

Agent Provocateuse

Audrey Thompson
University of Utah

I am a lesbian minding my own business in a gay bar when I am approached by an overtly, provocatively straight man who flirts with me. In a “heterosexual panic,” I violently attack or even murder him. Can I claim as my rationale that he provoked me? I cannot. Yet if a straight man, fearing a gay man’s advances, attacks or murders the other man, he *can* claim “homosexual panic” as a mitigating factor. The appeal to homosexual panic allows the attacker to intimate that the real offender is his victim, who provoked him into violence. “Judicially,” says Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “a ‘homosexual panic’ defense for a person (typically a man) accused of antigay violence implies that his responsibility for the crime was diminished” because he perceived his victim as sexually threatening — whether or not the latter made any sexual overtures.¹

When the high school principal pulls “heinously non-conformist” gay students out of class to warn them that their “non-conformism [is] going to lead to violence,” what explains the implied threat in this civic advice (always offered in the passive voice)? In my response to Cris Mayo’s fascinating essay, I want to focus on how the epithet “provocative” (meaning non-conformist, troublemaking, disturbing) works in mainstream thinking. Sexually, the term often means “asking for trouble.” Gay men or straight women who dress provocatively are not supposed to be surprised if a straight man attacks them; supposedly, they had it coming to them. Racially, “provocative” means “stirring up trouble.” Like Booker T. Washington, who described “the agitation of questions of social equality” as “artificial forcing,” many whites consider talk about racism to be inflammatory.² Indeed, racism itself may be understood as something actively stirred up by people of color *against* the best efforts of well-meaning whites. “Last year we hired two black teachers... but it didn’t solve any problems,” a white teacher explains. “They tended to stick together, always ate lunch together and made no effort to include any white teachers. They actually made things worse by polarizing some of the black parents against the teachers (whites).”³ Racial trouble, on this view, does not describe a pre-existing racialized situation. Nor does it refer to defensive reactions to people of color by whites. Rather, trouble comes into being when someone — the race agitator, the slave insurrectionist, the mixer, the agent provocateur — chooses to *make* trouble, changing the status quo.

The conventional use of “provocative” to signal an interruption of the norm is illustrated in this passage by Marilyn Cochran-Smith:

The idea that racism is something that all of us have inevitably learned simply by living in a racist society is profoundly provocative....Perhaps even more provocative is the position that part of our responsibility as teachers and teacher educators is to struggle along with others in order to *unlearn* racism.⁴

Passing lightly over the tendency of academics to cite themselves when pointing to *really* important research, I want to draw your attention to the oddity of the initial

claim — the claim that the idea that we learn racism by living in a racist society is “profoundly provocative.” This was old news long before 1989. It is *provocative* only if one starts from the assumption that all is well and can be kept that way if no one says or does anything upsetting.

Because all is not well, Mayo makes a case for the person who serves as the catalyst for change — for what might be called the agent provocateuse. In contrast to the agent provocateur, who *makes* trouble, the agent provocateuse *facilitates* trouble, removing the civil barriers that protect the privileged from having to think about racism, homophobia, heterosexism, sexism, ethnocentrism, xenophobia, and class bias.⁵ Facilitating trouble is not merely a question of pointing out the obvious. Unlike the child in “The Emperor Has No Clothes,” the agent provocateuse is not pointing to something everyone else recognizes but politely pretends not to see. Rather, she insists on showing people what they are refusing to see. “Incivility interrupts the active form of ignorance,” says Mayo. Whereas in the fairy tale the troubler is an innocent child who, not understanding adult lies, tells the truth, for Mayo the troubler is someone who does understand willed ignorance and will not play nice. In sabotaging civility, she practices a kind of civil disobedience. Unlike civil disobedience, though, “incivility entails spreading the social discomfort to everyone.”

Mayo’s project is to expose the protection of privilege inherent in the belief that all public interactions can and should be handled without offense or unruliness. Challenging civility’s hegemony does not mean eliminating all forms of civility from social interaction. Specific forms of respect and courtesy may continue to represent important values (though not necessarily the main values) to be brought into play in particular situations. It is not civility as local value but civility as discourse or worldview that Mayo challenges. Civility as worldview insists on non-provocativeness as the condition for all respectful public interaction. Because the civil person always puts others at their ease, I must couch my disturbing race, ethnicity, sexuality, and/or gender — or civic passion about any of the above — in terms that do not feel threatening to those who set the rules. Victoria Davion says, “I learned how to tone down behaviors that might be considered stereotypically Jewish around those who might find me too loud or pushy.”⁶ If I am a large, well-educated, heterosexual black man, I would be wise to speak softly and refrain from making any sudden moves. If I am a lesbian academic, I may want to temper my scholarly acuity with self-deprecating humor. The rule is that no one should feel excluded or intimidated.

Civility, as Mayo observes, “polices what is appropriate to the public,” relegating the messy stuff to the private sphere. At a diversity colloquium I attended recently, the question was posed, “What do you say to the white student who objects to the term ‘people of color’ on the grounds that it is divisive, since we are all people of color?” Cutting off the tentative comments about racism that followed this question, several white audience members insisted on a student-centered reading of the remark. “How do we know what she was *really* thinking, unless we ask her?” said one person. “We shouldn’t pass judgment on our students,” added another. “Most

people are not racist. We don't know her true motives." Although we (and I leave it up to you who "we" are) are supposed to call such objections "well-meaning," they are in fact defensive. They *count* as civil, but they have the familiar menace of passive aggression; they are meant to shut down a discussion that could get out of hand. And in fact this particular conversation seemed to be at a dead-end until a professor of color gently pointed out that while it was true that he didn't know what this student's motives were, the actual comment was one he had heard more times than he could count. He wasn't sure that he *needed* to know the motives for student comments that refused discussions of difference. Although mild in tone, this redirection of the discourse was "uncivil" insofar as it rejected the psychological standard according to which all talk of racism is speculative — a standard according to which white people's racial intentions are to be considered "good" unless someone specifically says that her intentions are rotten.

If talk about racism counts as provocative even in meetings convened specifically to discuss racism, talk about sexism, heterosexism, racism, and ethnocentrism in other settings is strictly off-limits. "That's an important issue," we say, "and one we all care about, but this is neither the time nor the place to bring it up." Supposedly, if we wait for the right time and if we abide by the precepts of civility, people will listen to us. Yet, by teaching us that everything worth listening to will conform to the ways we already know how to listen, civility may actually teach us *not* to listen. Indeed, those in power regularly exercise the option of not engaging, not being provoked. Ignoring queer theory's denaturalization of heterosexuality and whiteness theory's denormalizing of whiteness, for example, mainstream academia has continued with research-as-usual as if nothing had been said. The agent provocateuse does not wait for a suitable time to bring up racism, sexism, or heterosexism because there is no such time. Helping to break down the barriers to responsiveness, the agent provocateuse demands that people pay attention to what they have learned not to hear. You could call it "artificial forcing." But it is just trying to get people to listen.

1. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 19. As Sedgwick points out, "the 'homosexual panic' [psychological] defense rests on the falsely individualizing and pathologizing assumption that hatred of homosexuals is so private and so atypical" that, unlike "race panic," it represents "an accountability-reducing illness." While, in explaining away racially motivated attacks, it is not possible to make an overt appeal to "race panic," it is possible to invoke the threat represented by people of color, especially black men. No explicit claims need be made, as whites are already disposed to see racial violence as perpetrated or at least provoked by people of color. White jurors who saw the video of Rodney King being beaten by police viewed it as evidence that King was the instigator of the violence. One juror later said that she saw King as being "in total control" of the situation." The video that "many took to be incontrovertible evidence *against* the police was presented instead to establish police vulnerability." Judith Butler, "Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia," in *Reading Rodney King, Reading Urban Uprising*, ed. Robert Gooding-Williams (New York: Routledge, 1993), 15.

2. Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery: An Autobiography* (New York: A.L. Burt Company, 1900/1901), 223.

3. Julie Kailin, "How White Teachers Perceive the Problem of Racism in Their Schools: A Case Study in 'Liberal' Lakeview," *Teachers College Record* 100, no. 4 (Summer 1999): 737.

4. Marilyn Cochran-Smith, "Blind Vision: Unlearning Racism in Teacher Education," *Harvard Educational Review* 70, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 158.

5. Ivan Van Laningham coined the term “agent provocateuse,” albeit in a different connection. I use it here to play upon the public/private sphere contrast suggested by masculine and feminine terms, “agent provocateur” being productive (*making* trouble) and “agent provocateuse” reproductive (*facilitating* trouble).
6. Victoria Davion, “Reflections on the Meaning of White,” in *Overcoming Racism and Sexism*, ed. Linda A. Bell and David Blumenfeld (Lanham, Md.: Roman and Littlefield, 1995), 136.

MANY THANKS TO Octavio Villalpando, Ivan Van Laningham, William Smith, Suzanne Rice, Cris Mayo, and Deanna Blackwell for their comments on the manuscript.