To My Sisters-in-Law (Teaching) A Critical Race Feminist Perspective

Hope Lewis

Follow this and additional works at: http://lsr.nellco.org/nusl_faculty

Recommended Citation


This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Northeastern University School of Law at NELLCO Legal Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Law Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of NELLCO Legal Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact tracy.thompson@nellco.org.

To My Sisters-in-Law (Teaching)—A Critical Race Feminist Perspective:

“As an African American feminist law professor who is visually impaired and the daughter of immigrants, I am often torn as to which social justice organizing conference to attend first. . . .”

When I wrote those words more than a decade ago, I was making light of a deeply challenging change in my identity status. When I became legally blind in 1996, I had already been a lawyer (since 1986), a law professor (since 1991), a human rights activist (since college), and an advocate for race and gender justice (as long as I could remember).

Disability rights were part of my consciousness, but mainly through having had people with disabilities as relatives, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances. Having grown up in the ’60s and ’70s, I believed the notion that people should be treated as “lesser than” because of differences in status seemed self-evidently unjust.

But there is nothing like personal experience. Given my academic and activist inclinations, much of the advice I have for new law teachers who are also women of color is drawn from Critical Race Theory.

Trust your (informed) instincts. Take my advice, advice from organizations, books, the Web, and even disability professionals with a grain of salt. Only you know your personal circumstances, your colleagues and institution, your own personality and risk tolerance, and the road you’ve traveled to get to this point. You will find that there is a wealth of support and information available—on disability, on law teaching, and on life as a woman of color. Unfortunately, there’s no cookie cutter model for success.

Put things in perspective. Your well-being, and that of family and friends, must come first. Easier said than done, but it’s a necessity. If you don’t carve out the time and space for self-care and a supportive personal life, there’ll be no foundation (or only a shaky one) on which to build a career in law teaching.

Law teaching can be more flexible than some other forms of law practice, but, especially in the early years, it can mean that the “workday” has no clearly defined beginning or end. Create a reasonably well-defined work schedule that works for you.

Find at least one “reality check” outside the immediate work environment. This could be a close friend, a colleague from another school, or someone who works entirely outside of law teaching. Legal academia has its own rules, customs, quirks, and aggravations. These can take unique forms for women of color with disabilities. An understanding touchstone who can provide level-headed perspective is a must.

Although disability support services can be very helpful, some will make the mistake of trying to fit you and your needs into a model
Lawyers, Lead On

tailored for someone else. Well-meaning institutions overreacting to the word “disability” may try to impose “accommodations” intended for others on you without consulting you first. (Those of us with vision impairments who’ve spent time in hotel rooms adapted for wheelchair users and wheelchair users who find themselves in a brailled room with no space for a wheelchair have learned this the hard way).

Living in the intersection: Don’t get run over. Critical Race theorists use “intersectionality” as a helpful analytical framework. Your identities as a person of color, a woman, a person with a disability, and a law professor each bring with them ever-changing challenges and opportunities. No matter how you see yourself, others may be socialized to see you only through one or more of these lenses. It’s not always clear which one is dominant at any given moment. Being a member of more than one marginalized group can mean that the specific, compound nature of the discrimination you face is never fully addressed. Maintain the freedom to be all of the identities that inform your individuality as well as your participation in various socially constructed communities.

Ask the other question. Critical Race theorist Mari J. Matsuda urges readers to “ask the other question” when analyzing social justice issues. This is excellent advice for people from marginalized groups. It is also an important lesson for progressive activists who might fail to become more aware of how they might marginalize others in turn.

In a context where “neutral” considerations are on the table, ask about gender implications. When gender or sexual orientation is at the center of the discussion, ask about racial, ethnic, or cultural implications. When race is on the agenda, ask about the implications for persons of color with disabilities.


Asking the “other question” is rarely easy, especially when everyone else in the room is looking in another direction. Not only is it important for your individual ability to thrive within an institution, but it is also crucial for those who will follow you. As Frederick Douglass warned, “Power concedes nothing without a demand.” Of course, strategy, judgment, and coalition building are a must.

**Technology is an opportunity and a challenge.** These days, non-disabled vendors and observers who once saw assistive technology as quaint innovations for a “small” disability market, now routinely use them as everyday tools. Eager mainstream consumers wait in long lines to buy smart-phones that can scan business cards and other documents. People regularly download thousands of audiobooks and podcasts to mobile devices for business or pleasure. E-book readers and smart-phones can enlarge font sizes and provide text-to-speech options for certain books.

Yet these innovations, built on what was originally assistive technology, can be provided in less than accessible format once they hit the mainstream market. Similarly, although screen-reading software has advanced tremendously to allow vision-impaired users to surf the net, some website designers still fail to include the straightforward settings that make websites accessible.

**Work with mentors.** Critical Race theorists have written about the potential and perils of being a role model for other women law

---


Lawyers, Lead On

teachers of color.7 We can learn a great deal from those we emulate, but we cannot assume that, because they did things a certain way, we should do the same. Nor should we assume, if they show human foibles, that our own goals are meaningless or unachievable.

Still, we all need mentors. Those we choose to mentor us may not share our identities, but seek out those who have the sensitivity and openness to learn about them and the willingness to share positive strategies. It was because I had worked with blind attorneys in a federal agency that I believed it was possible to continue my law career when I first became vision-impaired. Disability organizations introduced me to blind litigators, sole practitioners, judges, and, most importantly, professors. I haunted them with questions about teaching strategies, the latest technologies, and the state of the law. Their generosity of spirit and leadership in their fields provided the concrete evidence that what seemed overwhelming—and sometimes still does—is possible.

Tell your own story. Storytelling methodology is another creative contribution of Critical Race Theory. Anecdotal evidence can be misleading when too easily extrapolated to an entire group. Nevertheless, subordinated groups find that legal scholarship can marginalize their lived realities. Telling evocative individual stories can spark recognition and open the door to further scholarly inquiry and legal reforms. Storytelling builds awareness of previously ignored issues.

Most important, don’t forget who you are and the talent, hard work, and trailblazers who helped get you where you want to be.

Peace,

Hope Lewis8


8. With thanks to Carrie Griffin Basas, my mother, and the family, friends, and disability rights organizations that supported me.