

# National Coalition Against Censorship

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## NCAC PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS

U.S. cultural institutions have a critical role in maintaining the openness of social and political debate. That role is threatened when those institutions fail to take on real controversies around difficult subject-matter.

A disturbing example involves the conceptual poet Vanessa Place, whose long-running project tweeting the full text of *Gone with the Wind* has become the object of virulent criticism, mostly conducted through social media. An anonymous online group led the charge, calling the project "at best, startlingly racially insensitive, and, at worst, racist." The same group has also attacked those they see as defending Place.

Ever since the attacks started in early May, in the midst of the controversy and the pressures from the protesters, various cultural institutions have opted or been forced to remove Vanessa Place from a conference committee, cancel a discussion panel and even a whole conference--to the effect of imposing a silence where the only voices heard are those who attack the project and its author.

On May 18, the Association of Writers & Writing Programs (AWP) acceded to the demands of the anonymous group and a related petition and decided to remove Place from a subcommittee that reviews applications for their annual conference. Paradoxically reiterating their commitment to freedom of expression, the AWP justified the removal as an effort to "to protect the efficacy of the conference subcommittee's work."

Then on May 29, the Berkeley Poetry Conference, which had refused demands to banish Place from the program, scrapped their entire event, citing the withdrawal of a number of the other participants. And on June 6, the Whitney Museum in New York canceled a public program on the subject of the death penalty featuring Place along with philosophers Kyoo Lee and Avital Ronell. The organizers were unable to determine how to secure the integrity of the program in the context of the controversy.

Those protesting have expressed little interest in engaging in a debate about Place's work; their aim has been to banish her entirely from cultural institutions. While they are free to do so - critiquing or protesting an art project is part of the give and take of a democratic culture - for cultural institutions to, in effect, blacklist its author and give in to online attacks from anonymous sources threatens our collective interest in maintaining a vital public sphere.

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American Jewish Committee  
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American Orthopsychiatric Association  
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& Authors  
Americans United for Separation of  
Church & State  
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United Methodist Church  
United Methodist Communications  
Women's American ORT  
Writers Guild of America, East  
Writers Guild of America, West

The cultural atmosphere evidenced by the events around Vanessa Place is chilling to any creative artist or institution that may consider approaching difficult questions around race, sexuality or politics. It makes real debate about emotionally charged issues over which we often disagree nearly impossible. Unless they develop strategies to manage conflict and disagreement productively, cultural institutions will operate as echo chambers under the pall of a fearful consensus, rather than leaders in a vibrant and agonistic public sphere.

Not only is silencing and suppression dangerous for the culture at large, it does nothing to confront the realities of racism. Censorship has never contributed to the cause of social justice; throughout history it has invariably been on the side of totalitarianism and repression. But in the echo chambers of easy consensus, this lesson is very easily forgotten.

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