

A white mob comes after an Arab-Canadian professor — in the name of anti-racism

One 50-year-old white woman tweeted, 'How is (it) that I understand systemic racism and she doesn't?'

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Publishing date:

Feb 25, 2021 • 2 hours ago • 6 minute read • [17 Comments](#)

<https://nationalpost.com/opinion/jonathan-kay-a-white-mob-comes-after-an-arab-canadian-professor-in-the-name-of-anti-racism>



An Arab-Canadian Mount Allison psychology professor is being accused on Twitter of racism. PHOTO BY LEON NEAL /Getty Images

Since my recent columns have comprised a running critique of progressive social panic on issues relating to race and sex, I should acknowledge that, for all their odd (and sometimes hilarious)

excesses, these panics often represent extrapolations of mainstream liberal ideas that are important, and even morally urgent.

By way of example, take the word “intersectionality,” which, on social media, has become a byword for all manner of nonsense claims. (Doctrines of “intersectional feminism,” for instance, now are routinely used to vilify, you know, *actual* feminists.) But when scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw coined the term in the late 1980s, she was describing the common-sense principle that a person’s multiple identities will affect his or her life experience in complicated and, literally, intersecting ways. Racism is a thing. Sexism is a thing. Homophobia is a thing. Poverty, difficult childhoods, disability, immigration status, gender dysphoria — these are all things, too. And if you’re looking for real viewpoint diversity in an organization, you might want to look for people who have these intersecting identities. I don’t see that as controversial.

But this is all very abstract, so let me offer a case study, by way of a Mount Allison University psychology professor named Rima Azar, who was born in Lebanon during a civil war that lasted until she was a teenager. It was this experience, she recently told an audience at her school, that aroused her interest in “how people face adversity and also how they bounce back.”

When Azar eventually immigrated to Canada, she developed expertise in helping parents who face complex child-care needs, and has gone on to found or supervise numerous acclaimed support programs in New Brunswick. In her personal life, Azar is a foster parent, a polyglot (Arabic is her mother tongue), and a blogger who writes passionately about classical liberal values and Lebanon’s ongoing challenges. She’s also a proud Canadian — writing that the Maple Leaf “means the world to me,” even while still being “moved” by the sight of a Lebanese flag. If you know of a more intersectional Canadian, I’d like to meet them.

I find Azar’s intersectional perspective particularly valuable because the country she grew up in has long been afflicted by violent clashes between the various groups whose rights are rigidly prescribed under the country’s identity-based political system — including Shiite and Sunni Muslims, Maronites, Eastern Orthodox Christians, Palestinians, and newer refugees from Syria. Many of these people linger in camps, prisoners of their ethnic origins. Azar also has witnessed the effects of Israel’s invasion of the country in the 1980s, not to mention the rise of Hezbollah, and so understands the deadly risks associated with identity politics. Surely, Mount Allison University’s stewards know how fortunate they are to have such a woman to guide their evolving intersectional conversation about racism, right?

Right?

Azar is no shrinking violet. When a local activist named Husoni Raymond opined that New Brunswick is “systemically racist,” Azar applied her comparative understanding of Lebanon and Canada to argue that, in relative terms, her adopted home isn’t racist at all, but is rather “a young country” that “wants to save the world.” (As evidence, she pointed to the fact that Raymond himself had been lavishly honoured for his anti-racism work, which is hardly consistent with white supremacy.) In a similar vein, she has argued down activists who claim Canada is a “patriarchy” afflicted by rape culture. If you want to see “real rape culture,” she’s noted archly, take a look at “ISIS practices in Syria.” Azar also has called Black Lives Matter a “radical”

movement, which is an unfashionable thing to say, but isn't remotely inaccurate given BLM's stated goals of creating a "global liberation movement" that will "dismantle capitalism," abolish prisons, and erase national borders.

You're all adults, and so you know how this story ends. One of Azar's umbraged former students, Tweeting under the name "Izzy," went through Azar's past blog posts and assembled an incriminating pastiche of the above-described viewpoints. Izzy pronounced herself "personally disappointed to see that (Azar) shows a fundamental misunderstanding of race," then helpfully listed some of Azar's professional affiliations, so readers would know where to direct complaints. Naturally, a local reporter from the Moncton Times & Transcript hopped on the thread, and duly wrote up Azar's "inappropriate" comments.

The CBC also got in on the mobbing in its patented CBC way: In a 19-paragraph story, reporter Marie Sutherland somehow managed to quote numerous people (including Mount Allison administrators, who are conducting an "internal review" of Azar) denouncing the professor for her "hurtful" ideas, without ever actually quoting a single word that Azar had actually written — thus giving readers the false impression that Azar had said something really shocking. Just a few years ago, it would have been completely shocking to see the CBC publish journalism on this sub-Canadaland level, let alone for a university to publicly denounce its own professor at the urging of a Twitter mob. But in 2021, it's all part of the routine.

The President of Mount Allison is, by appearances, a white man, as is student-union president Jonathan Ferguson (whose quotes and photo figure prominently in the CBC article). As far as I can tell, so are the Times & Transcript and CBC reporters, "Izzy," and the vast majority of people denouncing Azar on social media. @neocitrاندreams ("white/settler") Tweeted that Azar's comments were "disgusting," tagging Mount Allison in the process. A user named @phishtacos420 ("she/her. intersectional feminism & eco-socialism") expressed her intersectional hope that Azar "will lose her job." Then there's my favourite white-person comment, from @darevha11 ("acknowledging my white privilege & the fact I live on unceded Mi'kmaq territory"), tweeting — you can't make this up — "I am a privileged cis white 50-year-old woman. How is (it) that I understand systemic racism and she doesn't? She needs to be removed immediately!" Topping off the thread, Izzy herself huffed that this immigrant and civil-war survivor has fallen short of Izzy's own "understanding of systemic racism, colonialism and social determinants of health."

As readers can see, I'm straining to maintain the conceit of ironic detachment here — because the absolute gall of these self-styled "intersectionalists" is truly maddening. But also revealing: What these self-sanctifying white "settlers" want isn't diversity at all, but rather for people of all backgrounds and identities to celebrate their own "privileged cis white" moral grandeur. And if a woman such as Azar refuses to play that game, it's under the bus they go. After all, New Brunswick's Izzys have other, equally diverse, more ideologically compliant personnel options they can go with — such as the aforementioned Husoni Raymond, who spiked the football at Azar with a Tweet reading "Lol" and an emoji of someone crying. (Naturally, Raymond works as an "anti-racism project coordinator" at something called the New Brunswick Multicultural Council, which purports to "advocate for a more multicultural and inclusive New Brunswick.")

One important detail here is that Azar has tenure. So ultimately, I'd be surprised if the Izzy-led mob manages to get Azar fired from Mount Allison, even if it does manage to get her thrown off a few advisory councils and generally humiliate her, which seems to be their real goal. The real question is why Azar herself would want to stick around within a white-dominated academic community whose members have now betrayed themselves as the worst kind of hypocrite.

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