

Gendering and Racializing of Intellectual Spaces

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Do you recall the recent national news story involving Starbucks? In short, two men entered Starbucks and grabbed a table. Within two minutes of their arrival, a Starbucks employee called the police on the two men for loitering. This situation is not surprising or uncommon to me—these two men are Black. The Starbucks incident escalated to national news, but these occurrences are quite common for Black people. One Saturday morning in 2017, as I was driving to Purdue’s campus, I received a call from a friend. I spoke on the phone with her for about 20 minutes while I was parked in front of my department building. As I sat in the car, I saw a woman taking pictures of my license plate and video recording my actions on her phone. I rolled down my window and asked the woman if there was a problem, and she proceeded to ask me, “Why are you here? Why are you here?” These are the common, and for some, daily incidents of surveillance that students of color deal with as we enter academic spaces. Our existence in these spaces is constantly interrogated. Such experiences are the reason that everyday practices that foster inclusion are critical to the retention and success of marginalized students, staff, and faculty in academia.

I shared my experience with you because it is important to understand that marginalization of students, staff and faculty does not disappear in academic institutions. More importantly, we as members of academic institutions are responsible for the inclusivity of our spaces. Such responsibility is outlined in this excerpt from Margrit Shildrick, “... all of us— regardless of our own individual morphology— are participants in the socio-cultural imaginary that pervasively shapes the disposition of everyday attitudes and values— and we all therefore have a responsibility to interrogate it.” Shildrick highlights our responsibility to create and maintain the culture of intellectual spaces that we all share. Prior to accepting responsibility, we all must recognize that intellectual spaces are constructed by and for the privileged. Just as Starbucks is racialized, intellectual spaces are racialized, gendered, sexualized, colonized, and able-ized.

I distinctly remember the moment that I was made aware of my role in shaping the culture of intellectual spaces. I was in my third year of undergrad and speaking with my colleague about his relationship. Whenever he spoke of his significant other, he used the term *partner*. One day I

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asked him, “Why do you always refer to your *girlfriend* as your *partner*?” He explained that he chose to use partner because of its neutrality; it allows other colleagues to feel comfortable to converse about their relationships without being stigmatized for their sexuality. I know that many of you can recall a moment when your colleagues have inquired about your relationship status and they implicitly assumed that you are heterosexual. For those who are heterosexual, these moments may be insignificant; such is the epitome of a heterosexualized intellectual space. Our conversations and practices in work spaces accentuate the sexuality of the majority and implicitly privileges heterosexuality over homosexuality. We must continuously interrogate how simplicities in our everyday routine, such as the language we choose, construct our intellectual spaces.

Everyday practices that foster inclusion are not always implicit. At times, explicit validation of my value as an intellectual can counteract my feelings of “otherness”. As previously stated, marginalized students, staff and faculty are continuously made to feel like the “other” in intellectual spaces. Before we enter our first meeting of the day, our status as an intellectual could be interrogated. Explicit gestures can be as simple as informally recognizing your colleagues for the value that their unique experiences and intellect offer to enhance intellectual spaces. In our academic culture, it is critical that we give credit where credit is due and encourage our colleagues, especially underrepresented minorities, to continue to thrive in academia. We are responsible for creating spaces where recognition of contributions, respect, and reciprocity are the norm.

In closing, I encourage the Purdue academic community to analyze the construction of intellectual spaces that we are a part of and work towards facilitating more inclusive spaces. Challenge yourself and your colleagues to question the implicit biases in your everyday routines and practices. Remember, all of us are responsible for creating, reproducing, and changing the culture of Purdue’s intellectual spaces.

References

Shildrick, M. (2012). Critical disability studies: Rethinking the conventions for the age of postmodernity. In *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies* (pp. 30-41). New York, NY: Routledge.