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Vanessa DisPlaced | Racism vs. Censorship

Poet Vanessa Place trades sincerity for triggering text only to find herself in the art world's own Bermuda Triangle.

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A heated debate over whether Vanessa Place's poetry is "racist," "insensitive," "ignorant," "uninteresting," or "important" has erupted via social media, becoming the topic for many a long form essay and op ed, making everyone a critic. What has brought Place's poetry so much media attention, though, is the systematic censorship it has undergone. A discussion about whether or not the work is terrorizing or simply traumatic has ensued, but it's time, now, for the debate to refocus on what is and isn't acceptable to police in the worlds of art and literature.

Until recently, the overwhelming response to Place's work was one of academic appreciation. Comparable to performance artist Adrian Piper's 1960s "Catalysis" series (in which Piper would intentionally dress, act, and smell in ways that would make passersby in public spaces uncomfortable) Place's work hits a nerve, critiquing, usually, the medium within which it works—or the raced, gendered lens through which it is represented. A criminal appellate attorney, Place has written straightforward essays about "representing rapists and child molesters," and in her poems she often plagiarizes, blatantly questioning the necessity of sincerity in a genre so supposedly free. Her work from inside the prison industrial complex, too, dismantles broader understandings of the system by too-strictly following its own rules. "Nobody likes these people," she explains to me over coffee a couple weeks ago. "Nobody. So to me, there's the State. And the State can lock up whoever the State wants to lock up. That's the power of the State. If you believe that that power needs to be checked in all instances, that the State needs to have to prove, no matter what, no matter how bad the person is, that it's the same standard, then that's who you represent. Not the people that you feel bad for, the people that you really understand, but the people you actually don't feel bad for, and you don't understand necessarily."

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She is trailed by controversy. Earlier this year, she was short-listed for a PEN Award for Poetry Translation, and it was announced that she would join several panels and committees on poetry. Under-researched outrage (in some cases followed by apologies) demanded a response from the institutions giving credit to Place's work. The institutions, who had been supporting Place and fostering free speech for many years, sidestepped the conflict instead of taking the opportunity to talk about it, letting online uproar govern decisions years in the making after mere hours had passed. Collective responses that could fall out of an Ayn Rand novel asked that any and all distractions from whatever public event is taking place be removed. I.e., Vanessa Place.

In the Spring of 2015, Place's work and participation in programs has been called into question by three major points on the creative class-Bermuda Triangle: literature/creative writing, poetics/academia, and performance/art. First, the Association of Writers & Writers Programs (AWP) axed her from its 2016 subcommittee after working with her for ten years. Next, the Berkeley Poetry Conference's "50th Anniversary of Free Speech" program was cancelled, due at least in part to her involvement. Then, the Whitney Museum's 2015 Independent Studies Program (ISP) -curated performance, "Last Words," where she was to read a poem, was called off.

Here is where this particular saga started, if a saga like this can ever trace a starting point: In the July/August 2009 issue of Poetry magazine, Place's poem, "Miss Scarlet," which quotes word-for-word a particularly cringe-worthy passage from Margaret Mitchell's novel *Gone With the Wind*, was published. For context, it was printed with this note:

"Taken from Prissy's famous scene in the movie version of *Gone with the Wind*, Place phonetically transcribes the 'unreliable' slave's words, which are then set in Miltonic couplets. Through the simple act of transcription, Place inverts our relationship to Margaret Mitchell's best-selling and beloved American epic by prioritizing the formal aspects of language over Mitchell's famous narrative. With this deconstructive move, Place illuminates the many subtexts embedded in the text concerning plays of power, gender, race, and authorship. By ventriloquizing the slave's voice as well as Mitchell's, Place also sets into motion a nexus of questions regarding authorship, leading one to wonder: who is pulling whose strings?"

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It was an early iteration of the artwork that would get Place the most media attention she had ever seen. Familiar with guilt in all of its forms because of her day job, "Miss Scarlet" attempts to bring Place's own white guilt (or responsibility, as she likes to call it) into focus by plagiarizing a racism-inflected text written by a white woman whose work hasn't really been tethered. *Gone With the Wind*, argues Place, is as dear to America as ever, and yet it upholds a racist view of black people.

Place, 47, is one of the founding members of Conceptual Poetry, a movement that questions the sincerity of poems by performing and displaying largely appropriated text. Her work is notoriously polarizing in the same way appropriation artist Richard Prince's is. Take her website, the home screen of which states, "POETRY IS A KIND OF MONEY," and the "sold out" piece made up of a stack of 20 dollar bills, purchasable for \$50. After "Miss Scarlet," Place published a manuscript titled *Gone With the Wind* that consists of the entirety of Mitchell's famous text, but with the author credit going to Place. An accompanying artist's statement maps out the blatant racism of *GWTW*, the harm that schools and film societies are doing by ignoring its problems, and the role Place, as a white woman from a Southern family, plays in appropriating it. Place also published a shorter book that consists only of the overtly racist language used in *GWTW*. Both of these works, she says, specifically sought a lawsuit from the estate of Margaret Mitchell. In another effort to get the estate's attention, Place has, for the past six years, been tweeting every word of *GWTW* from @vanessaplace, which uses an image of Hattie McDaniel, who played "the good slave" Mammy in the movie version of *GWTW*, as its avatar.

On March 13, 2015, another Conceptual Poet, Kenny Goldsmith, read "The Body of Michael Brown" at Brown University. The poem is a rearranged version of Michael Brown's autopsy report. After the reading, a discussion followed, and the audience's response, according to press, expressed mostly gratitude for the space the poem provided for discussion on the spectacle of Brown's death. On March 14, Goldsmith posted a few of a quickly growing number of tweets calling his work racist, including one death threat, on his Facebook wall. On March 15, Goldsmith posted a statement saying that, in the tradition of his own book, *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*, which rearranges documents released around famous deaths like JFK's assassination and Columbine's school shooting, he "took a publicly available document from an American tragedy that was witnessed first-hand (in this case by the doctor performing the autopsy) and simply read it... This, in fact, could have been the eighth American death and disaster." On March 16, though, Goldsmith requested that Brown University not make public the recording of his performance of "The Body of Michael Brown" because "there's been too much pain for many people around this."

Place, a resident lecturer at Colorado University at Boulder, planned to parse out the Goldsmith poem's aftermath in class. But an open letter asked that, because of Place's insensitivity to racist iconography (her Twitter avatar), she not be allowed to give a talk on a poem accused of racial insensitivity. Place offered to instead cancel the talk and make herself available to listen to concerns about her work. "I would respond only if they wanted me to respond," Place says. "It wasn't fun for anyone, but it was really good. I think it was very useful for everybody. People said things I'd seen before on social media. Things like, 'Who is this project for?' Or, 'You're just doing work for white people.' And I responded to that. I said, 'It's not for anyone. I don't make work for people.'

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That's presumptuous, to me. I represent things. Somebody else said, 'You've appropriated images of people of color,' and my argument was, 'Actually, they're not images of African Americans, they're racist imagery that white people made and imposed upon African Americans, therefore they're my images, they're my people's stuff. My work is about taking responsibility for those images and that kind of work. Part of it for me, on an ethical level is: Everybody likes it when I do work on gender because I'm a woman. When I do work on race, people don't see that I'm also raced. As much as I cannot know what it's like to have the lived experience of being a person of color, a person of color cannot have the lived experience of being a white American. We need to make that kind of work too, that is historically responsive, that has all of those burdens, and risks.' So, then this woman, this African American professor said to me, 'Well, now I just feel like I don't necessarily think you're a racist, but I don't feel like this project goes far enough in interrogating whiteness.' And I just said, 'Fair enough.' Like, that's fine. We can have that conversation all day long."

I bring up trigger warnings, and Place responds: "Part of maturation is learning how to differentiate between your emotions. It's like when people realize that they're dating their father, or something. You have these moments of maturity where you realize your emotions may have a cause that isn't the cause directly in front of you. You've actually imported something. For example, during this thing that happened at Boulder, there was a woman who was telling me about the first time she had heard a racial slur. It was when she was being beaten up when she was six. It's a true association she had. But she's bringing that into her experience of a work. Aesthetic works aren't responsible for protecting her from a traumatic memory. There are certain movies I won't see, but I don't want to live in a world where those movies can't be made, or where somebody is always standing outside a movie theater screaming at me not to go in."

Triggers aside, *GWTW*, Place had all but concluded, failed to take a big enough risk. She hadn't been sued yet. The Mitchell Estate did respond, she says, must have realized she wasn't making any money, because they didn't seem to care. "It was going to cost them more to sue me than to ignore me," she adds. "We were going to print all of the email correspondence on cotton paper. We had all these thoughts about [the lawsuit]. I changed the cover images [of the manuscripts] because at one point they were all referencing me, because I was really pushing this copyright idea and that didn't seem to work. When I changed the Twitter avatar to Hattie McDaniel, that was when I was trying to push harder on the race aspect of it, to tag it more as overtly racist, because then I thought, maybe they'll sue me not because I'm making money, but because I'm sort of making them look bad. That didn't work either. Then, I was just going along doing my kind of monastic chore of tweeting 10 tweets a day. The last time I was really pushing on it was probably 2012. I didn't expect that three years later...I've done 16,500 tweets or something like that, at this point. You really don't expect, like, Thursday, you'll wake up and: 'This must be stopped.' In some ways, where were those people six years ago? Part of why I wanted to be sued was that it's a really long book." It's a long book that still sells, Place adds, 250,000 copies a year. "What's really interesting," she says, barbell-pierced eyebrow raised, "is that only half of the proceeds stay with the Mitchell heirs. The other half go to the Archdiocese of Atlanta. The Catholic church gets half. We can think about that for a minute. And the critique that the Archdiocese came into recently was that a lot of that money had possibly gone into building this mansion for the bishop. That money was gone...with the wind."

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In May of 2015, Place's *GWTW* Twitter account spurred another open letter, this time in the form of a petition created on change.org by one (white) poet, Timothy Volpert. When AWP announced their 2016 subcommittee, MFA students everywhere were outraged to see that when they googled one poet's name, racist images appeared. The petition stated, "We acknowledge Place's right to exercise her creativity, but we find her work to be, at best, startlingly racially insensitive, and, at worst, racist. We do not believe it is right that she have a hand in deciding whether panels having to do with race and identity will be a part of next year's AWP." It was publicized aggressively by the anonymous group Mongrel Coalition Against Gringpo ("gringo" + "poetry") and became a trending topic. Place, after putting some distance between herself and the event, wonders now, "Can people see the ideological structure—the structure that they're participating in? The click. The sign and click, the click and sign. So, I look at this, I see an image, I read the image as racist. That's true, absolutely. And then what? Then, do I say, 'That's a racist image, therefore it's bad, therefore it must be destroyed, it must be erased? Or, do I read the image—and by image I mean the language and everything else—and say, 'This is racist, why is it here?' and then try to reflect, as you would in a museum.

Place says that Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum*, actually, is an analogue and antecedent to her *GWTW*. "Because," she explains, "When you look at somebody like Fred Wilson's work in the mid-'90s, where he puts a whipping post from a museum archive next to a nice sofa, and says, 'These were made at the same time, they're both examples of woodworking in the 19th century,' the whipping post is itself racist, and you say, 'Well this is a racist exhibition, and so that's very bad.' Or you say, 'Why is this here? What's happening? What's the context, and where is this taking me in my own ability to think about something?'"

Within hours, 2,195 students signed the petition, and on May 18, AWP put out this statement, taking Place off without apologizing for putting her on:

"AWP has removed Vanessa Place from the AWP Los Angeles 2016 Subcommittee. We did so after taking into consideration the controversy her Twitter feed has generated. Place has been tweeting the text of *Gone with the Wind* and using a photograph of Hattie McDaniel as the profile picture. The context of this and similar work is explained by a few literary theorists and advocates of conceptual poetry, such as Jacob Edmond and Brian M. Reed. AWP believes in freedom of expression. We also understand that many readers find Vanessa Place's unmediated quotes of Margaret Mitchell's novel to be unacceptable provocations, along with the images on her Twitter page. AWP must protect the efficacy of the conference subcommittee's work. The group's work must focus on the adjudication of the 1,800 submitted proposals, not upon the management of a controversy that has stirred strong objections and much ill-will toward AWP and the subcommittee. Perpetuating the controversy would not be fair to the many writers who have submitted the proposals."

The immediate response pointed out that AWP's non-apology wasn't enough, or way too much. Dropping Place "was the wrong move," wrote Scott Martelle for the *L.A. Times* on May 19. "When an organization dedicated to advocacy on behalf of writers and writing programs, inherently extensions of free expression, penalizes writers for expressing themselves freely, the mission seems lost."

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GWTW was crystallizing in a way Place had never imagined it could, becoming the nebulous terrorism for a collection of poetry Patriot Acts. Instead of acting as a warning, Place's *GWTW* was being warned against, a trigger more traumatic, apparently, than the original text it parroted. It also seemed to say a lot about the snap judgments we're all so used to now because of our chosen sharing habits. It's the nature of Twitter to not research further, we all know, but if that nature is influencing the way we run museums, school lectures, and conferences, the future might be more bleak than any of us dared to predict.

"[*GWTW*] is in part about social media, and the way social media works," says Place. "And social media is an aesthetic medium. What happens when you have overt antagonism or antagonistic content, on social media? On the surface, it's so much based on affinity, and liking, and following, and a sense of community. But at the same token, the only way to consistently affirm your community is by having something to rally against. And then we can find out who our friends really are. It's predicated on [the fact that] we all think the same thing. We don't go to social media to be confronted by things we don't understand or don't agree with, which is maybe why we go to museums, or conferences, or universities. Do we really want museums and galleries, especially museums, to be curating based upon what people know they already like?"

Or censoring based on popular opinion? Here is another example. On January 13, 2014, Northwestern University published a policy stating that,

"When individuals involved in a consensual romantic or sexual relationship are in positions of unequal power at the university, such as faculty-student, graduate assistant-student, supervisor-supervisee, advisor-advisee, coach-student, senior faculty-junior faculty, senior staff-junior staff, or faculty-staff, there is the potential for a conflict of interest, favoritism, and exploitation...The fact that a relationship was initially consensual does not insulate the person with greater power from a claim of sexual harassment."

In February of 2015, Professor Laura Kipnis's "Sexual Paranoia Strikes Academe," was published in *The Chronicle Review*. In it, she wrote, "It's the fiction of the all-powerful professor embedded in the new campus codes that appalls me. And the kowtowing to the fiction—kowtowing wrapped in a vaguely feminist air of rectitude. If this is feminism, it's feminism hijacked by melodrama. The melodramatic imagination's obsession with helpless victims and powerful predators is what's shaping the conversation of the moment, to the detriment of those whose interests are supposedly being protected, namely students. The result? Students' sense of vulnerability is skyrocketing." A closely documented scandalization followed, in which Northwestern students asked for the article to be removed from the magazine's website and apologized for because of its "chilling" effect. Essentially, it wasn't sensitive enough to sexual assault victims, even though it was not about sexual assault.

The students' response to her essay, Kipnis said, proved her point. They marched with mattresses on their backs in protest and wrote up a petition asking for their higher-ups to protect them. Kipnis later wrote in an essay on her own website that two Title IX complaints had been filed against her, and that she was asked to comply with a strange and secret investigation concerning the petition and these charges.

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"Most academics I know—this includes feminists, progressives, minorities, and those who identify as gay or queer—" she wrote, "now live in fear of some classroom incident spiraling into professional disaster. After the essay appeared, I was deluged with emails from professors applauding what I'd written because they were too frightened to say such things publicly themselves. My inbox became a clearinghouse for reports about student accusations and sensitivities, and the collective terror of sparking them, especially when it comes to the dreaded subject of trigger warnings, since pretty much anything might be a 'trigger' to someone, given the new climate of emotional peril on campuses. I learned that professors around the country now routinely avoid discussing subjects in classes that might raise hackles. A well known sociologist wrote that he no longer lectures on abortion. Someone who'd written a book about incest in her own family described being confronted in class by a student furious with her for discussing the book." Later, in an *NPR* interview, Kipnis sounded calm, having moved past the eye of the storm. It was all a misunderstanding, everyone seemed to be saying—even if it was one that could have cost the professor her reputation.

Place, too, knows all too well the slanderous consequences of an evermore public public, and its resulting hyper-sensitive average participant. "Life is painful and life is damaging. It just is," she offers. "But there is one appreciable difference, and a really meaningful difference between young women on colleges being raped, or young black men being shot by police, and discussions about these things, or artistic representations of these things. That signs are symbols and not actual events. It's like, if you have a nightmare and you wake up and your heart's pounding. You feel the same as if somebody was in the room when you woke up, but the consequence of you waking up and being alone, scared somebody's in the room, versus somebody actually being in the room, are very different, and we shouldn't pretend they're the same, and say, 'You have to protect me from that feeling.' No, you don't have to protect me from that feeling, you have to protect me from that guy, or that cop. That's who you have to protect me from."

On April 22, the Berkeley Poetry Conference announced the 2015 lineup for "the 50th Anniversary of Free Speech," which included Place. On May 24, a petition made up by a (black) student, Anthony J. Williams listed writers and professors "in solidarity" and asked that Place be removed from the conference. It stated, "Ferguson and Baltimore are not the cause of our anger. We've been angry for a long time. They have simply exposed the situation for a broader audience, and that situation includes both police execution of Black and brown people and institutional support for white supremacist art, among many other things. 'Poets' like Place and her supporters are finally being held accountable for an unchecked racism that has made respectful, difficult dialogue and 'free speech' about contemporary poetry and art impossible. People like us are finally insisting that it is not for Place or her supporters to decide if the offensiveness of her work is justifiable. Place's work follows a tradition of white artists irresponsibly telling Black narratives, and the Berkeley Poetry Conference is complicit in the erasure of Black people by insisting on the inclusion of Place, despite her racist work and her dismissive attitude towards those who have criticized it as such." It goes on to say that Williams himself "has had to deal with rampant anti-Blackness that has taken a toll on him mentally and physically, including stomach pains as the result of anxiety."

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Besides that the poetry in question is purposefully plagiarized, and that its materialism is pointing out this very tradition of white irresponsibility that Williams brings up, that this petition asks for a voice to be silenced in the name of free speech and then urges discussion of the very topics Place's piece has dragged up should have perhaps red-flagged the committee members for an event celebrating the anniversary of, of all things, free speech. Instead, enough poets dropped out, Place was told, that the entire conference was cancelled. A new event was announced as a replacement on June 1. A statement on the website explains that "the transformation," titled Crosstalk, Color, Composition: A Berkeley Poetry Conference, was to occur instead. "The conference we had originally imagined and long-planned for no longer appears tenable," it reads, "but we see, in the failure of original plan, an opportunity to open up new channels of conversation and to feature a new constellation of poets. To that end, we are organizing a new multi-day event around readings given by and seminars led by several poets of color of national reputation."

The irony is not lost on Place. "Apparently, you can have free speech or a community, but not both, which is really interesting," she says. "It's complicated, because I feel as if underneath a lot of what's happening is a very strong push to keep the ideological structures in place. We'll do anything to have a conference. That's the most important thing. That's what we're talking about. We're not talking about a non-profit."

As to why *GWTW* became so charged in 2015, and not back in 2009, Place has a few ideas. "First, when I started the project," she says, "social media, especially Twitter, was very insular. You had your followers. What happened on Twitter stayed on Twitter. It wasn't a porous community, which it is now. Second, there's a kind of vigilance on issues of race and manifestations of racism, especially on social media, more than there was six years ago. And that's a very good thing. That said—How does the medium itself anticipate in certain kinds of structures? These little tiny sub-groups that we create purify our online communities. If you go to a museum, it's a different community. It's heterogeneous in one way, and less so in another way. But what we all know about social media is that it's designed to keep you safe from the things you don't want to see. In real life, if you see somebody and you don't care for them, you still have to somehow engage with them. Online, there's a whole series of algorithms that keep it from coming to you, even on the level of advertising you're not interested in. In many ways we're very happy about that. We love that. We also love the little antagonisms that come up, the pile-on that will happen, the call-outs that will happen. That gets into a really interesting thing in social media which I think is new. Now, you have to say something in order to be seen. You have to like or you have to affirmatively make a comment. And if you don't, then that can be looked at. The idea of the petition was, 'Well, why aren't you signing the petition?'"

Place has gotten some back messages apologizing for having signed the AWP petition. "One person told me that they signed it because people they respected had signed it, but that when they read my artist's statement about it, when they saw the way the piece had been re-contextualized and in the re-contextualization had turned into something else, they saw the work in a different light. Somebody else said that they still weren't sure about the work, but they were less sure about the idea of sanitizing the forum. They were more uncomfortable with that, upon reflection. I think it's the 'upon reflection' part that these things unify. The ability to change one's mind.

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When institutions run away from what they call 'the distracting' or 'the disruptive', they're foreclosing the ability for people to come to a different understanding than what they arrived with. I would never discount somebody's personal experience of trauma. That's very real, but so is this, and so are these works. Just as the Internet is a place of simultaneity, and a lot of things happening at once, all the things have to exist."

On May 21, The National Coalition Against Censorship sent a letter to AWP, saying, "AWP's action violates the very principles of academic freedom that are at the heart of its members' work. The logic of banishing Vanessa Place from the subcommittee could potentially be applied to many other situations: a creative writing professor's work for instance, could be attacked as controversial. Would this be considered to affect the 'efficacy' of his or her classroom teaching? Should such a professor then not be allowed to teach?"

On May 31, Place's other Twitter account, @vanessaplace2, retweeted the use of a new verb: "Every time I'm all excited because I'm finally going to attend one of these big poetry festivals and I'm so excited because all my favorite writers will be there and/or lots of books and stuff, and perhaps interesting topics and lovely readings, it gets Vanessa Placed." At least, Place admits, it's being discussed. People are considering and reconsidering their actions, she says, which might mean that she did something right. "It's not a head count—believe me, I think there are a lot more people who'd say I'm either racist or ignorant or misguided. But again, I would just say, 'Fair enough.' To be honest, I think that the approved white person response to being called a racist is, 'I'm so sorry, I had no idea, I take it all back.' To me what that does is preserve this sort of fantasy of white integrity. 'We're not bad, we're just stupid.' 'Sorry, I didn't see you were there,'-kind of thing. It's a little too clean. There's a desire for a kind of purity. I'm never interested in exculpating myself. I'm more interested in inculcation. I'm not out of it anymore than anybody else is. So, when a white person says to me, 'This hurts other people's feelings,' I say, 'Well if you looked at this and you didn't feel some sort of discomfort or pain or shame, not on behalf of somebody else but as you, then maybe you need to think about that.'"

On June 6, The Whitney Museum of American Art's website announced that one of its scheduled programs that day, "Last Words," was cancelled. "On the one hand I feel I've won some strange trifecta of literary world, academic world, art world," Place says on June 7. She had traveled to New York from her home in L.A. for the performance. It was going to be a reading of all the last words of executed Texas inmates since 1982, following a talk by philosopher Avital Ronell, and preceding another talk with philosopher Kyoo Lee. Ronell has written a book exploring absences in chains of communication, and Lee is a professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. The ISP had carefully curated this lecture on the idea of speaking about one's death as part of a larger, well-attended art series called *S/N* (Signal to Noise). But the Whitney, says Place, wanted to make sure all of the artists addressed what was going on with *GWTW*, ironically.

"In my understanding," Place offers, "heat was being put on the Whitney, specifically because of my presence, and Avital and Kyoo were separately receiving pressure—emails, phone calls, that kind of thing—about appearing with me. When they expressed concern about it, the museum's response was, 'We've hired bodyguards,' which didn't reassure anyone particularly. Everybody was continuing to express their concern, and the institution wasn't really taking responsibility for the event. It was simply canceled. It's the failure of the institution to actually be able to respond to disruption, or potential disruption."

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That the art world, too, had rejected Place's poetry, in a sense, had surprised her most, out of all the cancellations. "One of the things the art world does have is insincerity, and that's not a bad thing when you're dealing with representations," she says. "But the writing world, especially poetry, really trades on sincerity. I mean, my god, it's like a pipeline, a little snowflake of your soul. Here's my precious gift. I made a poem and it's the snowflake of my soul and you bring a snowflake of your soul to the poem and you read it and you go, 'Yes I have felt that too,' and that's the moment. The moment in poetry where people say, 'Mm.' And my work has none of that. I'm just as likely to get up and tell rape jokes for thirty minutes from the point of view of the rapist as anything else. And that's a genre transgression. The more I lie, the more I'm inauthentic, the more I'm transgressing the very things that make being a poet possible. I mean poets, when you sing the song of the pure self, you're singing the song of Facebook, you're singing the song of targeted advertising."

The concern the—as Kim Calder at the Los Angeles Review of Books described it—"Denunciation of Vanessa Place" brings up is one of censorship, not racism, though. Because racism was already brought up, by Place, and by many before her. That a work is racist, or that ventriloquizing racist work is racist, or that supporting the publication and performance of ventriloquized racist work is racist, is a conversation, and one that many, thanks to a pretty unbelievable chain of events, are now having. We already knew that Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* was pickled in racism. What we possibly didn't know before now was that social media frenzies can get an artist suspended from academia. As writer John Keene points out on his blog, even if Place's work is racist, ignorant, and misguided, our country should not try to squelch it. It is "deeply disturbing," Keen wrote, "to hear a queer white woman talking about stealing Mitchell's 'niggers' and claiming them as her own." He says, of "Miss Scarlet," that "quite a few people reading Mitchell's novel, or watching the film, or reading Place's poem, realize quite clearly 'who is pulling whose strings.' The question is, who doesn't?" But Keen, like most thoughtful critics of Place's work, do not applaud censorship, even if it is of art they consider bad. "I believe Place, like Goldsmith, has the right to post such things," he continues, "and if she feels compelled to continue doing so, she should. Their supporters should continue to support them, and make arguments on their behalf as they see fit. I do not believe in censorship, and she or anyone else ought to say whatever she likes, however offensive to one or many groups, with an awareness of what the effects of such behavior are, as well as the potential consequences might be."

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But the potential consequences, it turns out, might be censorship. The NCAC, on July 1, published another official statement, this one expressing concern over all of AWP's, the Berkeley Poetry Conference's, and the Whitney's hand-washing. The letter, signed by artists and professors, points out that "Those protesting have expressed little interest in engaging in a debate about Place's work," and that "the cultural atmosphere evidenced by the events around Vanessa Place is chilling to any creative artist or institution that may consider approaching difficult questions around race, sexuality or politics...Censorship has never contributed to the cause of social justice; throughout history it has invariably been on the side of totalitarianism and repression. But in the echo chambers of easy consensus, this lesson is very easily forgotten."

Place concludes that she sees two commonalities between every cancellation: "One, an institutional inability to deal with any kind of antagonism, and two, nobody's so overtly stupid as to say, 'We're not going to tolerate what you're saying.' It's always couched in terms like, 'This is too distracting, this is too disruptive. That's what we can't deal with.' But it ends up being exactly the same thing."