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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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HASTINGS WOMEN'S LAW JOURNAL 133
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.¹

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.²

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, 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. 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.

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.
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