

Regrets

This little essay bothers me greatly, because I want to write it and I want to write it right: to think about what has changed, what research remains to be done, what advice I'd give to younger scholars. But try as I may, I'm not sure I can even show up. Every time I sit down to write, especially when I think about the academy in the next five years, exasperation overflows my computer.

For twenty-five years I've been hearing too much of the same frustrations from my colleagues of color. Too little has changed for me to cherish the "progress" I know to lie at the core of a mandatory narrative from scholars of color. We can complain, but only after praising how far we have come and how much things have changed for the better, thank you. But I can't write the "progress" narrative. Managing mainstream feminists just saps too much energy for me to perform it at the end of the academic year.

How can I reflect on how far we have come when American historians still divide not only the American past but also American historiography into "real" history, which counts, and African-American history, which does not count and need not be read or cited, unless produced by whites?

How can I speak of progress when I know that young African-American historians' fear that they will not be judged fairly by their professors is founded?

How can I assure my younger colleagues that things have changed when only white historians receive prestigious prizes for writing African-American history?

When black women professors are vulnerable to harassment from male students of all races?

When white colleagues routinely forget they have black colleagues?

When we in the minority are still expected to smile gently when we're the only one, time after time after time?

When isolation, exhaustion, and frustration sit at the end of every working day, little energy remains for the contemplation of issues beyond how to make it to the next day and the end of each semester.

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After such a long time and still so many of the same old frustrations,
I'm just plain worn out.

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