

john a. powell of Ohio State University delivered the Fall Diversity Lecture: *A New Racial Paradigm and the Threat of White Space*.
by Hasan McGee '07

Professor john a. powell of Ohio State University delivered the Fall Diversity Lecture: *A New Racial Paradigm and the Threat of White Space*. According to powell, our collective well-being is threatened by “white space,” which allocates benefits and burdens. White space creates durable, group-based, cumulative inequality. It regulates status and behavior and creates racial inequality. He posed the problem of deconstructing white space as one of imagination, challenging people to imagine themselves into a different space and to eventually create a world that reflects this imagination.

Even imagining a different reality is hard, powell explained. When powell informally surveyed a class he was teaching at the University of Minnesota, he found that, while many of them had dreamt that they were animals and even inanimate objects, none of the white students had ever imagined themselves as non-white.

This lack of imagination was remarkable because dreams are usually where we feel the most free. That something as seemingly harmless as imagining oneself as non-white was off-limits indicated that some very powerful force was policing this boundary.

When this boundary is re-created in real life, it creates white space. While an imaginary force polices the mental boundary, the force that polices the physical boundary is very real.

“One way this [policing] is done is through racial profiling,” powell said. “Blacks are profiled most frequently, not when they are on the corner selling drugs, but when they leave their space and go to white space. We literally have police stationed at borders to make sure people stay where they belong.”

This separation is deeply rooted in the writings of seventeenth-century English political philosopher Thomas Hobbes. According to Hobbes, the state of nature was a state of “all against all,” in which everyone coveted everyone else’s possessions. From this state, we entered civil society as a means of protection.

Augmented by Calvinist thought, this philosophy emerged in America as “a religious and philosophical concept of separation, of radical individualism based on fear of others. The way you protect yourself is to arm yourself and build these closed-off communities.” In these circumstances, “the other, the most fearful other, is a racial other.”

This Hobbesian view contrasts to the ethos of spirituality, which is based on connectedness. And since white space is fear-based and denies spiritual connectedness, it is a fearful and spiritually dead place. For this reason, the existence of white space harms not only those who are excluded, but those who are included as well.

According to powell, a misguided solution would redistribute more non-whites into white space. Even if this redistribution occurred, the fundamental problem would still remain: the existence of

distinct and separate spaces. Although some non-whites are willing and able to buy into white space, the price of admission, the rules that govern that space, and the values and worldviews that predominate are still set by whites.

The major impediment to eliminating white space is that so many people equate their space with their identity. Thus whites equate attacks on white space with attacks on their identity, as if without white space they could no longer be white.

Thus, the first step to solving the problem requires people to imagine themselves in another space, as powell encouraged his students to do. Then, powell said, “we have to construct institutions and a world that reflects that imagination.”