

Becoming Full Professor While Black

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By Marlene L. Daut

After I received word of my promotion to full professor this past June — a day after my 39th birthday — I decided to text my friends rather than post the news on Twitter. One of them asked how I was celebrating. I told her that I wasn't yet. Instead I was making a list of all the people who had tried to destroy my career.

"Wow, that's heavy," she said. It was.

But it was also cathartic. Writing the list helped me realize something. From the outside, being a mother probably seemed like the greatest challenge on my path to full professor (the most common reply to my text was some version of "I can't believe you did that with two kids!"). In fact, the biggest obstacle was actually race.

That's because becoming a parent on the tenure track (even a single parent) can be managed — with both institutional and social support systems — in a way that racism in academe cannot. In my own case, as a mother with an often-traveling partner, I was fortunate enough to not only be at an institution with a family-friendly leave policy, but also to live in California, a state with its own parental-leave policy. Likewise, I lived close to family and had the necessary funds for child care and other household assistance.

In great contrast, my career was threatened — from the classroom to the conference room, and from the publishing house to the foundation world — by everyday racist and discriminatory behaviors for which there are still no mitigating policies. And that holds true for many black female graduate students and faculty members.

To say that my time as an untenured black female assistant professor was emotionally traumatic would be an understatement. I could fill volumes with tales of both the macro- and microaggressions launched by students, professors, and administrators alike. The larger point I want to make, however, is that while my promotion to full professor might signal hope for the tenure-and-promotion prospects of mothers in academe, it is not a sign of progress for black women.

My promotion last month brings the number of black female full professors in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Virginia, where I am now appointed, to a paltry three. Across the United States, black women are only about 2 percent of all full professors. That is at least better than the situation in Britain, where the number of black female professors at any rank stands at a total of 25, but it is still rather dismal given that black people make up 13 percent of the U.S. population.

In short, my promotion happened — like those of all the black women before me — not because times have changed, but because I beat the odds.

The truth is, the odds were stacked against me long before I arrived for my first day of work as an assistant professor. Having been admitted to the Ph.D. program in English at the University of Notre Dame in 2003, I found myself in a department in which some professors did not support comparative American studies, let alone African diaspora studies. I frequently heard white male graduate students brag about not having read any of the "women or minorities" on the qualifying exam lists.

Later, I was devastated to learn that the department had labeled me and the only other woman of color in my graduate-program cohort as bad teachers (based on inappropriate personal comments made on our course evaluations by students), thus leaving us ineligible for certain kinds of internal grants. As new instructors, we had little understanding of how our students' highly racialized perceptions of us as unintelligent, "mean," and undeserving of their respect were affecting our teaching evaluations in ways that our white male and female peers did not have to endure.

When I chose to write my dissertation on trans-Atlantic literary cultures of the Haitian Revolution, I faced an even greater battle. I certainly had ardent supporters in both the French and English departments, but I also had many more vocal detractors.

Under the guise of concern about my ability to get a tenure-track job, I was loudly counseled to work on so-called canonical writers who wrote in English. There were several kinds of irony in being told by male, one-author, literary-critic types — acting as if they were the overlords of an archaic fiefdom called "the canon" — that working on the Caribbean was too "narrow."

Instead of listening to them, I charted my own path. I frequently overloaded on classes by enrolling in graduate seminars in the French department. I learned to read and write Haitian Kreyól. I took summer classes to become proficient in an additional language (German), beyond the requirements of the program.

The fact that I had done all of this extra work — which undoubtedly helped me land my first position in trans-Atlantic literary and cultural studies in the English department at the University of Miami — did not prevent various graduate-school peers from stating outright that my race made it easier for me to get a job.

The unstated requirement that I do more than the typical amount of labor, only to be continuously painted as undeserving, followed me into my second tenure-track job at the Claremont Graduate University. I outpublished everyone in my cohort, yet my third-year review stated that I needed to "step up" my scholarship. And although my colleagues were the very ones who had hired me to teach 19th-century American studies, my qualifications as an Americanist were frequently attacked and undermined by a faculty member who sent me harassing and abusive emails during my first two years on the campus. Her disdain was at first hard for me to comprehend since I was actually more of a comprehensive Americanist than her, having expertise in both Caribbean literature and 19th-century U.S. American studies.

I later came to understand that this hostile colleague was angered by my comparative approach to American studies precisely because it exposed the ahistorical and anachronistic pretension of treating U.S. literature as if it emerged in isolation from the rest of the Americas. My American literature syllabi, for example, contained writings by Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, and Charles Brockden Brown, alongside black U.S. writers like Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and William Wells Brown, as well as their interlocutors from the same time period in Haiti, Cuba, Trinidad, and Jamaica.

Dealing with constant accusations about my teaching (not inclusive enough) and my scholarship (too narrow) caused a strange kind of cognitive dissonance to take over my mind. I had the distinct feeling of both being targeted due to perceptions about my race, and also erased as a result of what [Tracy Sharpley-Whiting](#) has called "seen invisibility," or the condition of "being seen and not seen."

- At one point, for example, a white male faculty member's \$5,000 internal research award was loudly trumpeted across a departmental email list, while mum was the word about the fact that I had just been awarded a \$40,000 Ford Foundation postdoctoral fellowship. When another woman of color on the faculty brought my fellowship to the attention of the department chair, one of my colleagues condescendingly congratulated me by claiming to have never heard of the Ford Foundation.
- On another occasion a white colleague's article published in *PMLA* was greeted with public praise while my recently published article in *Nineteenth-Century Literature* was treated to silence.
- Yet another time, I nearly burst into laughter (and then tears) in a faculty meeting after I proposed a new course on the Harlem Renaissance and a faculty member scoffed that we didn't need "a whole class on that" since she was frequently known to teach poems by Langston Hughes.

It would have been disingenuous to celebrate my promotion without revealing these struggles. But it would be equally misleading not to acknowledge the opportunities that helped me overcome the odds.

Release time from teaching due to the Ford Fellowship, plus a post-tenure fellowship at the National Humanities Center, were the most important factors, as those awards gave me the hours I needed to write. As a result, I had so many articles, plus a monograph, in the pipeline that I not only avoided the customary post-baby vita gap, but I was able to publish my second book in 2017, only two years after my first. All that publishing made it very difficult for anyone so inclined to maintain the presumption of my incompetence based on race.

In a recent interview in *The Nation*, Imani Perry, a professor of African-American studies at Princeton University, revealed that the late law professor Derrick Bell once gave her a piece of advice that had stayed with her. "Write a lot," he said. "Whatever you write will be highly objectionable to a lot of people, but if you write enough of it, they probably can't derail your career."

Note that Bell said "probably."

Over the years what most prevented me from giving in to crushing despair were my family and the various colleagues who supported my career and my work — especially those who intervened and encouraged me to file a complaint when I was being bullied.

But my supporters could not sit down and do the writing for me. And it is not at all lost on me that, given my emotional state during this time, if just about anything else had gone wrong, I would likely not be where I am today. What kept me on the path to tenure and promotion was having opportunities to be away from my home campus and the fact that I

remained in good health physically, as did my family members. That meant I had the energy to focus on my research and the space to write outside of the damaging purview of those who were constantly opposing me.

So while the racist haters may not be able to completely derail your career, they can make it infinitely harder, more frustrating, and sometimes impossible to keep on track. Indeed, for every grant I've won, there have been many, many more that I was denied thanks to highly racialized comments of peer reviewers who do not think Haiti is "important enough to receive funding at the national level." Continuing to apply for grants despite such dizzyingly racist comments bouncing around in your brain takes a kind of mental fortitude that I have not always been able to summon.

People who are tempted to ask, "Where are all the black faculty?," need to understand that no cluster-hire or diversity policy in the world will increase the number of black women at the full-professor rank, if the campus environment is hostile, abusive, and even violent. Christena Cleveland's recent resignation from Duke Divinity School because of what she termed its "insidious legacy of anti-Black racism" is a case in point. Women of color face extra impediments both before and after being hired that are not experienced by either white women or black men.

For women of color to succeed in academe all the way through the pipeline, they need support, programs, and opportunities targeted at the particular research and teaching obstacles blocking their way. They also need institutions to actively combat racism by purposefully reprimanding students, faculty, staff, and administrators who engage in racist behavior. As the research of Jemimah L. Young and Dorothy E. Hines has shown, "toxic" classrooms, "personal attacks," and "hate emails" really are killing the souls of black women on campus.

Marlene L. Daut is a professor in the department of African American studies and in the American studies program at the University of Virginia, where she also serves as associate director of the Carter G. Woodson Institute.