

Teaching in the Line of Fire: Faculty of Color in the Academy

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Historically, faculty of color have been woefully underrepresented in higher education. Since the 1980s, though, numbers for these academics have begun to increase. According to a 2005 report from the American Council on Education (ACE), faculty of color have experienced steady growth during the past two decades, more than doubling their numbers to over 82,000 and increasing their share of faculty positions from approximately 9 percent to 14.4 percent.¹ Similarly, among full professors, faculty of color representation has more than doubled over the past 20 years, rising from approximately 7,600 to nearly 17,000.²

Despite these gains for faculty of color, there is another reality, supported by an emerging body of literature, which suggests these increases may come at a cost. For some faculty of color, an unwelcoming and potentially hostile classroom environment awaits those who choose to teach in predominantly White institutions (PWIs). According to Cathy A. Trower, a research associate at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, faculty of color:

- experience overt and/or covert racism including being stereotyped and pigeon-holed;
- are marginalized and find that their research is discredited, especially if it concerns minority issues;
- bear a tremendous burden of tokenism, including feeling like they must be

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exemplars of their entire race and work twice as hard to get half as far;

- feel obligated to represent one's race or ethnicity on multiple committees that help the institution, but not necessarily the individual, and to mentor and advise many same-race students—a huge hidden work load that goes unrewarded in the promotion and tenure system; and
- suffer from negative, unintended consequences of being perceived as an affirmative action or target-of-opportunity hire.³

Conditions such as these have significant implications for how faculty of color negotiate their work environment. In particular, having to perform where there is

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the perceived or real threat of marginalization and devaluation can take its toll on their overall satisfaction, productivity and retention.⁴ Christine Stanley, a professor in Texas A&M's Department of Educational Administration and Human Development, argues that, "the wounds of covert and overt racism ... run deep for many faculty of color" and notes that many describe their campus climate as living in "two worlds," reflecting a constant tension of being pulled between their ethnic culture and the institutional culture.⁵ She found that faculty of color face problematic student attitudes and behaviors, including students inappropriately questioning both their authority and credibility in the classroom.⁶ In a study by Juanita McGowan, assistant dean of diversity in Kansas State University's College of Arts and Sciences, faculty of color indicated that some White students were more ready to: critique their classroom effectiveness; challenge their authority; have a lower level of respect; and report their concerns and critiques to department chairs.⁷

To bring attention to the some of the struggles that faculty of color face, five junior faculty members created a counternarrative by drawing on our collective experience to deconstruct and challenge the ways that race and racism play a role in our pedagogical interactions. Personal narratives and stories are important to understand lived experiences and how those experiences may confirm or contradict dominant belief systems, notes Gloria Ladson-Billings, Kellner Family Chair in urban education and professor of curriculum and instruction and educational policy studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.⁸ To that end, our hope was that an analysis of our lived experiences would contribute to the development of a critical literacy and that we—emerging scholars of color—could examine the impact of our racial identities on our pedagogical experiences at our institution.¹⁰

Shortly after a conference where we presented these counternarratives, the president of our faculty senate asked us if we would be willing to share our experiences with the entire faculty. Instead of sharing our individual narratives, we chose to combine our narratives to capture the essence of our collective experiences and at the same time ensure that no one voice remained isolated or exposed, potentially subjecting any one of us to unnecessary scrutiny. Our fictional counter-narrative follows.

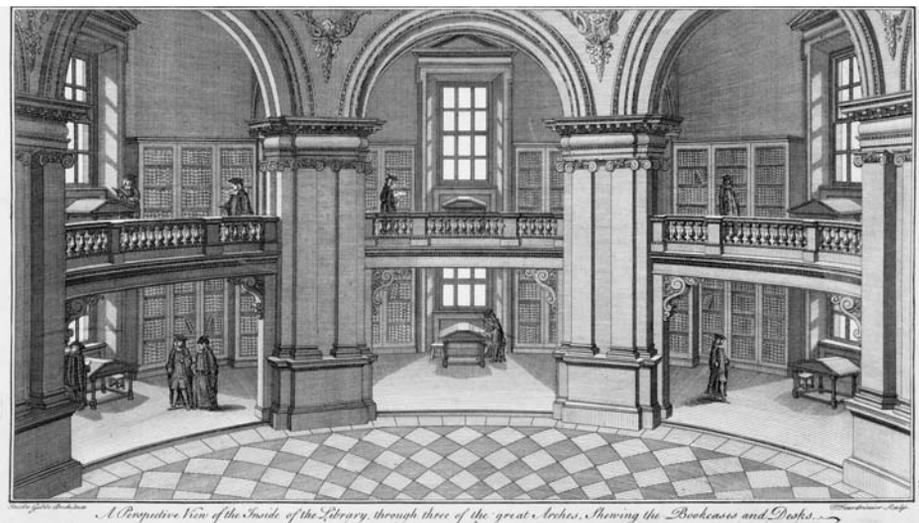
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Having completed the academic requirements necessary to enter this academic profession and having contributed excellent scholarly work within my content area, I have received national recognition from professionals who have sought my expertise and cited my research. I have received positive evaluations and accolades for my conference presentations; my teaching evaluations remain consistently high. While others with similar achievements might find delight basking in their personal satisfaction and peer accolades, I find myself surreally bleeding from the wounds inflicted consciously and unconsciously by my students, colleagues and so-called campus community. Every day, I walk a lonely walk down the long corridor that leads to my office, passing office after office inhabited by White colleagues who I may never really know, who cannot understand, and who would likely negate my lived experience with numerous examples of how they cannot possibly be racist. In the solace of my office, I often close my door and turn on some soul-nourishing music as I reflect on my experiences in this place. When I began my tenure as a professor of color in a predominantly White university, I anxiously anticipated the reality that I would constantly be faced with attempts to devalue my expertise, to question my authority, and to put me in my place.

After all, this was not new. I went to a predominately White institution and have lived and worked in predominately White organizations. I am used to being part of the few, the first, or the only. No, this was not new. I can still remember my experiences in graduate school when I was one of only two people of color. Despite my qualifications and the support of those whose footsteps I was following in, I felt like an imposter every time I walked into a classroom. Many of my peers in graduate school grew up in middle-class families, and had far more social and cultural capital than me, which they could wield and spend at will. Although I had grown up being told that I would go to college, I didn't know anyone who had.

Likewise, how many times did I find myself discussing Spinoza, Gramsci, and Nietzsche while sitting around the dinner table with my family? In graduate school, it was par for the course. Even at happy hour gatherings and housewarming parties, my colleagues discussed theorists and philosophers. There was no escaping it. It was difficult not to feel as though my performance in seminars and during casual hallway conversations was intended to gauge my worthiness to the field. I always wondered, “At what point are they going to realize I am an impostor?” I began doubting my abilities as a scholar, a writer, and a teacher. As my confidence waned, I began to wonder whether or not I was meant to earn a graduate degree. In fact, it was a teaching experience during my graduate training that made me realize that, to others, I was suspect.

As part of the requirements for completion of the graduate degree, senior faculty members were asked to evaluate graduate student instructors in the classroom. My peers and I were assigned senior faculty members who would attend an undergraduate class of ours and give individual feedback on the things we did well or needed to improve upon. As luck would have it, my peers were assigned to faculty members who worked well with graduate students or who were beloved by everyone. I was not so lucky. The faculty member assigned to my course was known for being, as another graduate student put it, terse and abrupt. This was a person who had a reputation for delighting in putting undergraduate and graduate students in the hot seat. Throughout the class, I could not help but see him out of the corner of my eye, sitting at the very last seat in the top row, staring at me over his glasses with his chin cupped in his hand, waiting for me to mess up. I was able to get through the lecture with only one major blunder, but it was the debriefing after class that I feared most.



I slowly walked from class and to his office and waited for the worst. I decided to make a pre-emptive strike by mentioning my flub first. He looked at me, and did not utter a word. We sat there for a few uncomfortable moments of total silence. My heart sank. He then sat up in his chair and said, "It's a good thing you carry your self in a professional manner and dress the part of the instructor." I was stunned for a moment, never thinking I would be getting fashion advice from a senior faculty member, but there it was. He continued, "It's a good thing you walk into the classroom as an authority figure ..." I began to sit upright ... "because you are suspect on three counts: your age, your race, and your gender." I slouched back

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down in my seat, taken aback for a moment, not because this had not occurred to me, but because no one had said it so bluntly before.

That was all he had to say for our debriefing. I thanked him for his time and left. But those words stuck with me and still echo in my ears to this day. After much time and reflection, I realized that he was not rebuking me; rather, as a faculty member of color himself, I believe he was equipping me with tools to confront the reality of being a person of color in academia.

From that point on, I have come to understand that I do not have the privilege of walking into a classroom and having students assume that I am a capable and credible teacher. Nor do I have the privilege of walking into a classroom and having people assume that I have earned my position through hard work and determination. I have to be deliberate in the subject matter that I teach so that others do not see me as an exception to their assumptions about who is qualified, about who has a right to be here. I also do not have the privilege of having people know that I am a well-educated person with three degrees, who teaches at a university, and who is an expert in my discipline. And throughout my journey in the academy, I have had plenty of experiences that remind me of the privileges that I do not have. I will continue to be suspect to my students, my peers, and to the world around me, regardless of my qualifications or academic accomplishments.

It is not uncommon for me to think, "I am done! I am tired, irritated, frustrated, and just done! Why do I have to deal with these things? Why can't I just go about my business, do my job, focus on my career ... why does the fact that I am a person of color keep interrupting my life?" Then I hear that small voice say, "Whoa—slow down, speed racer! Remember your goals, keep your eye on the prize, don't let this stop you! Focus!"

I am hopeful and convinced that every tinge of consciousness inspired matters.

I must continually play these words in my head if I am to do more than survive the world of academia. I cannot let them change my sense of purpose or weaken my resolve to demand justice and pave the way for young people of color who might not otherwise see images of themselves in academia. I must stand in the way of disregard, dismissal, ignorance, and the steadfast desire to do things the “way they have always been done.” For me, this is the key to dealing with the micro-aggressions and macro-oppressions that are endemic to this work—the understanding that my job, having arrived in this place, is to stand in the line of fire.

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Standing in the line of fire in the classroom poses its own unique challenges. This conversation occurred after the last class of the academic term:

He said, “This class was really great! Thank you.”

“Good, good, I’m glad you enjoyed it!” I said.

He said, “Yeah, you know I just really wanted to tell you that it was a really great class. I learned a lot. You’re a good teacher. I had never had a teacher that was [not White] before.”

I said, “I’m so happy that you enjoyed it, although I’m not sure that my being Brown had anything to do with my being a good teacher.”

He said, “Well yeah, you know, I know, I just never had a [not White] teacher before.”

At this moment, my White student and I established eye contact for a second. To me, my student’s eyes were wide with potential embarrassment, the fear of being offensive, and apologetic as well. In that moment, I understood what my student couldn’t say. He couldn’t say that he had doubted me based upon the color of my skin. He couldn’t say that when he first walked into class he was worried that he couldn’t learn from a non-White professor. But he did learn. In fact, I believe that he learned so much more than what the class was intended for. He learned to relinquish stereotypes, extend his comfort zone, and to see his biases. And I learned as well. I learned that my brown face means something here, probably more than I had ever imagined.

That day I walked back to my office holding back the tears of anger, of pain, of frustration. Do all of my students read my brown body as inferior, unintelligent, and suspect—and what about my peers, my fellow faculty? Feeling different, doubted, and emotionally taxed is an everyday challenge of simply existing in the world of academia as a person of color. My mere presence requires a daily justification for my exist-

tence and my right to be here. The silent and not so silent calls for justification stem from the systemic inequities that plague people who look like me. It is the constant comparison to dominant norms, the knowledge that perception is everything and that faulty assumptions are being made, and incessantly feeling the need to fight the battle. The battle—real or imaginary—fuels the conversation in my head, takes away my focus, and intensifies feelings of isolation that I can honestly say I never experienced before. It all hurts—being a faculty member of color has brought pain in waves that I never could have imagined, although part of me feels as though I should have known how much this journey would hurt.

The academy, rooted in White superiority and constrained with hegemonic practices, existed long before my arrival. I have been “thrown into a story that pre-exists and post-exists me.”¹¹ Yet, the story has a new chapter, “Diversity in the Academy,” and universities have begun to acknowledge a need to be more inclusive. This lofty and worthwhile goal makes for a different experience for those of us on the margins as we bear witness to the struggle persons of color have carried on for hundreds of years in order for people who look like us to have access to education. Despite their efforts and ours, I remain appalled at the seeming indifference of those who enjoy privilege at the expense of marginalized others. In the context of race and racism, they can choose to ignore their racial privilege, they can choose to ignore the instant credibility that comes with White skin, and they can choose to ignore the assumption of White as good and Black and Brown as suspect. I cannot choose to ignore a damn thing. I must understand, embody, and acquiesce to Whiteness. I must learn it; I must know it. There is no space—no place—where I can go without carrying the traces of my histories; color always matters in my world. As I look to the future, I realize that in all likelihood I will spend the rest of my life living in an inherently racist world and practicing in an inherently racist academy. It is quite likely that I will hurt for the rest of my life and I wonder if my White colleagues in the academy will recognize or dismiss my pain. They can choose. I cannot.

We shared the above fictional counternarrative on our campus with the hope that it might help our colleagues better understand how race impacts our lives as faculty members on a daily basis. We now share this narrative with a wider audience with the hope that it will provide a voice for other faculty of color who like us need the support and understanding of their colleagues. We believe that by sharing our story other faculty members and administrators will begin to understand that we cannot reap the benefits of diversity unless we create departmental and intuitional environments that nurture professional growth and foster success among all faculty—from both a professional and social perspective.

Social scientists have begun to develop a better understanding of the various benefits faculty diversity contributes to higher education. For example, Jeffrey Milem, of the Center for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Arizona, reports that increased faculty diversity results in more: student-centered

approaches to teaching and learning; diverse curricular offerings; research focused on issues of race/ethnicity and gender; and faculty of color involvement in community and volunteer service.¹² Additionally, Paul Umbach, at the University of Iowa, found that faculty of color were "... more likely to interact with students, to employ active and collaborative learning techniques, to create environments that increase diverse interactions, and to emphasize higher-order thinking activities in the classroom."¹³ While still emerging, research on the benefits of increased faculty diversity for higher education institutions clearly demonstrates that faculty of color make a difference in lives of the students they teach.

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The above fictional narrative of teaching while Black and Brown represents our personal interpretations of the significance of race in the academy, but prior writings on this topic suggest that there is commonality among the themes contained in our reflections. Ladson-Billings wrote about how some of her students came to her classroom questioning whether or not she would be fair as a female faculty member of color.¹⁴ Likewise, Fred Bonner, associate professor of education administration at Texas A&M, noted that many Black professors experience White classrooms filled with students who, on one hand, question their academic credentials and, on the other hand, expect them to be funny like Cedric the Entertainer.¹⁵ Finally, Claire Garcia, professor of English at Colorado College, learned that her White students expected her to personally represent the fictional literary characters they were studying; she notes that she never felt as conscious of her race as when she stood before a class of 25 young men and women eager to learn about what it is like to be Black in America.¹⁶ Unfortunately, the reality is that the burden of teaching while Black and Brown makes these instructors' experience uniquely and qualitatively different from that of their White counterparts.¹⁷

While we have no regrets about our chosen profession, our reflections have several implications concerning the success of faculty of color who teach in PWIs. To begin, higher education leaders need to enhance their understanding of the range of classroom experiences faculty of color encounter in PWIs and consider developing programs that address the various challenges faculty of color face. Correspondingly, because research suggests that race matters in terms of how faculty members experience the classroom environment, faculty of color need to familiarize themselves with the range of best practices related to creating inclusive learning environments and seek out resources that enhance their overall effectiveness in the classroom.¹⁸ Additionally, because many—but not all—faculty of color teach courses that address diversity-related content, they will need to prepare

themselves for addressing acts of intolerance and resistance in the classroom.¹⁹ Finally, it is imperative that educators concerned with ensuring the success of faculty of color who teach in PWIs create inclusive work environments. This will require that the academy identify new models for creating institutional change; pay attention to the climate and conditions under which faculty of color teach; and signal to faculty of color that PWIs are invested in their growth, development, and success by doing everything possible to ensure that support and resources are available. Then and only then will teaching while Black and Brown cease to feel like teaching in the line of fire. 

ENDNOTES

1. ACE report, 2005.
2. Ibid.
3. Trower, "Leveling the Field," 2003.
4. Aguirre, Hernandez & Martinez, "Perceptions of the Workplace," 1994; Astin, "Race and Ethnicity," 1997; Turner & Myers, *Faculty of Color in the Academe*, 2000.
5. Stanley, "Coloring the Academic Landscape," 705.
6. Ibid.
7. McGowan, "Multicultural Teaching," 19-22.
8. Ladson-Billings, "Preparing Teachers for Diverse Student Populations," 1999.
9. Solorzano, "Images and Words that Wound," 1997; Yosso, "Toward a Critical Race Curriculum," 2002.
10. Sleeter and Delgado, "Critical Pedagogy," 2003.
11. Lewis, "Stories I Live By," 2006.
12. Milem, "The Educational Benefits of Diversity," 126-169.
13. Umbach, "The Contribution of Faculty of Color to Undergraduate Education," 337.
14. Ladson-Billings, "Silences as Weapons," 1996.
15. Bonner, "Black Professors: On the Track but Out of the Loop," 2004.
16. Garcia, "Emotional Baggage in a Course on Black Writers," 1994.
17. Harlow, "Race Doesn't Matter," 2003.
18. See note 7 above. See also Salazar, Norton, and Tuitt, "Weaving Promising Practices for Inclusive Excellence into the Higher Education Classroom;" Tuitt, "Realizing a More Inclusive Pedagogy," 2003.
19. See note 5 above.

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