

Civility and Its Discontents: Sexuality, Race, and the Lure of Beautiful Manners

Cris Mayo

University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Let us never cease from thinking — what is this “civilisation” in which we find ourselves?
What are these ceremonies? Why should we take part in them?¹

After viewing “It’s Elementary: Teaching About Lesbian and Gay Issues in School” I asked my very quiet students if they were uncomfortable. I had only been in the South a short period of time and was more used to the titters and giggles of Northern discomfort. One student replied to my earnest wonderment, “We wouldn’t tell you if we were, we’ve been trained to smile through everything.” Later, in a different class, discussing the problem of racist harassment in public schools and the passivity of white response, I asked the pre-service teachers who had been reading and discussing the problem of racism for weeks what they would do in such a situation. A number of white pre-service teachers agreed that they would ignore racist harassment — some of them were afraid it was not “their” struggle and their input would be unwanted by students of color, others were afraid to say the wrong words and thus be racist themselves. I raise these examples because I used to be almost convinced that saying to students “I don’t want to change your minds, I just want you to act civilly or act as professionals” was enough to start them questioning their own biases and privileges. Like Aristotle, I hoped this kind of action would become habitual and thence lead to changing their minds in the end. But having seen civility as disabling change and having noticed a relative boom in race etiquette publishing, I am now more convinced that civility itself is a barrier to anti-bias education and not a subtle way to lure the intransigent and unwilling in.

These “civil” student responses, of course, do not arise from nowhere. School policies, too, embrace civility over political critique. No doubt this is because schools tend to be fairly conservative institutions and because schools are always concerned with how students get along with one another, some forms of multiculturalism are closely bound up with efforts to minimize intergroup conflict by improving interpersonal relationships. This effort is closely tied to instilling or cultivating a particular sort of civility, often through student codes of conduct and increasingly through character education. In addition, a variety of forms of anti-bias education are now being included in school assemblies, after school programs, and summer intensive experiences. In part, this collision of civil rights, multicultural education, and changing demographics (or increased awareness of demographics) is bringing schools further into the role of initiating students into civil society. Increasingly too, as cynicism regarding legal remedies to address discrimination has increased, educators have turned to more attitudinal approaches to ending bias. A new form of civility is thus upon us, explicitly more intent on curing social ills through mannered response than political challenge.

While I do *believe* that sharing experiences and putting faces on discrimination is a crucial part of any political project whose aim is social justice, I am concerned

at the extent to which personal knowledge is increasingly substituted for political reconstruction. I think at the heart of this problem is the conservative function of civility and so the task of this essay will be to examine and analyze civility from a variety of perspectives and analyze each aspect of civility. The first problem — and promise of civility — is that of distance. The second problem and promise is that of obligation and its attendant social distinction. Civility's third difficulty is its underlying hostility. I will end by suggesting that as much as civility may help us to encourage the cultivation of civil society, incivility too has its uses in reconsideration of problematic practices. By giving pause, the disruption entailed by incivility provides room for concerted reconstruction of social practices, identities, and spaces.

As diversity and fractiousness continue to define the social world, educators and theorists grapple with the difficulty of interacting with others without recourse to violence or oppressive behavior. Civility appears to be a promising way to guide those interactions as it seems to smooth social intercourse and foster respectful dialogue. As redress to school violence is increasingly sought through individualized conflict resolution, and anti-bias programs are called "leadership" seminars, civility finds a new place in an individualized response to difficult social discussions. Indeed, even if one sees civil society as a vexed place whose entanglements need untangling, the lures of smooth civil interaction appear to solve some of the difficulties of diverse opinions and commitments. In short, civility appears to its advocates to be a way of interacting that turns individual interest into group interest, enabling people to move across barriers of difference into common cause.

DISTANCE AND THE PUSH INTO PRIVACY

While the purpose of civility is to enable relationships across barriers not usually confronted in personal relationships, civility works precisely because it maintains the distance it initially appears to bridge. Civility, in other words, is not the way people build close relationships. Instead it is a way people can maintain civil and personal distance in order to appear to abrogate the very social and political distance that poses the problem for their relationships.

Civility is therefore a form of social discrimination; its practice is predicated on the ability to make distinctions. It entails enacting those distinctions, to the detriment of the purportedly uncivil, in the support of accepted practices and valuations. In other words, rather than seeing civility as opposed to discrimination, civility can be seen as a central activity of discrimination. This interpretation of "civility" may help to explain the shortcomings of civil tolerance and generic respect as antidotes to discrimination. The discourse of civility asserts that teachers, students and administrators ought to be kind, respectful and tolerant of everyone without having to specify to whom they are being kind, respectful, and tolerant. This practice serves to neglect issues that appear to be in and of themselves uncivil or distasteful. If civility requires leaving unspoken things that would disturb placid social interactions, the practice of civility will necessarily leave out those whose presence disrupts the bias that presumes their absence. Here I am thinking specifically of sexual minority youth, though the problem of civility's distance is not limited to them. For

instance, advocacy of generic, unspecified respect leads civil people to presume that all is well if their civil outlook means they do not and cannot perceive overt acts committed against sexual minority youth. Sexual minority youth themselves recognize that civility and tolerance privatize and remove their specific experiences of homophobia and place them in a double bind. If they complain about homophobia they are uncivil, because they state an explicit complaint thereby violating the social practice of civility. By complaining, they are making an issue of something that ought to, in polite society, be ignored.

This kind of distant civility moves to the private sphere anything that impedes smooth social action. Students as non-acting, non-feeling bodies are allowed to be present, but the actions and feelings that define their identities are not. This is most familiar as “love the sinner, hate the sin,” a phrase which does little to encourage people to feel that they are being respected, since, of course, they are still defined by their sin, whether they are actually doing it or not. Setting aside for the moment the response that all people are sinners (which never explains why the handy phrase only comes up when discussing sexual minorities), this discourse does two things which relegate sexual minority students to inappropriateness. One, it *does* name them through their sin, despite the fact that the sin itself is not exactly what they are “doing” at school. Two, it attempts to indicate the opposite: that sinners do exist as separate from their sin. The extent to which they are separate is the extent to which they are loved. But if we go back to point one, that seems an empty promise, along the lines of “pull yourself up by your bootstraps,” an impossibility couched as an imperative. The imperative is that in order to be loved one must not be oneself. Hence the distancing action of civility: we will only interact with you on the terms that you are not actually present.

In short, in an effort to minimize conflict, the discourse of civility ignores even the most blatant conflict. I want here to share some information gathered from pre-service teachers, former students and pre-service administrators in a needs assessment survey prepared for our local chapter of the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Educators’ Network because it demonstrates the differential views of civility in public schools in concrete ways. Sexual minority students consistently reported witnessing or experiencing more harassment in general and more harassment from faculty/staff. All groups did acknowledge in large numbers that such harassment and violence occurred. They diverged most strongly in what was being done about it and what to do about it, with over a quarter of faculty/staff respondents indicating that their school policy already protects sexual minority youth and only half of those respondents (one eighth) indicating that more ought to be done. The other eighth indicated a dislike of sexual minority students and a desire to see them not specified as a protected class. Sexual minority students themselves, in contrast, knew that school regulations did not specify protection from homophobia and deeply desired more active, stated advocacy on the part of teachers, staff, and administration.

Non-sexual minority students, teachers, and administrators were more likely to presume rules were already in place and that enough was being done. One administrator explained in a private conversation that he felt his school already addressed

the needs of sexual minority students because it taught students to respect everyone. When asked if his school could specify sexual minority students as a protected class he responded that since homosexuality was a sin that would not be possible. Another teacher explained that although he personally supported the rights of sexual minority students he also felt responsible for explaining to them the kind of harassment they would face from peers. He explained that when he had a “heinously non-conformist kid” in class, he would take said kid out of class and explain that his/her non-conformism was going to lead to violence and so he/she should stop behaving in a provocative way. In other words, this avowed liberal was doing the work of conservatives in advance, seeking to smooth the social fabric before conflict could rend it and, of course, in the process insulting and degrading the student he was intent on protecting.

Just as civility maintains distance in interactions, so too school conduct policies may appear to protect and respect all students, without actually naming specific protections that may be necessary. Most faculty/staff and students surveyed report hearing anti-gay harassment but most also report ignoring it, some for fear of making too big an issue of it that would in the end harm the student more. They maintained a civil silence about discord while recognizing that discord might escalate, their acknowledgement stands side by side with inaction. They recognize that sexual minority students are actually present, but do not encourage advocacy or an alteration of social and school practices that hold those students distant.

Still, the distance maintained by civility may encourage association and justice, which explains why political theorists have increasingly turned to civility to find a way around fracturing public space. While potentially problematic, distance may enable the kind of reflection and desituatedness that is necessary for considerations that go beyond personal interests. As John Keane argues, “Civil societies enable their members to see through civil society — to label it *this* society, *our* society” and thus engage in reflection on the practices and status of that society.² As this reflection requires capacities, the turn toward dialogic political relations has suggested viewing the citizen “not as a rational chooser but *as a talker*.”³ Mark Kingwell contends that this turn to civility necessitates reclaiming civility as the capacity necessary to engage in this potentially difficult talk. In contrast to Stephen L. Carter who contends civility is “pre-political,”⁴ Kingwell sees “justice *as* civility” and argues that “civility is indeed a basic civic virtue, but one primarily focused on political conversation... I have in mind the idea of vibrant and political engaged set of conversational practices, all of them governed by a commitment to self-restraint and sensitivity.”⁵ Following Richard Rorty, his definition hinges on civility requiring us *not* to say all we would like to say. “If we cannot in some sense abstract from moral disagreement, we can never isolate principles of justice that *both* take moral differences seriously *and* refrain from particular commitments enough to justify themselves across those differences.”⁶

Kingwell contends that this form of civility allows us all to present ourselves in a thicker manner, but does not allow this thickness to pervade our justifications, only our introduction of issues. Thus civility allows us to bring any issue before our fellow

talkers, but does not allow us to justify them via private commitments that are not likely to be held by them. He suggests that this practice makes us “all critics and therapists of justice and our fellow citizens.”⁷ In this capacity, we essentially judge when a fellow talker has raised something that properly belongs in the private. Unfortunately a major difficulty with this form of civility folds back into an age old problem of civility: it polices what is appropriate for the public. This tendency is continued in Benjamin Barber’s argument that while inclusivity is a good thing, “Talk that is too inclusive results in babble, democratic but perilous to community.”⁸

Of course one person’s babble is another’s central political concern. The hope in civility’s distance is that distance will enable a kind of reflection that allows babble to gain sense. But another form of distance that civility has more difficulty with is the presumptive “we.” As Virginia Woolf avers in *Three Guineas*, the project of patriotism, as well as the call to prevent war, each presume a similarity of situation. “But the educated man’s sister — what does patriotism mean to her? Has she the same reasons for being proud of England, for defending England? Has she been ‘greatly blessed’ in England?”⁹ If support of women’s colleges means a continuation of practices as they were then constituted, in support of a particular notion of “we” that maintained a purportedly civil society, Woolf suggests (and then withdraws) that her proffered guinea be used for: “Rags. Petrol. Matches.”¹⁰ Woolf’s discussion parallels a similar debate over the use of “we” to invite classes or groups into a sense of community. While some students agreed that “we” made them feel like they were all “in it together,” others expressed suspicion at the too ready use of “we.” They contended that rather than an invitation, “we” stood as a normative claim. If you are part of “we,” you are with the right people. If you dissent, you are in the wrong.

OBLIGATION AND SOCIAL DISTINCTION: THE GIFT OF PLACE

The second promise as well as problem of civility is that of obligation. Like the practice of gift giving, civil acts are sometimes intended to initialize a relationship of repeated obligations. Those with superior status may use civility to confirm their superior status. To illustrate the tensions and obligations generated by civility, let me use an extended example from a class discussion of cross-racial expressions of civility. I suggested that civility acts like a gift that expects reciprocation that essentially puts the recipient into an uncomfortable form of debt. One black woman replied that one of her friends, also a black woman, did not like returning to the South because of the constant demand for friendliness, particularly on the part of white women. This friend of our classmate wondered, “what do these white women want?” A Southern white woman countered that those smiles were her only way to get to know someone across the racial divide. Discussion then turned to the way in which civil engagement is initialized — and can only be initialized — by those with more social power (this is not to suggest that those with less social power cannot initialize engagement but only that those interactions are, by definition, uncivil because they disrupt the power-based expectations of social interaction). As such, then, civility is a demand for further knowledge brought on by those whose social power is essentially responsible for the divide that needs to be crossed. Civility is thus a mechanism for covering social power and social distinctions, as well as an antidote

to the problems caused by that social power. A seeming demand for reciprocated civility covers its power in at least two related ways. First, it covers over the social divide by acting personally across a structural boundary. Second, it re-enacts the social relationship of dominance and subordination by making a demand on a subordinate person to engage in a personal relationship.

Eventually, the white woman asserted that she would continue to smile and encourage black women to be her friends because that was what she wanted. In what has become the stuff of departmental legend and continued conversation, another black woman replied, "It's all about you isn't it?" I think part of the moral of this story is that some people have too much agency without enough regard for the social structure that allows them the ability to act. Certainly the above engagement points to the problems that attend dominant people who attempt to undo their dominance through a quest for knowledge of the other, especially when the other does not want to be known in that way. And I think this extended example points to a trend toward personalizing differences as it becomes the mark of a cultured person to understand difference and the mark of an uncultured rube to be prejudiced. This interaction also demonstrates the degree to which civility, as a discourse of *social* engagement, levels *political* differences and attempts to turn the focus from critique to assuaging personal discomfort. In short, engagements across differences are therapeutized through the demand for civility.

Recently, Lauren Berlant has suggested that we are in the midst of the development of "the intimate public sphere" where conservative anger over social justice claims attempts to level all difference since difference has been thrust upon them.

The voices that predominate in this new intimate public sphere are "white and male and heterosexual people of all classes who are said to sense that they have lost the respect of their culture and with it the freedom to feel unmarked."¹¹ In part, civility helps this leveling process by facilitating conversations that at least initially appear to indicate, through their measured give and take, that white resentment and black justice claims are all of a piece. Certainly they are related, but because white resentment potentially refigures the victim of racism as the self-absorbed white person, the problem with what appears to be civil give and take are clear. The disproportionate burden of leveled identities is obscured through the demand for fair, smooth, and even-handed engagement.

One aspect of this turn toward intimate and cultural (as opposed to political) differences is a current trend in newspapers and trade publications of what are essentially "multicultural manners" conduct manuals. Norine Dresser's column for the *Los Angeles Times*, Bruce A. Jacobs's *Race Manners: Navigating the Minefield Between Black and White Americans*,¹² Lena Williams's *It's the Little Things: The Everyday Interactions that Get Under the Skins of Blacks and Whites*,¹³ as well as some of Judith Martin/Miss Manners's work all confront the interplay of interpersonal misunderstandings embedded in social distinctions and social injustice. And all of the above attempt to negotiate not just the divide between races, but the relationship between the personal and the political.

Jacobs's *Race Manners* does repeatedly warn that his suggestions on conduct should not be taken for substitutes for political action to dismantle structural inequality. Rather, like Greensboro's large scale use of human relations courses in 1971 to address racism while desegregating schools,¹⁴ he argues that manners can enhance a political struggle that by itself cannot address personal interactions and whose political gains may be impeded by a lack of personal interaction.¹⁵ But much of Jacobs's advice entails moving the "time" of civility fully to the present. He suggests that "casting whites as enemies and personalizing the hostility with a tone of 'this is what you did to us,' only fuels white defensiveness. They know whether they admit it or not, that their ancestors did something terribly wrong. They also know it happened before they were born."¹⁶ He suggests "how to guarantee, if you're black, that a white American will want to turn on you without having heard you" is to "flog white people whenever you can for ancestral guilt."¹⁷ Each of these suggestions appears to place the time of civility in the present interaction, almost as if the rest of history was not differentially bound up in that present. Jacobs is not consistent on this point. He also argues that racial discord is born of a rage that is "like a heavy metal... that long ago leached in the viscera of black and white Americans on Virginia slave docks and has been part of us ever since."¹⁸ But his ambivalence on this issue points to a problem in cross racial civility: the time of civility is not always the same for each party.

HOSTILITY AND EXTORTED FRIENDSHIP

The third problem of civility is its underlying hostility, the return of the repressed. While the seeming intention of civility is to minimize hostility and violence, hence the recent interest in it as an antidote to violent civil unrest and war, it is clear that when competing justice claims meet, something has to give. By acknowledging distance by recourse to civility and yet by appearing to do nothing to end that distance, civility may protect the damaging status quo. In addition, the new civility that predicates itself on the ability and the desire to "get to know the other" installs a personal relationship in the place of a justice relationship.

This is one of the problems of the "intimate public sphere" Berlant discusses: it cultivates a personal quest for knowledge and an appetite for relationships that seek to overcome actively the political distances without actually altering the material conditions that structure those differences. To know another as a prerequisite for acting in the service of justice is an unfair burden to the other who may not want to be known or at least not be known in the paradigm of knowing they are called into by therapeutic forms of civil engagement (like sleep aways, retreats, any sort of depoliticized story sharing). Here I want to argue against the function of the "getting to know you" story, where the dominant group passively consumes the other's story in a setting that does not demand anything other than a personalized response to the responsibility for that story. The kind of hostility implicit in this civility is one where the demand for the "story of the other" appears to be payment in advance for better interaction. The story is extorted and is also itself part of a strategy to personalize, and thus level, social inequalities. A personal relationship thus demanded as an indication of civility may cover a structural relationship predicated on inequality and hostility that remains unchallenged.

INCIVILITY AS AN ANTIDOTE TO DISTANCE, OBLIGATION, AND HOSTILITY

The exchange of personal stories, in the hopes of nurturing civil society, has a potentially unfortunate effect of ignoring the social structures that make ignorance of those stories appear passive. As Eve Sedgwick argues, though, ignorance is an activity.¹⁹ In a society rife with social distinctions that are at once explicit and unacknowledged, the dogged persistence in ignoring them needs to be seen not as the lack of knowledge but as a particular kind of knowledge. One way that form of ignorance as knowledge gains credibility is through civility. As long as one appears sincere in one's ignorance, in other words, one expects to be forgiven and nurtured into knowledge. If one is culpable for the persistence of one's ignorance then civil interaction may be difficult because those interactions are no longer the innocent stuff of getting to know one another, but rather the calling into question of why one is pretending not to know. Incivility interrupts the active form of ignorance by reminding its bearer that they do already know, that that knowledge has been repressed in order to avoid muddying civil interactions or in order to avoid responsibility for privilege. Civility installs a personal relationship and a personal examination of identity into an interaction that is largely orchestrated by structural and social identity positions. By so doing, civility obscures the degree to which questions of interaction are not the stuff of individualized manners, but rather the problems of politics and history.

Incivility as I conceive of it is not a blatant disregard for the feelings of people, but rather a way to remind all in an encounter that there is historical and political background that structures their perceptions and interactions. I am not making a claim that we should turn to discomfort for discomfort's sake but rather that in approaching questions of bias, diversity, and difference through the manufacture of "safe spaces," we may neglect examining for whom those spaces are safe and why. Further, we may neglect the potential for disruption of patterns of dominance and comfort to bring students, teachers, and community members into a more public, contentious, political relationship. Because patterns of social power vary with context, it is conceivable that over the course of many interactions people will derive the comforts of dominance at different times. I would hope that having disrupted the placatory structure of civility in one instance would enable someone to recognize when their own strategic use of civility was being called into question. That anyone could be called to account, not only for their good intention, but for the power and privilege they inadvertently derive from a particular status quo complicates and opens to scrutiny the multiple patterns of power.

Civility may be a precondition for democratic decision making, ensuring calm membership in the process, but so too is incivility a precondition for democratic decision making in that it disturbs the placid surface of already existing problematic relations to the extent that it tells us that problems cannot be ignored. Incivility is sufficiently disruptive that sedimented practices can be shattered and the necessity of installing new, substantively different ones are clear. The civility advocated even by its more thoughtful adherents still bears within it the desire to have disruptions civilized in such a way that they become productive. But since their end is not always

apparent prior to negotiation, that productivity too would be problematic — premature and too instrumental.

If the capacity to be civil is important for justice, so too is the practice of incivility. Though incivility is not as firmly lodged in public, political encounters as its cousin civil disobedience (which is directed at particular laws rather than at seemingly peripheral practices), incivility points out the limiting problems of practices of civility that constrain and impede nascent justice claims. Incivility is an attempt to distance relations from the dulling aspects of civility, to bring moral proximity closer by disidentifying with practices that impede the relations that civility may intend to start.

If incivility gives pause, those pauses draw attention to the silences and active ignorances that preceded the pause. By raising hackles, incivility points to the obscured play of power that previously kept hackles down. Done correctly — and this is a difficulty — incivility entails spreading the social discomfort to everyone, the very discomfort usually borne by the hackle-raisers. Rather than mending the distance between social actors, incivility can bring the distance into focus emphasizing the relationality of terms of identity as well as structural power imbalances that bring particular tensions to that relationality. This is of course closely related to pointing out privilege, but also adds in a caution that there are fits and starts to how privilege functions and which identity/social position might be salient in which context. Thus, incivility, like its cousin civility, requires that we all become highly adept at reading the social, not to make distinctions that maintain our social and political power, but to become more aware of the play of power in every context in order to examine and address it, not to ignore it, smooth it over, or soothe it with a story. This means educational spaces will not be comforting but they may eventually be just.

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1. Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1938), 63.
 2. John Keane, *Civil Society: Old Images, New Visions* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).
 3. Mark Kingwell, *A Civil Tongue: Justice, Dialogue, and the Politics of Pluralism* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 6.
 4. Stephen L. Carter, *Civility: Manner, Morals, and the Etiquette of Democracy* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), xi.
 5. Kingwell, *A Civil Tongue*, 26.
 6. *Ibid.*, 41.
 7. *Ibid.*, 45.
 8. Benjamin Barber, *A Place for Us: How to Make Society Civil and Democracy Strong* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), 117.
 9. Woolf, *Three Guineas*, 9.
 10. *Ibid.*, 36. Woolf does give a guinea to the rebuilding fund, having decided the private home a worse alternative than higher education.
 11. Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 2.
 12. Bruce A. Jacobs, *Race Manners: Navigating the Minefield Between Black and White Americans* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1999).

13. Lena Williams, *It's the Little Things: The Everyday Interactions that Get Under the Skins of Blacks and Whites* (New York: Harcourt, 2000).
14. William Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 225.
15. Jacobs, *Race Manners*, 141.
16. *Ibid.*, 78.
17. *Ibid.*, 68.
18. *Ibid.*, 140.
19. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).