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for the Liberal Arts

**TO AND FROM THE BORDERLANDS: REIMAGINING THE
LIBERAL ARTS IN THE SPACES OF RACIAL INEQUALITY**

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Introduction

This presentation begins by asking, “How do the liberal arts compel Christian institutions of higher learning to confront the cultural power of whiteness and reimagine racial equity?” It ends with the reverse: “How does the confrontation of whiteness and lack of racial equity compel Christian institutions to reimagine the liberal arts?” We utilize the metaphor of “borderlands” as an embodied and living space within which liberal arts institutions might dismantle majority culture dominance and ensure equity of voice and an intercultural ethos.

The reflections are the collaborative effort of three faculty with administrative experience at North Park University (NPU). Philosophy professor Karl Clifton-Soderstrom will offer an initial framing of the metaphor of borderlands stemming from his experience teaching in the first year seminar of the honors program. He applies the metaphor to the direction of the university as it seeks the borderlands. Second, University Dean Liza Ann Acosta reflects on the idea of “when the border comes to you” and consider the challenge to NPU’s culture brought on by changes in the student population. One of those key changes is reflected in NPU’s recent recognition as an Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). Third, Seminary Dean of Faculty Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom reflects on the idea of “heading out to the borderlands” and considers how teaching theology in prison promotes change in the larger university culture. Together, these anecdotes and reflections offer North Park, and other Christian institutions, ways to rethink the liberal arts so that we may more honestly and courageously confront whiteness and engage the work of being intercultural.¹

¹ We define intercultural in distinction from multicultural. Intercultural moves beyond the celebration of difference to affirming educational spaces in such terms as antiracist and utilizing pedagogy that resists dominant ideologies and analyzes power relations. Kyoko Kishimoto, “Anti-racist Pedagogy: from Faculty’s Self-Reflection to Organizing Within and Beyond the Classroom,” *Race, Ethnicity, and Education* (Routledge, 2016): 1-15.

North Park is a 3000 student, Christian liberal arts university and theological seminary of the Evangelical Covenant Church. Founded in 1893 by a denomination birthed from the free church movement in Sweden, North Park sought to provide these Swedish immigrants with a way to become educated in the new world. A few borders define NPU. NPU is located in Chicago on the border between one of the most ethnically diverse neighborhoods in the country and a predominantly white neighborhood that earlier in its history housed many of the faculty and staff. In 1893, NPU's campus was outside the city, surrounded by farmland but quite soon was overtaken by Chicago. In the 1980's during difficult economic times, the university came close to leaving its urban home for the greener pastures of the suburbs when a large campus area outside the city became available. The board, however, wisely voted to remain. NPU's sponsoring denomination exists on the borders of the "evangelical" world. While NPU consider itself a Christian university, with a vibrant university ministries and chapel culture, it has a diverse student population religiously and ethnically who are not required to sign any lifestyle statement or attend chapel, and who represent a range of perspectives. Some think the campus is "too Christian" and others "not Christian enough." NPU has three core distinctives – Christian, city-centered, and intercultural—though any given student, faculty, or staff member may question which one of the three requires the most work. On a positive note, the university faculty recently passed a major overhaul of our entire class schedule to free up a 6 hour window every Wednesday for classes to leave the borders of our campus and learn in the diverse neighborhoods of the city. Furthermore, over the last 20 years, NPU's commuter population from Chicago and the surrounding area has increased along with the racial and ethnic diversity of the campus. Currently, the student population has no majority culture. These are only a few of the borders we will engage in our presentation today.

Section 1: The Liberal Arts as Borderlands (Karl Clifton-Soderstrom)

How do the liberal arts compel Christian institutions of higher learning to confront the cultural power of whiteness and reimagine racial equity? The thesis I will defend is that we should reimagine the liberal arts as an embodied borderland community. These three terms – embodied, borderland, community – must be realized together to disrupt the cultural power of whiteness and establish the university as a genuine learning space. The lesson I offer today is that the work needed within our liberal arts culture is beyond the curriculum (which can remain too intellectual) and the intentions of the faculty (which can remain too internal). The work requires the embodied practice of entering into *spaces* and *relationships* at the borderlands of intersecting cultures. The liberal arts are not simply a set of practices or ideas, but a living and relational space within which we need the fortitude to dwell.

Between the three authors of this piece, I have the longest term connections with university, having grown up around it as a child of a university administrator, graduated from the university and seminary, and taught in it for the last 15 years. I might add proudly that my first job at the university, when I was 10 years old, was being the water-boy for our basketball team during their three national championships in the late 1970's. These experiences over the last 40+ years, has given me some institutional memory. All this to say, I am the middle-aged, white, cisgender male, of Swedish-American decent, both a lifelong member of the founding denomination of the University, practically lifelong resident of the neighborhood, alum and tenured professor. When considering journey our school needs to take to the borderlands, of the three presenters here, I have the farthest to go. That said, I am not without skills or sensitivities – having grown up in the Chicago public schools, been an active part of our multi-cultural neighborhood and city, lived and traveled abroad, and, fitting for today, been formed by an urban liberal arts education.

I am also a newly appointed director of the honors program. The program has fostered an enthusiastic student culture guided by the critical and creative inquiry of the liberal arts, while it still

has a way to go on becoming intercultural. The revision of our university class schedule to take us out of the classroom will certainly help. That said, the majority of students in honors are white—well-meaning, but largely formed from middle-upper class white culture. While averaging about 25-30% students of color, the program is less white than most honors programs in the country, but the diversity in our honors program is disproportionately lower than the diversity in North Park's overall student population. These differences require examination if NPU is serious about the power of the liberal arts to engage race. Why? Honors programs, and the National Collegiate Honors Council, frequently pride themselves on maintaining liberal arts pedagogies amidst trends in higher education toward professionalization and specialization. And yet, honors programs rarely reflect the diversity of their host institutions, nor certainly of the country at large. Honors programs thus offer a unique window into questions facing the larger university culture. Confronting the power of whiteness, and the lack of racial equity, is something honors programs have recently faced more directly, as evidenced by the title of a recent conference session at the NCHC: "Honors so White." We hope at North Park to revitalize our honors program to fit the city-centered, intercultural mission of our school. It is not lost on me that they hired the white, majority culture, guy to lead it up. I have much work to do, and my reflections here a small part of this work.

For two years now, I have taught the 1st semester honors course. It is an introduction to the humanities, critical thinking, and college writing, on the topic "Authenticity and Identity." It integrates philosophical questions with personal storytelling and self-examination. As I have taught it so far, about half of the readings follow a history of ideas in Western culture, and about half of the readings are made up of contemporary (last 50 years) and largely American authors from a range of social demographics. As a philosopher, these questions continue to challenge to me, but they are also a bit too familiar. I have recently, however, incorporated literatures new to me, including the literature of the borderlands. In each of the last two years, these dispatches from the borderlands

have marked a turning point in how the class integrate the material and allowed us to confront cultures of whiteness in helpful ways.

It would be helpful to name specifically what I mean by borderlands. Kathlene Duval writes, “A borderland is both a place and a historiographic methodology, although historians often combine the two uses. A borderland, in its loosest definition, is a place where two entities (usually nations or societies) border each other. As a methodology, borderlands studies question what happens when distinct societies rub against each other or contest lands in between. What do those situations tell us about both the core societies and the spaces in between?”² In the reflections below, I would like to reflect mostly on the “spaces in between” as helpful in pedagogy and rethinking the liberal arts. In my class, we have read two texts—*The Borderlands* by Gloria Anzaldúa and *All the Saints and Agents: Dispatches from the U.S. Borderlands* by Stephanie Elizondo Griest. In her introduction to her collection of writings, Anzaldúa expands further on the meaning of the borderlands.

The actual physical borderland that I'm dealing with in this book is the Texas-U.S Southwest/Mexican border. The psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands are not particular to the Southwest. In fact, the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy.³

To illustrate the point differently, Griest begins her stories of traveling to the borderlands of those for whom the borders came to them:

We all know the rules. Cross an international border without the proper papers and-unless luck or privilege protects you-get arrested, imprisoned, and expelled. But what happens when an international borderline crosses over you, slicing your ancestral land in two? Division-by-force has been the confusing fate of peoples the world over. This book explores its living legacy among two: the Akwesasne Mohawks and the Tejanos of South Texas. . . Identity is everything when you live in the periphery, but are you born a Chicana, or do you become one? Is being

² Kathleen Duval, *Borderlands* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

³ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: La Frontera, The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012).

Mohawk solely a matter of blood quantum, or do cultural values play a role, too? Where does "American" fit into either equation?⁴

The borderlands are thus a physical space with a history, a framework of meaning-making within and across cultures, and an immediate personal identity for many. Historically, borderlands are contested through power struggles between individuals, peoples, and nations – most notably in our American history as the contested boundaries between colonizers and the colonized.

Borderlands of identity are also contested through internalized power struggles between dominant and subordinate cultures, values, and narratives.

Of course, an abstract concept of the borderlands is inherent to the traditions of the liberal arts. Historically the liberal arts are marked by interdisciplinary thinking, free exchange and debate of different opinions, an emphasis on reading and writing in different genres, and a participation in, as the Great Books tradition puts it, in “The Great Conversation.” Even within the historically white cultural confines of what was the Great Books tradition, there was the idea education occupying a liminal intellectual space where a parochial mind may be liberated. To this extent, the metaphor of the borderlands makes some sense. The borderlands also find their place in the Christian theological imagination in a host of different ways – the dual natures of Christ, living in “the now and not-yet”, existing as both sinner-and-forgiven, and “being in the world but not of the world”. Though the precise logic of these pairings differs, Christian liberal arts traditions can imagine liminal spaces.

When confronting the cultural power of whiteness and racial inequalities, abstract liminality must be replaced with living in the concrete borderlands. In our predominantly white classroom, we considered different the ways Anzaldúa experienced the borderlands deeper than a concept,

⁴ Stephanie Elizondo Griest, *All the Agents and Saints: Dispatches from the U.S. Borderlands* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017) 1.

I am a border woman. I grew up between two cultures, the Mexican (with a heavy Indian influence) and the Anglo (as a member of a colonized people in our own territory). I have been straddling that tejas-Mexican border, and others, all my life. It's not a comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradictions. Hatred, anger and exploitation are the prominent features of this landscape. However, there have been compensations for this mestiza, and certain joys. Living on borders and in margins, keeping intact one's shifting and multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an "alien" element. There is an exhilaration in being a participant in the further evolution of humankind, in being "worked" on. I have the sense that certain "faculties"—not just in me but in every border resident, colored or non-colored—and dormant areas of consciousness are being activated, awakened. Strange, huh? And yes, the "alien" element has become familiar-never comfortable, not with society's clamor to uphold the old, to rejoin the flock, to go with the herd . . . No, not comfortable but home.⁵

There is too much to unpack in this brief paragraph here. The range of emotions, memories, histories, and hopes are wrapped up in that last sentence – “not comfortable but home.” This is a description of an individual’s personal identity and political placement – it names a way of being oneself that is deeper than a metaphor, and more complex and contradictory than a concept. It names a living space within which and from which she dwells, where increasingly many of our students at North Park dwell, and where dominant culture persons such as myself must learn to dwell.

Majority culture people cannot simply imagine our way into these spaces, even with liberal arts techniques, for the liberal arts do not foremost speak *into* this space, as speak from this space. In this sense, the shared embodied space of the classroom requires diverse others and their voices to place us all in that uncomfortable territory. I must keep learning, as a white educator, to have the vulnerability to dwell in this territory as “alien,” not as expert, and to be “worked on” myself, and not simply give my students work.

⁵ Anzaldúa, preface.

My students and I go further into the borderlands when we consider another goal of liberal arts education: clear communication. Of course, in the Ancient Greek and Roman context, the sophisticated motivation of the liberal arts was to give young aristocrats the persuasive power to defend themselves before the court or senate. Today we would say more broadly, that citizens need the power of speech to protect and live into their freedom. In a contemporary, while still rather classical, defense of the liberal arts, Notre Dame University dean Mark William Roche claims, “A liberal arts education does not simply give students a capacity for clear and persuasive speech; it helps them discover the purposes to which such speech should be used.”⁶ Clear persuasive speech—that is what I as a philosophy professor ask of my students. Be clear! Roche goes further by saying the liberal arts help students discover “the purposes to which such speech should be used.” What are those purposes? For professional advancement? to sell real estate? to argue one’s case before a court? to talk one’s way out of a traffic ticket without getting shot? to be an active political citizen? to write poetry? Is it a practical virtue? Or an intellectual one? Debates on the liberal arts have defended both the ideal and utilitarian virtues of their curriculums. Whatever it is – we might say the liberal arts assume a individual’s power and freedom arer cultivated alongside their speech. The power to think, act, hope or remember.

So what can the liberal arts learn about speech from the borderlands? An important essay we read from Anzaldúa is “How to Tame a Wild Tongue,” wherein she considers how her native Chicano Spanish was tamed, corrected, and silenced through competing dominant linguist cultures. In the essay she writes,

Pocho, cultural traitor, you’re speaking the oppressor’s language by speaking English, you’re ruining the Spanish language . . . But Chicano Spanish is a border tongue which developed naturally, it is not incorrect, it is a living language. For a people who are neither Spanish nor live in a country in which Spanish is the first language, for a people who live in a country in which

⁶ Mark William Roche, *Why Choose the Liberal Arts?* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010) 156.

English is the reigning tongue but who are not Anglo; for a people who cannot entirely identify with either standard (formal Castillian) Spanish nor standard English, what recourse is left to them but to create their own language? A language which they connect their identity to—a language that with terms that are neither *español ni inglés*, but both . . . For some of us, language is a homeland closer than the Southwest.⁷

Anzaldúa's reflection on language offers something between the ideal and practical goals of the liberal arts. Language for her is not simply a practical tool useful to get what one wants, nor is it akin to the divine speak in the ideal quest for truth. Language is a matter of life, death, and recognition of herself and her people.

So if you really want to hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself. Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate. I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white . . . I will overcome the tradition of silence.⁸

In thinking about my own education in the Chicago public schools where being white was a minority, the presence of diverse students and teachers steeped me in a multi-lingual environment. But then I went to a predominantly white Christian liberal arts college, where for the first time in my life my circle of friends, professors, and immediate relationships were effectively all white. My college was no more than one block away from my high school, but it was worlds away. While yes, I was certainly white in grammar and high-school, but I understood myself to occupy a shared borderland space in my classrooms, neighborhood, and friendships. Going to college, however, was me leaving the borderlands for a white “heartland.” And as valuable as learning the liberal arts have been to me, they could have been much more if North Park had reflected the diversity of its own

⁷ Ibid., 77.

⁸ Ibid., 81.

city. I am grateful that now North Park is moving toward borderlands that is our proximal homeland.

Becoming more aware my own journey away from and now back to borderlands, I have learned better to give as much class-time over to storytelling from our student's experiences as I do dissecting the readings I offer. It has challenged me to give up more control, to demonstrating active listening, and to voices and languages to illuminate our shared space. When working with students to understand these authors, the storytelling of other Latina students in the classroom, including Dr. Acosta's own stories of growing up as a Puerto-Rican American, break open something new in my white students' imagination. Those moments were not comfortable for many in the classroom and were outright bewildering for others. They were also liberating for some as evidenced in how they spoke into our classroom discussions later in the semester.

To conclude, our question today is "How do the liberal arts compel Christian institutions of higher learning to confront the cultural power of whiteness and reimagine racial equity?" The liberal arts as borderlands must be lived through the embodied presence of diverse students to each other, the vocal participation to freely express and challenge dominant forms of communication, and the educator's humility to enter as the *neplanta* of new shared learning spaces. I mentioned than another key text we read is Stephanie Elezando Griest's creative non-fiction *All the Agents and Saints: Dispatches from the U.S. Borderlands*. The book is the result of years spent living among the peoples along the north and south borderlands of the United States -- among the Tejanos of the US-Mexican border, and the Mohawks of the US-Canadian border. The book is a great example of someone who herself lives a borderland identity, but also sought to enter a different liminal space among the Mohawks border communities. Her reflections in the conclusion to her stories offers a fitting conclusion to my reflections.

Psychically, the borderlands have left an indelible imprint, and for that I am exceedingly grateful. After a long stretch on insecurity that being only half-Mexican made me a “Chicana falsa,” I’ve come to see the beauty of hybridity. When you occupy a hyphenated space, you realize that nothing is stone-set. At a time when the world’s radicals have grown so uncompromising in their platforms, so unyielding in their beliefs, the ability to dwell in ambiguity has become an increasingly vital trait. Borderlands don’t constitute just the edge of a nation, but also the frontier. They might be lawless, yes (or worse, militarized), but they are also remarkably innovative. . . The greatest lessons in *neplantai* is that many borderlines need not exist at all. . . Spend enough time straddling one, and you can’t help but wonder what bliss might follow if we all just embraced the spaces in between.⁹

May we, as liberal arts educators, be similarly courageous and inspired to enter the spaces in between.

Section 2: “How do the liberal arts compel Christian institutions of higher learning to confront the cultural power of whiteness and reimagine racial equity?” : A very personal essay about how I wanted to change a PWI (Liza Ann Acosta)

“where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy”-- Anzaldua

Luis Rafael Sanchez, one of our most important writers in the island, asserts in his essay “La Guagua Aerea” or “The Flying Bus” the importance of anecdote and storytelling in the making sense of our fractured reality by the Puerto Rican person. This flying bus, the plane that takes the passengers from San Juan to New York in this essay, is the quintessential metaphor to illustrate our own borderlands, our crossing of liminal spaces (land-sea-more lands-more sea-the eastern US coast) inside a liminal space (the plane).

For the last 32 years, I have been boarding that plane at least 4 times a year, going between here and there, to the place I call homehome, Puerto Rico. Even though for the last 20 I have had a pretty settled life in Chicago, that city is only a home...a home away from homehome, while I wait

⁹ Griest, 273-4.

to use my metaphorical “open return ticket” as Sanchez call the final return to the island, ceasing the constant ebbing between island and mainland.

So, who am I? Right now, I am the University Dean at North Park University, a job that allows me to indulge in some of my passions—faculty development, academic integrity, and diversity work. I began the new millennium not only bopping to Prince’s 1999, but to a bright and shiny new job as an Assistant Professor of English and Comparative Literature at NPU. Green and politically inexperienced in spite of the great Penn State training as a teacher (one of the few programs with access to pedagogical training as a grad student), I dreamt of being in a place where I could inspire others like me (at this time, I just thought “like me” meant youth who wanted more than a job, a meaningful life). I had two options: A teaching fellowship in a prestigious Comparative Literature Dept at a prestigious Midwestern University or a teaching at a much smaller Liberal Arts Christian University. I made a choice.

What I was not prepared for was the kind of liminal space I would work in: a primarily white, protestant and evangelical Christian institution. I didn’t know what I had gotten myself into—well-intentioned (but mostly clueless) about racial issues, committed to work in principle in the tough work of racial equity, but resistant to make space in the intimacy or “the Great Conversation” that borderlands require. Mostly silent, observing, quietly doing a little here and there, because I wasn’t tenured yet, I felt compelled and convicted that this was what God had meant for me. This was a microcosm of institutionalized racism or well-meaning paternalism—the perfect storm. God had called me and many others here. Literature was my weapon. My body, my mind, and my spirit were a weapon. My education and training in the liberal arts would help me and like-minded colleagues to open students’ minds to possibilities they had never imagined, to understand that our

university's motto and distinctives were not some catchy verbiage concocted for marketing purposes, but that we all strive to live lives of significance and service.

My colleague and friend said,

Of course, the abstract concept of the borderlands as the liminal space is inherent to the traditions of the liberal arts. Historically the liberal arts are marked by interdisciplinary thinking, free exchange and debate of different opinions, an emphasis on reading and writing in different genres, and a participation in, as the Great Books tradition put it, in "The Great Conversation."—Karl

The English department gave me ample freedom—here, they said, we have no classes for you yet, so create all the classes you want to teach in your field. I went nuts—Courses on Race, Gender, Post-coloniality, Creative Nonfiction, World Literature, Ethnic Studies, Latinx literature, even Detective Fiction, you name it. On my fourth year, during a review, I asked my Division director if my tenure case would be ok with my writing for a theater company as scholarship output.

I was set. The Great Conversation will be had. Students will learn how to enter it. How to contribute. How to understand it! Grrrrrrr.....

Arrogant. That's not how it works. God works in mysterious ways.

First, I had to deal with my new existential crisis: Who am I? Why am I here? What am I supposed to do? What am I doing? What happens if it doesn't work? Am I doing things right? Am I doing things all wrong? Who am I?

"Where does 'American' fit into either equation?"—Griest

It is the flying bus that allowed me to write 15 years ago, a still unpublished essay called American Asopa'ō, originally submitted to an anthology about Puerto Ricans in the diaspora living outside of New York. I have revised it throughout the years and I want to read it part of it here because this essay was born out of my experience as a borderland person and the liberal arts:

I forget that I was born in Brooklyn a night in March, 1970. It was all an accident, I lie to myself, wanting to believe that my mom intended for me to be born en la isla but got caught momentarily in a snowstorm in the New York borough where she had actually been living since 1965. I don't remember Brooklyn. New York was never home to me. In the chronology of my memory I was always en la isla until I turned 18.

But after living more than half my life in the United States, I come to the realization that "no soy de aqui, ni soy de alla." I am simply a Boricua floating between two countries I call home, unable to choose one over another or to remain in one place for too long.

The first time I went back to New York was when I was six years old. Brooklyn was a mythical place known as "afuera," "los Niuyores." For many years I thought that the U.S. was in New York and not the other way around. That the rest was different, that there were other people with different cultures, different accents, different sexualities, different worldviews was knowledge I acquired slowly through the years as my academic pilgrimage progressed from South to Midwest in the United States.

My first visit "afuera" was during the summer of the bicentennial year and grandma took me with her to visit the relatives.

My grandmother was not a particularly religious woman. But during the airplane takeoff she whipped a rosary out, clutched it tightly in one hand, and closed her eyes tensing up until the pilot announced that it was safe to unbuckle our seatbelts because we had reached a cruising altitude of 33K feet.

Little did I know then that I would be hopping on that plane going back and forth once or twice a year every year to everywhere but Brooklyn, to pursue an academic education.

First stop. Spartanburg, South Carolina. Four years of living among pigtails, sailor dresses, high hair and flat shoes. My miniskirts, high heels, and large earrings attracted too much attention. I attended a college where I was one boricua of three. I befriended “others” immediately: the Japanese girl with the rotten teeth but the latest technology brought from Japan, the Jewish New Yorker redhead wearing leopard tights and a leather jacket who for the longest time was the only person whose accent I could understand, and the country girl from Georgia with big grandma glasses and a passion for Hill Street Blues that could only be surpassed by her love for Randy Travis. I wanted to blend in, to pass, so I imitated the southern accent as soon as I could figure out the inflections and learned to sing “My Love is Deeper than the Holler.” I tried to learn to shag but was too afraid that the salsa was going to trip me over. I tried grits but I thought “avena” was better-tasting. I went to a hair salon and the manager said my hair was too bushy, too ethnic, for them to style.

Second stop. Raleigh, North Carolina.

I tried hard to get an A in my Victorian Literature class. But the professor with the pornstache kept giving me B's. I asked for an appointment and asked why I was getting that grade since his marginalia was not really helping elucidate what I could improve for the next essay. He squirmed in his seat and said he was not going to change my grade. I calmly explained that I only wanted an explanation. He said I needed to have native speakers read my papers before turning them in. Three native speakers, two of which were in the same class, read over my papers, I replied. He said, “well, you will always have a language barrier no matter how long you speak English. You will never attain native fluency.”

Third stop. State College, Pennsylvania.

I was very traumatized by the time I got to graduation day. I had a deep suspicion that graduation would be interrupted, that a shooter would come in and try to kill us all, before I had the chance to grab that diploma from the hands of Graham Spanier. The week before, the president of the Black Student Union at Penn State had been threatened with murder. “Nobody will miss you, the letter read, we killed one of your people already and no one has asked for him. We left him at such and such a place, you can find his rotting body there.” There it was found by the police. FBI agents and helicopters descended upon Penn State. A bomb threat was called in. I just wanted my diploma. That bomb better be fake or I am going to be real mad if I can’t cross that stage.

Last stop. I hope. Chicago.

One time, a class full of Latinx students asked where I was from. I replied, from Puerto Rico. Naaaaaaahhhhhh. You don’t look Puerto Rican! What? I said, shocked, what is a Puerto Rican supposed to look like? Darker! Not with a nose like yours! Your ears, teacher! Your hair! Your accent, yeah, it’s your accent, its how you talk!!! You don’t sound hood enough! Hahahahaha. That’s rad. Go North Park.

Later, that same year, a mixed group of students had a similar reaction when they asked me What are you? Ohmygah! Until you spoke I thought you were Chinese, Japanese, somesortofAsian, naaaahhh, SouthAmerican, maybe Venezuelan or Colombian, nononono, she looks Middle Eastern, really, like Lebanese or something. But cool, cool. We like it. We need you. Good on NPU! Wow, things are changing.

The following year, a much older student did not have the same reaction to my ethnicity. He was auditing my class and every day brought me books about how to teach English. He would walk me to my office to tell me I was a bad teacher. He told me I was

not qualified, below the bar and proceeded to illustrate with his arm how low I was in his estimation. He was a Korean War veteran, he said. He was an alum, graduated from NPU sometime in the 50s. I wanted to respond that my grandfather was a WW2 veteran, my adoptive dad was a Korean War veteran like himself and my mom's current husband was a Vietnam vet. I was silent. I was afraid. He wrote strange letters to me about the immorality of Mexican cockfighting. He asked the President of NPU to fire me.

So, my existential crisis, my being, the collection of my experiences, my education, my travels, my reading, my writing, my memories, my storytelling, my faith, my faith...inform the work that I do. I tell you all of this, because I can't separate who I am from what I teach and from what I do as an administrator and as an artist. I can't go home and separate my racial identity and turn it off for the evening. In some places, I am now afraid to speak Spanish and hope that I can rely on my passing when I find myself in unfamiliar places. That has become my American experience of borders.

I tell you all of this because it doesn't matter where or when. Anywhere I go, the color of my skin or the color of my accent, my history, my world view will be met with resistance. The choices that I make in teaching will always be questioned or controversial. Teaching Literature makes some students mad, why are you shoving this down our throat? My family didn't immigrate here until ____ insert whatever century____ and It is NOT MY FAULT! Teaching literature makes ALL students uncomfortable but also for some of them, this is the first time Literature is being taught to them by somebody like me. Some call it biased. Some students feel validated and seen. Others see it as great preparation for—wait for it—the real world! And while some colleagues (very few very few) say that we should not hire for diversity because we should only look at quality, others are rethinking the way they teach and to whom they teach to create a more equitable educational system.

The president didn't fire me. NPU granted me tenure, instead. My colleagues saw the value of my teaching and the benefit of representation to a student body that increasingly was becoming more and more ethnically diverse. The students we were attracting were/are now majority commuters and about ¼ Latinx. In January we were designated an HSI institution. A lot remains to be done. We cannot continue our work when there is only one full time Latinx professor and me in the faculty. In order to have the "Great Conversation" about racial equity that the Liberal Arts facilitates, Christian institutions in particular have the weight of responsibility in looking at its administrative structures, its faculty, its curriculum and be brave enough to confront the whiteness and privilege.

Section 3: From the Borderlands to North Park's Center (Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom)

The first two presenters discussed the promise of the liberal arts to move majority culture to the borderlands for those vulnerable enough to pursue what liberal studies has to offer—including challenging learners to confront the cultural power of whiteness and reimagine racial equity. This final section addresses ways in which the borderlands challenge North Park to reimagine the liberal arts in three ways: 1) Content, 2) Pedagogy, and 3) Institutional Ethos.

First, I will describe my history and identity as an educator and administrator. I am white, and though I grew up in a diverse urban setting, my educational formation has been exclusively in white institutions in Minnesota, Europe, and Illinois. I have taught for over fifteen years at North Park Theological Seminary which is embedded within the larger university. I was born into the denomination with which North Park is affiliated (The Evangelical Covenant Church) and currently hold an ordination to word and sacrament.

My area of expertise is theology and Christian social ethics. I went into this area to confront society's deepest social ills in order to advance the very best of humanity—the flourishing of all

people, participation in civic life, and justice that is liberating for all – and especially those on the margins. After fourteen years of teaching Christian social ethics in an urban context where the topics we studied on North Park’s campus (such as poverty, racism, and educational disparities), affected real people in our community, I decided that, as a Christian educator, I wanted to do more than simply educate people *about* the good news. I wanted education to actually be a vehicle of good news.

I focused a sabbatical project in 2015 researching the feasibility of North Park educating those who are incarcerated. I quickly ended up in the prison—Stateville Correctional Facility to be exact, a maximum security prison south of Chicago infamous for, among other things, housing the last panopticon used in the United States. While visiting prison, I taught and learned alongside those who are not only marginalized. They are on the extreme borderlands and isolated to the point of invisibility. I sat in on a course on religion and violence against women that was being taught by a volunteer and Old Testament scholar. Inside students were presenting final projects, incorporating their own journeys with the themes of the course.¹⁰ As I listened to the students present their work, I had two realizations.

First, I realized that incarcerated students not only have a great interest in learning—they have much to teach the free world. One man said that he was taking as many restorative justice and violence prevention courses as he could to prepare for successful reintegration once outside the prison and begin advocacy work on the *inside* of prison. He was committed to learning as a tool that transforms prison culture and builds collaborative relationships with free people.

¹⁰ “Inside students” denotes students who are incarcerated. “Outside students” denotes free students.

Second, I saw the liberating power of learning in itself on a whole new level. The classroom was clearly a space where the inside students claimed their humanity back from a set of social ills that had stripped away their dignity for much of their lives. Regardless of the very good future outcomes of educational programs in prison, the classroom experience is liberating simply by existing. North Park began offering courses for credit, and they were so well received that the seminary is now offering a Master of Arts in Christian Ministry degree (the only in the state of Illinois) with a focus on restorative practices. The prison campus is called the “School of Restorative Arts (SRA),” is officially recognized by the Association of Theological Schools and the Higher Learning Commission, and over seventy-five incarcerated students are currently degree seekers. The majority of incarcerated students are African American and Latino, they come from economically distressed neighborhoods, and few have any college experience. The SRA also allows free students from NPU’s Chicago campus to take courses alongside men on the inside with the goal of forming students to become ministers of reconciliation and restoration—inside prison and in the free world.

How has teaching in these borderlands affected the Chicago campus and specifically the spirit of liberal arts? In his famous piece *The Idea of a University*, Cardinal John Henry Newman describes the liberal arts as various disciplines coming together, to talk to each other and to form a whole that draws in a community of learners. He writes,

...if we wish to become exact and fully furnished in any branch of knowledge which is diversified and complicated, we must consult the living man and listen to his living voice....The general principals of any study you may learn by books at home; but the detail, the colour, the tone, the air, the life which makes it live in us, you must catch all these from those in whom it lives already. (sic)¹¹

¹¹ John Henry Newman, *The Idea of the University* (Lexington: CreateSpace, 2016), 8.

Such learning, he continues, is not only about intellectual knowledge but “affections, imagination, and reason.”¹² The kind of interdisciplinary and communal learning championed by Newman has great potential to cultivate a classroom that fosters overtures of reconciliation, hospitality to strangeness, and the opening of intellect followed by a responsive feeling in the heart.

The prison classroom is a liminal educational space that has the power to both hide and reveal the human beings most knowledgeable of *and* most affected by intersecting social problems. If the virtue of the liberal arts is to solve life’s most complex problems, including social ones, then the expansion of access to liberal arts by those who have been traditionally excluded—those on the borderlands and (or “are”?) literally held captive—will invariably shift the content, nature, and ethos of liberal arts education. In other words, a shift in the affect, imagination and action of the majority culture requires more than intellect or reason. As my colleagues earlier in this presentation have also said, education requires proximity to those on the borders. When free and captive bodies meet in the classroom, those who are the primary sources most directly affected by society’s broken systems not only teach free people *about* social issues. (again – by saying “not only” you finish this sentence like you have more to say) More importantly in a Christian context, free students learn to care about the millions of people tragically affected by them.

The SRA has been instrumental in integrating the seminary and the university, and it has impacted not only the students in prison but the free campus. Faculty from the seminary, the Writing Center, music department and even across Chicago’s ACTS consortium teach in the prison. Undergraduate students across various disciplines and traditional campus seminary students, enroll in and attend classes side by side with inside students. In addition to the curricular opportunities for North Park students, the prison’s extra-curricular activities such as performing arts clubs, Bible

¹² Ibid., 14.

studies, worship, and study hall allow local pastors and retired congregants to volunteer in the prison—further connecting inside students with their neighborhoods in Chicago. The integration of the SRA with other primary groups within and around the university has affected the campus in three ways: 1) Course content, 2) Pedagogy, and 3) Ethos.

First, the curriculum that the seminary implements in the prison is similar to that of the campus. But because of the unique environment, the curriculum was also informed by men inside regarding the skills and courses they need to become ministers of reconciliation. The SRA degree requires a full additional year of coursework and adds courses that were not traditionally required parts of the curriculum. These include courses in trauma and family systems, conflict transformation and nonviolent communication, race relations, and restorative justice.

Additionally, courses that previously took a majority culture approach now have a required element of teaching students to examine causes of harmful ideologies and analyze institutional structures that are unjust. For example, a bible course in the Prophets that had previously focused on teaching students exegesis and interpretation now requires faculty and students to use the prophetic witness to determine operating idolatries that shape our worldviews, to discuss the effects that an almost exclusively white scholarly guild (such as Society of Biblical Literature or Society of Christian Ethics) has on the authoritative interpretations, and to challenge institutions including the church for the ways it has been silent on mass incarceration.

Second, teaching and learning in the SRA has forced faculty to reexamine pedagogy and to engage educational frameworks that encourage freedom and reciprocity.¹³ Incarcerated students have

¹³ For resources, see bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994) and of course Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2000). Freire and hooks views education as a practice of freedom as opposed to a practice of domination (or “banking”) and the classroom is a place of reciprocity and exchange. Theologians that might add to this conversation include Raymond Rivera’s work in *Captivity Theology, institutional power, and the importance of discipleship. Liberty to the Captives: Our Call to Minister in a Captive World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).

all been through multiple traumas, and many psychologists assert that living in the US prison system is akin to living in a constant state of PTSD. Trauma in students can manifest in the classroom by a student needing to leave the room when a topic is discussed or a conflict emerges. It may also manifest through anxiety about writing a paper or lack of experience with formal education. In *Bandwidth Recovery: Helping Students Reclaim Cognitive Resources Lost to Poverty, Racism, and Social Marginalization*, higher educator Cia Verschelden writes, “When students have been raised in conditions of economic insecurity and/or are members of a non-majority group and have lived with discrimination and exclusion for their entire life, they are most likely functioning with limited cognitive resources for learning and success in college.”¹⁴ This student population is not less smart or able, and our course are not less rigorous (in fact they are often moreso). The students are, however, often operating with a fraction of their cognitive resources. Verschelden’s book identifies appropriate classroom interventions that do not single out particular students, but create a positive, supportive learning environment for all students.

The pedagogical work of allowing invisible traumas or anxiety to be visible is heightened in the context of the prison. Yet, these stressful learning factors are not limited to students in prison. NPU’s campus serves many students who are not part of the majority culture and come from conditions of economic insecurity. The pedagogical lessons that faculty and students have learned in prison are ones that NPU has for far too long ignored and have great potential to serve our non-majority culture students as well as disciple majority culture students and faculty.

Finally, educational practices that integrate previously segregated bodies in borderland spaces confront white dominance, simply by happening, and have the power to move institutions from racial segregation to racial equity. Prof. Soderstrom claimed earlier that imagining these spaces is not

¹⁴ Cia Verschelden, *Bandwidth Recovery* (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2017), 2.

enough to change culture. Our institutions need embodied practices informed by the living stories of those who arrive on our borders and those we encounter outside our own borders. We must continue to share the lessons learned in our travels to and from the borderlands, and connect these movements to the best of our liberal arts pedagogy. In conclusion I'll offer a final anecdote of reimagination that we at North Park undertook.¹⁵

North Park's mission is to be a Christian, intercultural, and city-centered university, with a deep commitment to serving Chicago. So how does this fit with teaching and learning in Stateville? Chicago is often described as a city of neighborhoods, but none of Chicago's maps or city descriptions include Stateville Correctional Center. Stateville is located 30 miles south of Chicago in the town of Crest Hill. Yet, the majority of persons incarcerated at Stateville are *from* Chicago's south and west sides. With this in mind, we at North Park chose to see these invisible residents of Chicago and serve them as we would serve any other neighborhood in our city. To revisit the words of Stephanie Elizondo Griest, "The greatest lessons in *neplantai* is that many borderlines need not exist at all. . . Spend enough time straddling one, and you can't help but wonder what bliss might follow if we all just embraced the spaces in between."¹⁶

Conclusion: Three Considerations for Christian Liberal Arts Institutions (Liza Ann Acosta)

- **Empower Leadership (in the right way):** Hire, or advocate, for a Chief Diversity Officer. Deep work on an institutional culture is not as simple as hiring a gifted leader, and it requires the participation of faculty and staff across the university. Wisdom, expertise, and leadership are needed. The key is empowering them by having them on the senior team, reporting

¹⁵ This example as well as the original talk to which this example was in response is published in Kathryn J. Edin, Michelle A. Clifton-Soderstrom, and Rich Kohng, "Enlightened Hearts, Warmed Intellectuals: City Challenges and Opportunities and North Park Possibilities," *Covenant Quarterly* vol. 77, no. 1 (2019): 3-22.

¹⁶ Griest, 273-4.

directly to the president, and giving them access to build trust across the campus. Michelle Lloyd Paige at Calvin University seems to be serving in a good model for this.

- **Creating Brave Spaces (not just Safe Spaces):** The task and burden of educating white faculty and staff on the necessary work of anti-racism and anti-bias training must be taken up by white people. Taking ownership of their/our own education, without controlling the narrative, is key. One way to do is to create brave spaces, not just a safe spaces, for the work of anti-racism. Safe spaces are important, but they can also reinforce the divide between those who are seen as vulnerable and those who are empowered. They can also protect the dominant culture from confronting whiteness (i.e., white fragility). A brave space is where people share in the vulnerability and listening responsibilities – it is a space of mutual trust, where all are empowered, all can be called out, but all can also be brave in admitting the work they need to do.

- **Building Relationship through Shared Storytelling:** Universities often create and reinforce silos of micro-communities. Structured storytelling hours for faculty/staff, often without much analysis even, can help. Furthermore, these divides also happen at Christian colleges between the faculty and the denominational leadership or board of trustees. At North Park, we have asked for opportunities to break bread together, outside of the rhythm of official Board of Trustee meetings, with our board members and denominational church leaders. Without building these relationships in some informal ways, the faculty cannot build trust with the denomination with any nuance. Too often the controlled nature of our communications compel us to either put on our best face or come across as merely complaining. Stories offer more context and nuance.