sate polyglots was a special concentration—a minor-like entity that, unlike other concentrations, must be partnered with another field of study to meet graduation requirements.

But on October 10, the Spectator reported that the New York State Department of Education had approved the linguistics major, and that students could declare beginning this semester. Gado was not involved in the approval process, but those of us with well-endowed, dependable departments must applaud his perseverance in the face of academic dreams routinely deferred.

Gado grew up bilingual, speaking English and Spanish, with family members who spoke French, German, and Arabic. He recounted the ways in which his daily interlocutors’ idiosyncrasies fascinate him. Recently, he said, he heard his South Carolinian step-father say, “We used to fax, but anymore we just email.” The example prompted him to ruminate gracefully, if unintelligibly, on morphological contrast.

We were tucked away in a stairwell in Journalism. I had asked Gado to meet after noting his palpable passion in Contemporary Civilization, where he regularly shoots his hand into the air and gingerly resolves would-be aporias about textual translations. In a recent class, he questioned our professor’s assertion that Spanish conquistadors read the Requerimiento in Latin.

“I’m always thinking of the context of my sentence and the context of my ideas,” Gado told me. “I feel like I can’t just put words together anymore.”

Requirements for the linguistics major include Introduction to Linguistics; Phonetics and Phonology, as well as Syntax; and interdisciplinary choices like Structure of Hungarian—Gado has checked that box already—and Language Crossing in Latinx Cultural Production. Students also study languages from scratch; Gado is currently in his second semester of Japanese.

The linguistics program is interdisciplinary, so its professors are drawn from a variety of departments. Luminaries of the affiliated faculty include Akeel Bilgrami of Philosophy and Julia Hirschberg of Computer Science. Even the Director of Undergraduate Studies, Meredith Landman, is housed in Slavic Languages, and Program Director John Mcwhorter, who teaches the famous intro class, works in English and Comparative Literature. Gado looks forward to pursuing research opportunities with at least one of these thinkers.

Though Gado is considering concentrations in economics and art history, his central academic interest has been clear for some time. Asked to decode his love for linguistics, he paused for the first time since we sat down—indeed, for the first time since I had met him. “My friend said to me the other day—she’s like, ‘You know, I don’t think I’ve ever had a single conversation with you that language hasn’t come up.’ What makes linguistics special is that’s what we do all day. We talk.”

Peter the Polyglot

A sophomore linguist relates the excitement of realizing his academic dream

BY SAM NEEDLEMAN
I clicked on the google calendar link to see how much longer I could avoid scheduling my RA’s Connect Conversation. I knew that I’d have to meet with my hall director if I didn’t just get this over with, but I also knew that my RA definitely didn’t know my name. I wasn’t running the risk of a run-in reprimand in the hall. So what was the point?

The screen came up blurry and hard to see, especially with the glare of the sun on my phone screen as I walked down Broadway. I scrolled down. I didn’t want to sacrifice study time on a weeknight or time I might spend relaxing the next weekend. Nothing could make me take the plunge. It felt like the most insurmountable task of the 21st century.

And then I saw it. In little blue writing. Next to 8:30 pm, Wednesday October 23rd. He lives down the hall, by the elevators. During NSOP, our OLs (best friends themselves) decided to do a mixer with our two groups. We sat near each other, on the floor of a Hamilton classroom. Chairs pushed to the side. He was so dreamy and I was so ready.

College. We hadn’t really talked since, I’d really only seen him across the room in my 500 person lecture. I never, ever saw him on our floor. Even the sight of his name made me blush, but what really made my heart beat faster was the blank spot. 8:50. Wednesday. October 23rd. My connect conversation time slot.

Before my meeting, I pampered ever so slightly. Just enough to look put together; not enough to look like a try-hard. My suitemates insisted I would need to reintroduce myself. He wouldn’t remember my name from a year and 3 months ago. I practiced in the mirror: “Hey. We met a long time ago. I’m Sylvie.” And then I headed down the hall, showing up a couple minutes before 8:50 to make sure that if his convo ended early, I’d be there to see him.

At exactly 8:49:43 (I had been counting) voices came closer to me and then the door opened for just an instant. Then it closed. And for a second and a half voices stopped.

Soon he walked out. His right hand reached down his pants, tucking in his shirt. His hair was all messed up. Those one and a half seconds couldn’t have been what I thought they were. He was not kissing her goodbye. I was too shocked to execute on my well-practiced line. All I got from him was a sly smile, and then he was off.

A few minutes later, our RA opened the door, greeting me and pointing me towards the couch. Her room was a mess. Unmade bed. Clothing piled on top of her hamper.

We talked for a bit. The basic questions. What’re you majoring in? Where are you from? The whole thing reminded me of NSOP. It was stiff and it was forced. But the part of NSOP my mind kept going to weren’t the countless get-to-know-you conversations. All I could think about was that Hamilton floor. The first time I saw him. How handsome he was.

I must’ve been really deep in the daydream, because when she began to talk again, I jumped a bit in my seat.

“Sylvie, do you want this piece of chocolate cake? You know the guy who went before you? Well he brought it for me and I’m really not in the mood. You should take it if you want it.”

I took the cake even though I knew I wouldn’t be able to stomach it. Mostly because it was from him. It was supposed to be for me. I felt sick. Wasn’t this against some type of rule? I couldn’t believe how the night had gone and so I rushed off, cake in hand, to tell my friends.

Yes, I have had my connect conversation. And what I got from it? The wish that some other people had had a little less connect and a lot more conversation.
Sincerely? That’s your idea of a conversation starter? Come on now.

You could have asked me “What are planning on doing after graduation?” which may have indicated some actual level of interest in my life before you disappear *POOF* from it forever after the blue wave walks in May.

Actually, even if you had asked me such an insipid question, it would have at least reminded me that the holidays are here — reminded me of shoving heaping forkfuls of pumpkin pie down my throat to numb the pain of impending potential unemployment and the doom of desolation that may follow in the wake of graduating with a degree in English Lit.

But “So... have you had your connect convo yet?” puts very succinctly that you’d like me to know that you don’t want to commit to more than a 15 second exchange.

My freshman year diary would be so disappointed in me. But to answer your totally titillating question: no. I have not had my connect conversation. Which, for me, is weird.

Admittedly, for the first three years of college, I was a bit of an RA brown noser. At first I thought showing face at floor meetings and making awkward small talk in the elevator was just what was done and, well, polite? That is, until I realized cozying up to the RA meant that I could drink some brewskis with the bois unbothered. So be it.

But since it’s senior year, I decided to finally enact my due diligence as a lazy loaf and not go to the connect convo I scheduled with my RA. Why does it have to actually be scheduled? Okay, right, because some people might not get around to doing it.

And get this — I literally live with my RA. For the most part, the guy checks out as a real class act — not messy, not noisy. And, if he uses my intensive moisture moroccan oil shampoo, he does it infrequently enough that it flies under my radar.

So you’re probably wondering what the big ‘but’ is. Well, let me tell you: the butt has never been bigger. You ever been dozing with your significant other on a Sunday morning, lazily lounging under layers of linens? It’s a scene many of you Columbians are likely familiar with, (probably not in your own life) but through bleary-eyed rom-com binges, saturated with on-screen renditions of said scene.

So there I was, half asleep and lying in bed with my boyfriend. The only thing on my mind was a Hungry Man from HamDel — not the 10 a.m. connect conversation I had scheduled via doodle poll weeks prior. Suddenly, the sound of a downturned door handle jolted me awake. My room door handle.

“Egads!”, I yelped. I found myself face to face with my RA, staring idly at the tangle of blankets before him.

He yawned drowsily into his palm. Then his eyes performed a cheeky (pun intended) once-over of the scene in front of him. “Oh. Sorry,” he said with a languid shrug of the shoulders, “I thought we were supposed to be having our connect conversation now.”

As I quickly grabbed a ridiculously small decorative pillow to cover my exposed keister, the almighty indignation of PrezBo himself (combined with naked humiliation) caused me to sputter: “GET THE FUCK OUT!”

But it was too late. The damage was done. My resident advisor — a dude who is supposed to have as much intimate knowledge of me as he would of a sweet potato — had seen my bare ass.

Not long before the B(ooty)-Day Invasion, my RA let it slip that he would be keeping trays of Ferrero Rochers in the suite fridge. The sole purpose of these delectable treats was that they would be distributed during his connect conversations with various residents.

So, every night for the next two weeks, I would slink into the kitchen and snatch some of the chocolate-hazelnut deliciousnesses for myself until I had systematically decimated his supply. Revenge? I don’t know. But by the end of two weeks, I felt vindicated. I had also gained 5 pounds.

And that’s a double win. I hear weight goes straight to the butt. :)

By Gi Ferrigine
Measure for Measure

Apricot

I.

It is bone and wanting bone. It is the sight of an apricot tree in winter. Auntie explains the numbness of her leg with finger pressed against hardened sinew. In the bone. It is humming a raven song; always, humming and feeling in the bone.

Mama explained to me the prognosis in Mandarin, and I could understand bone. But how do you translate what is within bone and of bone and eating from the base of the spine? Perhaps only apricot cores know the secret of interior and humming, humming interior.

II.

And in the core, the bitter seeds. My Auntie eats bitter apricot kernels that rupture boils on skin; they are a promise in common words of life altogether again. But they turn cyanide in the stomach, and burrow deep into the pit of the belly.

Starve the tumor. This is the eyes of Uncle, who sees cell by cell and branch by branch of the apricot tree. Meat is dangerous, is appeasing and a hesitant bow. The apricot seed, though, is touted and toxic, but toxic and a necessitated toxic. It is the toxicity of salvation. And Uncle sits at the kitchen table—of Old China, New China, and America; he is watching Auntie eat bitter kernels, a man whose pupils ground seed and herb and whose hum is for no one and no Earth but that of his love.

III.

Such are the winds of Shenyang: rusting and caressed by Manchurian mountains. The winds of forefathers, industrializing as iron filings in air. And these metallic winds have carried Auntie. Through cloud bed and with two tongues, to the land of winds.

This is the wind to which burning incense beckons, to which it dims and undims. The winds of Auntie are the density of wisdom; lick skin dry with the rolling of her northern Chinese phonemes. I leave incense sticks alight to beckon to winds and breath, for the ash and unknowing ash to come.
IV.

No song is Auntie’s as no song is that of Mama or Baba. These are the lullabies of cross-pollination, this is the planting of apricot. And this is a medley: of sheep, one, two, and a lesson in maternal love, universal. While Mama is at work, Auntie sings to me the tune of filial piety: In this world, only mothers are good. Children with mothers are treasures. Hugging Mother, endless love. I am reminded to love Mama, to hold something in and grasp tightly. At such a young age, my grasp is still tender and forgiving, so that Mama and Auntie laugh and pinch my cheeks.

Auntie has a daughter, too. Now, Auntie speaks of her daughter like a tidal pool, she the shoreline, the wave and furl. Auntie fears nothing artificial; only evaporation. Not hers, of course, but of her daughter, of the fingers of tide that remain in wells of rock. Auntie knows that nothing can truly stay. In Mandarin, the word for stay is liu, much like the word for flow, liu. Auntie knows not to fear the flowing; she only prays for high tide, for rain in a desert she does not know. For rain on a field of earthen apricot.

V.

That night in Auntie’s living room, we are welcomed with a bowl of watermelon. To eat watermelon is to cross heritage, the past and present and future; it is familial and intimate in juice and flesh. Watermelon is melon of the west. It is the fruit of dusk and setting sun. Auntie does not eat, her appetite now a stretching shadow. Be good, eat it all, Mama urges me. I am left to eat alone, to eat the red of nightfall.

We shall bring again a watermelon from Good Fortune Market. It is a hopeful thing to purchase and offer watermelon; it is a prayer to the west and to the immediate. This is the promise of fruit: body and seed, seed and body; rooting and deliverance. A promise, I suppose to me and a realm of bone, and to Auntie—Auntie and a realm of bone.

VI.

And later that night, Auntie emerges from the kitchen with an apricot in hand. It is peeled and silk. She sits in a swivel chair and faces us, palm of apricot. Her numbing leg is extended and points a compass, though her body leans against the pull of steeled muscle. She holds the apricot in front of her and away from her; no, she is reaching for the apricot already in hand.

They say that an imperial woman with an apricot in hand symbolized fortitude. I realize that Auntie is as much an empire of wind and soil and water as she is of bone and humanity. And I remember that even the greatest dynasties were mortal.

—Benjamine Mo
MeasurE for MeasurE

Syllabus

Required Texts:
• Paul Henri, A Summary of Ethnic Conflict in Eastern Iran (1983)
• Unknown, Sefer Yetzirah (c. 2nd Century)
• Ben Jonson, Bartholomew Fair (1614)

Recommended Reading:
• Roger Bacon, Opus Majus (1267)
• Annals of the American Association of Oral Pathologists (1911–2019)
• Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, Three Books of Occult Philosophy (1531)
• John Dean, The Congressional Testimony of Former White House Counsel John W. Dean on the Watergate Affair (1973)
• Nancy Kerrigan, The Translated Voynich Manuscript (2019)
• Various, The Complete Contents of The Great Library at Alexandria (c. 300 BC – 136 AD)
• Nur-kubi, An Account of She-Goats in the Custody of Eluti, Son of Eitrum (c. 3100 BC)
• Keith Arnold, Transcripts of John Wayne’s Conversations with Classmates while Attending Glendale Union High School, 1921-1925 (1971)
• Hawaii Dept. of Health, Certificate of Live Birth of Barack Hussein Obama (1961)
• Proceedings of the Execution of Charles I of England (1649)
• Helen Keller, The Frost King (1891)

—Jacob Synder
Columbia Behind Bars

The Justice-in-Education Initiative brings professors and students to New York City prisons and formerly incarcerated people to Columbia.

By Dominy Gallo

““It’s not about you. It’s about them. And you’re not saving them. You’re just helping create a space in which they can save themselves.”

This is part of Professor Christia Mercer’s “pedagogy of dignity,” with which she trains students to teach three-week-long courses in prisons, part of Columbia’s Justice-in-Education Initiative. Run jointly by the Center for Justice and the Society of Fellows and Heyman Center for the Humanities, the Initiative aims to bring educational opportunities to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people and to incorporate justice studies into Columbia’s curriculum.

Mercer, the Gustave M. Berne Professor of Philosophy, designed, funds, and runs her own program under the auspices of the Initiative. “The idea was to have classes that were available to anyone who wanted to come regardless of educational level,” she told me recently, reclining on a sofa in her office. “The hope was that they would come from the same sort of section of the prison, so they would kind of create a community over a book or a course.”

“Can you see that woman, the blonde, blue-eyed person over there?” She pointed to a photograph pinned on the wall in the corner of her office. “She was a senior Women’s Studies major the first year I taught in Taconic”—one of the first correctional facilities that the Initiative served.

The woman, Mercer told me, inspired her to incorporate the methodology of Theater of the Oppressed into her educational program. “The point of Theater of the Oppressed,” she told me, “is to break down hierarchies and to reconsider the space in a theater between audience and performers, so everybody’s kind of a performer.” She added that the exercises “are supposed to create a space where everybody has a kind of dignity.”

Professor Mercer went on to describe some of the exercises they do to break down the boundaries, like racing to be the last person to reach the opposite wall, and how she keeps the classes small to dissolve the professor-student hierarchy that lectures frequently foster. “What people say,” she told me, “is that it’s the first time since they entered the criminal justice system when they felt free.”

Teary-eyed, she reflected upon two former students who have become her friends, both of whom came to speak to students in Philosophy & Feminism, Professor Mercer’s impossible-to-get-off-the-waitlist course. “They are brilliant. And they would be—I can’t let myself get upset here—but, in other circumstances, they would be CEOs or professors. And so the fact that they lived such horrible lives, but had these amazing capacities…” She trailed off.

Professor Eileen Gillooly, Executive Director of the Heyman Center for the Humanities, and Professor Nicole Callahan, a Lecture in Contemporary Civilization, shared with me stories from the Initiative’s projects on campus, rather than “inside,” as Professor Mercer described work con-
ducted in prisons. For five years, Callahan has taught a class called Humanities Texts, Critical Skills, which comprises 50% Columbia and Barnard undergraduates and 50% formerly incarcerated students, called Justice-in-Education Scholars. The class was designed to facilitate, as Callahan put it, “encounters with texts that are considered canonical, whatever that means, and as we broaden the meaning of that.” Professor Gillooly added that the idea was “to look at some of these texts that have been with us for a very long time that allow us to get at perennial questions in ways that have been fruitful for, sometimes, millennia. The questions really don’t change very much—the conflicts between self and society, obligations to community, what is justice.”

Callahan continued, “the idea is [to read] texts that provoke really difficult and sometimes uncomfortable questions about justice, about freedom, about whether we are in control of the things that happen to us or whether determinism or fate are things that control us in our lives.” Mercer had mentioned teaching, in three weeks, Antigone or The Epic of Gilgamesh in Metropolitan Correctional Facility; Professor Callahan detailed a semester-long syllabus containing Malcolm X’s autobiography, Shakespeare’s Othello, Dostoevsky’s Notes from Underground, Homer’s Odyssey, and Morrison’s Song of Solomon, among others.

Callahan described the atmosphere in her classroom: “I think the first few classes, there’s actually a lot of mutual intimidation. I find that often the ‘J-scholars’ are intimidated by the idea of a Columbia undergraduate and all the things that they will know, and the Columbia undergraduates are, I think, wonderfully careful to make space, and also intimidated just by the lived experience that people have had.” She described the thoughtful effort made on both sides to “blend the boundaries” until the students become an intensely connected and cohesive community.

Gillooly recounted the endeavors of some of the program’s formerly incarcerated alumni, many of whom have had something akin to a conversion experience while imprisoned. “One of our ‘J-scholars’ is a pastor now,” and others pursue degrees in theology. “There’s this kind of educational conversion experience, which is that they realize that school isn’t just punitive. There really is a kind of new world opened.”

These heartwarming stories paint a picture of education’s capacity to spiritually, emotionally, and materially transform incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people. But a chronic shortage of money limits the Initiative’s ability to offer those educational opportunities. Gillooly described how the Mellon Foundation provided the seed grant in 2015 that established the Initiative and awarded a second grant in 2018, which allowed both the Prison Education Program and the Scholars Program to grow. Mercer, however, noted that, for her program, it “seems like I spend half my time applying for funding.” She personally gathers funds not only to run the classes themselves, but to provide free books, folders emblazoned with the Columbia insignia, pads, and certificates of completion to all of her students.

Mercer expressed a concern worthy of attention: that Columbia “brags” about the Initiative and other programs like it, but fails to fund them adequately. Many of these programs rely largely or entirely on outside funds raised by the faculty.

And it’s clear why funding is so crucial to Mercer and educators like her. “Teaching in prisons,” Mercer told me, “has really transformed my life. I just understand so much more about all the topics in Philosophy & Feminism: how power works, how bodies are marked, and how bias works.”

Illustration by Tunshore Longe
The Hardest Beat

Columbia's Society of Professional Journalists Takes a Hard Look at Traumatic Coverage

BY UFON UMANAH AND GI FERRIGINE

On November 8th, Columbia’s Society for Professional Journalists sponsored a panel on “Covering Trauma,” which really served as a meta-commentary on how journalists, many times, cover traumatic events unethically. When darkly comedic anecdotes like how a NBC reporter asked for an interview via Twitter from a student still in an active shooter situation are tossed around, unethical is an understatement. As student-activist Alfonso Calderon explained through his experience at Parkland, journalists should feel a responsibility when they “cover people who are at risk” of suicide, especially because of recent trauma. The panel, moderated by Reed Alexander, JRN ‘20, was well-staffed to discuss this issue. Calderon spoke with fellow alumnus Cameron Kasky, GS ‘23, and reporter Kenneth Preston to discuss trauma through the lens of Parkland. On their wings, Psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Dr. Gail Seltz was to their right, while foreign correspondent and professor Judith Matloff was to their left. However, what was most troubling was the fact that much of the press at the time were responsible, many of the unethical incidents in Parkland were reminiscent of tactics used almost 20 years ago.

When a former Columbia student killed his ex-girlfriend and subsequently died of suicide in 2000, the press swarmed Ruggles Hall. The Columbia Daily Spectator reported that within four days, three newspapers had written 20 stories about the murder-suicide, and the story lead news broadcasts. For the press, getting the story out about this tragic event was of the utmost importance. Between the Associated Press, The New York Times, and The New York Post, descriptions of the incident and Columbia in the aftermath were straightforward yet meticulously detailed. The Post included in their write-up that Kathleen Roskot, the murdered lacrosse star, that “a literary journal with a picture of Jack Kerouac was left” on her face, on top of a description of her state that both the Post and the Times included.

Most writing, however, focused on the shock and mourning of the community, and that means talking to sources. While one student told Spectator they felt most of the press were respectful, members of the press reportedly rang random numbers of Ruggles residents, solicited a picture of the murderer with the currency of beer, and snuck into Ruggles for dramatic shots of Roskot’s body. So efficient were these techniques that Roskot’s parents, and many Ruggles residents, learned about the incident, were through reporters. Students had extraordinarily negative reactions to this wall-to-wall coverage, as many felt that an intrusion so close to the tragedy made it difficult to grieve.

As it turns out, such concerns track with today’s understandings of trauma. Unlike natural disasters, specific personal traumas like mass shootings or sexual assaults, are more likely to lead to PTSD and suicidal thoughts. Dr. Saltz testified at the panel that if victims do not want to talk, “then making them talk is actually more likely to make them develop symptoms.”

Ultimately, as Matloff told the audience, “you don’t want to do any harm; you have to be respectful to the people you’re interviewing.” That can be tricky in an always-connected world, where competitive journalists rush to deliver a story to a fickle public. However, as Calderon testified in relation to the string of suicides that followed the Parkland shooting, “If you want a community to consider suicide as an option, try bringing them up to the point of almost fiction, saying that the most important thing that has ever happened in your town, in your life, was that 17 people were murdered, and then the second that it’s not relevant enough for you … you just leave.” That spotlight, whether typed, printed, or broadcasted, can be destabilizing — going forward, journalists need to be careful and deliberate with its use.

Illustration by Tunshore Longe
Amber’s U-Pick Farm: Leona Valley

A short story about picking apples, even though it’s too cold outside right now

By Sylvie Epstein

I remember the smooth skin of each cherry— some red, some yellow, some red-yellow, some almost black — and how they felt cool against my sticky, sweaty skin each June. I see us each holding a bucket, teal and plastic, and can hear the sound of the fruit dropping to the bottom of the pail. It changes as the pile stacks higher and higher.

We chose cherries as our Father’s Day pickings for the heights of the trees. In the East, when I was young, we picked apples in the fall. In pictures of those days I sit on Dad’s shoulders, arms extended high into the branches, feeling around for a grasp. I needed to pull hard at those orchards, even atop Dad’s back, for leverage and for plenty.

We chose cherries because although the tips of the tallest limbs meet the sky twelve to fifteen feet in the air, the leafy, fruit bearing branches begin to sprawl just 10 inches above the soft ground. Eve was three the first year. And so was Graham. Juice dripped down their small chins and stained them. Pink and splotchy. I can feel the juice dripping down my own face and can remember how each cherry I sunk my teeth into tasted slightly different.

I wore navy blue saltwater sandals and as I ran up and down the rows of trees handfuls of dirt would get stuck between the soles and my toes. I can feel the dry friction of the filth. Like leftover sand in your socks after a day in the waves.

Mom would come up from behind me and tuck my hair behind my ears, lifting it off my neck and quickly tying a half-done twist. She allowed my small body to cool in the California sun. And then off I’d run again.

Even though we weren’t supposed to, we all ate the cherries as we picked, enough to make our stomachs hurt. When I’d bite into a sickly sweet one, I’d run to Dad for a drink of water — the liquid would be warm and taste vaguely of the heated plastic it came in.

When we needed to pee there were only Porta-Potties. They stunk, especially in the hotter years. Dad told me to go before we left the house, but I always needed these bathrooms. Squatting above the seat, I’d balance, carefully. We’d use pumped sanitiz-
Hunger Studies

Students at a world-class institution struggle with food insecurity. The community takes action

By Chase Cutarelli

As the year comes to a close and family feasts begin, you’ve probably committed at least one of the seven deadly sins, if not more. While many of us may take for granted the privilege that allows us to indulge every now and then, especially this holiday season, a lot of students on campus can hardly afford a trip to the grocery store.

The Food Pantry at Columbia resides on the fifth floor of Lerner Hall. While to some the prospect of having a pantry at an institution as wealthy as ours may sound preposterous, the organization seeks to address the widespread issue of food insecurity on campus. Although CC and SEAS have not collected data on undergraduate food, a survey conducted last spring by the GS administration found that close to 40 percent of non-joint or dual-program GS students experience food insecurity. The 2018 Columbia Student Well-Being Survey found that 19 percent of participants “had trouble paying for basic necessities like food, clothing, housing, and transportation” some of the time and 10 percent of participants had trouble paying for them all the time.

The pantry isn’t huge—it’s a few shelves lined with canned tomato sauce, beans, pasta, and other nonperishables, as well as vouchers for fresh produce through the Corbin Hill Food Project. But its presence has revealed an evident food insecurity on campus; since its inception in 2016 as a primarily GS-oriented group, it has given out over 2,300 disbursements across Columbia’s undergraduate and graduate schools. Although it is a member of the Food Bank for New York City, the Pantry is completely student-run, which raises the question: why didn’t the University act first to address food insecurity?

Last spring, the Blue and White was able to interview some of the leaders behind the Pantry about the organization’s relationship with Columbia’s administration and student press. “The University has basically reached out to us and said, ‘You know what? Yes. We acknowledge that [food insecurity] is way bigger than what we want to handle on our own,’” Co-Founder and Chair of the Pantry, Michael Higgins explained. “‘We [Columbia] could handle it on our own [...] but we don’t have the time nor the desire to do that.’”

Rather than manage the group, the school has supported its pantry monetarily. Among numerous donations, including a $15,250 grant from the Philanthropy Lab in 2018 and an annual endowment of $5,000 from Columbia Dining as of this April, the most significant contribution has come from the Dean of General Studies, Lisa Rosen-Metsch, who promised in May to give $50,000 to the Pantry over the course of five years. The lattermost gift came
after negotiations to integrate Swipe Out Hunger, a nonprofit whose central solution to college food insecurity involves sharing meal swipes amongst peers. However, the talks ended with the decision to provide financial assistance to the Pantry instead.

“It was bound to happen eventually, but the reason it happened was because we had boots on the ground before,” Higgins added. “We had an administrator in a very high-level position who supported us.”

Such support may suggest universal adulation. Not so. Last February, the Spectator published an op-ed criticizing the Pantry for its meager offerings, inconvenient hours, and connections with the city’s food bank that indicate a reallocation of goods from the truly impoverished into the hands of a world-class institution.

“The claim that we’re run by the Food Bank of New York City [...] was a little over-the-top ridiculous,” Matthew Linsky, Vice Chair of Events Coordination, said in May. Instead of directly combating the arguments made by the op-ed, the Food Pantry responded with an explanation of its progress over the past three years and the developments that will secure its existence in the years to come.

Indeed, as the Pantry makes plans to expand to Columbia’s Medical Campus, the future seems bright for this organization. “There’s a lot of growth that’s still happening, and before we know it, our current leaders are all going to be gone,” Higgins noted. “Everything that is happening today, we need to ensure that will continue to happen five years from now, ten years from now, twenty years from now.”

What else could the University be doing to combat food insecurity on campus? In an article in the Journal of College and Character, higher education scholar-practitioner Clare Cady argues that an institution’s first short-term response should be to assess the number of students experiencing food insecurity on campus more thoroughly, looking specifically at the various types of food insecurity students are experiencing. If the Columbia Student Well-Being Survey asked about food insecurity in particular instead of just financial insecurity more broadly, the University could use this information to connect students to local resources. In the long term, Columbia could devote significantly more attention to researching the prevalence of this issue, especially the ways it might particularly affect underserved populations like first-generation and low-income students. These actions, complemented with donations to the Pantry, would effectively address food insecurity financially as well as administratively while helping leaders like Higgins and Linsky better serve students in need. The Food Pantry at Columbia is open on Mondays and Thursdays from 4PM to 7PM in Lerner 582.
Started from the Barnard

A Conversation with Maria Hinojosa

By Ufonobong Umanah

Over the summer, Barnard announced that Maria Hinojosa, BC ’84, host of popular radio program Latino USA, would return as the school’s first journalist-in-residence. With decades of journalism experience between CNN and PBS, and fresh off her fiery 2018 Convocation speech Editor-in-Chief Ufon Umanah went to her new LeFrak Center office to talk about the press and looking at the Core from both the outside and inside.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

The Blue and White: I want to start off with a priming question because it wasn’t always AP standard to refer to undocumented immigrants as undocumented but you started off doing so. Why was that super important early on when you were starting off your career in journalism?

Maria Hinojosa: I think whenever I would start writing the world ‘illegal immigrant’, I remember thinking there is something grammatically wrong with this. I remember just feeling that ‘illegal immigrant’ had something grammatically wrong because it’s not like you have a bike rider who is illegal or you have a baker who is illegal or a taxpayer who is illegal, it’s somebody who has committed a crime, but that person himself or herself is not illegal. So I think even though English is a second language for me I think I was always kinda of like it didn’t make any sense to me, grammatically.

BW: How does it sound in Spanish?

MH: Un inmigrante ilegal. Now that’s a term because they translated it, so now it’s used. And in Mexico after the term illegal immigrant became widely used in the United States, in the mid 1980s there was a Mexican ranchera band called Los Tigres del Norte and they made an entire album called Los Ilegales. And they have a song about being illegal and they took the term and owned it like “Somos los Ilegales,” which I understand is a way to empower. Like we are gonna take the term and use it for ourselves, therefore taking away your power to use it. But the transformative moment for me was really when I spoke to Elie Wiesel, who survived the Holocaust, and when I asked him. And I don’t even know why I walked up to him so clearly and I was like “I need to ask this person this question,” cause I didn’t even know his thoughts on it. But something drew me to him when I saw him at the CNN bureau and I said, “What do you think of this term?” and he said, “There is no such thing as an illegal human being. The first thing that the Nazis did was to declare the Jews to be an illegal people.” That for me changed my life.

BW: It is interesting to see how that term that we as Americans colloquially use now has power internationally. It is really an American term.

MH: It has sadly spread around the world. It will have lasting damage.

BW: I wanted to talk about Futuro U.S.A for a bit because you said in the Columbia Daily Spectator profile that it was optimal for you to create your own journalism outside of the typical editorial process. Speak a little bit to how that has been for the past 10 years you have been doing it.

MH: There came a point in my career where I just realized that it was going to be very difficult. I was 40 years old and I was like: “Do I want to continue to be pitching my stories, my ideas, to essentially white men, to have them approve my stories to air on their networks?” and I said, “I can’t keep doing this.” I know the stories I want to tell are important, I know they have value, and I am tired of having to prove to somebody else that they have value. My concern is the fact that they are not seeing my community, immigrants, women, latinos, latinas. Because they don’t understand it, and are not close to it, they can dismiss it as not important. So for me, creating my own media company, my own newsroom, was essentially saying I have a legitimate voice as an American
journalist in the United States of America as part of the mainstream. So not part of outside, obviously I am independent, I am outside, but I see myself as part of trying to be within the mainstream. If you are going to continue to want to judge my stories, I am going to create my own thing so we are competing against each other.

BW: I imagine it’s harder to start a mainstream media company than it is to start a blog, so talk about what it was like to get funding.

MH: It is not for the faint of heart because it really means a lot of responsibility on your shoulders. But I’ll tell you what, when I would feel conflicted or confused or overwhelmed, I would think about Frederick Douglass, who was born into slavery, became a free man, and then became a publisher and editor of his own newspaper. And I am like, “Jesus. If Frederick Douglass can do this, with every challenge that he had, than you got this. You are gonna keep on doing this.”

BW: Is there a sense [from your competitors] that “oh, you should stick to your specialty or stay out of politics.” Or, “You are making this about identity, don’t make it about identity.”

MH: I don’t know if you can teach it. You have to talk about it so you raise awareness, so that you have journalists who are mostly smart people, right? It’s not like I want them walking around with the imposter syndrome, cause imposter syndrome is no fun. But, I do want them to be thinking outside of their body, looking at the situation and saying “Am I bringing my privilege here?” You have to have a level of self-awareness where you can just say, “Oh my God, what am I doing here? What am I bringing into this?” I mean that is why I am not sure if you can teach self-awareness. You can teach about these conversations and these dialogues. We have to. Will they incorporate it? It’s hard because they have to want to, and that means they have to be prepared to question their own power.

MH: Our competitors frankly are looking at us and trying to figure out how come we are winning. They are looking at us and saying “How is it possible that a small, little independent company based in Harlem is able to produce a national show that has a growing audience within public radio, when all other public radio programs are just doing okay?” And our audience is exploding. So, I think that those are the questions that they have for us. How is it that we are able to do that? Why is it that we are able to do that? And I point to some of the things that I raised. When you create a newsroom that is intentionally about saying to people to bring their entire selves into the newsroom, you get better journalism. And when people feel respected and represented, they will stop and listen. I wish I could tell you why our audience is growing. I think it is because our journalists love what they do and they do it with a lot of authenticity.

BW: How do we teach journalists to be conscious of the ways in which their privilege can affect their reporting? The closest we have gotten to trying to teach it is to have an affirmative action policy that is designed to create a diverse environment for you to learn in. And people just stay in their own circles and don’t benefit from that diversity. So, how do we teach this?
BW: I wanted to ask in specific, because the Harvard Crimson recently covered a protest of Donald Trump’s policies, ICE in particular, and the Harvard Crimson spoke out to ICE for comment. There’s been a lot of discourse about how activists felt that the Harvard Crimson put them in an unsafe situation by doing that, there is a lot of sites saying, “Well, you protested ICE, they have to comment, ask for their office to be disbanded. What are you going to do?” How do we address that while staying to core journalism values?

MH: My immediate reaction to this was pretty basic journalistically. Like, if you are doing a straight news report and you are covering a protest then yeah, I understand that. I understand that it is normal protocol. I also understand the reaction of the students, which is, “What are you doing? You are exposing us.” ICE knows that there are undocumented students on the Harvard campus, they know there are undocumented students here at Barnard and Columbia. So if they wanted to come and start taking people they could attempt to do that. I don’t think quoting them in the Harvard Crimson is gonna be the thing that is going to make that thing happen. What I wanted to do with this moment was create a space for dialogue. What I would like to have done, and I think it is very difficult to do this publicly, but I would have, and I am not a Harvard grad which means it is a little difficult for me to insert myself, but I would have had a conversation with, for example, esteemed African-American journalists of conscience. So journalists who are African-American who understand their role as observers and storytellers and reporters around issues of social justice, you know, which, if you’re black in America, there’s a lot there. And I would have brought in some of the immigrant leaders from immigrant communities, and other journalists, like myself or Julio Ricardo Varela, who’s actually on my staff and graduated from Harvard, wrote for the Crimson. I would have loved to seen this used as a way to do something productive. So while I can still journalistically understand that okay, they’re covering a protest, they need to get that response, I get that. But I would take that one step further, and say, okay, we’re going to create a space for undocumented students to always have their voice heard—like a column in the Crimson, once a month or every two weeks, that will always be from an undocumented student’s perspective. An active encouragement and recruitment of immigrant students, undocumented students, Latinx students to be part of the Crimson. Do you see how you take a situation that was really quite terrible and everyone feels bad about it, and turn it into a learning experience? But that requires a lot of work and effort.

What I wanted to do with this now, but there was a lot of discussion about how journalists could train to cover that story. There was a moment where an NBC reporter actually retweeted someone who was in an active mass shooting situation to say, are you free for an interview right now? And this student said, I’m literally unsafe right now. I get it to a certain extent, because you want to provide an up-to-date, detailed report of what’s going on, but you also don’t want to retraumatize people or put them at risk of suicide. Do you have any insight on that difficulty?

“Our competitors frankly are looking at us and trying to figure out how come we are winning. They are looking at us and saying “How is it possible that a small, little independent company based in Harlem is able to produce a national show that has a growing audience within public radio, when all other public radio programs are just doing okay?”
MH: I think that we have to recognize that part of what happens is that we are in a highly competitive media world. People feel like they’ve got to do these things in order to be first, to get the story. Journalists are competitive by nature, I get it, but being competitive just so you can prove that you’ve done well for your business is not what I look for in terms of success as a journalist. On the other hand, look, we’re very competitive, we want that story. But what you have to think about is, what’s our hippocratic oath? Journalists don’t often talk about our own hippocratic oath. The oath is, do no harm. That is part of our oath. We don’t have an oath, because it’s just too difficult, could we even agree? But part of the way I move in the world is to try not to do harm. But again, you have to be hyper self-aware.

BW: I guess especially because of what people in Parkland had to go through, or people in this high school have to go through—

MH: There is something that happens. I’m not talking about exposure in an immediate situation of trauma, which I’ve been through, and it’s very challenging. I’m talking, post-trauma, there is something that can happen in interviews where the interview becomes a part of the healing. I found that after 9/11, for example, there were people who were so glad that I called and that I wanted to hear their story, and they took the interviews as part of their way of understanding what happened. There were other people I called who would say, how dare you? How dare you call me up in this moment? And then of course there were others who said, thank you for calling, how soon can you get here?

BW: Your Columbia friends and students have to deal with the Core. There’s a new banner project that has been up since October. There’s the always relevant conversation about diversity in the Core. What does the Core mean to you as someone who doesn’t go through the Core but interact with people who go through the Core?

MH: Because I was a Barnard student, and I have a lot of friends at Columbia—this was before Columbia accepted women—we talked about the Core a lot. And mostly I would hear complaints about the Core. But I was actually very intrigued, because we didn’t have the Core at Barnard. I’m one of those students that took CC. I crossed and I took CC for a year and for me, it was one of the most transformational classes in my entire life. It happened to be taught by one of the most amazing human beings, who was battling cancer as he was teaching us. He was an existential Marxist, if you could imagine. Our class was just the most beautiful class, and I was the only woman in the class. And I have to be honest with you, there was a part of me that looked at the Columbia Core many many years ago and was, in a way, kind of jealous. The fact that the men were being socialized to be able to go out into the world of men, educated men, and to talk about educated things like philosophy and classical music and to be able to have these conversations out on the golf range. And I was like, “Why aren’t [women] getting that?” Back then, obviously, we were like, “Wow, they aren’t reading any women whatsoever.” I hope there is a very animated conversation that is being had in terms of the Core to understand the privilege they have been teaching this core for centuries. This is a major academic institution, which means things are being analyzed and rethought and criticized. That’s the nature of academia: thought, criti-
cism, dialectical materialism, moving things forward. There needs to be a serious conversation about the Core. But here’s the thing. In some ways you have to start from a place that people will immediately get very upset. So I’m going to tell you something that’s very upsetting. In the thought of how we teach American history, what would people think if we were now teaching that the first illegal aliens in this country, a term I don’t use, were the Pilgrims. What if we were to say “They came; they didn’t have permission.” What they ended up erasing was actually all of these stories, all of these stories, all of these traditions that were ancient, and those disappeared. What if the Core suddenly said, “My god, what we really have to do is we have to go back and research what were the first sounds that were being played in this land and try to listen to them. What were the sounds that were being brought by the people being trafficked into this country by a government that said it was of honorable men, but they were trafficking human beings?” What an opportunity for the Core to not feel threatened but rather to say “Will we read those new authors from that new banner and see them as legitimate?” I think it’s a major philosophical question for the men of Columbia University who designed that Core.

BW: Sometimes I wonder if there’s a perverse lack of curiosity. Because people think “The Core is designed to be Western, that’s how we built our ideas as a country, that’s why the Core is designed that way.” Is that lack of curiosity harmful in terms of trying to develop a Core that is reflective of a global institution, one that is more inclusive of what all of America is?

MH: Shouldn’t academia be reflective? Or does academia believe it’s on the tower on the hill? We don’t have to be reflective. But if you’re an educated person, you can’t put your head in the sand, which is what white men have been doing because privilege is a great thing: Having a big ego and not being questioned? Whoo, fun! The part of the United States that isn’t white, the half of the population that are women, we don’t live in a place of privilege, we live in a place of constantly questioning ourselves.

BW: If there had to be one book that over winter break that your students or anyone who’s interested in supplementing their Core studies should read, what would you recommend?

MH: I would recommend anything written by Thich Nhat Hanh, who is a Buddhist monk from Vietnam. He’s written books that include things like how to sit, how to read, how to walk. And also the Canadian Buddhist monk [Pema Chödrön], who’s a white woman. Both of these authors are Buddhist monks, I’m not a Buddhist by the way, I’m spiritual but I don’t follow any tradition. Both of these authors are teaching patience, they’re teaching the capacity to break down your own ego. They’re teaching love for our fellow human beings. They’re teaching self-awareness and self-critique. And they teach us how to make it through the most challenging times in our lives, and I feel that as a country right now, we are at one of the most challenging times in our history, so we are going to need patience and calm, strength and fortitude to make it through what’s coming.

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