

What Todd Eklof's Detractors Get So Very, Very Wrong

by Jim Aikin

Sometimes it's hard to figure out why people are doing things. Sometimes you can figure it out pretty easily, but you have to read between the lines.

Last year Todd Eklof, a Unitarian Universalist minister, self-published a book called *The Gadfly Papers*. In it, he pointed out and attempted to analyze what he feels are some disturbingly narrow-minded trends in Unitarian Universalism. His book was roundly attacked by his fellow UU ministers. More than 400 of them signed an Open Letter deploring the book. More recently the UU Ministers Association (UUMA) officially censured Eklof for "breaking covenant," whatever that means.

It may surprise you to learn that neither the Open Letter nor the UUMA's letter of censure took the trouble to explain what was objectionable about the book. As a writer, I find it rather alarming when people in positions of authority urge those who look up to them not to read a certain book. Naturally, I immediately bought the book and read it.

It's not a great book, but it raises questions that are well worth discussing, at least if you're a member of a UU congregation. The fact that the other UU ministers did not want to discuss those questions would seem, at a bare minimum, to suggest that Eklof's concerns are legitimate. His primary concern is the pattern he detects of attempts by the active anti-racist wing of the UU community to shout down those whose ideas, or mere identity, they object to. Attempting to shout people down has not, let's admit, been a prominent part of the UU tradition. At least, not up until the past few years.

Eklof goes into some detail in his book about two recent shout-down actions. The reaction to his book is a third example.

Trying to figure out why the other UU ministers object so strenuously to Eklof's book is not easy, because they haven't said. I have, however, been able to find two serious attempts to document the weaknesses in his book. One is by Dennis McCarty (<http://www.uuchurchlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/GadflyReview2.pdf>); the other is by Elissa Lowe (https://drive.google.com/file/d/1XjmVpXSe8xb6NTHeFx24t1B7n-YG0H0p/view?fbclid=IwAR2BgBjMW5_oUcIhawIJ4VQS6rhNTDIifX3vbbcNnpSwKR7LWH_AdZ9p26o).

Both are long and rambling. McCarty's essay begins, "My journey into atheism began at age sixteen." I'll have a bit more to say about his essay, but I want to start with Lowe.

Lowe's essay was recommended to me by my own UU minister. My minister, who I'm sorry to say signed the Open Letter, said Lowe's essay documented the inaccuracies in the book, so I felt I ought to

give it a chance. My position has been, from the beginning, that if the book is bad, I would like somebody to tell me what's bad about it.

Lowe does indeed document three inaccuracies in the book. None of them is significant. They could have been corrected easily by a good editor (whom Eklof should certainly have hired, but apparently didn't) without altering his thesis in any way.

Let's get them out of the way. First, Eklof gets a bit of Roman history wrong when he states that Seneca was exiled to an island by Nero. Second, his description of the activities of the House Un-American Activities Committee alleges that people could be convicted by them, but conviction is not something a House committee can do. Third, he attributes a quote, inexplicably, to someone named Murray, who seems never to have existed. The correct name is Murphy, and Murphy's career has nothing to do with the career Eklof confabulates for "Murray." This is a horribly embarrassing goof, but the quote itself is accurate.

And that's it for Lowe's list of inaccuracies. The great bulk of her essay is devoted to other matters. She makes accusations (some of them reasonable, some quite debatable) that Eklof used quotes out of context; and she attacks other authors for what she feels are their faults. She devotes several pages to a critical analysis of the writings of Mark Lilla, whom Eklof quotes in *The Gadfly Papers*. Her comments about Lilla tell us little or nothing about the weaknesses she perceives in Eklof's book.

She's really quite irate — to the point where one is bound to ask, why is this person so upset? What has engorged her spleen? In order to understand that, you need to be aware that there has, during the past few years, been a lot of anti-racist activity within the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA). This activity has nothing to do with addressing the very real issues of racism within our larger society. As far as I've been able to discover, the effort is devoted almost entirely to stamping out racism, or perceived racism, within the UU community itself.

The phrase "white supremacy culture" has been flung about. It has been applied to the UU community by the anti-racists, and also by the Board of the Unitarian Universalist Association. It is used several times in the Open Letter.

One of the things Eklof discusses in his book is how the term "white supremacy" is used by anti-racists without providing anything like a rigorous or sensible definition. In using the term, again without definition, while attacking him, the signers of the Open Letter simply show that he's right.

With that as a background, let's jump forward to near the end of Lowe's essay. In Eklof's explanation of how logic works, he has used a quote from a fellow named Preston Mitchum. Mitchum

said, “All white people are racist.” Eklof uses this as an example of a statement that is universal (“all”) and affirmative (“are”). He then points out that if even one white person is not racist, Mitchum’s statement is logically false.

Lowe describes his analysis of this sentence as “painfully literalist and pedantic.” But that’s the point! Eklof is asking that people analyze statements about racism in ways that are logical rather than validating the statements’ emotional intent. Lowe finds this painful.

She then goes on to say, “Preston Mitchum’s conclusion, ‘ALL white people are racist’ is true.” That statement gives us an answer to the question I asked above: Why is she so upset? She’s upset because she thinks Todd Eklof must acknowledge that all white people (including him) are racist. She feels his book undercuts the anti-racist efforts within the UUA. She feels he is dismissing or trivializing the statements of people of color within the UUA, statements in which they talk about the racism they encounter and advocate ways to overcome it, by using logic in a deceptive, racist way.

I want to take a closer look at Mitchum’s assertion, but first I’d like to point out that Lowe concludes her essay without broaching the subject of the 2017 hiring decision, in which Christina Rivera was passed over for a UUA post in favor of a white man. (McCarty’s discussion of it is mentioned briefly below.) Eklof discusses this incident, and the follow-up to it, extensively. Critics of the hiring decision, including Rivera herself, felt that it was racially motivated. But as Eklof points out in *The Gadfly Papers*, we don’t know whether it was racially motivated. The UUA issued a “white paper” about the decision (https://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/findings_related_to_the_southern_regional_lead_hiring_april_2017.pdf), but their investigation failed to provide evidence for that conclusion.

It’s strange that Lowe would have stopped before she got to that topic, since it’s an important part of the book.

Much more could be said about the racism that is still an absolutely central feature of the culture and political system in the United States. It’s real, it’s horrifying, it’s tragic, and I’m not going to get into all that. I just want to point out that with respect to Mitchum’s assertion, Eklof is right and Lowe is wrong.

When I read her critique, I found myself thinking of John Hammond. Hammond was a rich white man and a lover of jazz. This was in the 1930s. Hammond would often go down to the nightclubs in Harlem to listen to the music. Often, I’m sure, he was the only white man in the club.

This was, of course, white privilege in action. None of the black people in the club could have gone to a white nightclub to listen to the music! But that's not the point. Hammond actively promoted the careers of several black musicians, including Billie Holiday, but that's not the point either.

At some later date, Hammond was interviewed. I don't remember who did the interview. Hammond mentioned that he often walked home from the club to his Manhattan apartment, walking through Harlem at 2:00 in the morning. The interviewer asked, "Did you ever worry about what might happen? Worry that you might be mugged?" Hammond said no, he never worried.

That's the point. John Hammond loved jazz, frequented black night clubs, helped promote black musicians, and did not feel, when he was alone on a street in Harlem late at night, that black men were a danger to him. I assert that John Hammond was not a racist. If you wish to assert that he was a racist, you will need to provide specific evidence to support your assertion — evidence about him as an individual. A sweeping statement about "all white people" simply will not do the job.

This is the substance of what Eklof was pointing out. If even one exception can be found, the statement is logically false. The context in which he provided this analysis was a discussion of Robin DiAngelo's book *White Fragility*. DiAngelo makes a lot of unqualified statements about all white people, all sociologists, and so on. Eklof is suggesting that DiAngelo's book can't be taken at face value. We can't assume that she's right simply because we feel that she's right. Her statements must be analyzed.

Lowe had nothing to say about Eklof's criticism of DiAngelo, though it's a fair guess that she approves of DiAngelo. Because of her failure to address Eklof's comments about either DiAngelo or the Rivera hiring decision, I don't think we can accept Lowe's criticism of *The Gadfly Papers* as balanced or authoritative. She seems, more narrowly, to have been trying to get some things off her chest. And that's fine, but it leaves me still wanting to read a coherent analysis of the shortcomings of the book.

Let's go through the first section of Lowe's critique in more detail.

In her introduction, she tries to deconstruct Eklof's statement, "I must say what I believe is true and do what I believe is right, even if I'm wrong." Offhand, I'd say everybody believes this. It simply means, "I'm going to stand up for what I believe." But Lowe tries to reinterpret it: "It's as if he feels

it's totally ok to be wrong, because free speech trumps fact-checking." Right off the bat, she is deliberately misinterpreting what he said in order to fit it within her own narrative.

A little further down the page, she refers to *The Gadfly Papers* as "barely readable" (not the case at all — it's thoroughly readable), and as "riddled with right-wing pejoratives, hyperbolic language," and so forth. It's true that he sometimes gets a little overwrought, so I'll accept her criticism of hyperbolic language, but not "riddled with." The business of whether he's using right-wing pejoratives is disputable and also hard to interpret. He goes to some trouble to discuss the way in which the anti-racist movement has adopted right-wing tactics; he then extends the use of words that are often used to describe right-wing actions, to cover the anti-racist tactics. I don't know if this is what she's referring to. I don't think she's suggesting that he uses the pejorative terms that right-wing commentators use. If that's what she meant, I think I would need to see several examples before I'd go along with "riddled with."

She accuses Eklof of "white-hot anger." I didn't see that anywhere in the book. Again, I would need to see examples. (There are no footnotes in the introduction to guide us to passages that might provide examples.)

She refers to "the secrecy surrounding Rev. Eklof's plans to self-publish and 'ambush' the UUA ... at the General Assembly." Be it noted, this criticism has exactly nothing to do with the content of the book. It's an *ad hominem* attack on Eklof. Also, there's no explanation of what she means by "secrecy" or "ambush."

In her first longer section, Lowe takes aim at Eklof's discussion (which, by the way, is one paragraph long) of something an anonymous Facebook user said about a planned action by the Westboro Baptist Church. What this person said was, "Sometimes there are no two good sides. That [the idea that there are two good sides] is a fallacy created by white supremacist hierarchy to use the value of free speech to spread hate and oppression. Hate and oppression is never okay."

His analysis of this statement is that whoever made the statement wants us to believe that sometimes free speech is not okay — and that it is not okay because the "white supremacist hierarchy" has "spread hate and oppression" under the guise of free speech.

The anonymous writer's first and last sentences are obviously true. The problem is the sentence in the middle. By inference, the writer is asserting that it's okay to censor speech because (a) the speech spreads, in the would-be censor's opinion, hate and oppression, and (b) the "white supremacist hierarchy" has used the iconic value of free speech in this manner.

Here's the problem with this: Who is to say what forms of speech spread hate and oppression? You and I may agree whole-heartedly about this, but in a free society, you and I don't get to enforce our ideas — and nor do other people. We live in a world in which some religious conservatives believe fervently that advocating gay rights is, precisely, spreading hate and oppression. Meanwhile, other people believe that advocating sensible control of gun ownership is a way of spreading oppression.

In a free society, we take on the burden of listening to people with whom we disagree. Everybody has to be treated equally with respect to their right to speak, because none of us has the right to sit as arbiters on the speech of other people.

The response of the Facebook writer to the impending Westboro action seems to have been that the Westboro people should not be allowed to speak. And that's just plain wrong. As offensive as they are, they must be accorded the same rights we wish to enjoy.

Sadly, Lowe doesn't seem to understand this.

First, she dodges by saying that the Facebook statement "taken at face value" doesn't suggest that the Westboro action should be stopped. Indeed it doesn't. But that's irrelevant. Eklof was using the Facebook statement as a way of illustrating how people think about free speech when they get upset.

She feels Eklof's assessment of the Facebook statement is "incredibly uncharitable." I may agree that Eklof could have been more circumspect rather than saying, "the writer further justifies extremist thinking and behavior," or that "the writer's belief is not only presumed to be right but righteous, and therefore must be defended, even if doing so means denying the freedoms of those who disagree...." But was he being incredibly uncharitable? Or is Lowe just groping for a way to dismiss his central point without coming to grips with it?

She then accuses him "of being 'righteous' and 'morally absolute' himself." Again, she is failing to address the substance of what he is driving at, preferring instead to indulge in an *ad hominem* attack.

She goes on to point out, quite correctly, that the men who wrote the First Amendment were advocates of white supremacy. But so what? That tells us nothing at all about the value of free speech. Her point, in this passage, seems to be that because free speech has been advocated "by white, often wealthy men," there must be something wrong with it. She also, in the process, suggests that "many of the groups that the ACLU protects" are dominated by those wealthy white men. I'm not an expert on the ACLU, but I find this characterization rather surprising. My impression is that they have quite often advocated for the underdog. The Skokie case was controversial for precisely that reason: It wasn't what the ACLU is known for.

In her fifth point, she says this: “All the FB writer is saying is that the WBC’s ‘side’ (‘hate and oppression’) does not have equal standing with their own, or most people’s for that matter, since a clear majority of Americans support equal rights for gay people. There’s nothing ‘extremist’ about that.” This is a mistake. The problem, which Lowe would prefer to ignore, lies in the words “equal standing.” As I pointed out above, objectionable ideas *do* have equal standing in a free society. You and I do not have the right to censor them, however passionately we may wish to.

In her sixth bullet point, she claims that Eklof “need[ed] to denounce every word of the FB writer’s post.” That’s her projection. He didn’t denounce every word. If you read his paragraph, you’ll find that he analyzed the statement, certainly as a whole, but he did not denounce it. He used it as an example of the trend that his book is about.

In asserting that “Eklof’s attack on the FB writer’s post is paradoxical,” Lowe is simply flailing around. At no point has she set out her ideas as to the desirable limits on free speech. Instead, she assumes that Eklof is suggesting that anybody who is critical of free speech should not be allowed to speak. That’s not the point he was making. He was using an example of someone who is disturbed by other people’s use of free speech in order to suggest that some people want to shut down free speech. There’s a huge difference between analyzing what someone said and advocating that they should not have been allowed to say it. But Lowe fails to make this distinction. She would prefer to attack Eklof.

She then turns, for support of her misinterpretation, to a Harvard professor. I’m not going to try to parse what the professor wrote. It’s enough to note that since Lowe has failed to understand what Eklof was saying, an outside source that she brings in to support her position would be relevant only if that outside source was commenting specifically on Eklof’s paragraph. And of course that’s not what the professor was doing.

She then brings in a quote from journalist Noah Berlatsky. Berlatsky complains that “‘free speech’ is a battle cry that has been picked up by neo-Nazis and white supremacists. They see First Amendment advocates as allies....” Here again, as in the Facebook quote, we’re seeing someone who feels that the ideal of free speech has been allowed to go too far.

Lowe says, “My point is not that Berlatsky, nor any of the legal scholars linked above are correct; it’s that we, as a society can, and should, be able to discuss the downsides of free speech without being denounced as extremists.” This is a fair criticism. Eklof did indeed use the word “extremist.”

Her quote from another professor makes a good point about how “young people of color and young sexual identity minorities, increasingly reject liberal norms of free speech.” He ends his paragraph by

recommending “a robust public discourse,” and that’s a very good thing to recommend. I will note, however, that encouraging people not to read a book (as the Open Letter does) can hardly contribute to a robust public discourse.

With respect to free speech, it would be good to know what limits Lowe herself would like to set on it. She doesn’t tell us. It’s worth noting, as well, that the LREDA speakers and the author of “After L, G, and B” are hardly in the same category as Milo Yiannopoulos or the gang from the Westboro Baptist Church. Even if we choose to agree that the latter have nothing to contribute to a public discourse, we haven’t agreed that the LREDA speakers and the author of the article should be shut down. If Lowe were to define her preferred limits of free speech, we could assess the relative merits of various actions that might be taken against various speakers.

In her section on “linguicide,” Lowe points out Eklof’s factual errors about Seneca and HUAC. She then uses his mistakes as the basis for another *ad hominem* attack: “...my issue with these gaffes is simple: this stuff is easy to look up. That Eklof didn’t bother to do so before publishing/distributing *Gadfly* does not speak well for his priorities.”

Lowe objects strenuously (“my jaw dropped”) to Eklof’s comparison of McCarthyism to the assertion by somebody or other “that the article [on trans teens’ issues in *UU World* should] not be run, that an article written by someone who is actually transgender would be more appropriate.” He does make such a comparison, at least implicitly, and I think we can all agree that it’s a badly overblown and insulting comparison. The real question, however, is whether those who objected to the authorship of the article were correct, or whether they were wrong.

This is not a question that Lowe addresses.

We can grant that they had every right to protest, to make their views known to the magazine’s editor. That’s free speech. The important question is whether their criticisms of the article were right or wrong. I maintain that the article was respectful and appropriate, and that the question of the gender identity of its author is irrelevant. In addition, we need to observe that those who protested the scheduled publication of the article before it was published were specifically attempting to shut down some speech — not because they disagreed with anything that they anticipated the speaker (in this case, the author of the article) was going to say, but because she was the wrong person.

This is not a trivial issue. It has everything to do with Eklof’s thesis in his book. The position of those who are prepared to protest preemptively is that the identity of the speaker is more important than what the speaker does or does not say, since they don’t yet know what the speaker will or won’t say.

This was the case in the LREDA protest (because the presenters were white and male), and it was the case in the *UU World* protest (because the article’s author was not trans).

Lowe’s quote from Greg Magarian obscures this issue. “Preemptive protest,” he tells us, “is nonviolent, nonobstructive action that makes a case for why a speaker shouldn’t be heard.” However, asking beforehand that an article not be published (as was the case in the *UU World* incident) is clearly obstructive. I believe this is called a prior restraint on free speech. Magarian gets it wrong again as this quote continues: “Urging people not to buy a forthcoming book because its publication will have undesirable consequences is preemptive protest.” This is badly muddled. If the book’s publication will have undesirable consequences, then urging people not to buy it *after* it has been published is pointless. It has been published; the undesirable consequences, if any, will now be occurring; and urging people not to read it won’t change that. Urging the publisher, in advance, not to publish it would be a different thing. It would be preemptive, and also obstructive, in that it would *prevent* people from reading the book, whether they wanted to or not.

In this section Lowe seems to be putting forth a robust argument in favor of free speech: “News flash: mean letters and emails, even ones stating an article should not have been published, are FREE SPEECH.” (The capital letters are hers.) This is odd, given her earlier defense of the statement in Facebook. But let’s take her at her word. Free speech is good, and should not be trampled upon. What she fails to do is tell us whether she felt *UU World* should have published the article. Nor does she tell us whether she feels the LREDA presenters should have been allowed to continue their presentation.

It almost seems as if she’s willing to take either side of the issue, as long as she can continue to be critical of *The Gadfly Papers*. Her own position remains shrouded in mystery.

I would note, also, that her defense of “mean letters and emails” could easily be taken as a defense of the anonymous hate mail received by Christina Rivera. (See the section on Dennis McCarty, below.) I’m pretty sure Lowe wouldn’t want to defend whoever wrote those messages. So is she defending free speech, or is she advocating limits on free speech? I don’t know.

She then accuses Eklof of precisely the same defect she herself has been indulging in: “Whether he realizes it or not, he’s trying to have it both ways: he wants liberals to be tolerant of speakers that offend *them*, like the Westboro Baptist Church, while reserving the right to be intolerant of liberal speech that offends *him*.” (Italics in original.) This use of “intolerant” is slippery. What Eklof does (well or ineptly — your mileage may vary) is to critique certain ideas that are rather common within the UU community. Offering a critique cannot possibly be considered “intolerant.” If it were, Elissa

Lowe would herself be guilty of this particular sin. It's not a sin to be critical of certain ideas, so neither Eklof nor Lowe should be indicted for intolerance.

Turning to her bullet points that follow the quote from *Gadfly* about the *UU World* protest, she misreads Eklof as asserting "that its authors and editors should be immune from the criticism." This is wrong. He didn't say anything of the sort. His point was that the criticism was misguided, not that the editor and author should be immune to it. He might have preferred that they ignore it, but that's a slightly different thing, and in any event he never says that.

Her observation about Lukianoff and Haidt's principle of charity is, I think, valid. I agree with her.

Her fourth bullet point makes an unwarranted and grotesque assumption, namely, that the author of the article failed to get permission from her daughter and her daughter's friends for writing about them. "I would NEVER do that to my adult children/their friends without their explicit consent and approval of the final draft. Yet there's no hint in the article that consent was sought or given." (Capital letters in the original.) The fact that something wasn't mentioned in the article is not evidence that it didn't happen! In any event, their names were changed in the article. And this is the only criticism Lowe makes of the article itself. She quotes someone else (C. B. Beal) as saying that "the article contains inaccurate definitions, errors of language, even slurs." But we're given no examples with which to verify these claims. Slurs? Really?

In bringing in the criticisms of the article from Alex Kapitan, Lowe misidentifies critic Kapitan as "a UU minister." My online research suggests that Kapitan is "a lay community minister," which I think is probably a different thing. But we can give Lowe a pass on that if she'll give Eklof a pass on the Seneca goof.

Kapitan's objections to the article, which she quotes rather extensively, are, again, devoid of examples. Here's Kapitan: "I'm speechless about the title (for so many reasons). I'm stunned at the casual dropping of the f-slur. I'm angry at the conflation of trans and intersex identities and experiences, the over-emphasis on surgeries and hormones and genitalia, the way in which people of color and disabled people (many of whom are also trans) are also ignorantly diminished."

Let's go back to the article and see if we can figure out what Kapitan is referring to.

It's difficult to figure out what bothered Kapitan about the article's title. We have no information about that. I don't think it's a very good title; I don't know exactly what it means. Possibly it means something like "treating people as people rather than as belonging to categories." This would put the title in opposition to identity politics, and I suppose that might bother people who prefer to emphasize

their group identities. But I'm guessing. Maybe the title (which, in any event, the author may not have chosen — magazine editors often come up with headlines themselves — in the course of my career I did it hundreds of times) is just a coy way of saying, "After L, G, and B comes T!" That would make sense. But it leaves Kapitan speechless for some reason.

The opening paragraphs of the article suggest that it's not exclusively about the trans experience: The author (Kimberly French) begins by mentioning her struggles to "get it right" with a young trans or genderqueer woman.

With respect to "the casual dropping of the f-slur," I suspect that what Kapitan was referring to is this line, again early in the article: "I wrote in my high school paper in the 1970s ... challenging my classmates to stop making faggot jokes and get behind gay rights." If that is indeed "the f-slur" Kapitan is objecting to, we have a huge fucking problem. If you can't even use a word when explaining how you asked people to stop using the word, dialog and discourse become impossible. When writing about people's misguided attempts to censor *The Adventures of Huckelberry Finn*, one must — must! — be free to use the word "nigger" where it is necessary. That's exactly the same principle. It's not a slur; it's a word being used *as a word*.

I can certainly understand how trans readers might be taken aback by this passage in the article: "It was my turn to register shock. How could I get to know someone if their pronoun was all I could ask about something so central to who they were?" It's a central tenet of trans awareness (and quite properly so) that you don't ask a trans person questions (for example, about their genitals) that you wouldn't ask a cisgendered person. I wish French had emphasized that, and I can readily understand why it bothers Kapitan. In context, the article is about French's learning process — and in the paragraph just before that, Jenn has explained that you don't get to ask that. So the correction for French's ignorance is actually there in the article. It's just poorly structured and needed more emphasis.

The next part of the article discusses surgery and recent historical developments. There's nothing wrong with it except that Kapitan wishes it had been given less page space.

It may be true that trans and intersex identities are, to Kapitan, different things and should not be muddled together (conflated). But in fact there's a huge spectrum of identities within the non-gender-binary experience. Someone may identify using one word (or pronoun) on Tuesday and a different one on Wednesday. So I can't really see conflation of identities within the non-gender-binary experience as a problem.

French next turns to the political situation. The article has a quote from Kapitan about the political struggle. This segues into Kapitan's criticism of UU culture (again, we're in French's article), which "doesn't overlap much with trans culture."

The article then turns back to a discussion of French's own experience within her family. And pronouns. We can all have our own ideas about pronoun usage. As a writer, I have mine. I happen to think "they" is a little weird when referring to a specific single person, though I'm quite comfortable using it to refer to a single *nonspecific* person. (Some writers don't like that usage either.) I deplore "ze" and "zir." But that's just me. If you're not comfortable using some pronoun, just repeat the person's name. It's not difficult. I've been doing it throughout this discussion, and I'll bet you never even noticed. Indeed, French recommends using the person's name if you're not sure of or not comfortable with the pronoun.

To finish up, Kapitan is angry at "the way in which people of color and disabled people (many of whom are also trans) are also ignorantly diminished" in the article. But here's a quote from the article: "The overwhelming majority of the victims were transgender women of color (40 percent) and gay men (38 percent). The data collected in 2018 also show transgender women of color as the primary victims of hate crimes against LGBT people."

Ignorantly diminished? Without a specific example of what Kapitan is referring to (and I couldn't find one), I'm baffled. What I'm left with is the impression that Kapitan is angry not about anything that's actually in the article, but about the fact that it isn't the article ze would have written.

This is not a valid criticism. And it's not legitimate for Lowe to advance Kapitan's incoherent critique in an effort to blacken Eklof's reputation.

Lowe asserts that "Eklof's summary judgment, 'The main issue with [the article], for those troubled by it, is that it was written by a nontrans woman,' simply doesn't fly — it's clear that these writers disagreed with the content, not just the identity of the author." But that's not clear at all. As far as I can tell from reading the article and Kapitan's complaint, the latter as quoted by Lowe, the disagreement over content was vague and debatable. What's more, in the apology written by the editor of *UU World* following the uproar over the article, two of the three reasons the editor gives for needing to apologize were specifically that the article should have been written by a trans person. It *was* about the authorship. There is nothing wrong with the content of the article except that it didn't adhere to the talking points of trans activists.

Well, you didn't write the article. Someone else wrote it. Buckle up, buttercup.

At this point, I'm going to quietly bring down the curtain. Trying to dissect Lowe's misinterpretations of Eklof and her assertions that he takes quotes out of context is not likely to convince anybody, it becomes nitpicking to the point of microsurgery, and in any event her essay is not widely available even within the UU community, so I'm using a .45 automatic to shoot at gnats.

What I hope is that anyone who reads this will understand that it's not simply the case that Elissa Lowe has pointed out significant flaws in Todd Eklof's book. Quite the contrary. Though she has certainly noticed a few things about the book that a good editor would have fixed, she has not even attempted to address Eklof's principle thesis.

Possibly she didn't understand what he was saying; possibly what he was saying made her so angry that she couldn't think straight; possibly she was unable to put together a coherent response because there is none; or possibly the source of her difficulty lay elsewhere. I won't try to guess.

Turning to Rev. Dennis McCarty's attack on *The Gadfly Papers*, the best that can be said is that McCarty is baffling because he fails to provide examples. Lowe at least provides copious footnotes; McCarty doesn't. His essay is thickly larded with statements for which he provides not a shred of evidence. He indulges in underhanded attacks on what he presumes are Eklof's motives. It's possible some of McCarty's points are valid, but I found it difficult to wade through the vitriol and repeatedly frustrated by his failure to back up his statements with actual quotes from the relevant sources. At times he seems to be assuming that all of his readers will know what he's referring to; at other points he seems to be indulging in a sweeping and unwarranted generalization, or to have badly misunderstood the point that Eklof was making. Sometimes he lapses into what looks very like incoherence.

Consider, for instance, this passage in his discussion of the Rivera hiring decision: "Despite the fact that a white male from outside the Region received preferential treatment over female and non-white candidates from within the region, Ekloff [sic] maintains that accusations of racial bias are, in a logical sense, 'not possibly' correct.(GF, 90)"

The passage above seems to contain a direct quote from *The Gadfly Papers*. I don't have a print copy, so I can't turn to page 90, but I do have a Kindle copy, so I can search the text. The phrase "not possibly" does not occur anywhere in the text. Nor, in fact, does the term "racial bias." The closest passage I can find, searching for related words like "possibility," is this: "As stated earlier, it remains

unclear whether the hiring decision in question was the result of ‘structures of racism and white supremacy within the UUA,’ or due to legitimate issues with the applicant’s credentials. The report [of the UUA on the hiring decision], however, never considers the latter possibility.”

Somehow, McCarty has transmuted a statement of uncertainty and a criticism of the report into a mistaken assertion that Eklof said racial bias was “not possibly” the cause of the hiring decision.

Or consider this baffling passage. Here’s McCarty: “He [Eklof] also avoids mentioning the classic, good-ole-boy practice by which the Southern Region Lead hiring took place, under circumstances that were—at least in the written requirements— not allowed for women or People of Color.” What McCarty seems to be saying is that the hiring guidelines for the Southern Region explicitly created different criteria for women and people of color. I find this very hard to believe. And of course McCarty doesn’t bother to give us a quote from these written requirements.

Possibly McCarty is just a terrible writer. Or possibly he’s confused for some reason. I don’t think for a minute that he’s deliberately making up ridiculous claims in order to attack Todd Eklof; that’s not a credible explanation. But whatever the explanation, something is very wrong here.

McCarty goes on to say that unnamed people “call[ed] for the blood of a whistleblower [*i.e.*, Rivera] who reveals good-ole-boy hiring done with their UUA-donated money! That anyone associated with Unitarian Universalism could be as cowardly and cruel as those people who hounded this woman off the UUA Board and, subsequently out of her paid employment—is stomach-turning to me.” Indeed, it would be stomach-turning to me too. Unfortunately, McCarty fails to provide a hint about when or how this happened. I found a statement online from the UUA Board announcing her resignation from the Board. This statement says that “the white supremacy culture within UUism that has some believing letters of hate and threats are acceptable forms of expression — this is not reflective of the faith either of us have been taught from childhood and it must cease immediately!” Unfortunately, the Board’s statement raises more questions than it answers. First, given that the Board fully supported her, why did she resign? Second, who was making threats? What threats were they making? Were the people who were making the threats Unitarian Universalists?

It’s hard for an outsider to figure out what was actually happening. And that fact is not trivial: Part of the point of *The Gadfly Papers* is that we do need to look at the facts; we cannot afford to rely on emotion-laden statements that may or may not be factual.

Here is what I’ve been able to learn: According to an article on the *UU World* website, “Their [the UUA Board’s] announcement alludes to two incidents *UU World* has previously reported on. In March

2018, an anonymous racist message targeting Rivera was left, presumably by a parishioner, at Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church Unitarian Universalist in Charlottesville, Virginia, where Rivera works as director of administration and finance.... In October, during the UUA board meeting in Boston, the UUA received anonymous hate mail targeting Rivera's son, a Youth Caucus volunteer leader who was in Boston that weekend for a Youth Caucus meeting.... Rivera did not mention the hateful letters in her resignation letter nor during discussion of her resignation."

Please read that carefully. There were two anonymous messages, one of them "presumably" sent by a parishioner. What? That's a fact-free conclusion. Neither of the messages, according to the *UU World* description, contained threats. In addition, Rivera herself did not mention the messages in tendering her resignation.

In spite of which, McCarty says these anonymous people (one or both of them — there seem to have been only two) were calling for blood. He says flatly that they were UU's. He also says, without evidence, as Rivera herself did not say any such thing, that these messages were what "hounded" her out of the Board.

This kind of deceptive rhetorical overreach is what we expect from someone like Donald Trump. That it's coming, in this case, from a UU minister — McCarty, let's not forget, is a UU minister — is, well, let's borrow his phrase. It's stomach-turning.

I don't see any reason to go on analyzing McCarty's rant. Nobody who has any sense could possibly take the man seriously. If he makes any salient observations about *The Gadfly Papers*, they're buried too deep in the muck for me to wrinkle them out.

And that's what we've got, sports fans. Lowe and McCarty provide the only detailed critiques I have been able to find of *The Gadfly Papers*. In conclusion, I can do no better than quote a phrase my mother used to use occasionally, a phrase she picked up from a caption in a *New Yorker* cartoon 75 or 80 years ago:

I say it's spinach, and I say the hell with it.