Radical Hospitality: Let's Fill in the White Space in College Classrooms

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In a seminal 2015 article, Harvard sociology professor Elijah Anderson labeled for us what he called “the white space” in America: affluent suburban neighborhoods, golf courses, cemeteries, Congress and, as Martin Luther King Jr. had pungently pointed out some years before, most churches on Sunday morning.

Loathe as most colleges and universities are to admit it, that includes us.

Here I am in 2016 with our graduating seniors in Professional Writing at the University of Baltimore. That’s Edgar Allen Poe behind us with an honorary doctorate. You don’t need a diversity officer to help you seek diversity if you already have it.
However, I am less interested today in the demographic landscape of college classrooms than I am in their intellectual landscape.

Anderson defines “white space” as “settings in which black people are typically absent, not expected, or marginalized when present” and observes that “white people typically avoid black space, but black people are required to navigate the white space as a condition of their existence.”

He goes on to say, “When present in the white space, blacks reflexively note the proportion of whites to blacks, or may look around for other blacks with whom to commune if not bond, and then may adjust their comfort level accordingly; when judging a setting as too white, they can feel uneasy and consider it to be informally ‘off limits.’ For whites, however, the same settings are generally regarded as unremarkable, or as normal, taken-for-granted reflections of civil society.”

Context is everything, as this meme chillingly reminds us:

![Image of students in white coats with the text: Now, Do We Look Suspicious?](image)

The visceral response to the first photo, born of long conditioning into preprogrammed reactions, is hard to prevent. Black people practically never feel safe in the White Space because of it.

Robin DiAngelo describes the same phenomenon in *White Fragility*: “White people don’t think of themselves as having a racial identity. They think their
experience is universal and that the identity of groups and consequently of identity politics is particular to their subculture. We don’t think of ourselves as a subculture and identify with things like nationality, not ‘race’.\textsuperscript{3}

We immediately recognize this painting as a Madonna, which requires a knowledge of Christianity, as well as of European art history, that most academics just casually assume. That did not really register with me until I began to have Muslim students who had not necessarily been raised in an overwhelming Christian culture such as this one.

However, those of us raised in that majority culture are momentarily startled by this painting:
Although we are quick to acknowledge that these paintings more closely resemble what the historical Mary and the historical Jesus, if they existed, probably looked like, we see these next paintings as Madonnas of the imagination:
Raphael’s, of course, is just as fantastical.
Close your eyes and listen to this performance of Handel’s *Ye Boundless Realms of Joy*: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HtpjwVsXs_Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HtpjwVsXs_Y)

Now listen to this one: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y0N2I0GTPW8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y0N2I0GTPW8)

Do you hear any loss in the power of the music when it is performed by a non-English-speaking choir from a culture very distant in time and ethnicity from the culture that produced it?

Now try this piece, a contemporary gospel arrangement by Josephine Poelinitz of the spiritual *City Called Heaven*. It’s okay to watch, but make sure you stay long enough to hear the soloist: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JCa4WHH9v_Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JCa4WHH9v_Y)

Here’s another version:  [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XjA3mesoAVU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XjA3mesoAVU)

There is a correct way to perform this music, just as there is a correct way to perform Handel. Many of us were jolted into this realization when we learned from Whitney Houston, Stevie Wonder, and Garth Brooks that there are many ways to perform *The Star-Spangled Banner*, none of them incorrect.

Jessye Norman and Kathleen Battle, and before them Marian Anderson and Leontyne Price, became international superstars singing White Space repertoire in white spaces. They were “required to navigate the white space as a condition of their existence” to ascend to stardom; it would never have come about in the churches in which they all learned as children that they had glorious singing voices. However, they were all equally gifted at performing traditional spirituals, jazz, and gospel music, and included that repertoire as well in their concerts and recordings. It disrupts the conventional narrative if you stop to realize that it took them many more years of training to learn to sing traditional African-American music sublimely well than it took them to learn to sing Verdi.

Immersion in the majority culture tends to make it seem like a norm and to make everything else to seem like an odd but important subculture, like “Paintings by Women” in an exhibit of *The Art of the European Renaissance*—assuming that you don’t count all the women who painted for their families and whose art was lost to scholars. But perhaps the Museum of All Learning doesn’t just need a dedicated new wing. Perhaps we need an entirely new museum in which women and people of color are not defective white men--any more than deaf people are defective hearing people. Hearing people never see themselves as defective deaf people—but then universities are also Hearing Space, as I just established by using an example that is inaccessible to the deaf.
Culturally responsive teaching demands that we recognize that college classrooms in the United States have for centuries been White Space, in which students of color and those from traditionally marginalized populations struggle to find themselves represented in course materials and approaches to learning based on a tradition devised long ago to educate European males from privileged backgrounds. The opposite of exclusion is not just inclusion, it is welcome. The concept of “radical hospitality,” drawn from contemporary Christianity and Jewish thinkers seeking to return their faiths to their ancient and medieval roots and connect them explicitly with the values they share with Islam, is simply this: “Welcome the stranger. The charge is presented in Hebrews 13:2 “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.”

The very fact that many colleges and universities are not very diverse makes them seem inhospitable to all minority students—not just students of color but to international students and nontraditional students as well, who see themselves as strangers because they are strangers—in a strange land. Optics matters. Minority students will be more likely to see themselves as welcome if there are more of them. But it also means that we should make them welcome by reimagining ourselves with a longer table and a bigger tent.

Understandably, university faculty—most of them white--are reluctant to abandon curriculum and instructional strategies based on the methodologies through which they built their own success as students--and then as scholars. Hence, the persistence of traditional pedagogies, course materials, and performance measures based on a long-established system of dialectic designed to educate white males for civic leadership in ancient Greece, England, and the diaspora of the British Empire. How can faculty trained in the argument-based academic discourse on which they have built successful careers learn to recognize that assumptions about access to truth and reality embedded into that highly European form of learning are culturally limited and that it offers a built-in advantage to college students who are the beneficiaries of a suburban white middle-class educational system? How can those of us who belong to the dominant culture overcome "white fragility": the tendency to reflex defensiveness when our assumptions and perceptions about the argument culture and the traditional canons are challenged? How can we learn to acknowledge the reality that adversarial debates with clear winners and losers offer only limited access to truth? How can we learn more inclusive and less biased approaches? How can we welcome difficult conversations about race, gender, religion, and ethnicity into our classrooms as an equally legitimate means of arriving at truth and find ways to bring about such conversations?

The dialectical approach to learning is particular, not universal. It was not originally designed to educate the entire population of the democracy that invented it, including footsoldiers, farmers, women, and slaves, but rather to educate young men or privilege for military and political leadership. One clear
illustration of its embedded assumption about audience is that the language of argument as a path to truth is not the language of agriculture, in which ideas are planted, nourished, and grow to maturity over time, but the ancient language of hand-to-hand combat:

“Touché...rapier wit...on point...engage...parry...counter...riposte.”

An “opponent’s” ideas are attacked and counterattacked; theses and dissertations are not “presented” but “defended.” Over twenty years ago, Deborah Tannen taught us in The Argument Culture (Random House, 1998) that this culture exists because it speaks particularly to men, who are more inclined to agonism by nature.6

Beginning in the Middle Ages, European scholars and teachers eagerly took ownership of this adversarial model of advancing erudition because men claimed reason as their special province and because the concept that the highest learning was attainable only through reason supported the widespread political practice of excluding from civic life those who were deemed incapable of reasoning at the highest levels of logos. The higher education establishment, which resisted the education of both women and African-Americans until nearly the end of the nineteenth century, was stunned by Wiley College’s 1935 victory in debate over the University of Southern California and could attribute it only to the coaching of distinguished poet Melvin B. Tolson (a Columbia University graduate) and to the presence on the team of James Farmer, Jr., whose father was on the Wiley faculty. Maintaining the intellectual status quo meant dismissing Wiley’s achievement as a historical fluke, just as it meant dismissing the scientific theories of Rosalind Franklin and Cecilia Payne-Gaposchkin until they were advanced by men years later.

To deny that this classical infrastructure is central to American higher education is to fall victim to “white fragility.” Our very immersion in the war of words that comprises academic discourse keeps us trapped in the familiar and makes it difficult for us to venture outside the well-worn path to see ourselves from the outside with others’ eyes, particularly through the eyes of those who do not come to college from a culture of privilege—first generation students, veterans, and immigrants to the culture. Do you look at a classroom full of students of color and assume that they are less well prepared for college than a classroom full of white suburban kids would be? Do you feel less so if it is a music or art class than if it is a class in reading, writing, or math? The answer may not lie in trying to bring students who arrived from underperforming school systems up to speed: that simply reinforces the idea that they are “strangers” in the white space and that their suspicions about that are correct. The answer may lie in moving away from deficit-based assignment design such as requiring academic essays and in moving toward asset-based assignment design such as requiring professional products from the world of work.
Here are some examples:

1. Collect arguments by analogy that are being used to attempt to explain COVID-19 to people who unfamiliar with methods of disease prevention that predate the widespread use of contemporary pharmaceuticals. Analyze the arguments for accuracy. Indicate whether or not you think the analogy is sound. Here is mine.

   ![Maryland Flu and Coronavirus Prevention](image)

2. Create a new nonprofit. Fill out the 501(c)(3) application. Prepare a fundraising presentation to use in soliciting funds from prospective donors. Write a fundraising proposal that you can leave with prospective donors after they have heard the presentation.

3. Locate a grant that you or an organization to which you belong would be eligible. Apply for it. Include all supporting paperwork and a media kit for the applicant.

4. Select a state agency. Cut its budget by 10%. Make every effort to avoid costs or hardships to employees (e.g. layoffs, furloughs, etc.). If you must ask employees to absorb the cuts, justify them both to your superiors and, in a memo, to the affected employees themselves. Propose a new budget for legislative approval.

5. Create a piece of political rhetoric to be used in a real campaign that is already underway in this election cycle. This may be a new piece or a response to an existing piece of campaign rhetoric that is already being used in the campaign.
6. Write a therapeutic autobiography. This may be real or fictional. To go with it, create a musical autobiography, a visual autobiography, and a biopoem.

7. Create a digital presentation or a brief film in which you combine art and music into an essay consisting of images and sound that tells a story or makes a philosophical point that you want to share with your classmates.

8. Create a pocket museum that revolves around a key theme you see in *Lady Audley’s Secret*. A pocket museum is where you create a gallery exhibit of your own by taking pictures of various works of art in the Walters Art Gallery and then compiling them into a brochure or Powerpoint presentation. You must use at least five images. Write information plaques for each objet d’art explaining how you see it connecting to the book. Provide a brief explanation of how these images connect to form a narrative. For instance, if you were creating an exhibit for *Woman in White*, you might do an exhibit called "Pushing Boundaries" and choose an image of a masculine woman, a woman using a window in an unexpected way, and the like.

9. Create a utopia. Name it. Why did you choose this name? What does your ideal society look like? Describe it. Provide illustrations. Create a motto that citizens of your society will follow. Why did you choose this motto? Create a Declaration of Independence. (What don’t you like about your current society? How has the current society broken your trust? Why do you feel the need to form a more perfect society? How will your society be different?) What type of government will your utopia have, e.g. democracy, monarchy, dictatorship, oligarchy... How will the government make decisions? Why did you choose this type of government? Provide a list of ten rules for your utopia. Explain why you chose each rule.

10. Select a building. Learn its history. Prepare a written document in which you tell its story to the surrounding community in order to raise awareness that may prevent its sale or demolition. Create a presentation in which you tell the story to community groups that may be able to save the building.

Risk-aversion and neophobia, as well as "white fragility" often impede faculty who belong to the majority culture from deviating from the established European and colonial European canon in selecting course materials and in devising and evaluating assignments to assess students’ learning. Furthermore, there persists a toxic misperception that all students from marginalized and historically underrepresented populations need remediation to attain excellence. The fact that these students believe this about themselves often impedes their success. The truth is that many have competencies gained in the workplace or from life experience that enable them to produce high-caliber work, especially on
assignments other than conventional academic artifacts with little real-world application.

At the University of Baltimore, where we serve a nontraditional student population that is wildly diverse in age, ethnicity, and level of college preparation, we use problem-solving approaches and less orthodox teaching strategies such as Difficult Encounters and Place as Text, along with artifact-based assignment design and assessment, to enable these students to experience immediate academic success while bringing their skills in conventional measures of academic prowess such as logical reasoning and argumentative writing up to white middle-class standards. What many universities see as remediation, we see as working in the zone of proximal development until our students feel secure in the white space, secure enough to feel confident they will be able to make the transition to the white space world of white space work.

However, this track record of student success requires that faculty abandon the perception that students are exactly like them (but with deficits) and instead embrace a perception that students have their own assets which they can employ to demonstrate learning. Only then can faculty become less risk-averse about assigning only measures of learning on which they themselves excel. They can be taught also to measure performance by assigning real-world measures of learning, which they find can comfortably judge once they realize they can apply conventional measures of evaluating excellence even to unfamiliar artifacts such as slideshows and videos, museum exhibits, posters, and proposals. Through more imaginative assignment design alone, classroom environments can be made more inclusive so as to make success more accessible to traditionally marginalized populations who may lack dominant-culture skills and knowledge but may possess other skills and knowledge that can be used to measure their learning.

The concept of “radical hospitality,” welcoming the stranger, can be applied to transform White Space into Community Space in which members of marginalized groups do not feel like strangers pressured into respectability politics just to be accepted, let alone respected. Reflecting collectively on the power of heterodox approaches to learning as a means to invite all students onto the path leading to academic success, faculty can imagine ways to approach their subject matter that do not convey an automatic advantage to students coming to college from a background of cultural privilege. We seek diversity, but we tend to practice assimilation. However, if we can learn that deaf people are not imperfect hearing people, we can learn that African-Americans are not imperfect white people. Faculty may be taught ways to create learning space not based on dominant-culture assumptions, learning space into which all students may be safely
welcomed because no automatic advantage is conferred by curriculum or pedagogy on those who came to college from privileged backgrounds.

The leadership needed to bring about such a profound culture change must originate at the highest levels of academic administration. It will not come from the disciplines. As long as graduate education continues to be based on traditional approaches, those traditional approaches will be repeated in undergraduate education by newly minted Ph.D.’s whose path to a prized faculty position in a brutally competitive market came through publications of a traditional nature. The path to tenure and promotion must include leadership in innovative teaching for a 21st century population, and that too, must originate from the offices of provosts and academic vice presidents, through funding and other incentives. It must be supported not merely as an incidental supplement to the curriculum, administered by Diversity Offices, but as a part of the university’s central mission, administered through Centers for Excellence in Teaching, honors programs, and other academic centers of excellence. Faculty can be convinced that dismantling an academic culture that favors white males of means, however safe and familiar, is a good idea if we are serious about both access and student success. They may even be willing to take risks in pursuit of a greater good. But they will only do so if they know that their efforts to enhance access and thereby foster student success will be both blessed and rewarded by those in academic leadership. Otherwise they have no incentive to venture outside the system in which they are already been successful themselves. Universities like mine, which do not just seek diverse populations, but serve them, need visionary leadership if they are to reimagine classrooms as other than White Space. In this century when we have great need of an educated citizenry, it falls to our academic leaders to educate and inspire their faculty to deliver learning and to measure academic performance in ways that are radically hospitable to college students from every demographic category.


2 King made this observation on a number of occasions in different contexts and with slightly different wording. Here is one of the earliest: “I think it is one of the tragedies of our nation, one of the shameful tragedies, that eleven o’clock on Sunday morning is one of the most segregated hours, if not the most segregated hours, in Christian America.” Interview on Meet the Press (17 April 1960).

Anderson and Eleanor Roosevelt definitively established the Lincoln Memorial as Not White Space thanks to the DAR, making it the perfect place for King to deliver the “I Have a Dream” speech twenty-four years later.

Anderson, 11.