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### If We Could Get Over Whiteness and Blackness

Carolyn LaDelle Bennett  
*University of Maine at Orono*

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# If We Could Get Over Whiteness and Blackness

**Carolyn LaDelle Bennett**

University of Maine at Orono

**“This session explores some contemporary theories of whiteness and blackness, describes how these concepts act out in the university, and provides personal examples experienced by the presenter.”**

If it were not for whiteness and blackness, everything would be OK. We wouldn't be talking about problems surrounding "people of color in predominantly white institutions" if there were not this constant consciousness, this acting out of something known as "whiteness" and something else known as "blackness. "

Slights, oversights and fights come with the territory of working in academia in America, and probably anywhere in the world. Academics from coast to coast know, feed on and fear departmental cliques, turf wars, disciplinary protectiveness, perks for pets, gossip and pettiness; information withholding, stonewalling and dissembling about any number of things: procedures, committee assignments, pandering publishers, priority among teaching, research and service; making friends and making enemies, practitioners versus theorists versus theorists versus practitioners, bad news phone calls at home - without the "good news" part; rudeness under fire: "just do it" - without the "please will you" part; tenured professorial pouts when colleagues, especially "junior" faculty colleagues, raise objections or disagree. All of this is par for the course in the civilized milieu of higher learning. But in a climate of color consciousness (especially in a Mecca of feigned liberalism acting as if it is not color conscious) matters are made worse.

In the American predominantly white institution with minority people of color, racialists (people obsessively conscious of race whom some call racists), black and white, look at the same politics cited above but look no further for reasons, at least at first, than racist motives. It comes down to whiteness and blackness. And without the attitudes that constitute what has been defined as whiteness and blackness (most white people know what blackness is, or they think they do, and most black people know what whiteness is, or they think they do) - there would be no problems rising to the need for an annual summit on people of color in predominantly white institutions.

My paper examines some contemporary theories of whiteness and some contemporary theories of blackness. It describes how these concepts act out in the university (as in larger society) and details some personal examples of my first year at the University of Maine - crying until I laughed over: they "Did you know we are white?" interviews, the on the job condescension and paternalism, and the professional pandering-to-students-who-insult-by-permission-of-powers-hat-be syndrome, and the constant commands to: "turn into us while keeping your self the self that we want you to be," and "stay here (we have a retention problem, you know) - while we politely make your life miserable. If you let us, of course, by failing to talk back and act on your own behalf.

The final section of my paper looks to personal and professional experience and contemporary literature and to offer some ways of overcoming challenges confronted by the annual conference. It poses as one solution a rise in standards to correct bad behavior—whether or not the behavior can be proved to be racially motivated.

**PRESENTER:**

**Carolyn LaDelle Bennett** holds a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Teacher Education from Michigan State University, an M.A. in Print Journalism and Public Affairs from The American University in Washington, D.C., a Master of Music in Music Education from DePauw University in Greencastle, Ind., and a B.S. in Music Education from Knoxville College in Tennessee. She is an assistant professor of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Maine at Orono and has taught journalism courses at Howard University in Washington, D.C. and at Columbia Union College in Takoma Park, Maryland.

For 15 plus years (while on staff at the Library of Congress), she wrote and still writes a public affairs column for "About Time" magazine, "AIM Magazine," "The Chicago Defender," "The City News," "Philadelphia New Observer," "The San Diego Voice and Viewpoint" and other publications. She has written longer works on journalist Ida B. Wells-Barnett's anti-lynching campaign. Earlier books include "America's Human Connection" (University Editions, WV, 1994); "Come Home, America" (1991); and "You can Struggle without Hating, Fight Without Violence" (1990). Her recent scholarly papers include "Mary McCloud Bethune's Other Profession: A Near Slave Woman-Turned-Educator Turns to Journalism" and "Family in the Work and Words of Mary McCloud Bethune." Dr. Bennett is currently working on an annotated bibliography of newspaper columns of Bethune and on a larger work that sets Bethune's writings in historical context.

In the summer of 1998, Professor Bennett was a fellow in the 1998 Freedom Forum Teaching Fellows Workshop held at Indiana University. Her teaching areas are writing and reporting, public affairs reporting, editorial and opinion writing and media ethics and issues.

Bennett is entered in the 1998 edition of "Who's Who in the South and Southwest."