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# The Hollow Piercing Scream An Ode for Black Faculty in the Tenure Canal

*Vincene Verdun and Vernellia Randall\**

## Prologue

Very few notes are included with this poem since it is not intended as an expression of research or theory but of our experience. An experience that is mutually shared not only with other Black Faculty, but in many respects with Asian, Native, Hispanic and other oppressed groups. To fully appreciate our expression we encourage you to read it through at least once before reading the notes. We also encourage you to read endnote five which is an expression of fact.

## Dedication

To the Black Women and Men who proceeded us,  
who had an even harder row to hoe.

The hollow piercing scream  
was outside my body.  
I tried to reach deep,  
Grab the pain,  
    thrust it from me.  
But the scream  
was not from within me,  
and I failed.  
With fist clenching determination,  
I tried again,  
    crouched down,  
leaned forward, and

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searched long,  
slow and shrill.  
But the pain  
snuggled safely  
in the folds  
of my being  
unhindered  
untouched  
unrelieved.  
In the final  
frustrated effort,  
I dropped to my knees  
flung my head to the floor  
reared up with a full  
resonant bellow.  
But I was not it  
and it was not me.  
So the pain remained.  
Slumped in defeat  
I could not weep  
I found no rest  
I struggled and rose  
as the pain  
pulled the reins  
securely bound  
about my shoulders  
and I and the pain  
are still one.

You may scream  
but it won't give you any relief.

You may scream  
but nobody will listen.

*"What . . ." white faculty asks, "does screaming and pain have to do with Blacks and the tenure process?"*

Nothing . . . and everything.

Nothing because no one ever screams,  
because black faculty know that  
it will do no good and black faculty know that no one is listening.

Everything because at some point  
most black faculty  
feel like screaming  
as they go through  
the tenure canal . . .  
but do not.

*"Why . . ." white faculty ponders "is there a scream in the spirit of Blacks who are in the midst of the tenure process?"*

We do not change so much  
from the time that we are infants  
to the time when we are seeking tenure.

We want a warm nurturing environment.  
We want people who believe in us.  
We want people who encourage us  
. . . prod us to do our best.

When we were infants  
and our needs were not met . . . we screamed.  
In the tenure canal  
we do not feel warm,  
we do not feel nurtured,  
we feel aggravated  
frustrated  
mistreated . . . and  
singled out.

*Why now? Why me?!*  
we feel like screaming  
but we do not.

What makes us want to scream?

- New Rules and Policies  
make us want to scream!
  
- Different Standards  
make us want to scream!
  
- Discounting Race based scholarship  
make us want to scream!
  
- Isolation  
makes us want to scream!
  
- Denial of our Black Experience  
makes us want to scream!

Why do we feel like screaming?

*NEW RULES AND POLICIES . . .*

Or worse, old rules and policies never implemented  
Until the first black faculty seeks tenure.<sup>1</sup>

New rules and policies.  
On their face benign.  
New rules and policies are implemented all the time.  
Perhaps a good idea whose time has come.  
Perhaps a means of helping . . . BUT

Without regard to the intent  
If it did not apply to the last white male  
who went through the process—  
it makes us ask the uncomfortable question—

*Why now? Why me?!*

It would be okay,  
if the newly implemented rules and policies  
resulted in positive and encouraging comments  
but more often than not  
those newly implemented rules and policies result  
in extensive criticism and projections of  
problems with tenure.

With the discomfort of being the “first”  
When the policies and rules are changed  
We do not feel warm  
We do not feel nurtured

We feel aggravated  
frustrated  
mistreated and  
singled out.

*Why now? Why me?!*  
We feel like screaming  
but we do not.

Why do we feel like screaming?

*DIFFERENT STANDARDS*

Teaching, service, scholarship  
that is what you need.

Different strokes for different folks . . .  
some emphasize teaching  
some emphasize scholarship  
and service, well, it is the lonely stepchild.

It behooves an infant faculty member to know  
what is important  
But for us the focus  
may be a moving target.<sup>2</sup>

In a school that previously focused on scholarship . . .  
we will find ourselves in trouble over . . . teaching.

When the standards abruptly change  
We do not feel warm  
We do not feel nurtured  
We feel aggravated

frustrated  
mistreated and  
singled out.

*Why now? Why me?!*  
We feel like screaming  
but we do not.

Service.  
We wear many service hats . . . more than most  
counselor, role model, token black committee member, committee member,  
committee member,  
committee member, committee member, committee member, ad infinitum.

Service  
a stepchild little recognized.

When service is given little recognition  
We do not feel warm  
We do not feel nurtured  
We feel aggravated  
frustrated  
mistreated and  
singled out.

*Why now? Why me?!*  
We feel like screaming  
but we do not.

Why do we feel like screaming?

*DISCOUNTING RACE BASED SCHOLARSHIP*

Not all of us write about race  
but many do<sup>3</sup>  
And when we do  
we are told  
    *"save that piece until after tenure" or*  
    *"after you receive full professor" or*  
    *"do you have to use the word racist?"*

Race matters  
Race matters  
Race is a part of our lives  
    and matters  
Race is a part of the system  
    and matters  
Race is a part of scholarship  
    and matters

When race-based scholarship is discounted  
We do not feel warm  
We do not feel nurtured  
We feel aggravated  
frustrated  
mistreated and  
singled out.

*Why now? Why me?!*  
We feel like screaming  
but we do not.

Why do we feel like screaming?

*ISOLATION*

Isolation  
Isolated  
Always alone . . .  
the only  
the one  
the first  
    perhaps two  
    rarely three  
    almost never more.

Isolation comes coupled with  
the overwhelming sense  
that the white faculty  
lacks confidence in us.

Confidence  
warm and fuzzy  
immeasurable  
except through a poll of feelings and attitudes.

Lack of confidence  
easily spotted  
    by questions asked or . . . not,  
    by avoided glances  
    by getting every piece of information  
    long after it is common knowledge to everyone else.

When white faculty  
show us  
a lack of confidence  
we feel pain

we feel acute loneliness  
we feel insecure and uncertain.

Those feelings follow us  
into the classroom  
into our scholarship  
into our service and  
into our personal lives.

If no one reminds us  
to define ourselves  
and behave accordingly  
or if no one tells us that  
we are a whole lot better  
than white faculty think we are  
it crushes.

Be careful of the danger;  
Danger that the perceptions of white faculty  
perceptions tainted by a subconscious bias perceptions formed  
from residual attitudes  
perceptions that label us as

*Lazy  
incompetent  
mentally inferior  
unqualified.<sup>4</sup>*

When residual bias impacts  
white faculty's evaluation of us

We do not feel warm  
We do not feel nurtured  
We feel  
aggravated

frustrated  
mistreated and  
singled out.

*Why now? Why me?*  
We feel like screaming  
but we do not.

Why do we feel like screaming?

*DENIAL OF OUR BLACK EXPERIENCE*

No, all blacks are not the same  
No, all black experiences are not universal  
But being black in America is different  
from being white in America;

And our experience is different from  
the experience of white faculty

A difference many white faculty deny  
*"tenuring is grueling,"* they say.  
*"tenuring is grueling for everyone,"* they say.

Of course! Tenuring is grueling  
No one remembers it with euphoria.

But oh . . . we get it!  
Since it is horrible for everyone—  
when we claim  
that the experience is different  
for us than for the last white male tenured

our feelings are discounted.

*"you are super sensitive"*  
says a white faculty member  
*"you have a chip on your shoulder"*  
says another  
*"you are playing the victim"*  
they shout in chorus!

Stories, validating us are dismissed and explained away.

Amazing!

But our experiences are different!

So different that even when we are tenured  
we do not feel warm  
we do not feel nurtured  
we feel  
aggravated  
frustrated  
mistreated  
singled out  
discounted and  
invalidated.

Why do we feel like screaming?

■ New Rules and Policies

■ Different Standards

- Discounting Race based scholarship
  
- Isolation
  
- Denial of our Black Experience

I made it through  
the tenure canal.

I wanted to scream.

I screamed and  
the scream was from outside my body,

I could not reach  
the source of the pain  
with my scream and

I and the pain  
are now one.<sup>5</sup>

### Endnotes

1. Let's use the case of Relda, a fictional black woman, whose experiences reflect those of many African Americans. Relda is the first black woman Professor at AnyLaw School.

At AnyLaw School, faculty are expected to apply for tenure and promotion to associate professor in the fall of the fourth year. At the beginning of Relda's second year, the rank and tenure committee did a full review of Relda and a white woman colleague. Relda was happy to go along with the review until she found out that this was the first time such a review had ever taken place.

When Relda looked at the specific criticisms in the second year review—"You are seriously lacking in scholarship"—she was even more frustrated. She asked the last white male to get tenure where his scholarship stood at the same point in his tenure trail and he had been in the exact same position, for the same reason—he had scrapped a piece he had worked on in the first summer just as she had. The big difference—instead of a negative discouraging review by the rank and tenure committee in his second year he had received ideas and encouragement from his colleagues who liked him and wanted him to succeed and get tenure.

Relda felt a little like her faculty was building a record, just in case she did not make it. She was not feeling warm and nurtured at that point. She felt singled out, mistreated, and like an outsider. At that point she felt a lot like screaming—but she did not.

2. Relda was advised by numerous people that at AnyLaw School scholarship was the important determination. That is, if the scholarship was good—no one was ever denied tenure—in fact up until that point no one had ever been denied tenure. Relda was further advised that as to teaching, student evaluations were not significant at all—peer evaluations were the criteria used.

Well, you may imagine Relda's amazement when in her third year pre-tenure review (another first time policy) the focus was on Relda's teaching. In fact, even though Relda's peer evaluations had been excellent, the grave concerns about Relda's teaching were based upon the student evaluations. Black professors and particularly black women sometimes suffer under student scrutiny. Furthermore, Relda's student evaluations looked a lot like those of the white male professor who had received tenure before her and he had not suffered through similar demoralizing criticisms.

3. After Relda completed and had published a fairly lengthy piece on banking law, she knew she wanted to write a piece that dealt with race. From the very beginning, Relda was discouraged to write the piece and told that she should wait for post tenure or promotion to full professor. Relda ignored that advice because she knew that her only hope of writing a piece that would be accepted in a prestigious law journal was to write about what she cared about most—her own experience as an African American.

She did not follow the advice of her colleagues. Instead, she wrote the race based article. Writing that piece did not enhance the respect of her colleagues for her ability or her work. But it did get accepted in a well respected law journal, and received excellent reviews. This is a happy ending—but if Relda had not had the courage to defy the advice of a senior faculty member, and write the article that she wanted to write—it is very possible that she would have written a mediocre article and would not have qualified for tenure.

4. Relda was fourteen years old before she learned to be proud to be black. She can still recall James Brown's assertion to "Say it loud—I'm black and I'm proud." No matter how much we consciously try to reject the lessons of our youth—they are still a part of our consciousness and belief system. Relda had to remind herself to define her own competence—because of the likelihood that some of her colleagues' doubts about her ability (which may have been steeped in subconscious residual bias) had been reinforced by the reviews of the rank and tenure committee.

5. A recent example of the denial of the Black experience was the tone and content of a rejection letter from the *Journal of Legal Education*. It said:

June 6, 1995

Dear Professor Randall:

The editors have finished the review of "The Hollow Piercing Scream: An Ode for Black Faculty in the Tenure Canal." We have decided not to make an offer of publication.

The ideas in "The Hollow Piercing Scream" have been advanced many times. Despite that fact, we might have been interested in publishing the work if we had thought it had special merit *as a poem*. But a reader who is an expert in literary matters advised us that "The Hollow Piercing Scream" is not a good enough piece of poetry to justify publication in the *Journal*.

Very truly yours,

Coordinating Editor