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Cultural Studies Alive Conversations with Inkultus Scholars

Jiří Flajšar and Pavlína Flajšarová

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inkultus

CULTURAL STUDIES ALIVE

CONVERSATIONS WITH INKULTUS SCHOLARS

JIŘÍ FLAJŠAR AND PAVLÍNA FLAJŠAROVÁ

Tato publikace vznikla v rámci projektu ESF „Interdisciplinární inovace výuky kulturních studií na Univerzitě Palackého v Olomouci“ (reg. č. CZ.1.07/2.2.00/28.0137) a byla spolufinancována Evropským sociálním fondem a státním rozpočtem České republiky.

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INTRODUCTION

Jiří Flajšar and Pavlína Flajšarová

This volume brings together nine interviews with visiting scholars from Europe, the United States, and Canada who lectured at Palacký University in Olomouc as part of the INKULTUS grant project. The interviews were conducted within the period from November 2013 to spring 2015, either by Jiří Flajšar or by Pavlína Flajšarová, or by both. The questions ranged between culture, literature, film, art, history, nationality, identity, sports, regionalism, and many others, reflecting the unique expertise of each interviewee and their professional achievements. Each conversation is introduced with a brief biographical note about the interviewee. Presuming there can be no bad answers, only questions badly asked, the interviewers tried, in every case, to foster fruitful discussion, lend an eager ear, and otherwise contribute towards covering as many essential themes as possible. After much thought, the graphic format of *The Paris Review Interviews* was kept here, allowing for the greatest degree of legibility. There may at times be confusion, in the case of interviews conducted by both authors, as to who poses a particular question that contains an "I", yet the identity of the asker is left unspecified as these interviews are collective work of both authors. Markéta Gregorová, Markéta Byrtusová, and Monika Pitnerová helped with rough transcription of some of the interviews, while the rest was transcribed by the authors.

Olomouc, September 2015

OTHER WAYS OF KNOWING

REBEKAH BLOYD

Interviewed by Jiří Flajšar

The interview took place in Olomouc on February 17, 2014, during a lecture visit by Rebekah Bloyd to Palacký University. The original transcript was subsequently expanded by email during the following year. A former Fulbright to Jamaica and the Czech Republic, Dr. Bloyd has widely published her poetry, nonfiction, and criticism. She teaches writing and ethnic literature at California College of the Arts and at Santa Clara University.

INTERVIEWER

You have worn many hats as an American writer, teacher of literature and cultural studies, as a scholar. Let me ask about your recent writing concentration on creative nonfiction. For our non-American readers in particular, can you talk about what "creative nonfiction" really means as a genre of writing—as opposed to fiction, one of the traditional big three literary genres? Creative nonfiction has been very popular in the U.S. in recent years, in writing programs, in journals, magazines…

BLOYD

In some sense, creative nonfiction is very simple to define, if you think of it in the way that the founder and editor of the journal *Creative Nonfiction* does: "True stories well told." What does that mean in terms of what actually gets written and how? That's a question with many different answers: what results might be a piece that brings together poetry and prose, imagination and memory. Some people consider creative nonfiction the cousin of New Journalism, if the writing is reporting on the world outside; for others, creative nonfiction begins more like the essay, perhaps an exploration of something internal. The scene is a crucial, defining element of creative nonfiction. When I practice it, I bring together knowledge that's experienced, researched, and imagined.

INTERVIEWER

You mentioned memory. Let's talk about the relationship of memory and literature. About twenty years ago, in the early 1990s, there was a short-lived, Prague-based expatriate American literary journal in English called *Trafika*…

BLOYD

Sure, I know it.

INTERVIEWER

You do; great. Well, it featured many well-known international writers, their works, essays, interviews. There was an interview with Czech writers Arnošt Lustig and Miroslav Holub in which the latter mentioned the role of memory…

BLOYD

I've read that piece.

INTERVIEWER

Good. They talked, especially Holub did, about the role of memory, remembering, and forgetting in literature—how conscious memory of past experience only takes up about three percent of human memory and everything else you experience gets forgotten as you have to move on in life. Do you think that memory is useful at all for the writer, do you consciously explore memory during the writing process?

BLOYD

Yes and Yes! In making use of memory, I have to consider it pragmatically. How do we retrieve memories? Thanks to ongoing research about how the brain functions, one thing we know is that every time we retrieve a memory, bring it out, see it again, and put it back into storage, we've slightly altered it. So there is no such thing as retrieving a memory from long ago. I suppose it's a version of how you can't step into the same river twice.

INTERVIEWER

Right, and you can't go home again…

BLOYD

It's always slightly altered with each viewing. The extreme would be the more something is remembered, the less reliable that memory is. In the last few years, I have been working more in the area of creative nonfiction. The role of memory in this genre, of course, is an ongoing debate. What if one recalls the essence of a situation but not the specifics of the conversation, or the weather, or the shade of the couch? Ultimately, in creative nonfiction what matters most is the essence of what you are recalling. That essence—and how you use it to support the larger story—is more important than the accuracy of every single detail.

INTERVIEWER

Yes. Who cares if the protagonist of a story went to use the bathroom at 7:35? Something else may be more important, say, to evoke the state of mind.

BLOYD

Right. That said, I do believe in the author's responsibility to fact check what can be checked. For example, I *remember* that Holub and I attended "Rappin' Ronnie" in Southern California in 1985. I can check that, so I do. The name of the production was actually "Rap Master Ronnie" (with lyrics by Garry Trudeau, by the way). I make sure I get it right in the memoir. For some conversations, though, there is no record, so the reader or listener trusts you as a writer to be telling the truth in some way. I *recall* that Holub and I spoke about the soul, and about the existence of angels, as we drove around Death Valley during that same week. Of course there is no transcription of that conversation. However, I retain well the gist of that conversation; it's fair game for use. In that sense, creative nonfiction is a field where that pact of trust between reader and writer is of the utmost importance.

INTERVIEWER

What about poetry? Would you also subscribe to the notion of a pact, a rhetorical agreement between the poet and the reader?

BLOYD

I think so, but in a different way. The pact that I see coming more into play is the pact that is made at the entrance of the poem. In the first few lines, there's the establishment of how the poem will proceed, what it's pursuing, wheth-

er it will get there through language play or through narrative or through associative leap. That's what I mean by pact: *This is how I'm setting out, this is how I'll proceed.* I do think there is far more leeway in the poem for the tampering with memory. After all, the speaker in the poem is not the author. Creative nonfiction, on the other hand, is the genre where the speaker in the piece—overt "I" or not—is the author.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think about the relationship of form in literature to content, subject matter? For you, does a piece of writing start with notions of form, or with a phrase that comes to mind, a bit of language, a memory?

BLOYD

Writing starts with an overheard phrase, an image from a dream, an entry in my notebook. As one writes, the structure of the piece starts to suggest itself, and, eventually, its form on the page and in the air. Within a given genre, I think one should try any number of perspectives or structures—and read the piece aloud as it's becoming!—before one decides, *This is really the full flowering, this is where the idea reaches its potential*. Last week, I was re-reading some interviews with Muscogee Creek writer Joy Harjo. In one, she says that the seed of a poem or some other text may be planted long before, that it moves along with the poet and eventually may grow and be crafted to become a poem—so in that sense it represents the end of a long journey. What have you found as a writer in poetry, or nonfiction, or in analytical pieces? Do you begin with a form, an idea, a memory?

INTERVIEWER

Well, for the past fifteen years, I've written only academic prose. I suppose the journey from idea to final text is different in academic writing than in creative nonfiction, fiction, or poetry; it's more of a sense of what you want to communicate about a well-defined subject, building on the previous knowledge of others who have perhaps touched upon the subject before, rather than—which is what a creative writer does—following the lead where the initial phrase, idea, memory, or emotion takes you.

BLOYD

At California College of the Arts in San Francisco, I teach undergraduates pursuing degrees in illustration or architecture or painting; I work with

graduate students who pursue the Master of Fine Arts in Writing, with novelists, playwrights, poets, makers of hybrid works, and so on. As a teacher of writing, and as a writer and reader myself, I have become a little less interested in what is being said and more and more interested in the manner of saying it. Of course, how one says something—whether it's in rhymed couplets or whether it's in the braided structure of narrative—is part of what's being said.

INTERVIEWER

I'm happy to hear that, really. Now, you have been much interested in ethnic writers, ethnic identities. Why is that? Do you have a personal or professional reason to focus so much on ethnic literature and culture in your teaching? Have you found that, say, an ethnic writer such as Joy Harjo is better, or more useful to study, than Shakespeare or John Donne or another of these dead white male classic writers?

BLOYD

I don't think evaluation of writers based solely on their ethnic origin is useful, but I can say that what attracted me first to many ethnic American writers was the expression of experience that had to do with being an outsider, or understanding that in some way you were living a couple of lives. That aspect of the ethnic writer's work appealed to me. You know, when I was a child, my family moved quite a bit. Like my mother and her sisters, my brothers and I are P.K.'s—preacher's kids. My parents, my brothers, myself—we were always the new people in a town or farming community, where most people had been for generations. I'm not suggesting that we faced the discrimination that can be a very real part of the ethnic writer's life experience. I am suggesting that I had a way to begin to think about people and their practices—or tactics—for making you feel at home. Or not.

I've also found, because I attended Oberlin College—which was one of the first in the States to admit black students and the first to admit women as students—that, from the beginning as a student, I was aware of the importance of listening to marginalized voices or voices that had been historically under-represented. The majority of the works I read for my Creative Writing and English courses were those authored by women or by African-American writers (or both) or international writers. I learned to pay attention to the voices of small nations. Sometimes, the owners of those voices were sitting next to me in class.

That understanding has never left me and has influenced my choice, as a professor, of who I will teach, and how I will go about the teaching. Should I teach Shakespeare and John Donne? That's not where my heart lies—though especially with Shakespeare, there are writers and scholars from different cultures around the world who continue to illuminate his work in remarkable ways. Others are doing a fantastic job with that. The questions that I ask myself in teaching include: What can I bring? Who have I listened to? What ideas do I hear that are important?

INTERVIEWER

I see. The ethnic writers have felt close to your own experience and teaching and writing practice while the works of the old masters might seem just too distant to be of practical use.

BLOYD

For years, most of the students I've taught in the United States or in the Czech lands are best acquainted with Western, Judeo-Christian traditions. When we read ethnic American writings, we bring our knowledge, our critiquing skills from that tradition to the works which may be largely informed by other ways of understanding and organizing the world. Certainly, the writers we have been studying draw upon European traditions of literature and we can fruitfully read and enjoy their works because of this. Yet we can hear and look at these poems appropriately and at times more deeply when we have enhanced knowledge of the cultural and ethnic heritage of the writer, when we become, in short, more ethnically educated.

INTERVIEWER

Making these choices of what to teach, do you have in mind your student audience at all, or is it just a general professional decision that you make as a teacher—say, "I find Chinese American writers compelling, so I'll teach their work."

BLOYD

Certainly I am aware of my student audience. During my studies at Oberlin I had a very good adviser, the writer and translator Stuart Friebert—he's most recently translated select poems by Karl Krolow and co-translated a volume with your own Sylva Fischerová. As Stuart and I sat in his office discussing course options, he said, "Look, women make up more than half of

the population in the world, but how frequently do women have the chance to be taught by other women at university level?" He said, "Whenever you have the chance, the choice to be taught by a woman, do it! You need to hear more of women's thinking." That made sense to me. So, starting then, I've asked myself, say, when I develop my course syllabi, "Do I have the voices of men *and* women speaking? Do I have established writers and lesser-known but excellent writers?" And, especially for students in the United States who are coming from all kinds of cultural and linguistic backgrounds: "Do I have worlds for them to enter which will be new, unfamiliar, and sometimes recognizable?" My decisions regarding who's on the syllabus are connected to why any of us are interested in writing and literature. Sometimes we want to read a work that's connected to a feeling or an experience we've had. Sometimes we need to enter a place that's completely different. It's a way to inhabit a world we don't know at all. I majored in cultural anthropology alongside creative writing. In each of those disciplines, in the space of an hour I could be a worldview away from the flat Midwest. That possibility has remained thrilling and necessary to me through the years.

INTERVIEWER

So, discovery of who one is is then possible, along the way of teaching, studying literature.

BLOYD

A twenty-year-old Chinese-American student may be surprised by and interested in reading a work such as Laguna Pueblo writer Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, which features a young American Indian's post-war life on a reservation: *What is that like? What traditional stories get told? How do you relate to the world outside*? As one student commented in his short response paper: "Fiction makes the real world easier to understand." So I do think about the students' experience, what will educate them, what will intrigue them. In a class of fifteen students, I might have ten countries represented—and in our discussions I learn from them as well. I'll probably include, for example, Gene Luen Yang's graphic novel *American Born Chinese* in next fall's version of the same course.

INTERVIEWER

Of course, there is also the traditional, prescriptive approach of the literature teacher selecting the works of canonical authors that have been taught

for decades. I was wondering, in terms of women writers, women professors… in your experience of teaching literature, have you found the writing of ethnic women writers of particular interest, as in breaking the silence, speaking up, against their own culture, against mainstream culture?

BLOYD

Take West Indian literature, for example. Early in my career, I had the chance to live in the West Indies; I was asked at the time to teach a course in West Indian literature. Students from at least a dozen Caribbean nations enrolled in the course. I started reading more and more in this area, talking with my students, and asking myself why—as someone who had a master's degree in literature—I knew the names of, maybe, one or two West Indian writers, say, Derek Walcott and Jean Rhys. I deliberately set out to address that lack as I entered my doctoral studies, focusing not only on Ethnic American Literature but also on Fiction of the Americas and West Indian Literature. A couple of years later, thanks to a Fulbright student scholarship, I was living in Kingston, Jamaica, learning and writing a good deal more.

I met with Ken Ramchand (now Professor Emeritus of English at the St. Augustine campus, UWI). He was, in 1974, the first West Indian to teach a West Indian Literature course to West Indian students. I describe what I'm doing and ask if he thinks I have something to offer. His reply: "Both insiders and outsiders to the culture have something to say. You will see things that I can't see, and I will know things that you won't understand. But don't pretend, no matter how long you stay here, that you've become a cultural insider, because that won't happen, and as long as you're clear about that, yes, you do have something to offer."

I learned about the first wave of West Indian male writers who went from the Caribbean back to the colonial motherland, England; these writers were pathbreakers; they had no models of published West Indian writers before them. What about those writers who remained at home? What about the women writers of the Caribbean? What could they tell all of us about their own paths to publication and gaining audiences? About their specific experience as women in the Caribbean? I interviewed, among others, contemporary writers Pam Mordecai, Velma Pollard, and Christine Craig. These fine poets had insightful perceptions about women's experience, specifically as Jamaican Women.

One of the key aspects of West Indian literature and culture is the notion of an oral tradition, and, as part of that, orature—or oral, performance-based

art. I learned much more about this by living in Jamaica, a concept that I brought back to the way I teach American and world literature.

INTERVIEWER

On another note, what about the relationship of literature, or poetry in particular, and science? While you worked with Miroslav Holub, the Czech poet and scientist, when you did your research, you must have dealt with this question. Do literature and science mingle at all? Do the two fields have anything in common? Or do you think that there is something like a scientific sensibility and that there is something like a creative writer's or artist's sensibility—irrational, emotional?

BLOYD

Recently, I was invited to speak on translation to a group of students who are pursuing both an M.F.A. in Writing as well as an M.A. in Visual Criticism. In preparation, I'd reread some of Holub's essays; in one, he presented translation as a way of checking on the health of the poem. If the poem had some weak spot, something that wasn't working, that would be found by the translator, who might point to that place and say, "I'm not quite sure what's meant here, something's off-kilter." Holub really loved the idea of translation as a kind of check, because in the world of science there is the hypothesis and then the experiment, and the conclusion based on repeatability. There are these checks that can be put into place. Holub appreciated the idea of some similar method for poetry.

INTERVIEWER

So poetry is not what gets lost in translation but, rather, what gets checked, found in translation.

BLOYD

Yes, in a way! Now, more generally speaking, we have in the U.S. a ridiculous notion that persists to this day, that one must have *a* specialization—that one singular focus is the mark of the serious scholar. So, it's not only necessarily, say, the situation of a scientific career paired with a writing career, but even if one had a couple of specializations within a certain genre or field, one can be regarded as suspect. In Europe, I think it's accepted that one can be more of a Renaissance person.

INTERVIEWER

I just came across a young New York poet, Ben Lerner. He would typically title his poetry books after a scientific principle or term or theorem; he adopts terms from physics in many poems.

BLOYD

In the past few decades, as non-specialists, we are in the happy position of increased information coming to us from scientists themselves, say, Oliver Sachs or Steven Pinker, and science writers. Here, I think of people like Sheri Fink, Natalie Angier, Rebecca Skloot, and Mary Roach, to name just a handful. We're able to make use of findings that in the past would have been harder for us to access. It's not to say we're suddenly all scientists—we're not—but I think we have more acquaintance with the materials, theories, and results from a range of sciences. In particular, I'm fascinated by what we continue to learn about the brain's behavior—how new neural pathways can be forged, how we can see which regions of the brain fire up when, for example, we search for that word on the tip of the tongue.

INTERVIEWER

T. S. Eliot has a faulty chemical equation in one of his famous essays from the 1920s. My source says an early reviewer faulted his chemical knowledge in that essay and told him to go check his elementary chemistry knowledge to correct the error, but Eliot would not respond, check, or correct anything. I guess he took the chemistry equation as a point of departure, a metaphor for his creative thinking about literature, culture.

BLOYD

Thinking about points of departure, I've realized that in class a graphic novel can lead beautifully into discussion of form and other aspects of poetry. I read a fabulous essay by Hilary Chute in *Poetry* magazine; she suggests how the space around the panel can be likened to the white space around a poem, into which we are invited to interpret. She comments on the rhythms between the visual and verbal elements, within individual frames and in the comic as a whole. I've been wondering about the presence and rise of the graphic novel in Europe as well.

INTERVIEWER

Has the traditional novel, then, become other things, such as novel-in-verse or graphic novel…

BLOYD

Or narrative interspersed with graphic representation, which functions differently than, say, the way complementary illustration can deepen a text. I see more of these hybrid works. As storytellers and as visual makers our abilities dovetail in graphic novels. As readers and critics, we're getting better at talking about how and what we experience through them.

INTERVIEWER

In fall 2013, I heard a fascinating talk by a young Slovak scholar on digital poetry, tablet poetry, and so forth. So maybe the text is no longer the real thing; what matters more now is again the image, the action, the performance. Earlier, you mentioned that your family have moved many times; you in turn have traveled widely as a scholar, teacher, writer. Do you find travel, or a frequent change of location, useful at all for the teacher and writer?

BLOYD

I do—and that was so much a part of how I became interested in ethnic American poetry and in contemporary world literature. Also, because I have moved frequently—whether that is from city to city, to another state, or to another country—I found that reading literary texts that have multiple voices, not only in terms of perspective or worldview, but multiple languages, often fits with the reality that I live in, what I see and hear outside my window. When I was living in the Inner Richmond District in San Francisco, in the course of a day, sitting at my desk, I would hear outside my window Russian, Ukrainian, varieties of English, Mandarin, Vietnamese, and so on. In this particular way, reading ethnic American literatures, or literatures in translation as well, didn't seem particularly exotic to me; it matched my experience. Going down the street to the open-air stand for bok choy or Scotch bonnet peppers, I would hear several people in conversation for whom English was a second or third language. The hesitancy or the finding a different way to express something that seemed beyond the available words at the moment—that reminded me of the many histories that my neighbors car-

ried with them, of the delight when one was suddenly understood and the exchange continued, of the daily challenge of trying to get what you need.

INTERVIEWER

Maybe this experience is true for people who live in the more cosmopolitan areas of the U.S., such as the San Francisco area, New York City, Miami, where so many different cultures mingle. Yet, in some parts of the U.S. the cultures do not easily mix, as in the South, you have the black South, the white South, the Hispanic South…

BLOYD

I'm also thinking of other social practices, such as the intent to discriminate by those who believe they're the rightful residents of said place, their resentment of recent—or in some cases, not so recent—arrivals.

INTERVIEWER

But all Americans are, in a way, immigrants or the descendants of immigrants.

BLOYD

Many, many are. We are also American Indians whose ancestors were already present when the U.S. was established. We are also Mexican Americans, whose ancestors became part of the United States when the Southwest was annexed and the border redrawn after the war of 1846-48.

Let me share what's happening of late in small-town America. A few years ago, when I was preparing to teach a seminar on Ethnic American Poetries, I pulled information from the U.S. Census Bureau and the Brookings Institution. In the past, we had the gateway cities—certain cities in Texas, Florida, California, New York—where immigrants typically resided, whether legally or not. Now, in the States, community after community, from a small town of twenty thousand to a mid-sized city, has an ethnic and cultural mix. This is largely the result of economic shifts—people seek work in small towns as well as large. Businesses are locating or re-locating in smaller towns, where labor and production conditions are favorable and so on. The world has traveled to our towns, big or small.

INTERVIEWER

Interesting. Now, let's return to the question of travel. What about the argument against travel. Emerson claimed that the wise man stays at home and does all the traveling inside his head. I wonder if such an extreme view of travel and mobility works for anyone any more. Maybe it *did* for Emily Dickinson…

BLOYD

And Eudora Welty…

INTERVIEWER

Kant, others…

BLOYD

Often, contemporary writers live in at least two different places; so journeying to additional places is a given. Writers like Pico Iyer testify to this reality, saying *This is our way of being, we are at home in the world*. I still think that it's important to have a sense of belonging. Must it be tied to a place? I don't think so. It could be through tradition versus a physical place in the world.

Matt Amdahl, a former student of mine, suggested that the crow in Joy Harjo's poem "Ah, Ah", set in Hawaii, where Harjo lived for a few years, might act as a geographical connection to her usual home territory of the Southwest. Harjo travels a good deal, giving readings, leading workshops. Does home fly with her, so to speak, in this creature whose caw is familiar? In a piece I'm working on now, about Miroslav Holub, I'm looking at his concept of home as it is portrayed in his poetry—as a "virtual tornado", as "the tip of the needle" in one poem. I'm also considering his actual home in Prague. I was lucky enough to visit him and his family there. It was quite an adventure to be in the Holub household. He had a love of novelty, which meant that on one windowsill, a mechanical butterfly would be flapping its wings, powered by a decaying piece of fruit. A parade of three-dimensional ants crossed the path of dinosaurs on the wallpaper. What an incredible home environment! He did travel, especially in his last fifteen years. But he very firmly said, I am Czech, this is my home, there is no other place for me in the world.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel similar connection to a particular place, identity?

BLOYD

My ancestors have been in the U.S. since the American Revolution and before. However, virtually no stories specifically connected with their ethnicity—with being Scotch-Irish, Dutch, Welsh, English, or Blackfoot or Shawnee—were passed down in my family. But I understand what I understand about race and ethnicity from living in the United States; from being born into a family of *voraging* readers (a wonderful term my mother coined, combining *voracious* and *foraging*), a family that has moved multiple times; from my long-time friendships with people who aren't U.S. American; from my own choices to live in the Caribbean, including a year in what would be called in the States an "all-black" neighborhood but in Jamaica was simply a neighborhood; from my extended stays in Venezuela and in the Czech Republic. What I have found is that ethnic American literature speaks more to me about my daily life and my own past than does most European American literature.

To read and teach ethnic American literature is to recognize my home, even while I remain a visitor, a newcomer to many of the customs or beliefs I encounter in the works. To read and teach ethnic American literature allows me to live outside of the boundary of my own skin and experience. I believe that's true for my students as well. I believe that an underdeveloped imaginative capacity is a profound lack, capable not only of exacerbating petty differences but also wars among nations.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have any advice for future writers?

BLOYD

When I have students talk to me about pursuing life as a writer, I give them three pieces of advice. One, keep your overhead low, because you'll never make much of a financial living as a writer; you'll always have one or two jobs besides your writing. Two, find a couple of people who will read your work and give you feedback, not only what you want to hear but what you need to hear, readers you trust. Three, get out of the country or go someplace in your own country where you are an outsider, where you don't know the rules, where you are uncomfortable. You learn to listen, you learn to observe,

you also learn what it means, how it feels to be a newcomer. That's where the vulnerability comes in. Ultimately, that kind of experiential knowledge serves you—as a teacher of literature, as a writer, and as a human being. That kind of experience, if reflected upon, prepares you to behave appropriately and decently with people who hail from very different places. It doesn't solve all of the problems, but you can teach yourself not to be dismissive of other points of views, other ways of knowing and expressing what matters.