

Therí Pickens, Mellon Mays Fellowship Dinner, 2012

It is another lovely winter evening in Maine and Professor Brooks, whose first name still trills strange on my tongue, has sent me an e-mail asking that I give the keynote at the annual Mellon dinner. She says that I ought to give some indication of who I am, where I've been and where I'm going. Some of the answers to this are clear. I am currently an Assistant Professor at Bates College in the English department. I have just completed my first year and this time a half decade from now I will be tenured. I say that not with supreme arrogance or even the slightest hint of clairvoyance but with a little bit of moxie and the assurance that comes from having a clear plan. I was, at some point, a young member of what we affectionately call the Mellon mafia since we know that intellect wielded wisely carries a supreme danger and, as with all mafias, you join for life. In my sophomore year, I sat at a table near the wall of the Presidential Dining Room and listened to Professor Eddie Glaude give a rousing speech on the life of the mind. I spent the next two years at Princeton really wondering what the hell I had gotten myself into because as much as I liked books, being a professional nerd seemed simultaneously appealing and frightening.

By way of explanation and exhortation, I offer a few vignettes of where I've been.

Senior Year, May

I was on the train platform at Princeton Junction waiting to go north into New York. I had bought tickets to see Oleta Adams in concert. Right beside

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the two tickets was the narrative and grade for my senior thesis, which I had not yet read. Figuring the night was young and the company compassionate, I let my eyes drift across the pages. I appreciated the commentary that my prose was “blessedly free of grammar and syntactical errors” and that my progress demonstrated a level of admirable intellectual conscientiousness, but I was aghast at the “A-.” I did not feel then that I deserved it based on the work I had produced.

This moment marked the beginning of graduate school and the sense that some day I’d be found out as an intellectual fraud, someone pretending to be as smart as those around her. I did not know then how much I would fit in among my peers.

Year One, December

UCLA is on a quarter system. Ten full speed weeks of reading heavy material and trying to think at lightening speeds. Only ten weeks to adjust to Los Angeles or as the Latino staff with thick accents correctly pronounce it, “Hell A.” What others might consider a linguistic slip-up for me correctly captures the spirit of the city and provides a more radical introduction to the transformative politics of language.

There is also no reading period at UCLA. To quote Amy Winehouse: Princeton, “I cried for you on the kitchen floor.” Literally.

Year One, Summer

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Following the wisdom of Marge Simpson who characterized grad students as having made poor life choices, I applied to poetry programs thinking I had the morose and snarky temperament to become a real poet. Besides, all real poets lived in New York City, or split their time between Princeton, Paris and New York. CK Williams and I graduated from the same high school. My laughable pedigree got me into Margaret Porter Troupe's Harlem Arts Salon in Guadeloupe for a week where I got to befriend Derek Walcott. In order to do so, I had to affect the kind of nonchalance that had become slightly habit-forming at Princeton. "Oh yeah, that award winning, widely anthologized poet? He was my poetry professor." As though I didn't want to go running into the Caribbean water screaming "Suck it haters! I'm apprenticing with the Walcott!"

Derek moved our classroom from one of the hotel's stuffy conference rooms to a beachside café where we listened to him not so graciously tell us what we ought to do better. At some point, we each had a private conference with him where we brought our sheaf of papers trembling before his wicker chair throne. I asked him whether I had "writing ticks" (yes direct quote) that I needed to work on and what he saw in my poetry that I should continue to do. He said very solemnly and straightforwardly, "I see talent." I cherish those words in the way only a poet can. I let them hang in my mind whenever I doubt my ability to put a sentence together. They are like delectable fruit: beautiful, ripe, and thick with the odor of waiting.

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Year Two, Spring

In a frenzy of racial duty and madness, I assumed the role of president of UCLA's Black Graduate Student Association. Then, the story broke that UCLA's admitted undergraduate population of black students was below 100 in the freshman class. I was caught up in a swarm of meetings and presentations as I was the graduate student representative on an ad-hoc task force sent to get UCLA out of crisis mode. The shock of that experience stayed with me as it was the first time I had seen institutional racism up close. I began listening to Biggie Smalls' "10 Crack Commandments" as a metaphor for the academy. "1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, Ten." I was convinced I "been the game for years and it made me an animal. There's rules to shit. [Biggie] wrote me a manual, a step-by-step booklet for me get my game on track not my weight pushed back.." On days when that didn't work, my alternative track was Tupac's "Hit Em Up" featuring the Outlaws. It wasn't as though rolling about UCLA in my scooter muttering "fake money" was of any help to the crisis or my psyche, but the soundtrack did make me feel a bit better.

Years Three and Four, Summer into Fall

I was very clearly on a five-year plan to get out of grad school. It wasn't just that being perpetually broke was not cute. Though that was a factor. I took my comprehensive exams, passed them on the first try and finished my prospectus in a semester's time. I thought of them much as the way they had been straightforwardly described, more about the process of learning a field

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and articulating your interventions in it, than what others secretly believe them to be, exercises in perfection.

My forward movement was met with alternate snark and derision as well as conciliatory remarks from my peers. Some congratulated me to my face and began asking advice or referring people to me for advice. Others questioned whether I was “trusting the process” enough or whether my prospectus was really any good. Regardless of your thoughts about my actions and my progress, the lesson is this: Sometimes the academy gets in the way of scholarship. The affect, the attitude, the fetishization of time, personal beefs, and all that might be catalogued as the excrement of the institution can attempt to derail you in unproductive ways. Some flexibility is good, often necessary, but there are times when you need to tell people as politely as possible to “stay in their lane.”

Year Five, Dissertation

I spent that year and a half fellowshiping. I got up and did not make it out of my pajamas for much of the day. I wrote, read, ate, slept, bathed, and did laundry. My laundry only consisted of undergarments, socks, and pajamas. At times I felt like Frodo carrying the ring and, at other times, I felt exhilarated. The process of undertaking your own intellectual endeavor provides you with a liberating sense of freedom and a crushing sense of doom. The two feelings are mutual and territorial. It feels at times that they are the

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two factions warring your darkened mind and only the looming deadlines keep it from being torn asunder (cf DuBois).

Year Five, Job Search

Frances Smith Foster, who I met at a panel discussion in San Diego, told me not to call it the “job market.” To her, it was like the results of any other apprenticeship. Rather, I was to say I was “looking for a position.” In addition to preparing the series of documents for submission, my preparation included the Black Eyed Peas’ “Boom Boom Pow” on heavy rotation. I was convinced that “I had that boom boom pow. Some chicks were jacking my style. They tried to copy my swagger. I’m on that next ish now. I was so 3008. They were so two thousand and late. I had that boom boom boom. That future boom boom boom.” I had two interviews and one campus visit. I was a finalist for a position at University of Houston. I ended up with a Visiting Assistant Professor position at Pitzer College in California.

By this time, I had a close cadre of friends who were extremely supportive, and advisors who were realistic and helpful. Despite this, the job search tends toward being an anxiogenic process for anyone involved because there is so much at stake. Add to this the pressure of the economic downturn and the belief – which I would quote Tamar Braxton to describe as “ratchet and ridiculousness” – that studying blackness is obsolete because we are post-racial. Outside my pleasant, but realistic bubble of friends and advisors I encountered racism disguised as benighted liberalism, ableism masquerading

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as assistance, and sexism that wanted to be considered protection. I should be clear that this was not the first time I had encountered those “-isms” because they surround me on daily basis. It was, however, the first time I had felt exhausted by them. There were days that I didn't want to be around anyone who wasn't black female and disabled. Given my chosen profession and the fact that I was living on the west side of Los Angeles, I was left with a loneliness so complete it made my teeth hurt (cf Danzy Senna

Symptomatic)

Year in Purgatory, Negotiating the Job Offer

At Pitzer, it was hard not to feel as though I was stuck in the seventh circle of hell. I had come to myself near UCLA and Virgil had guided me toward the place where I would be forced to do violence to myself *ad infinitum*. My students took full advantage of the clothing optional policy. I walked out of my classroom one evening to see a naked student on his uni-cycle. It was in Claremont, California, the last outpost of Los Angeles County, which, for me, and all my Afro-cosmopolite pretensions might as well have been out world from Mortal Kombat.

I was able to bide my time with the help of some excellent members of the Mellon Mafia. I was also more convinced that neither biological womanhood, nor blackness, nor disability was a guarantee to transformative politics, and neither biological manhood, whiteness, nor ability always a blockade to the same. It wasn't just getting the job offer that rocked my

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world, but it was also successfully negotiating the parameters under which I would accept. I would not frame the negotiation as a process that helped me determine or even understand my worth vis-à-vis an institution. I was convinced I had that “boom boom pow” after all. What the negotiation seemed to do was christen me into the business of the academy, its meanderings, its manipulation, and its money. It would be a great Cinderella story to say that the call from the Dean of Bates to welcome me to the fold was the end of this story, but there is another chapter.

Confessions of a PhDiva or Tales from the other side of the desk

As I take stock of my first year on the tenure-track, I have to ask a question that strikes fear into the heart of any academic: “Is tenure all there is?” Job security is nothing to take for granted. We should neither believe pundits who pooh-pooh tenure as protection for a bunch of crybaby intellectuals hell-bent on a left-wing revenge of the nerds world domination fantasy. I do understand tenure as a bit of a dangling carrot that narrows one’s focus. It is a goal and one well worth achieving to my mind, but not at the expense of eschewing the moments that make it enjoyable.

Enjoyable may seem a far cry from the adjectives used to describe the crucible of grad school and the acronym *Piled Higher and Deeper* often ascribed to the degree. As someone who’s college career started on September 11th, grad school career began at the moment of Hurricane Katrina, professional life initiated with the earthquake in Haiti and first year on the

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tenure track marked by Hurricane Irene, I think I'm well acquainted with the way life impacts this peculiar art we create. I'm sure no one wants me to move again either.

As much as I did not want to become that real student living on the punch line of cocktail party jokes, I want even less to become the person unable to have fun at the party or not invited altogether. First, I love hors d'oeuvres. Even though this profession, this business, will put your feet to the fire, it does not have to be an act of self-immolation. Warm yourself in the moments whether they burn, or smolder. Watch the dancing light.

Soon you'll be able to say with the professors, in the words of Bruno Mars, "You and I know what it's like to be kicked down, forced to fight, but tonight we're all right. Just hold up your lights." And for all of us, tonight at least, "This one's for you and me, living out our dreams. We're all right where we should be. With my arms out wide, I open my eyes and now all I want to see... is a sky full of lighters."