

CHRISTINA VILLARREAL: So much of the ethnic studies class is really centered around and dependent upon the students' willingness and capacities to really bring their full selves and kind of their autobiographies to the table. And I think that that's important to kind of constantly keep at the forefront, and to also recognize the ways in which some of people's backgrounds and personal experiences are sanctioned and privileged systemically, ideologically, institutionally, interpersonally, more than others, historically and in contemporary context.

COURTNEY WOODS: In most of my academic experiences, classrooms have always been in place where whenever I speak or engage, I'm typically perceived as being disrespectful or disruptive, because I'm traditionally resisting the dominant narrative that I'm learning in schools. In this course, we positioned the dominant narrative to be critically analyzed and to be questioned.

SPEAKER: Could I dismantle systems of oppression from Harvard with a Harvard degree? Yes. But are they going to prepare me for it? Right?

And I don't feel like I've been-- no really, truly. I feel like I have not been nurtured in this place. Aside from this class, I don't feel like I've been nurtured, I don't feel like I've been supported. So all of that is to say, is like I suffer with these questions around compromising my own life a lot, especially as someone who thinks of themselves as a freedom fighter, but I coexist in systems of privilege all the time.

COURTNEY WOODS: When we're having a large group discussion and some students talk more than others, she doesn't stop calling on those students. She doesn't silence them because they're engaging. And when some students are disengaged, instead of penalizing them for it, she may check in on them individually.

But she may respect that that's not how they engage. She respects different levels and different kinds of engagement, especially within a course that focuses on social identities. The classroom is not a safe space, it's a brave space.

CHRISTINA VILLARREAL: I'm going to ask if I can try to bring these together. And then I want to look at some curriculum if we can. I didn't want to take away from this discussion because I think it's so important.

Because actually, everything you said wasn't tangential. It was actually directly related. Directly. And it is exactly where we are moving next.

JUSTIN HAUVER: And I think the idea that everyone needs to participate was not a guiding principle of discussions. Some people chose, I think, to take a more listening, a more empathetic approach because maybe it was their first significant exposure to not only the intellectual ideas we were exploring, but also to sometimes the raw emotions that could be expressed and the lived experiences that were shared. So just I think as a way of honoring and respecting that, those people were given space and opportunities to participate in other ways that weren't discussion, whether it was smaller groups or activities, or even just discussions that were maybe a little bit less charged.

CHRISTINA VILLARREAL: There oftentimes can be resistance if you've been taught through a Eurocentric lens for the entirety of your schooling experience, and you're not introduced to really the epistemologies developed by and for historically targeted and marginalized populations. That can be a pretty intense moment in anybody's learning experience. And so I think that's the biggest challenge in the class, because that looks very different for every student, no matter what their background. And as the instructor of the course, it's challenging to meet them in that place and to try to meet them in that place with as much informed empathy is possible, and navigate through that journey with them.