

I was a graduate student at a University of California when the chair of my department called me to his office regarding the school's policy on sexual harassment. Though the man did not strike me as the congenial kind, I assumed he was assembling his most recent batch of inductees to acquaint us with the university's recent adoption of a policy meant to protect women students. Was I in for a stinking surprise! No sooner had I stepped through the door but the chair began to lecture me that I must refrain from sexually harassing my professors, specifically, the black professor of the department. I was dumbfounded. The professor in question was in charge of the department's sub-specialty of creative writing. The few times I had consulted with him—in his office, with the door wide open—I sat in the visitor's chair while he, barricaded behind a sprawling desk, flashed teeth and sensuous lips amid a luxurious beard.

Following the odious meeting with the chair I went to the department secretary to inspect my student file. It contained not a whiff of any alleged misconduct. Since English Studies functioned under his umbrella, I consulted with the Dean of Humanities. I got nowhere. It wasn't until I learned that the Office of Graduate Students keeps copies of every written scrap regarding every single grad student that I got hold of a file containing copies of the pertinent inter-office memos. I found that my TA professor had knee-jerk joined the black professor's cause by writing up a misleading report on my conduct as teaching assistant. (Apparently, the department secretary had instructions to remove any "sensitive communication" before allowing an "outsider" to view the file.) Emboldened by a meeting with the Dean of Graduate Studies I called the TA professor on his falsehood and he retracted the statement. The chair downgraded the black professor's allegations to "a misunderstanding." But the department had tipped its hand. The males in charge, who but a few months earlier had welcomed us with handshakes and smiles and tables laden with food, had labeled me the outsider. I was the despised other, the one to be shunned. I still took a certain pride in the fact that I'd been designated a "nontraditional student" (I was older than my classmates); that my German inflection was incontrovertible; that I was indifferent to Brit lit—a professor tried to shame me for being unacquainted with Dickens's "Bleak House"—but these personal markers were cold comfort. My problems were just beginning. By then a gay grad student, an aspiring poet, had packed up and left. Since she was from my area, California's central coast, I telephoned but she would not say why, after passing a rigorous screening selection, she threw in the towel.

The department did boast a prominent woman professor, a poet and feminist writer I had got to know at a function in San Luis Obispo. It was because of Sandra Gilbert that I applied to the UC Davis program. But Gilbert's husband, then chair of the department, had recently died. She went incognito and never even noticed I could have used her support.

This all happened at the time of the Clarence Thomas hearings, when Members of Congress savaged Attorney Anita Hill for her testimony regarding Thomas's sexual misconduct. Apart from the Hill allegations, ample evidence existed that Thomas, an unexceptional bureaucrat, would make a lousy Supreme Court Justice. None of that fazed the white congressional males. They wanted their token black man.

Years later I was to learn that my black creative-writing professor, though married to a white woman, had a history of harassing white women students. Surely his colleagues in the department knew this but, like their congressional counterparts, they were set on their token black man.

Ironically, it's only to the uninitiated that the English professors appeared powerful; behind the scenes they bickered and jostled over their postage-stamp sized territories: "British Romantic Poets"; "Novels of the American Civil War"; "Shakespeare"; "Creative Writing" and so forth. Because they had tenure they declined to teach expository writing, the bread and butter of English Departments. They hired part-time lecturers who, notwithstanding their masters or doctorate degrees—and because of attendant burdens of student-loan debts—lived hand to mouth. My fellow grad students and I had no inkling that we were headed toward careers as part-time lecturers. If we were lucky and got hired 50% we would gain health coverage, but we'd be teaching five days a week. We couldn't afford to get sick.

In California part-time lecturers are known as "freeway flyers," for they commute daily between several colleges and universities. Rarely do they have office space to meet with students, much less to grade papers; essays are packed in the lecturer's car in boxes and crates to be pored over nightly at the kitchen table. As should be expected, the institutionalized neglect is anathema to student learning. Since the writing courses are mandatory for AA or BA degrees, students avenge themselves with essays bought from internet "essays-r-us" sites.

A plucky decision—was it a desperate decision?—relocated me in Tennessee. As fate would have it, among other things I taught at HBCUs (Black Colleges and Universities), where students shared encounters that made my California days seem a walk in the park. White supremacists continue to be part of local and state governments, especially in law enforcement. The Tennessee years have been captured in another essay.

As a young woman I bid adieu to my home country. I set out for California to marry the man of my choice. What a journey it has been.