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Demographic reductionism

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Quad 136

Demographic Reductionism

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Demographic Reductionism



A recent article in the *New York Times* examines a controversy at a New York art museum.

The [article](#) by Maya Salam describes criticism the Brooklyn Museum is receiving for hiring Kristen Windmuller-Lund as the curator of the African art. Windmuller-Lund appears highly qualified on paper. The story notes that she “has Ph.D. and M.A. degrees

from Princeton, and a bachelor’s degree in the history of art from Yale. She has worked at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Princeton University Art Museum and the Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase, N.Y.” She is also white.

Critics of the decision “on social media and from an anti-gentrification activist group...argue the selection perpetuated ‘ongoing legacies of oppression.’ ” Another activist group wrote that the museum’s choice was “ ‘tone-deaf’ and said that ‘no matter how one parses it, the appointment is simply not a good look in this day and age.’ ”

The Brooklyn Museum is pushing back against the criticism, releasing a statement praising Windmuller-Luna and including a reaction from Okwui Enwezor, the renowned Nigerian-American curator, scholar and arts leader, who called Dr. Windmuller-Luna,

“...formerly a brilliant student of mine. The criticism around her appointment can

be described as

arbitrary at best, and chilling at worst,” he said. “There is no place in the field of African art for such a reductive view of art scholarship according to which qualified and dedicated scholars like Kristen should be disqualified by her being white, and a woman. African art as a discipline deserves better.”

The story caught my eye because of its potential implications for higher education. There are at least two major concerns with a world view that suggests subjects, disciplines or topics should be limited to certain individuals or groups.

1. Educational breadth. A broad-based liberal arts education is the foundation of most of the finest universities in the United States and is part of every institution that has general education requirements. The underlying philosophy is that every student benefits from studying things that are outside their experiences in order to stretch and challenge them. Such study makes students better able to understand the experiences of others and more empathetic. It might even introduce them to a topic that could become their academic major and even a lifelong passion. Faculty do not discourage certain students from studying topics based on their background, gender, economics, religion or any other demographic characteristics. In fact, on the contrary, students are often encouraged to try subjects that are distant from their previous experiences. This may well be how Windmuller-Lund got interested in African art.

2. Demographic constraints on professors. Beyond the limitations this narrow world view would impose on students' educational choices, consider how the logic of the Brooklyn Museum's critics could play out when taken to its logical extreme. Only white men teach Shakespeare? Christians only research Christianity? Women only teach Middlemarch and Virginia Woolf? Latin American or Asian or European historians must have appropriate genetic/family roots? Jews only explore the meaning of the Holocaust?

To reduce individuals to the collection of demographic characteristics they might check off on a census form is deeply reductionist. It suggests that an individual is simply a collection of traits rather than a person capable of synthesizing their many attributes into a complex irreducible human being.

If a liberal arts education teaches anything, it is that we are all capable of transcending mere

genetics and history. Ideally we can discover and live out a shared humanity in which we have much more in common with each other than the differences that are sometimes given too much weight.

By [Michael Hemesath](#) | April 17th, 2018 | Categories: [Higher Education](#), [History](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] [PrezHemesath](#).