

Interacting Across Difference at Dartmouth
Memo outlining planned remarks by Professor Elijah Anderson

THE COSMOPOLITAN CANOPY: RACE AND CIVILITY IN EVERYDAY LIFE

<http://sociology.yale.edu/publications/cosmopolitan-canopy-race-and-civility-everyday-life>

The “cosmopolitan canopy,” a concept that I introduced in my 2011 book, refers to an island of civility located in a sea of segregated living, where diverse people come together and, with the aid of “social gloss” – being polite and on occasion politically correct – typically get along. The “canopy” is a metaphor for civil society and, as such, can contribute to our understanding of race relations in public spaces in our increasingly diverse society.

Encountering one another under the canopy, people may find a respite from racial tensions and enjoy what they have in common. Here they commonly people-watch and engage in a kind of folk ethnography, observing others and sometimes appreciating their diverse expressive styles. They may even learn to get along with members of groups who traditionally had been strangers to their own kind. Thus, as an institution, the canopy can teach and edify, and thereby help to generate more cosmopolitan orientations.

A college campus can be thought of as a cosmopolitan canopy — a diverse place of civility, unlike urban ghettos, suburbs, and ethnic enclaves where segregation is more often the norm. The hallmark of the campus is its universalism and its tolerance for a diversity of people and viewpoints, and almost by definition it is the kind of place where we seek learning and sophistication. In fact, a college campus offers a unique opportunity for cross-cultural interaction, where diverse peoples gather, learn from one another, and for the most part practice getting along. This sort of illumination and appreciation of the lives of others is a vital component of a college education.

Under the canopy, there exist essentially two types of people: the cosmopolitan and the ethnocentric. For short, I call them “cosmos” and “ethnos” — and either type comes in all races, ethnicities, and genders. Of course, everyone is ethnocentric or cosmopolitan to some degree, and these attributes may manifest more or less at any time. The canopy, though, is a setting that encourages us all to express our cosmo side, and to keep our ethno side in check. After all, the primary theme of the canopy is civility; it is a setting where all kinds of people can expect to be welcomed and not discouraged, where everyone can feel a sense of belonging. In other words, in such settings, cosmopolitan norms and expectations are privileged and most often prevail in everyday life.

Therefore, under the canopy, the cosmo person can feel relaxed, even at home. On the other hand, the more ethnocentric person, perhaps hailing from a parochial background, may feel at odds with the diversity of

this setting, and might need to reach deep inside himself or herself and stretch to meet its norms. Depending on the person's sense of group position in the pluralistic racial, ethnic, and class order, operating in this setting may well pose a difficult challenge. To function under the canopy and not be perceived as deviant, the ethno may meet this challenge by painting himself or herself in social gloss in an effort to pass as cosmopolitan, which may be impossible to accomplish; but at least the person is encouraged to try. Adopting or applying social gloss to present oneself as politically correct, polite, and civil may be against the person's nature, or at odds with what he or she would really prefer. But the social gloss serves as a sort of mask that typically deflects scrutiny and may allow the person to hide his true feelings.

Under the canopy, because of their relatively parochial backgrounds, ethnocentric people of any race may feel especially challenged. They may sense themselves to be marginal, or even in competition with "others" for place and position in this setting, which they themselves may have only recently joined.

On occasion, however, the "pressures" of diversity may so challenge a person that his social gloss erodes, exposing the fault lines of the canopy. It is in these circumstances that the ethnocentric may have had enough and feel the need to draw lines or create borders between himself and others. Such actions can suddenly shake the civility of the canopy, and tensions may surface. This exhibition may be offensive to others with whom the social space of the canopy is shared. In fact, those who are most stigmatized, or feel marginalized, may take offense at what they experience as a moment of acute disrespect.

Strikingly, the ethnics are the ones who most often draw the color line, or create borders of class, sexual preference, and gender. In these tense situations, as the gloss erodes, latent ethnocentrism or racism may be exposed. Depending on the weakness or strength of the civil society, the canopy may be severely impacted, creating a generalized sense of shock and jeopardizing feelings of civility and positive race relations in the local community.

However, the resilience of the canopy ultimately prevails, as the rending of the canopy serves as a teaching moment in which community members can become sensitive to the peculiar challenges others face in the setting. Often, but not always, the resulting social education helps reinforce and spread tolerance through contact, reflection, and mutual understanding.