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FEATURES

Race, speech, and values

What really happened at Yale.

By [Kathrin Lassila](#) | Jan/Feb 2016

Kathrin Day Lassila '81 is the editor of the *Yale Alumni Magazine*. Alice Baumgartner '10, '19PhD, and Mark Alden Branch '86 contributed reporting.



Arnold Gold
Yale students cheered at the "March for Resilience" of November 9. The march ended with music and dancing. [View full image](#)

First of all, it was nothing like the sixties.

During the heated debates at Yale over race and free speech in November, the surge of media and social media coverage conveyed the impression of a student body out of control. In reality, the campus was quiet. There were no sit-ins. No buildings were occupied. Day after day, you could stroll through Cross Campus and see only

the usual random assortment of students walking to class, lost in thought or texting on their phones. In all of November there were only three large outdoor gatherings, and one of them turned into a massive dance party.

What did take place was an intellectual and emotional upheaval. Inside dorm suites, dining rooms, the four cultural centers, and in lecture and seminar rooms, students and faculty of all colors were having intense, sometimes painful conversations about profound subjects: race, free speech, their values, Yale's values. It was a sobering, often divisive period. But it was also, in many ways, a teaching moment.

One *Atlantic* writer called the student unrest "a fight over Halloween costumes." While many bloggers saluted the activists, others mocked "privileged Yale students" upset by the mere idea of a potentially offensive costume. But that now-famous e-mail from Erika Christakis about Halloween was only a spark. The real reason behind the protests was what Yale president Peter Salovey '86PhD calls the "accumulated experience" of racial slights over time.

The sequence of events

Below is a time line of the incidents, statements, and events that took place around race and free speech this fall.

OCTOBER 28

The Intercultural Affairs Council of Yale College sends an e-mail to students describing Halloween costumes that members of some religions, races, or cultural backgrounds might find offensive—including blackface, feathered headdresses, and turbans—and urging students to avoid costumes that perpetuate stereotypes. The e-mail does not suggest a prohibition on such costumes or the possibility of disciplinary action.

OCTOBER 30

Erika Christakis, a lecturer at the Yale Child Study Center and the associate master of Silliman College, sends an e-mail to Silliman students. Explaining that she and her husband, Silliman master Nicholas Christakis '84, have heard from students "frustrated" by the IAC message, she asks, "Is there no room anymore for a child or young person to be a little bit obnoxious,...a little bit inappropriate or provocative or, yes, offensive?" She adds, "Nicholas says, if you don't like a costume someone is wearing, look away, or tell them you are offended. Talk to each other."

That evening, an open letter to Erika Christakis is posted by "Concerned Yale Students, Alumni, Family, Faculty, and Staff" calling her e-mail "jarring and disheartening." They write that "giving 'room' for students to be 'obnoxious' or 'offensive,' as you suggest, is only inviting ridicule and violence onto ourselves and our communities." The letter will gain more than 1,000 signatures by late November.

OCTOBER 31

In a Facebook post, Neema Githere '18 writes that a member of the fraternity Sigma Alpha Epsilon "turned away a group of girls from their party last night, explaining that admittance was on a 'white girls only' basis." Githere had heard the story from others, but writes that the same thing had happened to her last year at SAE. Members of the fraternity deny the allegation. Later, a Yale College Dean's Office investigation will find that there was no "white girls only" rule, and both men and women of color were admitted; but that individuals guarding the door became harsh as the night went on, and two people said they had heard the "white girls only" statement. No formal disciplinary action is taken against SAE, which is already under sanctions from Yale.

In her October 30 e-mail to students in Silliman, Associate Master Erika Christakis criticized an earlier e-mail from the Intercultural Affairs Council, which had suggested that students think carefully about whether their costumes could offend someone. Christakis, a Yale lecturer on child and young adult development, called Halloween "a day of subversion for children and young people" who might want to be "a little bit inappropriate or provocative or, yes, offensive." (The e-mail is on TheFire.org.)

Within hours, Christakis's message had been widely shared outside of Silliman, and the reaction was sharp. An open letter posted the same night read, "You deem the call for sensitivity 'censure'—one which you say comes 'from above,' not from the students, as if the repeated requests of many students of color do not count."

The other spark was an October 31 Facebook post by a sophomore alleging that a member of the fraternity Sigma Alpha Epsilon had "turned away a group of girls from their party last night, explaining that admittance was on a 'white girls only' basis." She wasn't present at the event and had heard the story from others, but she wrote that the same thing had happened to her last year at the same fraternity. (The Yale College Dean's Office investigated and found that while women of color had been at the party, two people said they had heard someone guarding the door say, "White girls only.")

On November 4, 350 people crowded into Yale's Afro-American Cultural Center to talk about these two events. Those conversations would blossom into student rallies, multiple discussions with the Yale administration, and the midnight demands delivered to Salovey on November 12. Ultimately, the organizing and the anger grew out of the continuing debate over race relations that started in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014 and has spread across the nation—including to many campuses. A national website called TheDemands.org has collected a list of student demands around the country; as of early December, 72 campuses were represented, including Dartmouth, Brown, and Harvard.

At the same time, the Yale students' motives were intensely personal. They described, to administrators, on social media, and in student publications, the experience of putting up with racial jokes, slurs, and misperceptions. Taylor Eldridge '16 told the *Yale Alumni Magazine* that students closed her college gate behind them in her face, as if she were trying to sneak in. Although she was a member of the track team, she stopped wearing her navy blue track sweats because she was tired of being mistaken for a custodian. "Even though I'm here, even though I got the letter," she says, "I'm still perceived as not really supposed to be here."

NOVEMBER 3

Yale announces a \$50 million initiative to recruit and develop faculty who bring diversity to the university. The program, which has been in the works for several months, will cover all of Yale's professional schools as well as Yale College and the Graduate School.

NOVEMBER 4

The Afro-American Cultural Center hosts a two-hour forum in which 350 people talk about the SAE and Christakis controversies. Among other things, students express frustration that the administration has made no official response.

In the November issue of the *New Journal*, Dave Harris '16 wrote about playing video games with other brand-new freshmen. When Harris won his fifth game in a row, his white opponent shouted, "Ahhhh you nigger." He quickly apologized, saying, "It's just because of where I grew up, you understand." There was "a moment of silence," Harris writes, "and then a chorus of laughter."

Yale College dean Jonathan Holloway '95PhD, who is African American, underlines that racial slights are far from unique to Yale. (Several students agreed.) But for people of color, Holloway told an audience of alumni in Battell Chapel on November 20, the privilege of being at Yale does not cancel out such slights. "Everybody here is privileged," he explained, "but we don't all have the same experience." On campus, he's a faculty member and a dean. But when he steps off campus, "I'm just another black man." When he drives to the Southeast to visit family, he sets the cruise control to the speed limit plus three miles per hour: as an African American, he says, he can't run the risk of being stopped.



Philipp Arndt

More than a thousand people participated in the March for Resilience. [View full image](#)



Mark Ostow

Taylor Eldridge '16, above right, has found that students close the gates to their colleges in her face. [View full image](#)

Some of the media coverage caricatured the protesters; the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page called them "Yale's little Robespierres." On the other side, Christakis's searching e-mail was sometimes misrepresented as a full-throated defense of blackface. And on at least four occasions, the behavior on campus was in fact extreme. The example that went viral was the student captured on video screaming at Silliman College master Nicholas Christakis '84. But

there were others. Christakis himself got into a shouting match with

NOVEMBER 5

Yale College dean Jonathan Holloway '95PhD meets with some 200 students who are chalking the pavement in front of Sterling Memorial Library with messages of support for people of color at Yale. In an emotional and sometimes confrontational two-hour gathering, Holloway listens to students talking about their experiences as people of color at Yale. He eventually gives an impromptu speech from atop the Women's Table. "It's not easy to hear your stories," he says. "It's painful for me, but I'm glad you did...I want you to know that I'm going to try my damndest."

After leaving Cross Campus, some of the same students go to Silliman College, where they are joined by Master Nicholas Christakis. The tense conversation escalates into shouting by both Christakis and students. A video of a student shouting at Christakis and using obscenities is later uploaded to YouTube by a free speech advocacy organization and widely shared in the media.

That evening, more than 50 students meet with President Peter Salovey '86PhD and Dean Holloway in Woodbridge Hall. Salovey later tells the *Yale Daily News* that "to have about 50 minority students in a room with me saying to me that their experience was not what they hoped it would be—I take personal responsibility for that and I consider it a failure."

students. Grant Mueller '17, president of Sigma Alpha Epsilon, says that some African American SAE members had been called Uncle Toms, and that someone, possibly a student, had spat at his feet. Finally, after a speaker at a free-speech conference joked that the reaction to Christakis's e-mail seemed as if someone had "wiped out an entire Indian village," a group of students arrived to protest outside; most of the protesters were orderly, but at least two students who attended the conference were spat on as they left.

Those acts were exceptions, however. Most students who participated in the debates did so passionately but reasonably. And the range of emotion and opinion was wide. On November 5, Holloway met with 200 students who had gathered on the plaza in front of Sterling Library—not to protest, but to chalk messages of support for people of color. When they told him about their experiences of racism at Yale, many were confrontational, but many were crying.

The single largest event of the entire period was the "March for Resilience" on November 9—again, not a protest, but this time a celebration. Marchers chanted, "We out here / We've been here / We ain't leaving / We are loved." More than a thousand people participated, many joining along the way, and the rally ended with music and dancing on Cross Campus. The entire event was organized without the knowledge of Yale administrators, who weren't sure what to expect when they found out late the night of November 8 that a rally was planned. It turned out to be, says Holloway, "a thing of beauty."

Hundreds of graduate and professional students attended forums held across campus, says Kim Goff-Crews '83, '86JD, Yale's secretary and the vice president for student life. The Graduate School convened one that was attended by 300 to 400 students, and others took place at the nursing, medical, divinity, and other schools. Generally, says Goff-Crews, graduate and professional students "are focused on issues about faculty mentorship and diversity, and relevant and respectful learning experiences in both the curriculum and the classroom environment."

NOVEMBER 6

Salovey and Holloway each release statements to the Yale College community. Salovey writes that “Yale must be a place where each person is valued automatically, without having to demand or labor for that recognition,” and that “our community also shares a commitment to free expression and an open exchange of ideas free from intimidation.” Holloway endorses the original Halloween message by the IAC; otherwise, neither administrator refers to the SAE or Christakis incidents directly.

A speaker at a William F. Buckley Jr. Program free-speech conference jokes that the reaction to Christakis’s e-mail was as strong as if someone had “wiped out an entire Indian village.” The comment is shared on social media, and some 100 students gather outside the conference to protest. A Yale College Dean’s Office investigation will find that, while most of the protesters were orderly, two students leaving the conference were spat on. An activist, Rose Bear Don’t Walk ’16, tells the *YDN*, “Our movement is founded in the idea that all people’s voices should be heard. We cannot maintain the integrity of this message whilst questioning or silencing other accounts.”

NOVEMBER 7

A “Committee for the Defense of Freedom at Yale” issues a petition supporting free speech and the Christakis and criticizing the protesters. By November 17, more than 700 students, faculty, staff, and alumni will sign it.

NOVEMBER 9

Students hold a “March for Resilience,” beginning at the Afro-Am House and ending at Cross Campus for a rally and musical performance. More than a thousand people show up; the rally eventually evolves into a dance party.

The most prominent group that emerged from the discussions around campus was Next Yale, a loose coalition of at least 200 students, mostly undergraduates and mostly women of color. At midnight on November 12, they marched to the president’s house, met him and his wife on the sidewalk, and delivered a series of demands. These included, among others: removal of the Christakis as master and associate master, increased funding for the cultural centers, an ethnic studies distributional requirement for all undergraduates, mental health counseling at the cultural centers, and more resources for low-income students. They also asked for symbolic changes, including a campus monument commemorating the local Native Americans, the renaming of Calhoun College, and elimination of the college title “master.”

Next Yale had vocal support on campus and from several alumni groups, but again, opinions ranged widely. Student columns in the *Yale Daily News* argued all sides, from “The diversity behemoth is an enormous waste of academic time and energy” (Isaac Cohen ’16) to “White ignorance reproduces racist norms” (Cassandra Darrow ’18). So did alumni commentators (as the Letters section in this issue reflects). Some students were reluctant to express disagreement for fear of undercutting the activists; one residential college master was approached in confidence by a group of black students who said their feelings were more moderate than Next Yale’s.

Andi Peng ’18, born in China but raised in rural Ohio, took issue with the disrespect she saw on both sides at the height of the debates. Students and administrators alike shouted each other down. And as an Asian American, Peng felt excluded from a student movement of mostly African Americans.

Michael Robinson ’15, ’18MBA, also differed with the activists. He wrote in the *Washington Post*, “I cannot and will not dismiss the way others may feel, or characterize their experience at Yale as inaccurate,” but “the Yale I know helped me embrace and love my blackness in an anti-black world.”

Austin Muñoz ’16, a senior from South Bend, Indiana, who is Puerto Rican, adds by e-mail: “I don’t doubt that students have experienced racism on campus. But I think it’s misleading to suggest that every minority student has felt victimized by malicious racial stereotyping during their time here. I will remember Yale as a welcoming place where I made amazing friends.”

NOVEMBER 10

Salovey and Holloway write to the Yale community about the university's commitment to diversity, declaring, "We cannot overstate the importance we put on our community's diversity, and the need to increase it, support it, and respect it." They also "affirm Yale's bedrock principle of the freedom to speak and be heard, without fear of intimidation, threats, or harm" and condemn instances reported in the media and social media of "threats, coercion, and overtly disrespectful acts."

Signs displaying racist messages are found on the Old Campus. They are later linked to an online comedy group not affiliated with Yale.

NOVEMBER 11

More than 1,000 people attend a teach-in about race in Battell Chapel organized by the cultural centers. Panelists talk about experiences of discrimination, systemic racism, and the importance of ethnic studies as a vehicle for understanding.



Philipp Arndt

At the March for Resilience. [View full image](#)



Mark Ostow

Gabriel Ozuna '16 was troubled by the decision of two liberal student parties to boycott a Yale Political Union debate on affirmative action. [View full image](#)



Mark Ostow

Andi Peng '18 took issue with the disrespect she saw on both sides at the height of the debates. [View full image](#)

Henry "Sam" Chauncey '57 was the secretary of the university during the Yale debates of the Sixties and Seventies over race and free speech. On the campus today, he says, "There really is a complex problem that has arisen over the two issues of free speech and civility. At times the expression of free speech can become uncivil. And so the question is, if a free expression offends a person should the free expression be in any way curtailed?"

This central question was discussed all over Yale during November, and by many outside Yale who criticized the student protests as an attack on free speech.

One episode that raised concerns for some students took place at the Yale Political Union: two parties on the left boycotted a debate over a resolution to "end affirmative action."

The boycott

troubled Gabe Ozuna '16, a third-generation Mexican American and

NOVEMBER 12

A group of 200 students calling itself Next Yale marches to President Salovey's house at midnight. Salovey, who was notified, is waiting with his wife on the sidewalk. Next Yale delivers a set of demands, including removal of the Christakis from Silliman, increased funding for the cultural centers, an ethnic studies distributional requirement for all undergraduates, the renaming of Calhoun College, mental health counseling at the cultural centers, and more resources for low-income students.

Late at night, the Yale Police report that a racist phone call had been received at the office of the African American studies department that day. Department chair Jacqueline Goldsby '98PhD tells the YDN that the call was "very disturbing" and "violent" in tone, although no threats were made.

NOVEMBER 17

President Salovey announces new steps to "make significant changes so that all members of our community truly feel welcome and can participate equally in the activities of the university, and to reaffirm and reinforce our commitment to a campus where hatred and discrimination have no place." He also reiterates Yale's dedication to "full freedom of expression," stating, "No one has been silenced or punished for speaking their minds, nor will they be."

That same day, Salovey and Holloway write to students in Silliman College to affirm that the Christakis will remain: "Both Nicholas and Erika Christakis remain committed to serving the college, and we fully support them in these efforts."

NOVEMBER 19

US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan calls Salovey to commend the plan released on the 17th.

member of the Federalist Party. He says students of color do face "incidents of ignorance" on campus—but he feels that debate and discussion are the solution, not the problem. He also worries that the left's boycott reflects a larger reluctance to engage in ideas. "It offends me," he paraphrases, "therefore, I'm right, you're wrong, because I don't feel safe."

Cole Aronson '18, a *Yale Daily News* columnist, adds, "You are not at Yale to feel—in the thick sense of it that's being used now—safe. I think that you're at Yale to feel unsafe intellectually."

To some extent, the two sides are talking past each other. "There's a debate, but the debates are not aligned," says Holloway. He has spent hours listening to the student activists, and he believes they "understand that at the university they're going to be challenged, and that sometimes it won't be comfortable." The "safe space" they're asking for, he says, is not a constriction of discussion but a change in social and cultural mores—for instance, in the culture of their residential colleges, so that they're no longer shut out if they forget their IDs. (In *Time*, Annie Murphy Paul '95 wrote that the protests were "about a sense of belonging.") One activist, Rose Bear Don't Walk '16, told the *Yale Daily News*, "Our movement is founded in the idea that all people's voices should be heard. We cannot maintain the integrity of this message whilst questioning or silencing other accounts."

Stiles master Stephen Pitti '91, who has been at Yale as a professor since the late nineties, says, "We're now seeing students engaged in dialogue and debate. I've been very impressed with the way students and others articulate their diverse perspectives. I see it every day in the dining hall, and I hear about students having these discussions in their suites." In practice, "free and open speech" on campus is "embraced more than ever."

By far the most difficult campus debate on free speech was over Erika Christakis's e-mail and Next Yale's call for the Christakis' dismissal from Silliman. By mid-December more than 80 faculty had signed a letter expressing their concern that the e-mail was "misinterpreted, and in some cases recklessly distorted, as support for racist speech" and used "as justification for demanding the resignation of our colleagues from their posts at Silliman." And although the Christakis remain at Yale, in their roles both as faculty and at Silliman, Erika has decided not to teach her usual courses next semester. (Several administrators said that Yale had tried to persuade her to keep teaching.) She told the *Washington Post*, "I worry that the current climate at Yale is not, in my view, conducive to the civil dialogue and open inquiry required to solve our urgent societal problems." Nicholas is taking a scheduled sabbatical from teaching in the spring.

NOVEMBER 30

The *YDN* and others report on an open letter published online expressing support for Nicholas and Erika Christakis, defending both the content of her e-mail and her right to free expression. The letter will eventually be signed by 86 faculty members.

DECEMBER 3

Erika Christakis tells *Business Insider* by e-mail that she “will not be teaching at Yale in the future.” In an e-mail to the *Washington Post*, she writes, “the current climate at Yale is not, in my view, conducive to the civil dialogue and open inquiry required to solve our urgent societal problems.” On December 7, the Yale administration releases a statement that neither of the Christakis’ “has resigned from any form of employment” at Yale and that Erika “is welcome to resume teaching anytime at Yale and has the encouragement of the university administration to do so.”

DECEMBER 11

The *YDN* publishes results of a survey answered by 1,485 undergraduates about the racial climate on campus and Salovey’s recently announced initiatives. Overall, 61 percent of students say Salovey responded sufficiently, 23 percent say he should have done more, and 16 percent say he should have done less.

Future plans

On November 17, President Peter Salovey ’86PhD announced a university-wide plan “to build a more inclusive Yale.” This plan, he says, is not a response to student input alone, but also to input from faculty, alumni, and staff; “it’s a response to a need at Yale.” Many of the elements were already under way.

Yale president Kingman Brewster Jr. ’41, Chauncey recalls, once said: “Universities should be safe havens where ruthless examination of realities will not be distorted by the aim to please or inhibited by the risk of displeasure.” But Brewster also said, “Never let disagreement fester into disrespect.”

Is it possible to have free speech and “safe space”? Salovey says, “We can do both. We can allow Yale to be a place where anyone can give voice to any idea. But it can also be a community characterized by the kind of respect that allows one to seriously contemplate an unpopular idea, even an idea that one finds offensive.” (See [interview](#).) He adds: “That may sound idealistic, but I think Yale should always be pursuing that ideal.”

Beginning with his first communications to the campus about the student unrest, Salovey consistently stressed two points: that “Yale must be a place where each person is valued automatically, without having to demand or labor for that recognition”; and that Yale has “a commitment to free expression and an open exchange of ideas free from intimidation.” In the end, he announced a substantial plan to support diversity and education about diversity. (See “Future Plans” box at left.) After it came out, US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan called Salovey to commend the plan and Yale’s willingness to engage with students. Salovey and Holloway also wrote to the Silliman community to reaffirm the Christakis’ place in Silliman College.

On both sides, some found fault. Supporters of the Christakis’ asked why the administration had waited more than two weeks to weigh in on the e-mail controversy. Salovey says Nicholas attended a weeklong conference soon after Erika sent her e-mail, and that when the Christakis’ came back he wanted to get a clear picture of the interactions between Nicholas and the students before making an announcement. He adds, “No one was going to be pushed out of his or her position because of an opinion stated in an e-mail message.”

As for the activists, Next Yale members said at a teach-in on November 18 that Salovey’s announcement did not come close to addressing all their demands. “Keep fighting!” someone yelled from the audience. The student activists said that they would.

Soon after that, the campus was caught up in its year-end preoccupations—exams, final projects, holiday plans. Students buried themselves in the libraries. The administration began moving to put Salovey’s plan in motion, and the media and social media were turning their focus elsewhere. For the moment, Yale was tranquil.