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Embracing Equity: Discussing Inequity

Deena J. González

I attended Berkeley in the 1970s, an era when only three women (out of a history faculty of over fifty) were housed in the department. They were models of what a historian could be—analytical, graceful, professorial, and energetic (Natalie Davis, Paula Fass, and Lynn Hunt). I did not reckon from the outset with feminism, theirs or my own, with sexism, that of the department or in the university, or with homophobia. Rather, my focus as a graduate student of color in those years was largely grounded in the racism and prejudices that ran rampant through all university environments. All the other intersecting –isms were there, to be sure, either in blunt attacks or subtle slights. Until I took my first job, truly a novice as I was ABD, had been away from the dissertation, and had written no pages in over three years, I had no vocabulary to name my situation. The roles of sexism as well as racism, of heterosexism as well as of homophobia, in the modern academy came to shape me early in my career as they infused my scholarship in those first years of nervous instructorship. The two years flew by and my position was converted into an assistant professorship when I squeaked to the finish line and Pomona College deemed me worthy of tenure-track employment, but as a joint appointment in the history department and Chicano/a Studies. That signified one body and two full-time jobs, which I then occupied for the next eighteen years. I would also serve on over twenty search committees in that same period and would help increase the number of women of color whose areas of specialization explored the lives of women of color from one to seven by the time I left the post.

Perhaps this level of biographical detail will one day be woven into a pattern measuring my “success” as an historian, or alternatively of what it meant to be the first Chicana to receive a PhD in history at Berkeley (three others so identified have followed in the intervening twenty years). A bit more of my history toward what some will inevitably read as “strident” in identity, or approach: I was a risky graduate school applicant because I came from the colonies (more specifically, the New Mexico public educational system, but my advantages outweighed my disadvantages, as Natalie Davis would note in presenting my case for admission). I was an equally risky tenure-track appointment in 1983 because I had left a research university and the cosmopolitan Bay Area environment for a small, private college “of the New England type” located in the suburbs of southern California (but, again, where Steve Koblik would present the case that I brought different

qualities or advantages).

The steps I took to get there—obviously aided by mentors and other faculty with a vision for change—were not the largest in the context of my other life events. At seventeen, I had moved from the family farm to college, and at twenty-one, I left my native land or state for the Bay Area; at age twenty-nine, in that all-important “first” job, I found myself staring out of a college-owned, subsidized “ranch” house’s windows into a suburban street where the largest of community events would occur just after our move-in date on the Fourth of July: Claremont’s annual patriotic demonstration, the parade, complete with a “U.S. out of El Salvador” contingent! It began to sink in that I was no longer at Berkeley. At the office just three short blocks away, I had no clue about how I was to organize my time and work, as a trained “Americanist” hired to teach Latin American history, as an historian hired to also help develop Chicano/a studies, as an ABD fully expected to complete the dissertation and teach new classes.

Other pressures seemed, in this formula for failure, less significant but in hindsight were equally compelling in helping me to view realistically the task that lay ahead. In that first week in Claremont, the Lacys from next door had come over, delivering the most delicious homemade pie, and at the door stoop, they declared, “By the way, we are Democrats.” I would learn, across those eighteen years of life in this particular suburban community, exactly what this was meant to convey, and I am grateful to them to this day! During the first weeks on the job, as I sat at the secretary’s desk to type in a form, three of us huddled and looked at one another as if a mistake had been made—an Asian American who was the Asianist and hired the same year, an African American who was the Africanist and hired just two years prior. We sensed the challenges ahead when a delivery man came in to drop off a package and mistook me for the secretary; our joke was that we might have scared away this worker had we turned and said to him, “and I’m not the gardener,” and “I’m not the postman.” Surely the sight of three faculty of color historians in 1983 at a private college practically unknown anywhere but among its legacies would cause disorientation. In those first years, I was often mistaken for the secretary, a student, or a member of the cleaning crew, and my colleagues faced the same except that as men, they were treated with the respect that often is granted by men to other men when a sense of just conduct permeates the interactions. Unless I acted like a “lady,” the same would not apply to me. White feminists on campus approached one of my mentors and asked him to “muzzle” me, as my outspoken remarks about racism were questioned at every turn up until the weeks I left. The record of successful recruitment and of struggle would never outweigh this particular history and its lessons continue to stand as explanations for a junior class not willing to take such risks.

Each professional and personal juncture, in hindsight, was loaded with the possibility of failure, but I persevered, as I told the AHA Survey just published recently and to which Linda Kerber refers in her essay. Kerber notes elements and grammars of distress that are so much a part of the place where women began as they made inroads in the 1970s, especially in the historical profession, but her short essay also needed to account for whatever survival strategies—whether conscious or unconscious—we deployed, and to mention those elements that sustain women today engaged by the discipline of history, stressed and lagging, or not. I would suspect that the same vocabularies or elements of success that originally enticed us into the profession, the models in the profession, scholarly teachers, graceful mentors, challenging professors, sustain us despite the wretched conditions of unequal pay, unequal work schedules, unanticipated additional burdens of role modeling, of instructing the instructors, plus care-giving responsibilities in our other lives. The AHA Survey (or report, prepared by Elizabeth Lunbeck at Princeton) highlights this gap between “real” life for women and “barriers” in our existence within departmental and university structures ill-equipped to handle new family structures, the necessity of pay equity, the generally superior academic preparation we bring, and all other aspects of our academic professionalism.¹ It as if “they” were asleep at the wheel of an imaginary automobile, when we crawled into the back seats, some of us taking the front seats, too, and another group of us familiarly struggling for air in the confines of the vehicle’s trunk! In other words, academe did not come to us, but rather, we to it, to borrow the familiar southwestern refrain about the U.S. conquest!

Both academy and profession were woefully underprepared to greet us. (One could say that there was no manual of style.) The first generations of women historians, from the beginning of the last century and closely up to its finale, were amazingly adaptive; women of color scholars often reflect on this quality, as we are often constructed as people who display the opposite qualities. Scholars have written that the primary beneficiaries of affirmative action were Euro-American (white) women. This would make eminent sense if we narrowly took into account that the choreographers and primary supporters of the affirmative action decades (the mid-1960s to 1995) were either partnered with these same women or were invested somehow in the success of the two-income household. Broadly speaking, however, more seems to have been at play in the historical profession: not all successful, first generation women were white, not all were heterosexual, and not just a few divorced those same men who might be viewed to have been motivated by self interest.

Viewed as a platform upon which gains would be built and thus achieved, the Kerber and Lunbeck Reports question seriously the slow

progress of affirmative action. Imagine what or where we would be without the mandated laws? For women of color historians, especially Latinas, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and African Americans (the national ethnic minorities traditionally quashed by the U.S. educational system), the notion that the gains garnered are negligible, that their method is suspect among the mainstream as well as among those who are its "beneficiaries," does not mean halting equal opportunity programs or outreach. It does mean, however, that serious attention and study—as these two reports affirm—is needed. It means that institutional climates that are stale, stodgy, or inbred must revamp themselves before young women or women of color are brought in to help "fix" a problem which has everything to do with race in American society. The lack of women in the historical profession is based on both the lack of affirmative action's progress (male authority, men's power grounded on women's lack of power), as well as the lack of racial equality. Economic and racial equality are the only remedies to the dire situation traced in both the Kerber and Lunbeck reports.

Teaching as I do now at a Catholic university and plagued by many of the same issues (retention of women of color in particular) outlined in Kerber's essay, it has become all the more necessary for senior faculty, administrators, and students to take seriously the particular challenge of campus remediation. Things could hardly get worse, and few places seem to be models of success in the matter of women's lives in the professoriate and women of color in the academy. Senior women of color, in particular, rarely hold the prestigious chairs or positions in a university system, held back not because of lack of credentials, but rather by an implicit code that cast us as remediators at the ground level only. To refuse this challenge of recruitment, retention, and more, promotion, means that in good conscience, we cannot encourage, recruit, and retain women professors; to refuse also means that we shall carry on for yet one more generation the task of instruction, mentoring, and apprenticeship on two levels, the public and the private. The latter becomes the "cheat sheet" for new, young faculty: "Don't ask 'am I earning as much as my male cohort?' but rather, ask 'can you write and reassure me that I am at or near the top of my cohort?'" A smarter, more well-trained professoriate, however, helps only within institutional climates eager to embrace change, and that is rarely the case in most colleges and universities if the example of women in history over three decades of enormous transformation is an indication of what lies ahead!

In the past, the solutions have often been federal, or mandated, when a group finally confronts the reality of its demographics, in this case, the lack of women progressing within the historical profession. Our problem is unique in that we must first convince policy makers that this issue is of central significance to the society, in an era when intellectual endeavors are

viewed as nonsensical (the NEA debates at the level of the federal government of the 1990s come to mind), in an era when the history of the nation state and of men at its helm are repeatedly affirmed as the only acceptable version of history.

Those historians who have the ear of legislators or judges need to continue to offer their services; we ask, as Kerber and Lunbeck have done, what it would take to make truly dramatic inroads because the fact of more women entering graduate programs is not in and of itself sufficient. Communities of color have long known this to be the case, that is, waiting until the populations of color rise, as is the case in California where we now constitute the majority and so can no longer be referred to as minority, does not necessarily remediate the problem. Despite this numerical majority, there are still public schools without books, insufficient numbers of certified teachers, few students of color admitted into the flagship University system, and no significant increase in the number of people of color elected to office. In other words, to rely on the demographic shift is not a solution. Intervention affords some remedies, of grant money to assess the extent of the problem, of support to individual women faculty to ensure that they remain in the profession and are truly promoted, and of legal solutions that do not "outlaw" tenure, but instead reform it, as the Kerber and Lunbeck reports make clear.

Today faculty are working longer hours, publishing earlier in their careers, competing with each other and setting ever-higher standards for tenure. Intuitively, they often place the sorts of issues discussed here at the bottom of their list of duties. Critical to any solution as well, however, is sending the message that dedication to equity is a worthy endeavor, as worthy as any other form of public service. It should be evaluated positively by review committees because creative solutions are critical to the problem of women's successes in the profession, and thus critical to our scholarship and by extension, to improving the society and the world. Anything less demeans the goals of the profession of history.

NOTE

¹Elizabeth Lunbeck, *The Status of Women in the Historical Profession, 2005*, <http://www.historians.org/governance/cwh/2005Status/index.cfm>, last accessed 29 November 2005.
