

DIVERSITY STATEMENT**Daniel Williams**

Department of English & Comparative Literature | Columbia University

I grew up in Zimbabwe, a white person privileged, to be sure, by most metrics of social position, economic status, and access to opportunities that enabled me to leave the place where my family still lives and attend college (as we quaintly say) “overseas.” Yet my encounters across many years within diverse schooling systems made me ever more aware of the sense of discomfiture, even abashment, that can potentially haunt a place of marginality. I was the only Jew, for example, in my large class at a Jesuit high school, left in an empty classroom several times a week when everyone else went to chapel. As an international student in the United States and later the United Kingdom and Germany, my sense of intellectual commonality with those around me was less visibly shadowed by the isolating frustration of dealing with bureaucracies typically wary of citizens from a “problem” country. I joined a mentoring/tutoring program for international students, and worked on the editorial board of *The Harvard African*, a student magazine geared at broadening the horizons of those who reflexively think of a continent rather than its countries.

My first teaching experience was as the founding director of the English Department’s Writing Center at the University of Heidelberg. I worked with ESL students from a variety of language backgrounds and competencies, who often grappled with the codes of German institutions. I developed methods for assessing and strengthening students’ writing skills in intensive one-on-one consultations (of which I held several hundred), and gave presentations in the department and the university to address the challenges of instruction across languages and cultures. During my graduate work at Harvard, as a member of the Graduate Advisory Committee, I was part of discussions that led to greater racial and gender inclusivity in the PhD program’s general examination. I also had the opportunity to generate a course of my own, a small-format tutorial for juniors on South and Southern African literature, which diversified the options at this stage of the undergraduate English major. Teaching what I consider to be materials close to “home” made me see how that region’s legacies of racial, economic, and environmental injustice register in striking ways with students in the United States precisely through cultural defamiliarization.

One student found this course “an exciting and new venture into the literary terrain of a beautiful and complex nation.” Yet as I introduced my students to the daily challenges of many living in Southern Africa, they added complexity to my sense of an adopted country. I learnt more about the specificities of the fraught history that has shaped the United States and continues to condition the experiences of its minorities. I became aware of the unique challenges of students who are the first generation in their families to attend college, often struggling to meet costs that others unthinkingly pass on to their parents. I realized how women pursuing careers in STEM fields must overcome subtle and pernicious stereotypes from the outset. I glimpsed the stratifications along racial and socioeconomic lines that foreclose so many lines of advancement to certain students, despite the appearances of access and financial aid. I firmly believe that our instruction needs to take active steps to model the sort of inclusivity in terms of race, ethnicity, class, gender identity, national provenance, and linguistic capability that universities are more broadly striving to achieve. I am dedicated, in my capacity as teacher and adviser, to creating a milieu in which my students and I can work, energetically and unequivocally, to foster equality of opportunity and forward the lives and careers of women and other minorities.