

# *Scandalous!:* An Analysis of Administrative Discourse Around the Student Body, and an Examination of Student Resistance at UIUC, January- August 2014

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## Abstract

*This paper examines the various discourses surrounding students during scandals on the University of Illinois campus between January and August of 2014, with a focus on the racist Twitter scandal and the Salaita scandal. Drawing on administrative statements, emails to the campus community, and University documents, this project analyzes the administration's rhetorical deployment of the student body. Further, the project examines the modes of resistance utilized by students and their allies to resist efforts by the administration to shape the narrative of student experience. Making use of critical content analysis with a queer theoretical lens, the paper shows how the discourse of "civility" was used as a neoliberal policing tool by University administration to avoid conversations of larger issues such as race and colonialism.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

My research question began as a much more expansive project. Beginning the semester, my goal was to research the discourse used to depict and construct the UIUC student body during the past decade of administrative scandals and wrongdoings, in an attempt to find a link between the actions of the administration and the rhetoric used by the institution throughout scandal. However, I quickly realized this to be too sizeable a task, given the research and time constraints on my project. The question then shifted towards examining only the most "major" scandals of the past five years at UIUC: the clout/admissions scandal, the scandal that removed University President Michael J. Hogan from office that involved reading the email of faculty (this scandal was, unfortunately, not given a catchy name by which we can briefly refer to it), and the summary unhiring of Steven Salaita. Upon making this research shift, I changed my focus as well, going from simply analyzing the administrative rhetoric during these scandals to examining specifically the way that the administration talked about the student body and used the institution to construct an image of undergraduates and their needs in a particular way. This administrative shaping of the narrative of the

student body is significant, because UIUC, an excellent model of the neoliberal, corporatized University, can then take actions claiming for them to be "in the interest of the students" or "what the students want," and self-justify these actions because they are in control of the narrative.

This focus on administrative control of the discourse surrounding the student body remained prominent in my final research, although the focus continued to narrow. Further narrowing of my topic came not because of the size of the question, but rather from an unsuspected obstacle that arose while I was conducting archival research. The University Archives at UIUC collect data and materials when they it receives new items from departments or offices on campus, and I quickly learned that my particular research question was located too near to the present to have substantive materials regarding the way that the University was portraying undergraduates during the years between 2009 and the present. This led to a final shortening of my topic to examining only the administrative rhetoric around the student body during the year of 2014, and a final project emerged with two major instances of examination: the racist tweeting scandal that took place in January of 2014, and the unhiring of Steven Salaita, which occurred during August of 2014. In its

current form, the project consists of four main questions: What is the relationship between the Twitter scandal of January of 2014, and the scandals resulting from the unhiring of Steven Salaita in August of 2014? How has the changing discourse of “civility” impacted speech on campus? How did the administrative deployment of the student body change since the January 2014 scandal? And, finally, what forms of queer student resistance arose in the aftermath of these scandals?

## II. CIVIL AND UNCIVIL DISCOURSES

The year of scandal began on January 27th, 2014, a particularly cold and windy day near the beginning of the Spring semester, when then-Chancellor Phyllis Wise declined to grant the student body a snow day, despite temperatures being in the negative-twenties. Students took to the social media site Twitter to express their displeasure at having to go to class, and to attack the Chancellor for her decision. The outbursts quickly turned ugly when many students, including women and students of color, began using racist and misogynist epithets at the Chancellor, aggregating them using the hashtag “#FuckPhyllis.” Tweets began to appear using East Asian stereotypes and jokes about the Chancellor, comparing her stance on the snow day to Communist China and likening her to Kim Jong Un (Rega Jha). Subsequently, tweets called the Chancellor a “bitch,” “slut,” and “whore” and threatened violence against her, all for her decision to not call a snow day (Jha). These actions on social media by students are now referred to as the “Twitter Scandal”.

Responses from the University began the following day, beginning with an email entitled “Civility and Respect for an Inclusive Illinois,” sent to all University students by then-Student Body President Damani R. Bolden. In his email, Bolden emphasized the “respect we share for each other and our campus leaders,” extended an apology to Chancellor Wise for the actions of those undergraduates, and professed that “civility, respect, and tolerance must always be shown through our words and actions toward each other and all members of our community” (Bolden). He concluded the email by encouraging students to commit to the principles of Inclusive Illinois, the campus’ diversity and inclusion initiative, including the principle of “challenging my own beliefs, opinions, and viewpoints” (Bolden). On January 29th, two days after the social media attacks on Chancellor Wise, then-Chair of the University of Illinois Board of Trustees, Christopher G. Kennedy, and then-University of Illinois President Robert A. Easter sent out a University MASSMAIL to the entire UIUC

campus community, entitled “Civil Discourse 101,” by . This email directly admonished the student body for their racist and sexist attacks on the Chancellor, saying that they had nationally shamed the University. The email continued, citing political theorist John Locke’s definition of “civil discourse,” and highlighting that it is “expected that... we engage in civil discourse in our treatment of others” (Kennedy and Easter, January 2014). Chancellor Wise herself responded to the attacks with an op-ed published through Inside Higher Ed on the 30th, again restating the need for “civil and respectful discourse” and stating that she “shudder(ed) to think what might happen if that type of vitriol were directed at a vulnerable member of our student body or university community” (Wise, January 2014). Although University officials were quick to state that there would be no consequences for the students who attacked the Chancellor in their tweets, the rhetoric of the responses as a whole, particularly their invocation of “civility” is of utmost importance (Culley).

In this context, we see the rhetoric of civility widely deployed as an admonishment to students, reminding them to speak with the proper respect to one another, and to others on campus. Civility is used as a rebuttal to racism, attempting to imply to students that one can eliminate racism from conversation by simply being polite to one another. Further, in a move emblematic of the neoliberal university culture of “diversity,” and “inclusion,” Inclusive Illinois was invoked multiple times, encouraging students to challenge their own views on race, racism, and hateful speech. Indeed, the Inclusive Illinois Office produced a semester-long series of events, beginning in February of 2014, with the aim of challenging students to confront their views on race (Inclusive Illinois). Simultaneously crucial to recognize is the administrative deployment of the student body in this scenario. Despite several members of the undergraduate population hurling virulent racist and ad feminiam attacks at the campus’s highest-ranking administrator, the University depicted these same students as largely innocent, or at worst, ignorant in the attack. No consequences were levied against the students, and formal responses were rife with statements casting the violent tweets as “teachable moments,” and shifting blame for the content of the tweets away from those who actually produced them (Kennedy and Easter, January 2014). Regardless of the impact or content of their speech, students could not and would not be blamed for their hateful words, and would instead be educated on how to be more “civil,” in order to work towards an inclusive Illinois. However, this softball approach to the discourse of civility would not long retain its gentle touch.

In July of 2014, Steven Salaita, a Palestinian-American scholar who had agreed to take a tenured professorship in the program in American Indian Studies at UIUC began tweeting about the vicious Israeli bombing of Gaza taking place that summer, and the genocidal policies of the Israeli government. His tweets, made throughout the month of July, including critiques on the ubiquitous deployment of charges of anti-Semitism by Zionists, and emphasizing the Israeli bombing campaign's killing of children, were quickly noticed by community members in Champaign-Urbana, and donors to the University (Mackey). Emails from then-UIUC Provost Ilesanmi Adesida to Professors Nicholas Burbules and Joyce Tolliver noted that Chancellor Wise had been "deluged" with protest messages from donors and the community, since news of Salaita's tweets broke in the community newspaper (Scheinman). Chancellor Wise and UIUC Vice President for Academic Affairs Christophe Pierre, facing this mounting pressure, decided to take action. Without consulting with the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, any of the professors who were on the search committee that hired Steven Salaita, or the Chair of the Program in American Indian Studies, Robert Warrior, the Chancellor and Board wrote to Professor Salaita on August 1st, notifying him that he was no longer employed at the University of Illinois, and effectively unhired him from his tenured position (Wise, August 2014). This unfolding of events at the University is now referred to as the "Salaita Scandal" or the "Salaita Case".

When the news of Professor Salaita's unhiring reached students on campus, some twenty days later, the backlash was immediate. The program in American Indian Studies issued a vote of no confidence in Chancellor Wise, and student protests began, including a sit-in outside a Board of Trustees meeting that lasted several hours (Abunimah). The same day, Chancellor Wise sent the students a MASSMAIL communication entitled "The Principles on Which We Stand," in which she outlined the reasoning behind her decision to unhire Steven Salaita. The email contained commitments to academic freedom, repeatedly referred to by Wise as a "bedrock principle" of the academy, and assuring students and faculty that the decision to unhire Professor Salaita was in no way made because of his political speech. Instead, the concerns over Salaita's speech were recast in terms of civility, or, in his case, incivility. Wise went on to write that "we cannot and will not tolerate... personal and disrespectful words or actions that demean and abuse either viewpoints themselves or those who express them," and a belief that her job as Chancellor required her to ensure that debate is possible on all topics, both in and outside of

the classroom in a "scholarly, civil, and productive manner." Concluding the email, Wise asserted that UIUC is built upon a tradition of civility, and noted that "most important, every student must know that every instructor recognizes and values that student as a human being" (Wise, August 2014). Within three hours of the Chancellor's MASSMAIL, Christopher Kennedy and Robert Easter sent another statement, which was co-signed by the entirety of the University system's executive governance, echoing Wise's remarks on civility and affirming confidence in her leadership (Kennedy and Easter, 2014).

In the context of the Salaita case, the discourse of civility underwent a significant shift. Civility here was deployed decisively as a weapon against the speech of Steven Salaita, positioned clearly in an attempt to silence his deep critiques of the Israeli state. Wielded as a censoring tool as well, the rhetoric of civility was used to cast into doubt the teaching ability and scholarship of Steven Salaita, despite a lack of evidence implicating an inability to engage civilly with students. Particularly striking, and telling, are the words of the Chancellor, that "every student must know that every instructor recognizes and values that student as a human being," implying heavily that, because of Salaita's perceived incivility, and his political speech against Israel, he was unable to view Jewish students as human beings (Wise, August 2014).

With that line, the administration fully reconstructed the image of the student body, and recast civility as a method of protecting students from allegedly dangerous, anti-Semitic views. The undergraduate population itself was deployed as a mass of homogenous students, headed by the concerns of Jewish students, collectively terrified of the possibility of having a vehement critic of Israel on campus, and indeed feeling unsafe in his presence. On top of that, students were portrayed as wholly unable to have their views challenged substantively, unable to learn from faculty who disagree with them, and were narratively placed as fully in support of the administration, save for a few disgruntled outliers against members of the faculty. This differs wildly from both discourses in January, where the student body and the rhetoric of civility were put forth in entirely different ways, despite a strikingly similar context.

### III. COMPARATIVE CIVILITY

In the span of nearly seven months, the rhetoric of civility, and the institutional narrative of the student body at UIUC were turned on their head by the same administrative actors that shaped them in the first place. Of most concern are the changes in the

meaning of “civility,” the alteration in the deployment of the student body, the subject position of those students, and the administrative violence of “no consequences,” which created hierarchies of acceptable racism on campus. Yet all of these changes hinge on the drastic shift, not solely of the discourse on civility, but the deployment of the student body, as well. Were the narrative of the student body to hold true, the collective population of students had gone in seven months from forgiven, irresponsible aggressors to fragile, unable-to-be-challenged individuals, who cannot withstand an encounter with a professor whose opinion differs from their own. Yet there is a grim irony in the claim that students could not be “safe” or “comfortable” if exposed to Salaita’s views, when their own were arguably much worse. It could be argued that one forfeits the right to label the social-media-based political views of a faculty member of color “uncivil” after hurling racist and misogynist slurs over the same social media platform. The shift in discourse was created entirely on an administrative level, creating an act of administrative violence against marginalized students, particularly students of color, and a sense of acceptability around sexism and gender-based attacks.

The administration’s deployment of the discourse of civility in conjunction with an insistence that no punishment would be meted out to students who tweeted personal threats at Chancellor Wise created a hierarchy of what kinds of threats and speech would be deemed acceptable by the University. This clear administrative violence is a replica of the institutional violence discussed by Dean Spade in his foundational book *Normal Life*, when biopolitical institutions of the state drive people of color, low income people, and queer people into spaces of oppression by legislating them fewer life chances. To understand the administrative violence of the University’s creation of acceptable racism, we must first understand the mechanisms of neoliberal narratives of diversity and inclusion that allow for the burden of administrative violence to be shifted to already oppressed groups of students. The Inclusive Illinois initiative and Chancellor Wise’s scheduled “listening and learning tour” of the campus following the unhiring function as the foundation of an institutional bulletproof vest for accusations of racism. As Sara Ahmed argues, how can the University be accused of creating a hierarchy of racism or violence when the University is committed to equality and diversity (116)? Yet, these commitments and initiatives, like Inclusive Illinois, are non-performative commitments. In performative commitments, the language of the commitment serves the purpose of taking action, and making an

actual commitment to do something, and then bringing to reality the commitment which they name. However, in a non-performative commitment, such as the diversity and inclusion statements of many universities, including UIUC, the language and repetition of the commitment serve the purpose of making a commitment to diversity and inclusion, without actually bringing into being any sort of action on that commitment. In other words, the repetition of the commitment itself serves as the actual action upon that commitment, freeing the committing body (the University) from having to actually take real steps and take real action beyond token gestures towards furthering diversity, hence “no consequences for students” (117).

The fact that the administration failed, and continues to fail, to take real action in furthering the goal of diversity, or simply takes token actions towards that goal is useful to the critics of the University as well, because, as Ahmed points out, if the administration is saying what it is doing (or what it is supposed to be doing), then we, as critics, can show that they are not actually doing what they are saying (121). The rhetoric of civility took a similar turn as the deployment of the student body, once used as a means of challenging student racism in January, “civility” quickly became a tool of the administration to silence challenges of student views from faculty.

The discourse of civility took a similar turn; once used as a means of challenging student racism in January, “civility” quickly became a tool of the administration to silence challenges of student views from faculty. While this change was much clearer, and easier to identify in the MASSMAILs themselves, the shift in the rhetoric of civility played a major role in facilitating the narrative change in the image of the student body. Civility was the operative force, allowing the administration to cast the formerly aggressive students as a collective body who had “learned their lesson,” so to speak, and now conducted themselves civilly and with respect. Therefore, when the label of “uncivil” was applied to Steven Salaita, he was immediately cast in opposition to the students, as not only a personal threat to their comfort, but also a de-civilizing force, threatening to return a lack of civil speech to the student body.

This portrayal has a twofold effect, particularly considering Salaita’s hiring in the program in American Indian Studies. First, the casting of Salaita as uncivil reinforces the settler colonial origins and motivations of the University, and positions the administration in direct opposition to the faculty, the mission, and the scholarship of the program in American Indian Studies. By casting Salaita as an uncivil, or savage, influence on the student body, the justification for his unhiring was

made implicitly clear, and the program in American Indian Studies was further damaged—a boon for the administration, as the faculty of this program are a site of continual challenge to the racist and settler colonial policies of the University. This makes the hierarchy of racism created by the narrative manipulation of the student body by the administration strikingly clear: the University tacitly endorses racism against people of color, even if they are administrators, and will go so far as to stealthily endorse and promote racism against indigenous peoples, be they Native American, or Palestinian.

On the opposite end of this hierarchy is perceived racism, particularly that charged as racism to deflect critiques of interests that mirror the University's own, for the University has little reason to invest time, effort, or endorse scholarship that seeks to dismantle settler colonialism, white supremacy, or cisheteropatriarchy. This realization leads into the second purpose of the changing discourse of civility: enacting fear in other faculty, similarly aligned to Professor Salaita. According to Roderick Ferguson, the kinds of power that this rhetorical shift attempted to exert directly over the American Indian Studies Program is evidence of a form of violent institutional coercion, aimed at subduing the activities and the faculty of American Indian Studies so that the administration does not have to do the work of “controlling” them directly (31-35). The work of civility is impactful in that way: it forces the faculty to either shift their efforts to leaving sites of administrative control (and indeed only two faculty who were in the Program in American Indian Studies remain with their lines in that program as of the writing of this paper), and away from the project of creating spaces of resistance within the University without putting themselves at risk. The unhiring of Steven Salaita is positioned as a warning to faculty, while the administration seeks to control their speech with the rhetoric of civility. The main ability for creating sites of resistance then falls to the students.

#### IV. METHODOLOGY

My research methods consist of conducting a close reading of University statements, and mass communications, and a student statement. Using queer theory as a primary analytic lens, I conducted a critical content analysis on my materials, drawing on the theoretical works of Cathy Cohen, Roderick Ferguson, Sara Ahmed, and Dean Spade to inform my analyses. Given the nature of my research, the subjects of my analysis consisted of documents, rather than individuals or interviews. These documents consist of four University MASSMAILs,

two per scandal, sent during late January and late August of 2014, respectively, one article from Inside Higher Ed by former UIUC Chancellor Phyllis M. Wise, in which she responded to the racist tweets from the January scandal, and student statement made by the student activist coalition #UIStudents4Salaita on the statements made by the administration during meetings with the group. Finally, my documents include several of the tweets that could be said to have caused the scandals themselves. Compiled in two different news articles, these tweets are a vastly important piece of these scandals, as their content informed both the discourse and the response of the administration.

Through a close reading and examination of these documents, I will demonstrate how the University constructed an image of the student body which fit their needs. Further, I will demonstrate how the University politically deployed the discourse of “civility” as a policing tool, and how students utilized queer political resistance in opposition to this administrative deployment of their narrative and imposition of speech codes.

#### V. CONCLUSION

We must conclude with discussion of the students once more, and how the administrative use of their narrative allows for students to access queer modes of resistance against this narrative, and the discourse of civility. This queer resistance comes in the form of applying queer political resistance to the neoliberal, settler colonial, and racist structures in the intellectual tradition of Cathy Cohen (437-465). In the context of the Salaita case, this queer resistance came in the form of an activist student coalition named #UIStudents4Salaita. Naming themselves in using the tagging style of Twitter, this group, led by a core of seven students (four graduate, and three undergraduate students), released a statement following a meeting with Chancellor Wise on September 1st, and organized multiple protests, events, and rallies until November of 2014. The student statement called out the administration's manipulation of student body narratives, and the violence of the discourse of civility, particularly the unhiring of Steven Salaita. The statement served the purpose of creating a clear counter-discourse to the administrative narrative of the student body, and presenting an open resistance to the regime of fear that civility imposed upon the faculty. Clearly emphasized in the statement were Chancellor Wise's contradictions with her earlier statements, and a clear callout of the manipulation of the rhetoric of civility. #UIStudents4Salaita stated, “we feel that the Chancellor is strategically using the rhetoric of

protection and safety to justify this decision, which in effect makes us more vulnerable to ignorance, racism, and intolerance by not honoring academic freedom or supporting American Indian Studies' (AIS) expertise in the field, their governance, or their hiring decision" (#UIStudents4Salaita). Clearly marking what they saw as sites of administrative violence, the coalition pulled back the metaphorical curtain on the actions of the administration, and exposed the true implications of the administration's speech, actions, and neoliberal practices.

This student group's resistance played a key role in the disruption of the administration's attempt to cleanly sever Steven Salaita from the University, and brought an intense spotlight onto the additional hardships that his firing, and the conduct of the University brought to marginalized students in underappreciated departments and programs, like American Indian Studies. Most importantly, it denied the University a complete hegemonic narrative of the student body as fearful of Salaita's views. The importance of denying this narrative cannot be understated. With a counter-narrative in place, #UIStudents4Salaita was able to cause disruptions to the administrative process, and the formal process of finalizing Salaita's unhiring. Student activism and resistance received major news coverage, and created a platform for dissenting student voices to the administration to be heard (Jodi Cohen). Yet aside from the importance of the disruption, the creation of counter-hegemonic narratives, and the exposure of violences, the queer resistance of #UIStudents4Salaita accomplished one more thing. Their resistance showed that the only individuals truly capable of controlling and creating narratives of the student body are the students themselves.

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