

Getting Anecdotal

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NOT LONG AGO, at an elegant brunch with a distinguished colleague, I was surprised to hear the bitterness of some of his on-the-job stories. I reciprocated with a couple of mine, and we joked that we ought to write up our experiences as cautionary tales or as “college confidential,” even seek out other contributions and publish a collection of academic horror stories. Now that Felice Lifshitz has decided to devote an issue of the *Medieval Feminist Forum* to such themes, I’m not sure how to frame this set of anecdotes.

Is it worth doing? Some readers will dismiss such stories as over and done with, never to recur, too personal; but as long as these and similar anecdotes remain true to their etymology (*anekdota* are secrets, unpublished, not given out), they remain unable to fulfill their ability to reveal what Stephen Greenblatt called “the radical strangeness of the past.” Doctors say “merely anecdotal” as a way to reject subjectivity and individual experience in favor of controlled experiment and the statistically significant numbers emerging therefrom. With respect to sex discrimination there is, of course, no lack of statistical proof, and if my and others’ stories seem bizarre now, all the better.

As a historicist, and indeed personally, I believe it’s usually best for people to know “what happened,” whatever use they may make of the knowledge. Here, as chronicler, I don’t believe I need to be concerned with how the material is received, used, or valued, or even with the usual Foucauldian or Derridean caveats about the tentativeness of any effort to record the past. Hypothetically I could have invented it all, just like a medieval monk recording the latest dragon-sighting. Are there still any dragons out there? A younger generation will have to answer.

Nothing ever managed to overcome my sense of the radical strangeness

of sexism, the feeling that it might occur in some two-dimensional cartoon-world, but not in “real” life, so it always came as a shock. For example: as a graduate student at Columbia with two small children, I was hired at Queens College contingent upon completing my doctoral work. My thesis advisor, Kent Hieatt, phoned up my prospective chair and urged him not to hire me: “She has two infants at home and will never finish the thesis” was his malicious prediction, as reported by the chair later on. (I should add that as a faculty wife and holder of a scholarship from the State of New York, I was protected from most of the financial stress that other graduate students had to deal with. The thesis was finished on time and published by the University of Chicago Press.)

My other thesis advisor, Howard Schless, came into a graduate seminar, late as usual and carrying his usual pile of tomes for no apparent reason—none was ever opened in class. He had just left a job interview, he explained; it was a woman candidate and, he went on, he would never vote for a woman to be hired because every time her child had a cold, she’d stay home. Columbia was, of course, where Kate Millett wrote her ground-breaking study of modern literature, *Sexual Politics*, as her doctoral thesis and, so the rumors went, had it turned down by her advisor.

Having already published a paper in a prestigious medieval journal, I sent another to *PMLA*, which turned it down. Some months later I met Talbot Donaldson at a conference; he told me that he had been the *PMLA* reader for the article, loved it and recommended publication as is. But the editor, John Fisher, had overridden this recommendation on the grounds that the journal “doesn’t publish graduate students; let her come back as a senior scholar.” This wasn’t sexism, true, but it does suggest another handicap or prejudice in the collection of prejudices my generation fought against, never more visibly than at the famous MLA protest in New York, 1968, which took on several issues in both hiring and scholarship. Targeting the Vietnam war, sexism and elitism, a group of academic activists were joined by hundreds of MLA members to sponsor resolutions and candidates at the MLA membership meeting, form picket lines and sit-ins at hotels, and have impromptu

debates with MLA officers. Several leaders were arrested; a commission on the status of women was established, and radicals were elected to the executive committee.

Despite a top academic pedigree, publications, and positive teaching evaluations, I was fired from Queens College, CUNY, having helped lead a departmental mini-insurrection by a dozen of the new-hires. We demanded what is now pretty much boilerplate everywhere: voice and vote in departmental meetings for junior (i.e., non-tenured) faculty; a maternity leave policy; a genuine appeals mechanism; an end to secret files, etc. (There was no union at Queens at the time.) My rehiring became one of the demands in the student strike that erupted soon afterward as a protest against military and industrial recruitment on campus. As a participant in the weeks-long struggle I was part of the team negotiating with the administration, and recall the college president (but don't remember his name) complimenting me on my ivory lace stockings. "I won't be able to afford them any more if you don't reverse the decision," I replied. He didn't, and my husband didn't get tenure at Columbia, so we started looking.

With two small children, long-distance marriage was not an option, and finding work in the same department without the wife being penalized was a challenge. One offer, from the University of Colorado at Boulder, came with a dean's assurance that I would never get tenure, as they wouldn't want a "voting bloc" in the department. "Aren't you afraid of being sued under Title VII?" (the 1964 legislation outlawing sex discrimination in employment). "We wouldn't hire someone we thought would sue us" was the smooth reply, and I was a bit puzzled, not to say annoyed, as to why he thought I wasn't such a someone—maybe he assumed that a woman with children wouldn't want to launch a legal case. A similar offer came from one of the southern California campuses; when we turned it down, the chair ruefully acknowledged, "I don't know why you'd even consider it."

Canadian universities seemed to have got the picture sooner than the Americans: that the bright young men often had bright young wives who were also going to need jobs. (It wasn't yet a question of wanting the bright young wives in their own right.) So we had a few decent offers from Canadian universities and opted to return to the west coast, even

though our interview experiences at Simon Fraser had been nothing short of bizarre. (“A zoo,” as I described it to my consciousness-raising group back home.) Sample conversation at dinner with our prospective colleagues: The dour British renaissance prof seated next to me informs me that he has been reading Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*—perhaps preparing for our arrival. This had been an influential book for me, so I am pleased and surprised. “What do you think of it?” I ask. “That’s a very aggressive question!” is his agitated reply, and I don’t recall whether the conversation went any further.

This prof’s young wife—a shy graduate student—sat in complete silence across from us during dinner. Leaving the restaurant, though, she managed to position herself just behind me, and whispered, “I liked the book.” Overhearing this, or perhaps only noticing our contiguity, the chubby, red-haired modern poetry prof sneered, “United by mop and pail!” Later this man was marginally part of our social circle, though the acquaintance was seriously strained when he brought along on a movie double date a pretty but silent undergraduate girl. The dour renaissance prof also turned out to be a womanizer, inflicting his attentions on graduate students and married babysitters among others. Of course they were not alone, for abuse of institutional power was widespread at SFU as I am sure it was, and doubtless still is, in many places: profs and current students, chairs and young secretaries, deans and secretaries. I don’t mean to seem moralistic here—consenting adults and all that—but many of the men were married (often to wives parked in beautiful houses in picturesque and conveniently distant seaside villages), many were teaching or supervising their dates in a class or graduate program, while others had the girlfriend’s job in their hands.

Conversations like the ones cited above, plus ample evidence of departmental dysfunction, gave us pause; all the more when we learned that the offer to me would be on the low side, lower than that of another new-hire without publications and without top credentials—but with that other excellent qualification, a penis. (He was also a friend of the dour renaissance prof from the mediocre state university where they had met.) Eventually the anomaly was corrected—but not for long. At SFU I was underpaid for two decades and kept in rank far too long, despite a constant stream of articles and books in reputable journals and by the

top academic publishing houses. “Why, you’re a star!” gushed one chair after reading a set of reference letters, but his discovery didn’t change anything, so that every few years I launched a salary anomaly appeal, all of which I won. The cycle came to an end in the early 90s, when a new lobby group, Academic Women, persuaded the SFU administration to launch a sophisticated investigation of the position of senior women at SFU. It confirmed statistically what we all knew: as compared with male colleagues in their cohort, women had been hired at below-par salaries, promoted late, and systemically underpaid. As a result, senior women were bumped up several notches in the rank-salary scale and awarded a compensatory flat sum. Deficient pension contributions were not made up, and although some colleagues considered a class-action suit to remedy this injustice, it didn’t happen. (Canadians tend to be much less litigious than Americans, and Canadian courts less eager to remedy injustices.) In my department, a conscious effort was made to readjust the sex imbalance through hiring.

Academic Women also lobbied for more women in administration; some were excellent, others not so much. We had two women chairs over the years, who demonstrated that women are as capable as men of obtuse behavior. One campaigned on the slogan “For the women,” won by a single vote, and did all she could to prevent me filing a salary anomaly appeal, lest the administration think our department was less than harmonious. The other made department history when she claimed she’d rather hire a Canadian fascist than an American liberal.

Is everything fine now? As far as homosexuality is concerned, there never was any overt anti-gay sentiment in the department; we always had both gay men and lesbians in tenure-track and contract positions. On the other hand, in four decades we hired only two tenure-track Asians (despite many highly qualified Asian applicants of both sexes), one who left after a couple of years and the other a recent hire. There has been, in tenure-track, no one of African or Hispanic background. Of First Nations it is imperative to speak, though there aren’t going to be many applicants any time soon in most departments. In 36 years I had three First Nations students that I know of: one dropped out, another wound up in a mental hospital, the third left after being caught plagiarizing. To generalize: Canada’s treatment of First Nations indigenous

is its lasting shame; their near-absence from the university scene, and difficulty functioning there, is the sign of that disgrace. It's to SFU's credit that for two decades it has run a First Nations degree and certificate program in the interior, which has graduated nearly 400 people at various levels.

I don't want to draw too bleak a picture of my own history. I studied with, taught with, and met men academics who encouraged well qualified women professionally and did a great deal for them institutionally. Did any of them ever tell a risqué joke, flirt, have an extra-marital affair? No doubt, but as long as human consciousness remains unevenly developed, I think it's important to distinguish between personal foibles devoid of institutional or professional consequences on one hand, and abusive or exploitative professional practices on the other. I'm thankful to some of these mentors and supporters for helping me to survive—as J. D. Salinger put it—“with faculties intact.” But not everyone does or did, because sexism kills body and spirit, dead souls perpetrating more dead souls. If, as some claim, the old battles are over, wonderful—though I hear plenty of anecdotes to the contrary. In any case, new ones will surface, perhaps all the more likely in a period of economic contraction such as we currently have, and perhaps in new forms. If there's a message here, it's: tell the truth and fight like hell.