

October 2001

# Beyond Comfort Zones of Whiteness: Strategies for Inclusion of People of Color in the Social Milieu of Predominantly White Institutions

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West, C. S'Thembile Ph.D., "Beyond Comfort Zones of Whiteness: Strategies for Inclusion of People of Color in the Social Milieu of Predominantly White Institutions" (2001). *Sixth Annual National Conference, POCPWI*. 15.  
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# **Beyond Comfort Zones of Whiteness: Strategies for Inclusion of People of Color in the Social Milieu of Predominantly White Institutions**

## **Abstract**

*This session seeks to promote the recognition and acknowledgement of the humanity of people of color and discusses the development of faculty initiatives to enhance the retention of people of color in predominantly white institutions as it highlights the challenges of white skin privilege.*

## **C. S'thembile West, Ph.D.**

Assistant Professor of African American Studies, Western Illinois University

Developing curricula of inclusion that acknowledge, identify and discuss the contributions of diverse ethnicities in classroom pedagogy represent a critical thrust in twenty-first century higher education planning. Yet, in the ubiquitous shuffle to provide discourse representative of the voices that sustain the U.S. cultural fabric, little attention has been given to the interpersonal skills required of mainstream, white, faculty members to create and facilitate a welcoming environment for those who look different from themselves. Moving beyond the comfort zone of a monolithic whiteness, that relegates non-whites to historically inferior status and stereotypic assumptions associated with "otherness," (i.e. blackness, Latino-ness, etc.), will help facilitate the retention of people of color at predominately white institutions.

First, this presentation looks at the particular, social/ cultural climate of midwestern university in a predominately isolated, rural environment. Secondly, it identifies how people of color are marginalized within that setting because of the absence of a routinized, social etiquette that consistently recognizes and acknowledges their humanity. Thirdly, I will suggest how a faculty development initiative, which emphasizes specific protocols engined by common courtesy, would not only bridge the gap between diverse staff members, but also appropriately address the periperalization of people of color on white campuses. Finally, I will briefly discuss how a faculty initiative to develop a mindset and subsequent behaviors to support social inclusion, not only benefits and develops consciousness of difference among faculty and staff, but also demonstrates the kind of social/behavioral modeling that supports pedagogies of multiculturalism and inclusion.

Petty McIntosh (1981) has identified the privileges of whiteness as an "invisible knapsack." Unconscious of the access to specific privileges like the comfort of interacting with people who look like them, speak the same language in terms of cultural behaviors and vernacular, as well as share similar hairstyles, foods and dress, it is not difficult to understand how whites assume postures of fear, ignorance and malaise with regard to people of color. However, if multicultural programs are to succeed and institutions are truly committed to the retention of people of color on predominately white campuses, then faculty development initiatives must teach and encourage behaviors that counter main-stream media stereotypes that demean and malign people of color by aligning them with extremely negative, monolithic images and categories: poverty, violence, gang-

banging, thievery.

That whiteness is historically associated with normalcy, respectability, success and social acceptance, while blackness is conversely associated with inferiority, destruction, failure and pathology, it is not surprising that when a black person enters a room, the assumptions wed to his/her very *beingness* come into question. Hence, the person of color is under a constant state of siege as his/her humanity is negated, ignored and consequently devalued.

In order to create an environment that promotes the inclusion of people of color in the social milieu of predominately white campuses, whites must develop a new consciousness not only about the presence of people of color in the workplace, but also proactively confront mainstream media stereotypes that represent people of color in monolithic and pathological ways. As whites take on the task of dismantling oppression, then people of color will move from beyond the veils of invisibility and into an arena where they may be "judged by the content of their character" (King, 1963), rather than the color of their skin. Proactive behaviors by white faculty and staff to dismantle racial biases, will help to contextualize white skin privilege, as it creates space for the recognition and acknowledgement of the humanity of people of color. Ideally, this is the mandate that supports multicultural education, curricula of inclusion, equity and social justice within academic institutions in the U.S.

In sum, this presentation, "Beyond Comfort Zones of Whiteness: Strategies for Inclusion of People of Color in the Social Milieu of Predominately White Institutions," seeks to address the challenges of moving outside the comfort zone of whiteness to embrace the changing face of the nation's citizenry. If the academy takes the charge of adequately preparing students for the new millennium seriously, then addressing assumptions of blackness and u.s. society, constitutes a critical initiative to deconstruct the mentality that supports exclusion.

### **Presenter**

**C. S'thembile** [pronounced: stem-bee-lay] **West** is an interdisciplinary scholar, educator and cultural critic. Currently, Dr. West, who earned a Ph.D. in African American Studies, teaches Womanist Theory, Women in Literature and Diversity at Western Illinois University, Dept. of African American Studies. A former Fulbright scholar to the Southern African region, S'thembile has written arts criticism for the Philadelphia Inquirer, the Philadelphia Weekly, the New York Amsterdam News and NAACP Crisis Magazine. The Black Scholar and the Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion have been venues for her research. She was a recipient of a Multicultural Teaching Fellowship, summer 2001, University of Nebraska-Lincoln and taught the course, African American Women and Moral Agency, cross-listed in Ethnic Studies and Women's Studies.