

BEING
BLACK
IN THE
IVORY

TRUTH-TELLING ABOUT RACISM
IN HIGHER EDUCATION

EDITED BY
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THE SMALL THINGS ADD UP

THOMAS F. DeFRANTZ

Spotlight Narrative

Microaggressions cohere through time for senior Black faculty. I have been a full professor for over a dozen years now; I worked for ten years before that as an assistant and associate professor. During this time I have been party to several hires that have produced mediocre white colleagues, even as each search counted outrageously accomplished Black candidates, as well as Brown and Asian candidates who were short-listed and even interviewed. But white supremacy and the continuous practices of whiteness that support its operations tend to lead to awkward outcomes.

I've reported to four deans across these many years as an academic: two white women, one Brown man (Middle Eastern), and most recently a Black woman from the US South. Sometimes Black people forget that we are also embedded in systems of oppression, that we learn from these systems, and that we can be racist, misogynistic, homophobic, and colorist. The Black woman dean from the South expressed very little grace toward me during the time we worked at the same institution; I started looking for another position nearly as soon as we met at the president's house for her welcome event. In the blink of an eye, I could see the lack of empathy toward my skin, my scale, my obvious queerness. Like many "church ladies" I have encountered over the years, her expression hoped for me to be somehow different: possibly less visible or more restrained. I wasn't wrong, and within sixteen months she removed me from all leadership positions I had been assigned before she arrived. This crushed my spirit and my self-confidence. It's very hard to work well when one feels disavowed or out of place.

I teach graduate courses in several different units; my work focuses on Black cultural production. I work with the major queer and Black feminist theoretical models available and provide overviews to intersections among these and the more prevalent white masculinist European formations. In these circumstances, there are always, *always*, white students who relate that they are better prepared than I to lead conversations and provide an "accurate" rendering of theoretical materials at hand. These

students inevitably reveal that they are only passing through this temporary relationship with me, a Black faculty member, along the way to working with some more famous white faculty.

I have chaired two units and served as director of graduate studies twice. The ceremonial aspects of this sort of leadership invite scrutiny from a larger public. As program director in women's studies, I was tasked to introduce an invited feminist Israeli academic. Confusion reigned when a tall queer midwestern Black American academic performed as the representative of the university and its presumably pro-Israeli, anti-Palestinian leanings. Activist protesters and security guards alike registered uncertainty as I introduced the speaker and moderated the discussion after her talk. Are Black American academics not to be involved in concerns of Palestine, Israel, and the Middle East?

Years later, hosting a visiting former colleague and his friends did not go so well. I arrived late to the intimate dinner reception, coming from some other responsibility. We were three Black senior academics, all men, somehow surrounded by three young white women postdocs who worked on Caribbean topics. One of the young white women, whom I did not know, felt compelled to "interview" us at her pleasure, asking the visitors "what they did." When she turned this weird colonial attention toward me, I was not at all polite. I refused to answer her query about "what I worked on" and "what my position might be" at the university. Note that I was chairing the department that cosponsored the visit of my friend, and I was allocating the departmental funds to pay for the dinner that she enjoyed. The temperature at the table dropped in response to my refusal, and it took the white girl some time to understand that I would not respond to this sort of social maneuver. Clearly, she did not consider the relationships of the people she encountered at the dinner, and on meeting us, felt entitled to perform a colonial maneuver of discovery among us. She behaved with ignorance as a girl might, even though by her age she might have known at least how to respond to a refusal. My friend seemed distraught that I would not lubricate the social event toward happiness. But I refused. I briskly explained that I had not consented to be part of her "anthropological fieldwork." The dinner ended awkwardly. The next day, I wrote to the two white faculty mentors who work with the young woman about their mentee's actions and effect and her lack of understanding that in our cultural traditions, young people do not ask elders personal or inconsequential questions. I expected, and experienced, no particular outcome from that communication.

These sorts of microaggressions cohere to an overall dispiriting experience for me as a Black academic. All too often, I have been expected to perform the labor of explaining these points—the dangers of obviously biased hiring practices, that Black people are able to hurt and intimidate each other, that we know what we’re doing as academics and intellectuals, that our interests extend beyond our areas of expertise, and that we have long-established modes of social relationship that nurture and enliven us. Luckily, I have also enjoyed simultaneously a full career as a working artist and crafted creative experiences that explore the potentials of an afroFUTUREqu#r at most every turn. These performances inspire me, alongside the audiences and witnesses who attend them, allowing us to commune briefly outside of the governing racial logics of the universities where I have held positions.