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Transcript

Erec Smith

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Zach Rausch

Erec Smith on Heterodox Out Loud. I'm Zach Rausch. Welcome to another special episode. It's about one of the core themes of Heterodox Academy's 2022 conference, which is coming up weeks from now: the trust crisis in higher education, what it is and how to solve it. Our guests today are Kyle Vitale, HxA's director of programs, and Erec Smith, a returning podcast guest currently serving as associate professor of rhetoric at York College of Pennsylvania. Erec is also the cofounder of Free Black Thought. In our interview, we discussed the roots of the campus trust crisis, the contraction of acceptable discourse in higher education, and HxA's upcoming conference in Denver. Before we chat, we'll listen to a blog post featuring four perspectives from some of our conference speakers on this same topic: Erec Smith, Holden Thorpe, editor-in-chief at the Science Family of Journals, Shirley Mullen, President emerita at Houghton College, and Michael Roth, President of Wesleyan University.

The full blog post can be found on our website here: [On The Crisis of Trust in Higher Education: A Pre-Conference Roundtable](#)

Zach Rausch

Now, our interview with Erec Smith and Kyle Vitale, the mastermind behind HxA Conference 2022. Erec and Kyle, thank you both so much for coming onto Heterodox Out Loud.

Erec Smith

Thanks for having us.

Kyle Vitale

Yeah, great to be here.

Zach Rausch

So, we're discussing the blog post that included brief comments from a few of our major speakers at the Heterodox Academy annual conference in Denver next month. And one of them is you, Erec. First, tell us more about yourself and a little bit about your background.

Erec Smith

Well, I am Erec Smith, an associate professor of rhetoric at York College of Pennsylvania. I'm also a cofounder of Free Black Thought, which is a website that celebrates, or at least showcases, viewpoint diversity within the black intelligentsia. People have this tacit belief that black people all think alike and have the same exact brains and hearts and interests and things like that. It couldn't be farther from the truth. How did I get here? I became, at a young age, curious as to why people believed in different things and abided by different things. Like very many other people, I thought that to be an intellectual was to abide by a particular narrative. And that narrative has everything to do, if you're black, that narrative has everything to do, typically, with leftist politics, with certain ideas about what it means to be American, what the obstacles are, and things like that. It took me a while to realize that I wasn't thinking, I was abiding. Abiding by a particular narrative that is made popular. It really hit me lately, in the last few years when this narrative began to trump critical thinking. And I mean critical thinking, not like critical theory.

And I'll explain the difference there. Critical thinking is what the philosopher Richard Paul calls fair-minded. Right? It's not about what you want. It's about thinking about things, looking at the facts and coming to a conclusion based on those things. Then there's what he calls sophistic critical thinking, which is researching and thinking insofar as it abides by a particular narrative. A lot of people think they're thinking when they're really thinking sophistically, right? And when you hear things like critical theory or critical race theory, the critical there is really sophistic critical thinking. When you are thinking critically, you're looking around and you're saying maybe there's something wrong here or there's something off here. There's something people are missing. Let me see if I can

find it. The critical in critical theory and critical race theory says, "There's definitely something wrong here. I just have to figure out what it is." And that's a very different thing. You've already concluded that there's something wrong. Now I just have to find it. It's already out there or something like that. I think that's dangerous for reasons that one can see the past few years in what many people call the culture war, especially when it comes to race.

Thinking that, and this is an actual tenant from Robin DiAngelo and her ilk, it's not whether racism happened, it's how it manifested in that situation. So, long story short, all this stuff bothers me, and I would like to put an end to it.

Zach Rausch

Alright, let's turn next now to Kyle Vitale, our Director of Programs at Heterodox Academy. Give us a brief introduction to yourself.

Kyle Vitale

So I and my team do a lot of the designing and facilitating of the virtual panels and virtual chats that a lot of our members tap into every month. We oversee the Tools and Resources Library, so opportunities for new materials and new teaching tools and writing tools. And the conference, which we're really excited about coming up in Denver in June.

Zach Rausch

But how did you come to be at Heterodox Academy?

Kyle Vitale

It kind of all started with Shakespeare. I'm a humanist. My doctoral training is in literature and British literature, so I spent a lot of time traveling and reading and exploring Shakespeare, took me through the PhD. And during that work, I discovered how much I love programming and talking to faculty and really being in a support role and helping universities do what they do well, even better. And I remember HxA's founding as a blog, and I really found a lot of support and warmth from the writing in that blog. And as my own trajectory continued, I found myself continuing to have trouble being the fullest version of myself in academy hallways and classrooms. Parts of my identity were permitted and parts were not. And I saw the same in others who are also only permitted to share

certain parts of their identities. And I wanted to do something about that. So I hope I'm doing it. And I love our team. They help me do it every day.

Zach Rausch

What were the hidden identities that you felt you couldn't express? Because maybe many people just think maybe in terms politically, if that was your approach, or if there were other things.

Kyle Vitale

Sure. Yeah. So for myself, it was primarily faith and religion. The other thing, though, is the idiosyncratic things, the things that make you you, regardless of your race, class, gender, religion or ideology, personal experiences that you've had growing up that led you to the work that you do, that lead you to talk a certain way. And those were often shared by me or by some of my friends and greeted with a kind of uncomfortable "Well, isn't that nice? But we're doing the serious work of scholarship here. We're doing the serious work of trying to preserve and develop equity in our campuses and classrooms. And we need to talk about race right now. We need to talk about gender right now." And don't hear me wrong, we do need to talk about those things. But it was almost like the stripping away of any of the particularities of who we are in favor of these more visible conditions, identities, realities that also matter. But I just want to get us to a place where the fact that I read Othello for the first time in the back seat of my parents' minivan on the way to Ithaca for vacation, and that I had a physical reaction to him killing his wife, spoiler alert, that matters to me.

That is a core experience of who I am.

Zach Rausch

Well, I think this is a really good segue into a brief conversation about our conference, which is all about the concept of trust. And Kyle, I want to pivot back to you on this. Can you give us a grounding a little bit more about what the conference in Denver is going to be, why we're having it, and why we're focusing on this idea of trust.

Kyle Vitale

On a really functional level, it is, frankly, a party. It's the first time in several years that we've held an in-person convention for HxA. It's an opportunity for a whole bunch of people who haven't seen

each other since the pandemic, who have met virtually during the pandemic but haven't met in person to come together and do a couple of things: get energized and empowered to go back to their offices in the classrooms and just keep doing this work as well as we can to discover new tools and resources and to just connect with new people and discover a community here. So we really hope that it is one of the more energetic and friendly gatherings of scholars and instructors and friends that people will experience. It's also, however, an opportunity to really underscore the critical issue of our day. And that is how and who do we trust and why. Every day, it seems, the institutions that traditionally have been places we look to for authority and for guidance and for leading lights are struggling, are undercutting themselves or being undercut, it all depends on the issue. And there are also tensions in and out of higher ed. I mean, within higher ed, the faculty versus administrator dynamic is as alive as ever.

And there's also increasing tension between constituents of higher ed parents, higher ed and K-12. So we are here to talk about what is going on, how can we diagnose it, how can we fix it? And that's two parts. That's how do we repair our relationships, and that's the trust component, in order to do our core work, which is continue to pursue truth and knowledge for the betterment of ourselves, society, and of our grasp of reality itself.

Zach Rausch

And to Erec, just if you can expand a little bit about what you wrote in the post about what you think is at the root, causing a kind of a crisis of trust in our institutions and an inability to really communicate with each other.

Erec Smith

Well, we don't realize that we've been conditioned to look at the world in a particular way. Right? And we don't realize that other people have been conditioned otherwise. And we're looking at the same things, for example, and we're seeing the same things, but we're focusing on different aspects of that same thing. Right? Kenneth Berg the rhetorician called this terministic screen. We have a particular discourse, a particular ideology that shapes our frame of the world. And we're looking at the world in that way, not realizing that A) it's constructed and B) that other people have constructed things differently. Burke said, we can't get away from this. The best we can do is recognize that we're doing it and work from there. That way, this person isn't crazy, this person just has a different filter. And this goes back. It's not just Burke, Locke talked about this in essay, "Concerning Human Understanding." He went as far as to say that perhaps the biggest issue we have in getting along is

the fact that we don't have operational definitions. He didn't use that term, but that's what he was talking about. Basically, we have one word and various definitions to go with that word.

We all assume that the other person has our definition. First and foremost. What we need to do is say, okay, what does this term mean to everybody? Let's make sure we're on the same page about this term. So that when I say "racism," it means discrimination based on race and not something that only white people can do. And that's the issue with a lot of contemporary antiracism. We have this one word and various different definitions, and we have to make sure we're on the same page regarding that before we can move forward. If we're not on the same page, then that should be the conversation.

Kyle Vitale

Erec, I love your reference to frames and this was part of my experience in my past or HxA. And I think a lot of people are experiencing something similar when we talk about equity and diversity and inclusion because this is one of those exact kinds of topics. Whereas you say in your blog post that we relate to values in slightly different ways. I would be among colleagues who were very enthusiastic about DEI in the traditional ways that we are seeing it play out, discussion of microaggressions, implicit bias, that sort of thing. And I would to often, and this is my fault, I would too often get mired in, "But the science is not complete on implicit bias. There might not be a connection between implicit bias in action and talking about it might make it worse." And I get so mired in that loop and trying to resolve that issue that I'd forget that, "hold on a minute, we do share a value here. We do share a goal. We all in this room do want to help all of our students have a better experience in the classroom, and we all agree that our underrepresented students might be struggling in this particular area and our more privileged students might be struggling in this area."

And until I realized, "Wait a minute, we can back up, I can sort of remove myself from the weeds and get to a slightly higher level and start talking to them about that shared goal." I actually felt we could get more work done. It was absolutely about that, Erec, recognizing that there are different frames here, but that there might also be undercurrents beneath those frames that we can tap into. But that takes time, right? And it's not always possible, but when it is, it's worth attempting.

Zach Rausch

Do you feel like in the past few years that it's become harder to recognize that we have different frames or we're less willing to tolerate different opinions?

Erec Smith

I think it feels good to be a part of something and that something has gotten narrower and narrower. We call it tribalism. We belong to this group, and the more we can juxtapose and differentiate ourselves from other groups, the more important we feel, the more meaning we have in our lives and things like that. I'm a big fan of broadening those tribes, broadening the "We" so that more people can fit within that circle. I think what we're trying to do is redefine what America now is because it's not what it was ten years ago. And in doing that, various people have different definitions and they are butting heads. But if we can realize that that's what we're all doing, maybe we can collaborate better and create a more inclusive tribe.

Kyle Vitale

Sometimes it's just about listening and asking questions and not trying to push. And sometimes it is about pushing. And I found that the pushing happened best when we were, not that we're talking in general terms that don't matter, but when there was a little bit of distance from any named event that was raising our emotionality and making it just harder because we're human, we can only control our motion so far. And Erec, your point about who are we as America? I find that sometimes that topic is a pitfall that is worth not avoiding, but treating very carefully. And sometimes it is exactly the kind of place where we can push with each other and be a little more vulnerable.

Erec Smith

The main point I make in my latest book is that in order to come together and do something like create a wider narrative, we have to be self aware and we have to be able to self manage our own emotions and expectations. First and foremost, we typically skip that part of it, the interpersonal part of it. Right. So if we don't do that, then we bring baggage with us to this meeting about broadening the tribe. And that baggage can get in the way. That baggage can make us grab onto a particular screen more tightly than we should. And it's over before it begins.

Zach Rausch

So back to our conference theme, which is about the crisis of trust in higher education and the difficulty of producing knowledge as a result of that. And I want to present just a couple of arguments I imagine that some people may have when thinking about this theme, and I want to see

what you guys think. I think there is a camp, a group of people, who might agree that there is a crisis of trust in higher education today, but really, it's not the fault of the university itself. And actually it's the fault of a media ecosystem, maybe a right-wing media ecosystem that deliberately tries to sow distrust into higher education by focusing on things like CRT or other things. And I'd like you to talk about that address that where you agree, where you disagree with that argument.

Erec Smith

Based on my experience, that's not the case. It's not the media. And when the media does point out the illiberalism of certain aspects of antiracism in higher ed, they're not entirely wrong. In fact, they're mostly right as far as my assessment is concerned. And I have this experience because I hang out with colleagues, people in my field who are blatantly illiberal and proud of it. I wrote something for FAIR a couple of weeks ago about this very thing and how there is a leader in the field who basically says black students who want to acquire proficiency in standard English are acting selfishly. They're immature, they're duped. They've been brainwashed by white society. They're not being conceptually pragmatic or anything like that. No. They're suffering from some kind of Stockholm syndrome. That's absurd, right? That's a ridiculous idea. And that is not, unfortunately, just the opinion of this professor. It's a thing. It's a theme, especially when it comes to social justice, specifically antiracism in my field and in academia in general, especially the humanities, social sciences. It's not this right-wing media scare tactic. There is something going on.

Kyle Vitale

I love higher ed. I always have, always will, but I point the finger squarely at us. Erec points to personalities and types in higher ed. I also think that, I'm not going to call right now for burning it all down, but I do believe that some shifts in how we incentivize our work in higher ed, what we train for, what we don't train for, doesn't help. I mean, we send teachers into the classroom with very little practice in how to manage and deal with tough situations, tough occasions and way too often when you read the fact patterns of faculty who get canceled, I'm not blaming them. I'm not blaming the victim. But I am saying there are ways that those classroom situations could have been handled differently to not end up in the New York Times or the Post. So we have only ourselves to blame for eating what the media does say about us and not being any better for it.

Zach Rausch

Erec Smith and Kyle Vitale on [Heterodox Out Loud](#) If you enjoyed this episode, subscribe and listen to more thought-provoking ideas on Heterodox Out Loud. To hear more from Kyle and Erec, along with Shirley Mullen, Holden Thorpe, Michael Roth, and more than 50 additional speakers, join us at our conference in Denver this June. Get details at [HeterodoxAcademy.org](#) thanks to Davies content for producing this podcast and to Kara Boyer on our communications team. I'm Zach Rausch, until next time.