Narrating the PC Controversies: Thoughts on Dinesh D’Souza’s *Illiberal Education*

This essay takes a different subject from the others: neither a fictional narrative nor a canonical text but an entry in the so-called culture wars being conducted in the early 1990s: D’Souza’s *Illiberal Education*. For that reason, the essay runs the risks of dealing with dated material and giving D’Souza’s text more prominence than it deserves. I want to emphasize that the essay is interested in D’Souza’s book as a representative case: as D’Souza’s new book, *The End of Racism*, illustrates, narrative continues to be used in the day-to-day political and ideological battles over the nature of our institutions, and ideologically committed partisans continue to employ at least some of the tactics found in *Illiberal Education*. If the analysis I offer is persuasive, then it has relevance for current and future situations. Furthermore, the essay engages the more general theoretical question of how ideology influences interpretation by reflecting on how my own commitments influence my discussion of D’Souza. Finally, I think it is important for those who disagree with books such as *Illiberal Education*, which have achieved a certain cultural influence, not to ignore them but to take them seriously.
Narrative, Narrative Theory, and the Case of *Illiberal Education*

Although the media storm swirling around the term *political correctness* has now abated, universities and their publics are still debating such important issues as affirmative action, multiculturalism, speech codes, and faculty accountability to students and taxpayers. As these debates continue, I want to consider Dinesh D'Souza's *Illiberal Education* from the perspective offered by my approach to narrative as rhetoric, because I believe that the book shows—both in its own strategies and in the reception that made it a best-seller—how much the debates are influenced by the narratives that surround them. Indeed, my first reaction to D'Souza's heavily documented book is to echo E. M. Forster: "*Illiberal Education* tells a story. Yes—oh dear, yes—it tells a story." For out of the book's welter of statistics, interviews, case studies, and discursive analysis arises D'Souza's tale of the decline and fall of the contemporary American university. The villain of the piece is what D'Souza calls the "victim's revolution," the efforts by leftist academics to do such things as promote affirmative action, revise the traditional canon, and curb so-called hate speech—in short, to take race and gender into account in admissions, in the curriculum, and in the conduct of campus life. According to D'Souza's narrative, these efforts have undermined the ideal of a liberal education: the university, rather than being a place for open, unfettered inquiry in which students are taught values of toleration and fairness, has become a place beset by a rigid and constricting ideology of victim's rights, a place in which students get "an education in close-mindedness and intolerance, which is to say, illiberal education" (229).

Clearly, much of the attention, both positive and negative, *Illiberal Education* received rests on the perception that its story is important and/or well told. Here I will take the story's importance as a given and focus on its telling. Indeed, my primary interests are *how* D'Souza tells the story, *how* he views his own narrative—and *why*, after studying these matters, I remain unconvinced by the story. I shall employ tools of rhetorical analysis to move both inside and outside D'Souza's ideological and narrative perspectives—in other words, both to listen carefully to his story and to question it seriously. More particularly, I shall,
first, analyze the powerful claims D’Souza implicitly makes for his narrative by examining the way he views the relationships between facts, interpretations, and that narrative. Second, I shall argue that many of D’Souza’s local narratives do not make—at least as straightforwardly as he thinks—the points that he presents them as making. Third, I shall interrogate my own interested relation to D’Souza’s narratives as a way of considering the role of ideology in his construction of those narratives and in my analysis of them. Finally, I shall consider some general conclusions that follow from this exploration of narrative, narrative analysis, and the debates over the university.

**Facts, Interpretations, and Narratives**

Here the reader will find a wealth of concrete information and specific detail that has withstood the most searching factual scrutiny. It is possible to come up with varying interpretations, but while people are entitled to their own opinions, they are not entitled to their own facts. What it is important to recognize is not horror stories or excess but the fact that these are the logical consequences of a set of principles, indeed of an ideological world view.

—Dinesh D’Souza, introduction to the Vintage edition, xx

D’Souza’s statement proposes a very strict connection between fact, interpretation, and narrative: solid fact provides the firm foundation on which (proper) interpretation and narrative should be built. Although the statement gives lip service to the variability of interpretation, it actually works to control and close off interpretation by claiming that interpretation follows directly from fact. If facts are given, not chosen, and if they point directly to conclusions (as “horror stories” point to an underlying ideological view of the world), then alternative interpretations of the facts, though possible, are finally wrong. D’Souza tightens the link between fact and interpretation through the rhetorical moves of his last sentence: “What it is important to recognize is not horror stories [about the way Political Correctness is ruining campus life] or excess but the fact that these are the logical consequences of a set of principles, indeed of an ideological world view.”
The first half of the sentence graciously denies any interest in sensationalism ("horror stories are not important"), but the second half reclaims sensationalism's importance by subsuming it in its alleged underlying cause ("a logical consequence of a set of principles"). More significantly, in light of D'Souza's seemingly commonsensical assertion that you can't choose your facts, the otherwise inelegant phrase "the fact that" raises the stakes of his claim here. That "horror stories" have a dangerous ideological perspective as their underlying cause is not just D'Souza's opinion or interpretation—this is a matter of fact. And just as we cannot choose to accept or reject this fact, we cannot choose to accept or reject the narrative that follows from it, because this narrative is now also rooted in the indisputable.

If we look more closely at the passage, however, we can see that, despite D'Souza's skillful rhetoric (and to some extent, because of it), this passage actually indicates that facts and interpretations are much less tightly connected than it overtly claims. D'Souza's confident assertion in the last sentence indicates that he regards the close link between facts and interpretations as fairly straightforward and unproblematic. The rhetorical strategy of the whole passage tells a different story, however. D'Souza is worrying here about those readers who have disputed his evidence and especially those who have tried to interpret it differently. So he makes his assertion about the indisputability of his facts, and then tries to make this tight link between fact, interpretation, and narrative. But he must also deal with the inconvenient fact that his evidence has been—and will be—used as the basis for different interpretations. As we have seen, he tries to acknowledge this fact and then gloss over it. But the glossing over does not work. If it is a fact that people are entitled to their different interpretations, then it cannot indisputably be a fact that the "horror stories" are a logical consequence of an "ideological world view"—unless, of course, there is only one correct interpretation of the facts. But if there is only one correct interpretation, people are not entitled to their own (differing) interpretations—unless, of course, they are entitled to ignore the truth. And if they are entitled to ignore the truth, they are entitled to ignore the (indisputable) facts. In other words, they can choose their own facts. If D'Souza is serious about people being able to form differing interpretations, then his conclu-
sion about the link between fact and interpretation does not follow. If he is serious about the link between fact and interpretation, then people cannot choose their own interpretations.

To come at this point about the gap between facts and interpretations from another direction, let us imagine a reader who believes that the horror stories are not “a logical consequence” of an underlying set of principles but rather a consequence of some people’s overzealousness. According to this reader, these well-intentioned people become so committed to one principle (e.g., speech that mocks minority groups should be discouraged) that they ignore other equally important principles (even distasteful speech deserves First Amendment protection because otherwise all unpopular speech is subject to censorship). Clearly, D’Souza’s assertions in this passage will not convince this reader because what D’Souza points at—the “fact” that the horror stories are the consequence of an underlying set of principles—is something this reader disputes. In effect, he says to D’Souza, “You see the wrong thing when you look at the horror stories.” Indeed, this reader would be inclined to point to the horror stories and say, “Mr. D’Souza, can’t you see that they stem from overzealousness?” To which D’Souza would probably reply, “You see the wrong thing when you look at the facts.”

Neither act of pointing to the horror stories will settle the dispute about how to interpret their meaning. The facts of the horror stories are susceptible to more than one interpretation. Indeed, whether a particular incident deserves to be designated as a “horror story” will frequently be a matter of dispute. By insisting on the gap between facts and interpretations, I have only complicated the issue of how the arguments and controversies surrounding the role of the university should be narrated. Insisting on the gap immediately raises two related questions: (1) why does a given observer develop one interpretation rather than another? and (2) how is it possible to adjudicate among different interpretations of the same phenomena? I think I can better address these questions—and the larger issue of narrating the political correctness controversy—after analyzing a few of the many places in Illiberal Education where the relations D’Souza finds between facts, interpretations, and narratives seem highly questionable. My purpose is neither to disprove D’Souza’s entire narrative (I work with too small a
portion of his book) nor to develop a counternarrative; instead, I want to focus attention on the broader question of the role of narrative and narrative analysis in the debate over the university.

D’Souza at Tufts: Narrative Thematizing
In his introduction to the paperback edition, D’Souza recounts an incident during his visit to Tufts University shortly after the original hardcover came out:

I was berated by a white student who maintained that my defense of academic standards amounted to nothing more than an apology for the “white perspective.” Universities needed to give equal prominence in the classroom to black, Hispanic, and non-Western perspectives, he argued.

When I asked him to identify the white perspective, he looked appalled and threw out his arms, as if to say it was so obvious that it needed no elaboration. I insisted, however, that he provide two or three specific examples of a white perspective.

“How about rationality?” he said with a confident grin.

I wrote that down on the blackboard. “What else?”

“How about logocentrism?” That’s how they talk on many campuses these days.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“The white man’s obsession with big words,” he maintained, so I wrote down logocentrism, and asked for another example.

“How about sexual restraint?”

“Not in my experience,” I said. But I wrote that down too.

For students in the audience, this proved to be an exercise in getting the joke a few minutes after the punch line. There were titters in the crowd, but the laughter came almost in slow motion. Gradually, students realized that the concession to white norms of all qualities of logic, clarity of expression, and decency of behavior—and the implication that such things could not be expected from other groups—was profoundly condescending and ultimately demeaning to the minorities. Ângriy, the advocate of race-based knowledge accused me of “insensitivity” and of unconsciously advancing the goals of “white America.” (xii–xiii)
D’Souza goes on to give an interpretation of this narrative—and one of another incident at Tufts in which a professor tells D’Souza that, although his speech is racist, he is not because only whites can be racists:

As my experience at Tufts indicates, the First Amendment remains in force at many American universities, but there is also a pervasive illiberalism of mind. Instead of cultivating in young people those qualities of critical thought and civil argument that are the essence of a liberal education, university leaders have created sham communities where serious and honest discussion is frequently drowned out by a combination of sloganeering, accusation, and intimidation. (xiii)

D’Souza’s way of telling the story also implies other features of his interpretation. Because the student is initially unable to give any content to the phrase “white perspective,” the narrative implies that it is merely a bit of liberal cant, a phrase devoid of meaning. Even better for D’Souza’s purposes, when pressed, the student comes up with meanings that can’t be considered the exclusive property of whites—unless one is hopelessly racist. The student is thus caught in self-contradiction, and the concept of a “white perspective” seems fatuous. Furthermore, in making the point about the student’s self-contradiction, D’Souza appears to show that he is actually more sensitive about race and racism than the student. All in all, from D’Souza’s perspective, it’s hard to imagine a better way to begin.

But let’s look more closely at how this narrative works. One apparently slippery maneuver D’Souza makes is to leap from rationality, logocentrism, and sexual restraint to “all qualities of logic, clarity of expression, and decency of behavior,” but I don’t want to make too much of this point because it is possible that the student’s other answers justify D’Souza’s leap. More central to the narrative’s argumentative point is the thematic function of the student. The narrative will work for D’Souza to the extent that we regard the student not as an isolated individual but as a representative of a much larger group of white, liberal-minded undergraduates who share his beliefs. The narrative signals the student’s representativeness in large part by the
minimal development of his mimetic function, that is, by not individualizing him. D'Souza gives him no name, no physical characteristics; D'Souza refers to the student simply as “he”—until the end of the narrative when “he” is replaced by a clear thematic designation, “the advocate of race-based knowledge.” D'Souza gives the student minimal mimetic life in brief descriptions of the student’s demeanor and affect at different points of the narrative, but these all highlight a general progression from arrogant confidence to anger, and the narrative implies that both emotions are unjustified.

Is D’Souza’s thematizing of the student warranted? Is the student’s definition of a “white perspective” widely shared? Do most people who believe that a white perspective on academic standards could be usefully supplemented by the perspectives of other races define the white perspective as rationality, use of big words, and sexual restraint? The answer is clearly no. The link between the facts of D’Souza’s narrative and his interpretation starts to loosen. To be sure, the narrative effectively shows that the student does not understand his own position very well, but it does not succeed in discrediting the more general idea about the importance of cultural perspectives.

Furthermore, once we loosen the connection between fact and D’Souza’s interpretation, we open the space for another interpretation, one that is less flattering to D’Souza. Once the student confidently says that “rationality” is part of the white perspective, D’Souza must know that he will be easy game. Rather than stepping in at that point and talking about the dangers of making a concept such as rationality the distinctive property of one race, D’Souza strings the student along, makes a joke about one of his answers (“Sexual restraint”/“Not in my experience”), and lets the larger joke gradually dawn on the rest of the audience—a surefire way to humiliate the student. If we adopt this interpretation, then this early narrative has almost the opposite effect of the one D’Souza wants: rather than showing him to be open-minded and tolerant, the narrative shows him to be, well, an intellectual bully; rather than being sympathetic to him, we are inclined to be sympathetic to his opponents. Consequently, rather than being disposed to accept D’Souza’s narrative about the way things are on campus these days, we are inclined to doubt it.
D’Souza’s Case Studies: The Powers and Limits of Monologism

In chapter 7, “The Tyranny of the Minority,” D’Souza offers a long series of “case studies” designed to show the epidemic of abuses committed in the name of the new political orthodoxy accompanying the victim’s revolution. D’Souza’s strategy of piling up the cases makes good sense because it overwhelms the objection that he is arguing merely by anecdote. The message of quantity is that these stories are the rule, not the exception. But the way D’Souza tells and juxtaposes some of these cases again invites a narrative theorist to loosen the link between fact and interpretation. The following two cases occur consecutively in D’Souza’s text.

The Case of Murray Dolfman

Nobody in Professor Dolfman’s class in legal studies at the University of Pennsylvania could identify where the term “servitude” could be found in the American Constitution, so Dolfman commented that there were “ex-slaves” in the class who should have an idea. “I don’t know if I should have used that term,” Dolfman recalled, “but it got students to think of the Thirteenth Amendment right away.”

Shortly afterwards, a few minority students came up to Dolfman and accused him of racial insensitivity. A second charge against Dolfman was that he had once told a black student to change his pronunciation from “de” to “the.” Dolfman said that he met with the students, and apologized if they had taken offense. “I told them that I understood and shared their concerns, that I am Jewish and during seder we pray: When we were slaves unto Pharaoh.” Dolfman also pointed out that it would be important for students, in courtroom argument in later years, to speak in a clear and comprehensible manner.

“They seemed to understand,” Dolfman recalled, and the matter was dropped for a few months. But after that, during Black History Month, it was brought up again and again, Dolfman said, “to illustrate just how bad things are at Penn.”

The adrenalin generated by the Black History Month rhetoric brought about a demonstration of minority students, several dozens of whom occupied Dolfman’s class and prevented him from teach-
ing. “They read a document of indictment to my students,”
Dolfman said. President Sheldon Hackney met with Dolfman and
asked him to refrain from public comment, even to abstain from
defending himself against accusations. Then Hackney joined the
ranks of the accusers, telling the campus newspaper that conduct
such as Dolfman’s was “absolutely intolerable.” Dolfman was pres-
sured to issue what he termed a “forced apology” and to attend
“racial awareness” sessions on campus. The university subsequently
decided not to renew Dolfman’s teaching contract for one year.

Dolfman is now back at Penn, a chastened man. “The message
has been driven home very clearly,” Dolfman said. “You can’t open
your mouth on these issues now without fear of being humiliated.”

The Case of Pete Schaub

When Pete Schaub, a business major at the University of Wash-
ington at Seattle, enrolled in a Women’s Studies class in early 1988,
he expected to learn about the “history of women and the contribu-
tions they have made.” Schaub said his mother was a 1960’s rebel
who divorced her father and moved to rural Washington state to live
“close to the land.”

“Introduction to Women’s Studies,” taught by Donna Langston
and Dan-Michele Brown, was not what Schaub had expected. On
the first day of class Brown asserted that “the traditional American
family represents a dysfunctional family unit.” Students who pro-
tested that their families were functional were shouted down by
teaching assistants hired by Langston and Brown. “Denial, denial,”
they yelled in unison. A few days later Langston brought guest
speakers to talk about masturbation. “They said you don’t need a
man,” Schaub said. “They proceeded to show how to masturbate
with a feather duster, and they had dildos right there.”

When Professor Brown claimed that U.S. statistics showed that
lesbians could raise children better than married couples, Schaub
asked for the source. “I asked after class,” Schaub said. “I wasn’t
challenging her.” But the teacher “wouldn’t hear of it. She said:
‘Why are you challenging me? Get away from me. Just leave me
alone.’” A member of Brown’s undergraduate circle called Schaub a
“chauvinist goddamn bastard.” The next day, Schaub was banned
from class. The teacher had two campus police officers waiting in
the hall to escort him away.
Schaub protested to the administration, but nothing happened for several weeks. Finally he was permitted to go back to class, but advised by Associate Dean James Nason to drop the course. (201–3)

On the one hand, I am prepared to believe that here we have two genuine horror stories and that, if I investigated these cases, I would reach conclusions similar to D’Souza’s. On the other hand, I am also struck by how D’Souza’s narration of each and his juxtaposition of the two actually undermine their force and begin to open each of them up to alternative interpretations. The problem here is not the way D’Souza thematizes the characters but rather the combination of point of view and what Bakhtin calls monologism—D’Souza’s strategy of giving weight to only one ideology in the narrative. D’Souza tells each story from the perspective of the protagonist; he asks us to see everything just as Dolman and Schaub do. In one way, of course, this restricted perspective makes the stories more powerful; there is very little recalcitrant material in them—almost everything points to the interpretation that D’Souza gives them. If one is already convinced of the tyranny of the minority, these narratives will surely reinforce one’s conviction. But if one is not already convinced, the restriction to one ideology is likely to seem suspicious. These are narratives about disputes and about the kinds of disputes that many people are now familiar with. It seems reasonable to ask about how the “antagonists” would interpret the facts of these stories.

Once we become conscious of the monologism, the little bit of recalcitrant material in each becomes available as the basis, if not for counternarratives, at least for complications of these two. Dolman’s singling out the African American students as “ex-slaves” who should know what “servitude” means appears to mark them as Other and put them in the role of educating those in the mainstream. Such a judgment does not mean that Dolman deserved to have his teaching contract suspended, but it certainly alters the sense of “horror” in this story. Schaub’s apparent belief that talk of masturbation and lesbian sex is somehow beyond the pale opens the question of whether his teachers, however mistakenly, were picking up signs of homophobia in his behavior. That is, one may legitimately wonder whether the teachers’ past experience with genuinely homophobic students might be influ-
encing the dynamics of their interaction with Schaub. Again, raising this question does not justify what happened to Schaub, but it does suggest a more complicated situation than D'Souza's account admits.

Even if D'Souza's narratives by themselves don't give us much sense of a possible other side, the juxtaposition of the two stories makes me wonder about how he handles the narration. In the first story, the professor is without fault and the students are tyrannical; in the second, these roles are reversed. This switch reinforces the desire to know how the African American students in Dolfman's class would tell their story and how Professors Brown and Langston would tell theirs. Surely their interpretations of the same basic facts would not coincide with D'Souza's. The question then arises: why should we accept D'Souza's monological interpretations as final?

**D'Souza and Atwater at Howard: Reading Cultural Narratives**

In chapter 4 of *Illiberal Education*, D'Souza discusses the efforts of Howard University students to resist the appointment of Lee Atwater to the Board of Trustees. The main reason for the students' resistance was Atwater's role as the man behind the Willie Horton ad in George Bush's 1988 campaign against Michael Dukakis. Through this ad, as D'Souza reminds us, "Atwater helped destroy . . . Dukakis' electoral base in the South by exposing the Massachusetts governor's furlough program, exemplified by black convict Willie Horton, who used a weekend release to assault and rape a white woman in Maryland" (96). The passage I want to focus on here is argument rather than narrative, but matters of narrative and narrative analysis are crucial to understanding and evaluating that argument. Atwater's initial claim that Horton's race was totally irrelevant is perhaps a bit much. The students' point that, even if anchored in the crime statistics, Atwater used Horton to play on fears of black crime is probably valid. The irony, however, is that one of the biggest complaints at Howard—if the campus newspaper's reports are any indication—is the crime rate in Washington, D.C., that is hurting
Howard students. *The Hilltop* echoes this in issue after issue. The April 7, 1989 edition, for instance, coming right after the Atwater controversy, reported as its lead story, “Donald Hatch, the AIDS rapist, who terrorized the Howard community in the fall of 1987, was sentenced last week.” It turns out that Hatch “raped and orally sodomized a Howard student after threatening her with a hypodermic needle which he claimed was contaminated with the AIDS virus.” Hatch was black but got no sympathy; rather, Howard students proclaimed the sentence “marvelous.” Alonza Robertson said that burglaries are common at Howard, especially during breaks when students go home, and the campus does not provide adequate security. “A couple of girls were raped here recently,” Robertson said matter-of-factly.

In the Horton case, however, both the convict and his crimes were far from home base. Howard students tended to think of Horton as an issue, not as a dangerous con who sadistically attacked an innocent couple. The entire moral equation would be changed if Horton attacked a black family. Yet Howard protesters did not find it at all inconsistent that they would protest Atwater’s political use of Horton while insisting that the administration bolster campus security to avoid further burglary and rape. (106–7)

The underlying logic of this argument goes like this: if you’re an African American who wants protection from crimes by other African Americans, you have no right to call Atwater’s Willie Horton ad racist. If you admit that some African Americans have committed rape, how can you object to Atwater’s ad? If there are African American rapists, how can Atwater’s reference to one be racist? In this case, D’Souza’s interpretation seems not just questionable but seriously—even shockingly—inadequate. The interpretation is wanting because D’Souza fails to recognize how Atwater’s ad about Willie Horton intersects with a larger cultural narrative of black-white relations, a narrative that is both patriarchal and racist. In this narrative, the white man’s fear of the racial Other mixes with his hatred for the black man, and the hatred and fear fuel each other. Because the white man also convinces himself of the black man’s inferiority, he does not fear the black man’s intelligence or his strength or his spirituality; instead, the white man fears the black man’s allegedly unrestrained sexuality, be-
cause sexual intercourse between races leads to the contamination or pollution of white blood. Those who intermarry must be ostracized, and black men who rape white women must be severely punished. Atwater's ad appeals to this racist narrative by using Willie Horton's crime as a representation of the racial anarchy threatened by Dukakis's being soft on crime.³

Despite D'Souza's acknowledgment that the ad did "play on fears of black crime," his main argument about the inconsistency of the Howard students misses the connection between Atwater's ad and the larger narrative. From the perspective of rhetorical theory, we can say that D'Souza's argument fails to recognize that Horton is not just a person but also a thematic character with this large thematic function. To put the point another way, D'Souza does not recognize how the relations between facts and their symbolic weight change from one discourse to the next. In the Howard students' discourse about safety on campus, an African American rapist is as dangerous—for all races of women—as a white rapist. The symbolic dimensions of the rapist's and the victim's racial identities are less important than the threat the rapist presents. In the discourse of political advertisements, however, when a white politician chooses a black rapist's attack on a white woman as the symbol of another white politician's softness toward crime, the situation is very different. Here race matters and takes on significant symbolic weight precisely because the discourse of the ad intersects with the larger cultural narrative. D'Souza's handling of the local narrative here seems to be the weakest part of the book.

**Narrative, Analysis, and Ideology**

Let us return to the two questions I raised earlier: (1) what causes a given observer to choose one interpretation rather than another? and (2) how can we adjudicate among different interpretations of the same phenomena? My examination of these few narrative moments in *Illiberal Education* suggests that one (unsurprising) answer to the first question is ideological commitments. D'Souza is clearly interpreting the facts in a way that advances his conservative view of the American university. If he had less of an a priori commitment to this view and its
correctness, he would be less likely to overthematize the Tufts student, more likely to allow the other side of the Dollman and Schaub cases into his narratives, and more likely to recognize the difference between the Atwater ad’s use of Willie Horton and the presence of African American rapists in the neighborhood of Howard University.

But if this conclusion is unsurprising, the relation between it and D’Souza’s initial claim about facts, interpretations, and analysis is perhaps less immediately evident. The overthematizing of the Tufts student, the monologism of the case studies, and the attention to the “facts” at Howard in the absence of the larger cultural narrative are all consistent with a belief that facts directly point to their own interpretations. Once we see this consistency, we can also see what D’Souza does not acknowledge and would probably deny: his statement about facts and interpretations itself reveals two significant, closely related assumptions: (1) one can unproblematically separate facts from their contexts, the complex situatedness that sometimes makes facts difficult to ascertain, and (2) once abstracted, they will tell their own story. The analysis of D’Souza’s narratives suggests not only that these assumptions are highly questionable but also that they function to keep him from recognizing the powerful role ideology plays as he moves from his facts to his interpretations.

As D’Souza would no doubt himself be quick to point out, this attention to ideology needs to be turned on the arguments I have been making about Illiberal Education. If ideology plays such an important role in D’Souza’s moving from facts to interpretations to narratives, then it follows that ideology also plays a significant role in my evaluation of those narratives. If I shared D’Souza’s ideological commitments, I would no doubt praise his book as highly as Roger Kimball does in his review for the New Criterion (“indispensable reading”; “D’Souza has chronicled the intellectual and moral degradation of a great liberal institution” [8]). Because my ideological commitments are different, however, I am more inclined to see alternative interpretations of the same facts and, consequently, I end up challenging these local narratives and remaining skeptical about Illiberal Education’s global narrative.

Having acknowledged the importance of ideological commitments in both the construction and analysis of these narratives, should we
conclude that in these matters ideology finally determines interpretation? If so, then any genuine adjudication is impossible, since any judge will simply decide on the basis of her own ideological commitments. Anyone who has spent much time reading the debates about the university is likely to be tempted to answer this question in the affirmative. Anyone who has dipped into Kimball’s Tenured Radicals will find his praise of D’Souza to be entirely predictable, but Gerry O’Sullivan’s negative review seems no less a consequence of his ideological commitments: “In the continuing devolution of the conservative critique of academic life, few have aspired to the depths of Dinesh D’Souza’s Illiberal Education” (43). To consent to the view that commitments determine interpretations, however, is to deny the existence of facts as anything but the product of interpretation. To do that in this realm is to deny that people on all sides of the debates have experienced pain, oppression, and injustice, while others have experienced profit and pleasure.4

Ideological commitments, then, inevitably influence interpretations of facts, and to some extent such commitments help shape facts in one way rather than another—as we have seen in considering the cases of Dolfman and Schaub. But this phenomenon of commitments influencing interpretations that in turn shape facts—let me call this phenomenon a fact—can itself be a reason to question our interpretations. This questioning, of course, will not itself be totally neutral and objective, but it can—and should—come from the commitments of a competing perspective. That is the strategy I have employed with D’Souza’s narratives, and I would expect him to employ a similar strategy in assessing my interpretations. If the questioning is serious, then it can have genuine consequences—can make us change our interpretations—because in some cases facts are sufficiently recalcitrant to resist the interpretations that our commitments would encourage us to make. It seems to me that D’Souza’s interpretation of the situation at Howard is a clear example of such a case.

At the same time, these very principles mean that I must be open to the possibility that D’Souza will be able to show me that this conclusion about his handling of the Howard situation needs to be revised. This awareness does not, however, prevent me from taking my stand, from claiming that my interpretation of his account should persuade, if
not him, then most other readers of our exchange. In other words, because commitments influence interpretations that in turn shape but do not create facts, the narratives we tell about those facts legitimately make truth claims, but those claims are likely to be highly contested. This contestation is one important means by which we can revise the narratives and refine their truth claims, though our reaching the stage where our narratives are beyond contestation is as unlikely as the eventuality that facts will speak their own interpretations. Furthermore, because the narratives we tell about our world themselves reinforce or revise our ideological commitments and our interpretations of that world, we have a very big stake in the ongoing negotiation of those narratives.5

For that very reason, narrative theorists in the academy have another lesson to learn from Illiberal Education: the importance of telling stories about the university to the larger public in a way that is both engaged and accessible. If we speak only to ourselves or if we speak to our publics without recognizing the importance of adapting our language to our audience, we will not be shaping the public narrative about university life, and we will be left in the position of reacting to the stories told by others. Narrative theory offers us valuable tools not only for the serious analysis of Illiberal Education, Tenured Radicals, and other such attacks but also for the task of constructing alternative narratives for the public. Narrative theorists, I believe, have a vital role to play in the ongoing debates about the university; it is time we both recognized and embraced that role.

Postscript

D'Souza wrote a brief reply to this essay when it first appeared in Narrative, one in which he makes the general point that he is appealing to liberals “on their own terms” and asking them to combat the way “liberalism is being betrayed by political correctness” (“Response,” 268). The only specific analysis he responds to is the one about Murray Dolfman and Pete Schaub, arguing that my discussion offends “what Aristotle has called common sense” because my ability to imagine alternative voices shows that he has, in some sense, included them:
When Professor Phelan says it is possible to read the record differently, I am not sure whether he means that the facts are not as I describe. (No one, to my knowledge, has demonstrated that.) Perhaps he means that Dolfman’s and Schaub’s detractors would see the facts in a different light. “How dare Professor Dolfman use the term ex-slave?” “Pete Schaub is nothing more than a male chauvinist jock.” While I do not offer a detailed study of these nuances of assertion and counterassertion, I think they are implicit in the narrative. They are there for the reader to see, which is why Professor Phelan found them.

Thus Professor Phelan’s analysis unwittingly exonerates me of the charge of monologism. My narrative, he acknowledges, gives room for more than one interpretation. He seeks out an alternative interpretation. He assumes, wrongly, that I am unaware of or tried to suppress his interpretation. My argument is that the weight of the evidence does not bear it out. (“Response” 268–69)

My reply was also brief:

I acknowledge the cleverness of D’Souza’s rejoinder to my point about the monologism of his narratives about Murray Dolfman and Pete Schaub. As he suggests, however, he and I will continue to disagree about both how he tells his stories and the larger narrative these stories form. On his account, I offend “what Aristotelian called common sense” by both accusing him of monologism and claiming to hear other voices or at least “nuances of assertion and counterassertion” in those narratives. “They are there for the reader to see, which is why Professor Phelan found them,” and, thus, my “analysis unwittingly exonerates [him] of the charge of monologism.”

I find this reasoning similar to D’Souza’s narratives: like them, it has a surface appeal, but the more one looks at it the more the appeal fades. The initial appeal here derives in part from D’Souza’s tapping into a general truth about narrative: purely monologic narratives are very rare, because the act of narrating almost inevitably involves some implicit communication of alternative ways of telling the story, shifting the emphasis, locating the privileged positions. So I would agree that D’Souza’s narratives are not totally monologic; nevertheless, I still maintain that they—and D’Souza’s defense of
them in his reply—reflect an author with a monologic imagination. That is, the narratives still show that D’Souza’s way of telling the stories seeks to exclude or to undermine the alternative voices and perspectives that briefly appear within them.

D’Souza’s effort to express those voices in his reply tellingly reveals this monologic imagination. He imagines those he calls Dolfman’s and Schaub’s “detractors” saying such things as, “How dare Professor Dolfman use the term ex-slave?” “Pete Schaub is nothing more than a male chauvinist jock.” The first voice speaks de haut en bas; the second engages in an ad hominem attack. Neither voice says anything that might pass for rational argument (or the beginning of one). Consequently, the voices are no sooner heard than they are discredited. A storyteller who imagines the opposition’s voices this way seems unable to imagine any genuine merit in them. Such a storyteller, in other words, seems unable to hear alternative voices without first filtering them through an imagination that is already convinced of their error. For these reasons, I find myself slowly beginning to accept D’Souza’s claim that he has not “tried to suppress” my alternative interpretations. He has not tried to suppress them, I think, precisely because he has been unable to imagine them.

... By telling his stories so that they conform so neatly to his ideology, D’Souza encourages us to accept his larger claim that facts of campus life speak his interpretations of them. By (unwittingly) revealing in his reply that his ideology strongly controls his hearing of alternative voices, D’Souza gives us even greater cause to dispute that larger claim. (“Monologic Imagination,” 270-71)