BLACK WOMAN IN CHARGE:
ROLE DISPLACEMENT IN A MIDWEST MAJORITY INSTITUTION

Additional findings of the Commission on Race and Racism in Anthropology and the American Anthropological Association

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Introduction

Minority women’s ever-increasing presence among the top administrative corps within higher education is often viewed as the litmus test for our success in moving forward an agenda of diversity and inclusion. This would in fact be a real test if it were not for the fact that, even in this enlightened age and a world full of possibility, many still identify certain professional careers and positions as definitively male, marginally female, and never black. Perhaps nowhere is this truer than in the very classrooms and the central administrative meeting rooms of higher education where we commit ourselves to educate all, without gender or racial preferences. So, it is all the more perplexing and at times downright embarrassing to witness the games played to avoid the biased truths in staff, faculty, and administrator efforts at hiring and promotions.

For myself and for all new minority Ph.D.s, there are a few cautionary “writings on the wall,” that may ensure that if scathed, we will suffer no irreparable damage to our psyches or physical well-being in the quest to find our space in the ivory towers of higher education. Twenty years ago as a newly hooded Ph.D., from a highly regarded university system, racism (manifest or latent) was “rightfully” the last thing on my mind. I negotiated a reasonable package, moved my young family across the country, bought the first suburban home, and the future was looking good. Three early incidents would short-circuit my unrestrained enthusiasm. Lesson number one for every new Ph.D. entering the halls of the academy is the need to be ever mindful of how higher education reinforces the status quo, and the timeless saying from Frederick Douglass, “Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.” To capture the essence of a few racial-ized and gendered interactions that have led to teachable moments in the sound-bite society we have become so comfortable with, I will discuss very briefly three variable episodes that highlight some of the cognitive
challenges we face when working at a four-year minority research university. Incident one: I came to complain, but what are you doing here? Incident two: the stove needs cleaning and what do you intend to do about it? Incident three: the golden rule. Given that context and content are equally important, my own experiences show that fortunately not all the white guys are bad, not all the black guys are good, and not all women are invested in sisterhood-equity. But, the students keep coming, which leads to the possibility that diversity and inclusion in higher education will prevail to the astonishment of all.

**Part One: In the beginning...**

I joined the Gateway University faculty in 1992 after completing my Ph.D. from a well-known West Coast research university. In hindsight, I now more fully appreciate the cautions (and the glares) shared by more senior colleagues who constantly reminded me, “You really don’t want to compare us to California.” Still having that willful spirit which often attaches to a newly minted doctorate, I would usually have a ready response for my colleagues, and then continue to pursue the route chosen. Having negotiated well, I was free from teaching in my first semester, which gave me the much-needed time to present my first academic paper as both a Ph.D. and a tenure-track assistant professor. Unless you have this experience it is hard to appreciate the sense of self-actualization of all the work of the last eight years now being acknowledged by a community of scholars, etc. Yes, I was feeling pretty damn high right about then. And then, it happened. My first (re)awakening came after delivering a conference paper when a young man approached me at end of our session. Getting ahead of myself, I assumed he was coming to comment and compliment me on the presentation. I was only half correct; he came to compliment me and to also ask, “What are you doing on that plantation?” My interrogator, a native of my new city, expressed a genuine concern about my future. I will never forget that early query and because the young black man was the first to bring his experienced reality to my attention. I will be forever grateful for his sincere concern. Even twenty years later, I can remember the words and, not knowing how to process them, I was stung silent. The young man then went on to tell me that he was from my new city and that Gateway University was the worst place for Black people. Sometimes the young do know what they speak, or at least the parts they have experienced or have been well informed about by elders. With a new cloud of doubt casting a palpable shadow, I returned home to get family and myself settled in this new place while getting to know colleagues and surrounding campus communities.

My first semester of teaching began in winter, and I swear it was one of the coldest ever, but it wasn’t just the weather! After finishing up an evening lecture, one of the Caucasian male students stayed back as I collected my belongings and cleared the board. We still have a few chalkboards on campus. He looked a bit uncomfortable, so I slowed down in my packing. Finally, and apparently gathering up his nerve, he asked, “Are you going to stay?” Needless to say, I was dumbfounded, but
not at a loss for words. I can remember as if it were yesterday, I responded, “Unless you know something I haven’t heard, yes, I am staying.” He literally gave a sigh of relief. I then asked why he thought I was leaving. Curiosity will punish me one day. He said and I quote, “We had a black professor before and she just left. We miss her.” Since I could not deny all knowledge of this person’s departure that now so troubled this young man, I tried to assure him and perhaps myself, by replying, “The University needs to keep me at least a few years to recoup the expenses of bringing me here.” I smiled. He smiled. We left the class and entered into the winter cold, and the plantation analogy stirred within me.

At Gateway University, we applaud ourselves for our urban mission and we find multiple opportunities to praise our minority student enrollments within the state public university system. But we remain undeterred by our inability to recruit and maintain a respectable level of diversity in our professorial ranks or within central administration. Even at the department chair level, our biggest success is having women in traditionally male-dominated units take on leadership roles, without becoming “men in garb.” Most recently, a prominent department in the College of Arts and Sciences elected its first female chairperson. Yet the door marker reads prominently, “Chairman’s Office” in 2008.

I had the good fortune of being a tenured associate professor at Gateway University, and for a six-year period, held three different administrative positions, including an interim dean assignment. All of these appointed posts provided opportunities for me to be ignored, insulted, slighted, and ultimately to be acknowledged as “a credit to my race.” I have sometimes wondered, when this is given as the highest valuation of one’s personal worth, whether the opposite attribute is being a discredit, credit-less, or race-less? While still pondering this achieved status, a white male director magnanimously informed me that he likes all Black people, because during his childhood a Black woman took care of him. With this shared insight, I realize my upbringing must have been lacking because while a good number of Black women took care and helped raise me, they never suggested that I should or would like all Black people. Even worse, if this reasoning makes sense, they never mentioned white people much at all. Yes, the challenge of responding is always driven by the context of the event and the status of the speaker. Lesson number two for all of us, and for new Ph.D.s in particular, we must find validation for our personhood both inside and outside of the academy. As one colleague puts it aptly, “My God is bigger than this.”

Part Two: Episode One—Right Person, Wrong Place or what?

Here at Gateway University, we are geographically located just a few short miles from the inner city limits. We sit where just 50 years earlier a very segregated golf course anchored a surrounding gated community which also included a nearby nun’s residential facility. The generous fathers of the community donated the land to the state, and the Gateway University was born. Golf
continues at another nearby location. This backdrop for many continues to be important in assessing how far we have come in removing the unofficial barriers to racial integration.

As the normal progression of a tenure-track appointment came to unfold, I did secure the coveted academic job security at the designated time and was immediately given the opportunity to become a department chairperson. Department and division chairs at Gateway University serve at the pleasure of their colleagues who vote, the College dean who accepts the vote, and the chancellor and/or provost who confirms the three-year appointment. My initial reaction to the offer was one of appreciation to my closest colleagues for their shared confidence in my ability to take the reigns over from the person who had had a marathon run of more than twelve years! He had hired all the current faculty and staff. Our esteemed colleague not only handed over the reins of department leadership, but also went on sabbatical leave so that in his words, “Campus people will let you be in charge of the department, if I am no longer available.” My esteemed colleague was and is always the optimist! In actual fact it never really occurred to silly-me that campus people would not let me do my job.

Then one day, I got a call from my colleague and former chair. He was brief (perhaps embarrassed) and to the point, when he told me, “X is going to call you. He already called me here at home to ask for a favor. I told him you are now the Chair and he would have to call you about this and any other similar requests. So, I am just giving you a heads-up and whatever you decide you have my support.” We then spoke briefly about his sabbatical and his family. I thanked him for the call. Now, I like a good “Who done it story,” like most people, but I have never had much patience for conspiracy theory, so I waited to get the call. It never came. I continued to do my job, with just a tinge of resentment knowing that someone, perhaps someone close to me, still preferred an absent white male colleague to get things done. Now, to say this incident brought my own prejudices to the forefront might be overstated, but it surely did not endear me to the community of assumed entitlement and privilege.

So it was with some comic relief when just a few weeks later, a self-appointed aggrieved white male student professing (no pun intended) to represent his interests and that of his course mates came to complain about the organization of an online telecourse being offered by our department. The young man was directed to the chair’s office. As chairperson, my policy was to keep my door open whenever I was in. The furniture was situated so that I could simply look up to see someone coming in, but not be distracted by everyone using a common hallway. On this day, a young white man walked in firmly, and then stopped in his tracks. He looked at me, I looked at him. He backed up and looked at the name on the door. He was stuck in the doorway, and most probably having a “What the x#%? moment?” To me he seemed somewhat conflicted, so I invited him in. He now moved somewhat less assertively, and
walked up to my desk. I invited him to have a seat. He then said, “I came to complain about my professor and her course, to the department chair.” Together we both simultaneously recognized the awkwardness of this situation. He came to complain to me about me. Since he appeared to me to be at the disadvantage, I took the “high” ground and invited him to share his complaint, since he was now with both the chairperson and the offending professor of record for the course. The irony was not lost, nor the embarrassment, but I have to give it to this young man, he slugged it out! Hey, we are one of the most enthusiastic baseball towns in mid-America, if you can afford the ticket.

The student told me that the course materials were not well organized and as a result he was falling behind and there was no one to help the students taking this course. I made sure not only to pay attention, but also to show I was paying absolute attention by looking very decidedly at the young man as he related his frustration. My full attention was not lost on him, since, when he completed his narrative, he sat back looking, in my opinion, very smug and awaiting an apology. I then told him that I understood his frustration and hoped we could get to a good resolution. I asked if he had his course syllabus handy. He replied in the affirmative, and I then felt a wonderful calm because I knew that all the “missing” course information was, in fact, included in this document. Together, we went through the syllabus, page by page, until all the lack of organization fell into place. We both looked up and looked at each other. I decided to be both magnanimous and to “have my day.” I asked, in my most comforting professor voice, whether he was now okay. He, very embarrassed, responded, “Yes.” I knew then, and I know now, I should have let him go, but I didn’t.

I asked the young man sitting before me to tell me why, if he had a reason, he chose to report to the department chair before taking up his concerns with the professor of record? Looking down, with great faked interest, he replied, “I don’t know.” Now it was my turn to be less than honest. I told him that I suspected that he just didn’t know where to go, so he decided to go to the top, which is a good strategy. I then asked, “Are you now okay knowing you can come to both your professor and the department chair?” My sarcasm was not lost on him. I smiled and wished him a good day and a good semester. He smiled. As the semester continued, I paid special attention to this young man when I saw him on campus greeting him and inquiring of his general well being. His response was always a very brief, “Fine.” He never reciprocated with any expressed concern for my wellbeing.

Episode Two: The Woes of Diversity

No doubt for some of our most esteemed academic colleagues, the world has changed in ways they never imagined possible, and that they refuse to embrace. Filling diversity positions in response to affirmative action policy or the lack thereof is still a quagmire of uncertainty. The ongoing balancing acts of being politically correct or minimally appearing to be correct has
presented some very intriguing issues within the corridors of higher education. When my own perceived harassment from a member of our dean’s office was brought to the attention of central administration, I was questioned, “Do you think it is racism, or is it sexism?” Angered already, I was now saddened that such a distinction was deemed necessary and the question appropriate. My immediate response was, “I don’t know and I don’t really care, as long as it stops.” But, as we say in polite company, “It is what it is.” The overly confrontational behavior did stop, but only after I insinuated, but left unsaid that legal recourse is an option for cases that cannot be resolved internally. Of course once we reached checkmate status, now the elephant and the mouse were in the room, and no room is big enough. In response, ever smart and sometimes even clever, I find ways to avoid the avoidable confrontations and resolve to stay out of harm’s way whenever possible. In short, offenders now send mediators to work with me and/or get things needed from me. So what is the problem with this reasonable strategy? On the surface, nothing is wrong. In reality, too many senior male faculty members are superb scholars, but clueless on how to diplomatically address junior colleagues, especially women. When it then comes to women of color, the most reasoned experience is often of a person who is there to serve.

A case in point occurred when we had a visiting international scholar coming to our department for a semester. It never occurs to me that somehow it is my responsibility to personally examine the designated living arrangements until a full professor, who is a personal friend of our visiting scholar, came to inform me in the Chair’s Office that, “The stove needs to be cleaned.” Yes, if I had not been there, I would not have believed it either. Since there really was no context, I looked up and said something to the effect of, “What?” Mister History Professor then told me that our visiting professor is his friend, and he has gone to check out the assigned university housing to make sure it was all right. He had now come to report that the place needed cleaning, especially the stove. I then told him, without a stutter, “And what do you expect me to do about it?” It must have been my tone, my scowl, or a revelation but Mister History Professor then looked back at me somewhat sheepishly and said he wanted to report the problem to me so that the university would not be embarrassed. Reaching into my core, I replied something to the effect of, “On your way out, please ask our administrative office to contact campus facilities to determine who oversees visitor housing so the problems can be taken care of as soon as possible.” The professor actually thanked me and departed. I was done for the day and it seemed the smart thing to do would be to take my non-stove-cleaning behind home.

Over the years, I have gotten to know this history professor a little better, and he has actually taken a stand in defense of his unit colleagues of color. He retires next year after a stellar career of more than 50 years! Lesson three is taken from religious text of all denominations, “Forgive them for they know not what they do or say.”
Episode Three – The Way We See It

The following recollection is really not one event in time, but rather a series of interactions brought about for me while having some discretionary control over the limited resources that define state-supported universities. In the process of fiscal decision-making, I learned more about my unit and university colleagues than I ever imagined possible. At the co-director level, it became clear that only a winner has any friends. To sustain grant programs designed primarily to serve underrepresented populations takes on an added element of balancing that reveals the bi-polar nature of many funding organizations. While timing is vital, having a program that fits with campus vision and mission is even more important. The fact that our central administration often runs in five-year cycles generally limits commitment to programs not tied directly to our research standing. So, to keep the program running, we talked, talked, and talked. Most conversations focused on reaffirming why the university must serve the under-represented neighboring communities. Some days we knew that administration just wanted to get us out of their offices, and so they would promise the most minimal amount to get us out of the building. I would personally learn that there is something very important to knowing how to bring a “money conversation” to an early end. Saying no should not take a long time, and a deserved yes takes even less time.

The real lessons for fiscal management came for me as department chair. I inherited a long-standing deficit at the same time the College hired a new dean. Herein lies the perfect storm, as I was told pointedly and in the presence of the college fiscal officer, “You will not be allowed to have a deficit and you will work on reconciling the current one. The College will help you and monitor your accounts.” So much for confidence from the top and my misplaced gratitude to my department colleagues! We cultural anthropologists are not usually known for our budgeting skills, but I decided to use the classic home economics model: if you don’t have it, you can’t spend it. Courtesy of a cartoon posted on my door which read, “Come in and tell me what you need, and I will tell you how to do without it,” in two years I retired our debt and we were now in the black, with the first African American chairperson in the history of the College of Arts and Sciences. Interestingly enough, the new tough-minded no-deficit spending dean resigned after just two years and there have been no other African American department chairs in the College of Arts and Sciences.

My next assignment may very well have given a renewed meaning to “from the frying pan to the fire.” As Interim Dean of the Evening College, I became the highest-ranking African American female academic administrator on campus. To the outside world, the title sounds impressive and I was now invited to many high profile university events. When approached about the possibility of taking the position, I was told it was being offered because: first, I cared about students, and second, I was not afraid to fight for the best interest of
students. Reason number one made me proud. Reason two should have been the red flag; it wasn’t. To those familiar with our campus politics, I had just accepted an interim job that no one else wanted. For years, there had been infighting about how and why the Evening College should be funded. The Evening College continued to “win” the fight, because it always managed to serve it constituents and have a balanced budget. The only African American Dean died unexpectedly, to the shock of the campus, and for nearly a year the College was lead by an associate dean who was preparing for retirement. The fight was now mine. While central administration promised their support, there was no timetable for recruiting a substantive dean, and within the next two years, all of the key positions in central administration had also changed. The fight was now truly mine, along with the assistance and support of a very able and loyal group of support staff. Together, we gave new meaning to “Come early and stay late.” I once calculated the hours put in for the week, and speculated that an hourly wage at a local fast-food joint would provide a similar pay packet. I was now on a dean’s salary, but the Evening College Dean position had historically been the least well paid on campus. In keeping up with an increasing number of demands, it also became clear that maintaining a balanced budget still needed to be a priority, especially if the College were to survive a hostile takeover bid. Yes, it happens in higher education too. It was during one particularly difficult annual review cycle, accompanied by a miserly raise pool that I learned the “golden rule.” As was the norm, I would evaluate colleagues who both taught exclusively for the Evening College, as well as proposing a percent of our salary pool for those who had other college homes. During this particular cycle, I got a call from another dean who requested a meeting to discuss the Evening College raise pool. I agreed to the meeting, and for the sake of efficiency agreed to send my preliminary calculations for his colleagues that we would be discussing. A few days before our scheduled meeting, I got another phone call from my dean colleague. It was then that my colleague proposed that I send him all of the raise pool designated for colleagues in his college and he would decide on the appropriate allocation. You would think by now that nothing would leave me speechless but you would be wrong, or nearly so. I told my dean colleague, “I will get back to you.” He replied a very confident, “Thank you.” When I put the phone down, I went for a walk. When I came back, I stopped by my fiscal officer’s door and requested a meeting when time permitted. He came almost immediately. By now, he was familiar with my temperament and sensed that something was not good. He is a very bright man and strong in his faith. He waited for me to speak. I then related to him the earlier conversation, and confessed, “Is there something about the way white men see the world that escapes me, or is Dean X really asking me to give him my raise pool?” My fiscal officer looked at me and calmly said, “I can’t speak for all white men, but if he meant what he said, you should go by the ‘golden rule.’” I looked at my fiscal officer and asked, “What is the ‘golden rule?’” He said, “The person who has the gold makes the rules.” I said, smiling, “Thank you.” I called my dean colleague
back that afternoon and told him after considerable thought, the answer to his request was, "No, and I would be sending my original evaluations and the appropriate raise for each colleague. I did agree that we did not need to meet." It took a couple of years for this colleague to speak to me again.

As I come to the conclusion of this short essay, it is now twenty years later, and it is safe to say, I am still learning, and so is Gateway University, the lessons of surviving winter; dress warmly, cover your head, and keep your mouth shut.

References