

“Political correctness” conceals issues



Ben Wallis

“Political correctness” is — judging by the innumerable reports in the mainstream media — a scourge upon college campuses nationwide. We hear that students are incapable of considering political views different from their own and in many cases attempt to suppress them. Protests against “controversial” campus speakers are used as evidence of this phenomenon. Last week, demonstrations against conservative activist Allen West at Saint Louis University received just such an interpretation. However, an emphasis on “political correctness” obscures more than it reveals. Public discourse on college campuses has always been regulated, and protests are themselves instances of speech that bring attention to existing social inequalities. Protesting groups do not appeal to political correctness, but to anti-racism and social justice. Only by considering these issues — and discarding the inadequate concept of political correctness — can we understand student protests and the issues that motivate them.

The controversy that developed around Allen West’s speaking engagement at SLU last Thursday demonstrates many of the characteristics typical of the political correctness narrative. West, a retired lieutenant colonel and FOX News pundit, complained in the days leading up to his speech that SLU administrators removed the phrase “radical Islam” on event flyers. A post on West’s personal website reads, “Folks, I’ve just been CENSORED.” In it, West speculates on “ill-conceived political correctness” and calls the university’s Muslim Student Association “an affiliate of the Muslim Brotherhood.”

At his speech, many students participated in a peaceful walk-out. West went on to speak about the threat posed by radical Islam in America, according to a September 29 report by Fox2News.com. SLU’s Muslim Students’ Association released a statement condemning West’s remarks, drawing attention to the danger of such rhetoric in a climate of Islamophobia. Though West raised the specter of political correctness to describe his perceived censorship, does it explain what actually occurred?

The idea of political correctness supposes that there is a virtual consensus on college campuses about what is acceptable to say and what is not. This can hardly be true in the case of SLU, however, as both the organizations that invited West to speak — the Young Republicans and the Young America’s Foundation — and those that organized the protest against him — the Muslim Students’ Association — are part of the same student body. What actually appears to exist is a struggle over the university’s values between groups with distinct political interests. And it is precisely the distinctiveness of these political interests that is erased when debate is drawn into the framework of political correctness. The Muslim Students’ Association’s critiques of Islamophobic rhetoric and its potential to cause violence are framed as simple opposition to “free speech.” The thrust behind an anti-racist critique or protest is to reveal conditions in society and on campus which create insecurities for marginalized groups. A discussion of political correctness cannot have this effect.

Aside from the fact that the concept of political correctness distorts the terms of the debate and distracts from social inequalities, it also mistakes the real conditions of “free speech” present at the university. Although they might appear to be relatively open forums, universities have implicit limits to the topics available for discussion. Last November, a speech at SLU by an attorney for Planned Parenthood was moved off-campus under pressure from the university administration, according to a September 29 Riverfront Times article. Did such a speech conflict with the university’s values more than West’s? If so, how could such an appraisal be made? The concept of political correctness informs nothing here. Rather, it is more likely that dominant political interests prevailed. The power of donors and establishment groups within university administrations expose inconvenient and fundamental problems with the notion that universities are open to all forms of free speech. Institutional “values” are never clear, but they play a powerful role in what is said — or not said. And the groups that prove most decisive in struggles over values are rarely students at all.

While Allen West might frame the controversy at SLU as one over “political correctness,” this term fails to illuminate actual events. General debates over political correctness confuse the real conditions under which political debate is conducted. It overlooks the social inequalities, political interests and institutional power imbalances that all contribute to constraining acceptable discourse. In this way, student protests do not attack “free speech” but expose the existing limitations to public speech and the groups that benefit from them. Only by engaging the substantial problems raised by protests — openly and honestly, without evasion or easy answers — can any solutions be arrived at. Talk of political correctness is only a barrier.

Ben Wallis is a junior political science and history major from Troy, Mo.

Kanye West is an artist



Eboni Miller

Yes, I said it, the best! From what I’ve observed throughout Kanye’s career, people are forever doubting his genius. I grew up listening to Kanye from his first album, “The College Dropout.” My dad introduced me to his music when I was little. Ever since then I never looked back. And it wasn’t just me and my dad who were die-hard fans — it was both my parents and all six of my siblings as well. I remember my dad playing the clean version of “The College Dropout” on my way to school. “Spaceship” was my favorite song on the album, and I became a fan that very day. Kanye has always brought something new to hip hop, whether it is his music strategies, fashion or even powerful conversation — you can always expect something new and innovative from his work.

One of the reasons I’m such a fan of Kanye as a person is because he is the definition of a hard-working innovator. He recorded the song “Through The Wire” while his jaw was wired shut weeks after a car accident. Not many artists would take that risk, and that itself shows us the individuality of his work and his sheer dedication. It’s quite unexpected.

According to Vox, Kanye considers “the best, ideal, most greatest instrument ever to be the human voice” and he showcases that through every inch of his music. A traditional hip-hop track consists of an instrumental beat and a vocal. What makes Kanye so awesome is he doesn’t limit his songs to just singing and rapping. He fills every single part of his songs with the human voice, and it constantly advances hip-hop to another level. “The College Dropout” was released in 2004. It’s an hour and sixteen minutes, and 21 tracks. It’s a long album, but a great listen. One of the hits from that album, “Jesus Walks,” won a Grammy and a BET nomination for best gospel artist. How many rap artists do you know who are that versatile musically?

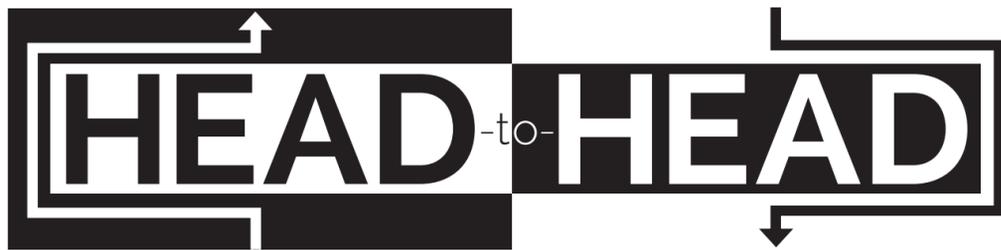
The ARC music choir is featured in the song, and they fill the song inch to inch with their vocals. According to Vox, they become “the baseline, percussion and the melody of this track.” He even layers the track with more vocal samples, such as a military drill sergeant

shouting orders. He often layers vocals throughout the second album as well. West was the single producer on “The College Dropout,” but as you listen to more of his work, you can hear a shift in his third and fourth album “Graduation” and “808’s and Heartbreak.” In his fifth album “My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy,” one of his songs “Runaway” takes a traditional structure of a rap song and completely flips it upside down. Can you see what I see now? Within this song he distorts his voice to make himself sound like a distorted guitar. Now fast-forwarding to his latest album “The Life of Pablo,” his song “Ultralight Beam” is a combination of everything I’ve described previously. The layered tracks, gospel choirs, distorted voice and auto-tune as well. This technique is what puts Kanye on the radar as a musical innovator — it shows just how underrated Kanye is on a grand scale. Instead of recording an actual choir, he creates his own, with Kirk Franklin and Chance the Rapper taking the lead. Most say that this song was his best work to date, with the only rival song being “Jesus Walks.” Kanye started his career as a producer with no one thinking he would be one of the best rappers alive, but ever since he decided to create “Through The Wire” with his jaw wired shut, no one can quite live up to and compete with his innovation. Even now, he’s still trying to break more barriers with music.

Most people choose to hate Kanye because they mistake his confidence for arrogance. Most people who say that also choose not to listen to his work or acknowledge his accomplishments to back his confidence. He is one of the reasons I find confidence in myself everyday. He finds ways to be so unique through his music and fashion and could care less what anyone thinks. Many of his interviews are quite prophetic. They allow you to dive into the mind that creates shoes that sell in less than two hours, according to CNBC. He’s the kind of artist who wins 21 grammys and creates a fashion show that continues for four seasons.

Here’s a couple of my favorite quotes by Kanye — “If you have power, you should empower ... The power is in the people ... The people chose me to be the people’s champ.” This quote shows that he’s not a narcissist, he’s more of a people person, and his life and personality are relatable because he has also started from the bottom. My all time favorite has to be, “If you’re a fan of Kanye you’re a fan of yourself.” Kanye doesn’t just talk, he empowers himself and encourages people to do the same. In terms of fashion, hip-hop and self-worth, his work speaks for itself.

Eboni Miller is a junior justice systems major from St. Louis, Mo.



Kanye West is narcissistic



Katie Puryear

As a Taylor Swift fan, it should be abundantly clear how I feel about Kanye West.

I remember the morning after the 2009 Video Music Awards all too well. I was in seventh grade, and as a card-carrying Swiftie, everyone wanted to know my reaction to Kanye jumping on stage, taking the microphone away from Taylor and telling the whole world she didn’t deserve to win Best Female Video for “You Belong With Me.”

It was rough for 12-year-old me to watch my idol get belittled like that and subsequently have to defend her. And it was just as rough for me this summer to watch Kanye still obsessively try to ruin her career with the drama surrounding his song “Famous” and its music video.

Ignoring all the other disgusting aspects of that video, putting the image of Taylor’s naked body next to Kanye’s in bed, after she has told him she wants no part of this narrative, is symbolically raping her. It’s saying her “no” means nothing to him. No amount of talent makes that okay.

I’m not arguing Kanye isn’t culturally important, or his music isn’t innovative or he doesn’t have a right to speak his mind. He’s been pursuing music as long as I’ve been alive, and he’s been releasing critically acclaimed and commercially successful music since “The College Dropout” in 2004. I’m saying his ego is so vastly overinflated it compromises his sense of right and wrong, and his talent in other areas doesn’t excuse his lack of morality.

The man calls himself Yeezus, for goodness’ sake. He posed as Jesus for the cover of Rolling Stone in 2006. He thinks of himself as God, and therefore, he can do no wrong.

Kanye thinks his opinion is the ultimate truth, and while that’s not true, he does have a right and a duty as a cultural influence to voice what he thinks. I’m not saying he shouldn’t have opinions about what art is, about who should win awards, about problems in the music industry or about anything else. In today’s world, it’s impossible to separate artists from their message. It’s impossible to separate the art from the artist, and as an important cultural figure, Kanye should have a message. If that means he doesn’t think Taylor Swift should win an award, so be it. As an adult, he should be able to express his opinions respectfully.

But he can’t. And his talent cannot justify his lack of respect for other people. It’s not like you have a “talent” bucket and a “morality” bucket, and if one is overflowing, you can use the surplus in the other. The two are inseparable. You can’t talk about Kanye without talking about his incredibly overinflated ego. You can’t talk about Kanye without his long history of interrupting awards shows, beginning with the MTV European Music Awards in 2006. You can’t talk about Kanye without talking about his music video for “Famous,” which he calls art and I call symbolic rape.

You can tell me how great his music, his influence and his voice are until you’re blue in the face, and I won’t argue with you on that. The fact of the matter is, no amount of talent excuses anyone, even Kanye West, from being a deplorable human being.

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