

Substantial Disruption



The White Rapper Chick of the AZ Leg

By Mike Tully

If you were looking for a hip-hop artist who quotes Kendrick Lamar you would probably not look in the Arizona Legislature. And you certainly wouldn't look at Maria Syms (R-Paradise Valley), a conservative member of the Arizona House who represents a toney Phoenix suburb. Syms is a first-term legislator whose accomplishments include sponsorship of a bill to designate the State Dinosaur, with the help of 48 co-signers in the 60-member Arizona House. Perhaps it was in that spirit of comity that she quoted from [Pulitzer Prize Winner Lamar](#) in a [guest opinion piece](#) for AZCentral: “we hate Popo [police], wanna kill us dead in the street for sure, nigga.” (AZCentral almost immediately deleted the term “nigga” but you can read the uncensored Syms in the [Blog for Arizona](#).)

Actually, there's no comity in Syms' piece, a denunciation of all things liberal – especially the young leaders of Arizona's “Red for Ed” movement, which fought for a 20 percent pay raise for classroom teachers. While that should raise salaries from rock bottom to closer to the national average, the Republican-dominated Legislature rebuffed Democrats' attempts to expand spending to include non-classroom teachers, like Special Education teachers, as well as librarians, nurses, counselors, monitors, clerical staff, bus drivers, maintenance workers and others without whom schools could not function. The Red for Ed movement is not disbanding. They know the Arizona Legislature has under-funded schools for years, [frequently illegally](#), and intend to continue their campaign for adequate funding through November's election.

Syms indulges herself in a tirade against two of the prominent members of the Red for Ed movement, Noah Karvelis and Derek Harris. “These two promise more harm than good by politicizing Arizona education in pursuit of their self-proclaimed agenda,” she wrote, “a national socialist revolution.”

Syms represents a segment of the Republican Party that conflates Democrats with socialists, revealing a lack of political fluency that questions her fitness for office. She submits no evidence to support her allegation of a “socialist revolution.” The closest she comes is to note “Karvelis ... credits the teachings of long-distance Communist academic Noam Chomsky.” Chomsky is a [member of the University of Arizona faculty](#) and respected in the Tucson community. She criticizes Harris for a social media comment entitled, “Republicans Are the True Sodomites,” that included this quotation: “Now this was the sin of Sodom: They were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. They were haughty and detestable.” Sounds like modern Republicans, does it not? The quote is from *Ezekiel*.

Syms focuses most of her anger on Karvelis. She attacks him for quoting Angela Davis, whom Syms refers to as “virulently anti-American.” This is what Karvelis said in a [guest opinion piece](#) for *Truth Out*: “As Davis sees it, this struggle for freedom, if it is to truly deliver freedom, must be a global struggle, not an American struggle, not a Black or white struggle, not a male struggle,

but a global struggle.” Is that “Anti-American?” What about this: “The most powerful single force in the world today is neither communism nor capitalism, neither the H-bomb nor the guided missile. It is man's eternal desire to be free and independent.” That quote from John F. Kennedy expresses Americans’ belief that the entire world should enjoy the freedoms we have. It is not Donald Trump’s belief – or Syms’.

As for Kendrick Lamar: Syms’ quote was from the song, “Alright,” which starts with the words, “Alls my life I has to fight” but actually strikes an optimistic tone with the repeated line, “We gon’ be all right.” I’m not a fan of rap music, my personal soundtrack influenced by the music of the late 1960s and early 1970s, but I recognize the value of protest in song, as much of my music was a reaction to a government sending my generation off to die needlessly in Vietnam. And, while Lamar’s musical rhythms don’t resonate with me, his words do. They are poetry. Karvelis’ lessons, which include Lamar’s works, [do not include lyrics with profanity](#).

Syms’ piece had an unintended consequence: it reminded us of the racism of Arizona’s Legislative Republicans. Just last year, a federal court overturned a law passed “with [discriminatory intent](#).” Syms reopened the wound. After she publicized her piece in AZCentral, Rep. Reginald Bolding (D-Phoenix), an African-American whose district is near the school where Karvelis teaches – and who probably has a better understanding of Kendrick Lamar than Syms – [objected to the piece](#). “The more I read the more I was disappointed that it appears to be OK to use a racial slur about black people in the article,” Bolding said on the House floor. “Let me be crystal clear: It's not acceptable to use a racial slur even if that slur is used as a quote.” That was too much for Representative Mark Finchem (R-Milita), who could not abide a black man criticizing a white woman. He accused Bolding of violating House rules, whereupon Bolding asked for a vote on whether he should be silenced. He lost the vote and was silenced, along with Rep. Gerae Peten (D-Goodyear), the House’s only other African-American who spoke in Bolding’s defense. “I don't know why it's so hard to follow the rules,” an angry Speaker J.D. Mesnard told Bolding and Peten. “It doesn't matter whether you are white or black or brown or whatever the color the color of your skin is, you follow the House rules.” In other words, don’t be “[uppity](#).”

One more line from Lamar: “My rights, my wrongs; I write 'til I'm right with God”

Syms should try that. Or, better yet, say nothing at all. Sometimes the way to get to heaven is to shut the hell up.