*DAY OF ABSENCE*, AND OF REFLECTION

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The Evergreen State College

The current controversy about the *Day of Absence* at The Evergreen State College resonates with me because from 1988 until 2004, I was the sole African-American woman faculty member permanently assigned to the Olympia campus. Others took advantage of teaching at the Tacoma campus, but I was hired by Patrick Hill, a Faculty Dean who had led a battle to hire more people of color for the Olympia branch. I had traveled from the State University of New York where the equal ethnic/racial and gender percentages of staff, faculty and students had been an explicit objective for nearly two decades. In the Northwest, I was not only a novelty, but I discovered that many students found it difficult to discuss the racial issues in their lives.

Moreover, Evergreen had a whole new vocabulary—such as Seminar as a verb as well as a noun. The Seminar was a learning context in which faculty were expected to help guide students to discuss a text with a “shared intellectual commitment” to reach new syntheses or conceptual creations that brought the text alive. A cardinal rule of Seminar-ing was that students were to acknowledge the thought processes and intellectual efforts of prior speakers.

Yet, the Seminar was often where I experienced the type of complexities that were taken to the annual, much-anticipated *Day of Absence* event. Named after a play that satirized a fictional southern town in which white people wake up to find no black people around to do the labor, its subtle subtext seemed to suggest that a part of the town’s soul was also missing. I enjoyed this occasion to learn from others how they were faring, especially since I was frequently the first or only African-American teacher for many of my students.

Let me share one of my cases. Imagine a circular group of enthusiastic students, in which there is a single student of color. She has attempted to introduce a comment grounded in her experience as the daughter of farm workers. Students listened to what she said, but after she stopped speaking the group returned to their prior analysis without acknowledging her contribution. After Seminar, I told her,

“You have to do something to change that. If you don’t tackle it, I will have to. But if you find a way, you will have learned how to address a complicated meeting on the job. And if you use our Seminar’s strategy of *Mutually Respectful Dissent*, some day you might even feel comfortable facing a difficult superior. If I do it, you will take none of that with you as something learned.”

Not only did she do it, she eventually became one of the campus leaders.

But being “the only one” on a campus had its costs. Colleagues and staff sometimes expected me to represent, or do battle for everybody. And some, I just could not understand.

Second Case: One day I approached a colleague to thank her for helping me obtain a very difficult-to-find book in its original German. I was deeply grateful for her expertise and said so. Instead, she responded to me that she would tell others she worked with that they didn’t have to be afraid of me. Afraid of me? I was incredulous, and replied that she had hurt my feelings. Things like that happened all the time, and were the precise examples that people of color would share, try to find resolution for, or otherwise consider during the *Day of Absence*.

My last course at Evergreen in 2007 was co-taught with Michael Vavrus and entitled “Race” in the United States: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives. Students of all backgrounds were hungry to talk out loud about these issues. I believe in my heart this is still true. Why don’t we seek *students’* views? Let’s quote *them* for a change and honor the leadership they are trying to develop.

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