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## **Pipeline Dreams and Endeavors: Integrating French History in American Universities**

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“Who is that colored gentleman in my class?”

I learned about this remark my second year of graduate school, while taking a class in modern European history, from another doctoral student in the program. Since I was the only black student in the class, an upper division course for both undergraduate and graduate students, the professor clearly meant me. Although this particular professor had been teaching the class for some time, it’s quite possible I was the only black student he’d ever worked with. I did not take offense, especially since he decided he liked my work, evidently at one point declaring there should be more black students in his classes. We worked together amicably throughout my graduate career and afterwards.

This off-hand remark, remembered many years later, highlights some of the challenges faced by minority students in history PhD programs in the past and today. In particular, it is relevant to the relationships between minority graduate students and their professors, from the casual and fleeting to the most profound. Ever since the invention of the modern research university in Germany, the mentorship of doctoral and advanced students by faculty has played a key role in academia. The ideal of the *Doktor Vater* goes back to the classic trope of education as the relationship between one student and one teacher, long before the invention of modern mass higher education. In the sciences, this relationship frequently centers around the employment of graduate students in their advisors’ labs and research projects, so that the relationship is often financial as well as academic. In a field like history, where graduate students are expected normally to strike out on their own rather than participating in their advisor’s research, mentorship is not so concrete. It remains powerful nonetheless; having the right advisor can open career paths to a graduate student that might otherwise remain foreclosed.

At the stage in my career where I have been a full professor in research universities for some time, I can now reflect on what it has been like to be both an advisee and an advisor, and on the role of mentorship in academic life generally. As a graduate student, I benefitted from the advice and guidance of several prominent faculty members, including the one mentioned at the beginning of this essay. All were white (as were all my fellow graduate students in French history), and in fact I didn’t know of any other African Americans in the field. Since I was not studying African American history, I did not generally have access to those networks, although I did get to know both some of the few black faculty and other black graduate students. I learned that graduate education in history was largely segregated by field along racial lines, and that the

very idea of a black student pursuing a doctorate in European history represented a challenge to that system.

As a professor of French history, I have taken up that challenge in two primary ways. The first has been to integrate the study of race into French history. My dissertation, on the Parisian suburb of Bobigny in the early twentieth century, explored urban marginalization and the structures of political protest. Although about social class, it considered issues with important racial implications, a point made by several of my relatives when I discussed my research with them. The fact that the Paris suburbs have now emerged as a key symbol of multiracial and postcolonial France has underscored this relationship. After publishing my dissertation, I moved to develop a research focus on race and blackness in France more specifically. Starting with my second book, *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light*, I began to write about the history of blacks in France, and the French approach to racial difference in general. I was inspired to take this new research direction not only by my interest in carving out a place for myself as an African American in the field of French history, but equally because of the rising social and political salience of race in France as that nation entered the twenty first century. For me this new concentration on race, something largely expected of black academics in America, opened doors professionally as well as enriching my own research and understanding of modern France.

The second way has been to use this new research specialty as a way of attracting and mentoring minority graduate students in history. Doctoral candidates from underrepresented ethnic and racial groups remain a relative rarity in the historical profession, and their absence is compounded by the enduring segregation of the field. For me, therefore, attracting students of diverse backgrounds has been a key part of my own efforts to open up the profession in both respects. Training graduate students in a discipline like history is an act of both personal and professional self-reproduction, so my hope is that my students would build upon and expand the diversity my own career has brought to our profession. Like all mentors, I have dealt with the fact that my goals for my students are not necessarily their own, which of course come first. At the same time, I have operated under the assumption that many students shared my own desires to see a more inclusive historical profession, and that we could thus work together to achieve both their own professional goals as well as a broader reshaping of our field.

Mentorship for me has worked at several different levels. My most intensive commitment has been as a dissertation advisor to doctoral students. I have advised several graduate students from BA to PhD, at both Santa Cruz and Berkeley, and few if any aspects of my academic work have been more demanding or more meaningful. Roughly half of my doctoral advisees have been students of color, a record I am proud of and which I imagine compares favorably with most other American professors of French history. For these students in particular I have been able to provide advice not only on teaching classes, research, and writing, but also on how to negotiate the complicated dynamics of what remains a largely white subfield, and discipline in general. Moreover, I like to think that my own career as a black historian of France helps inspire others and shows that such a pathway is possible. Most of my students, from all backgrounds, have written studies of France that deal with race as a central issue, and as is common with doctoral students I feel I have learned as much from them as I have taught them. I have also mentored

graduate students by serving on their orals or dissertation committees, and in addition have worked as an advisor for some undergraduates who have gone on to graduate programs in the field. For me, mentorship has always been not just about advising individual students (although that remains its most important function), but also making French history a broader and more inclusive profession.

Like many university faculty, I believe my legacy will be not only the books and articles I have published but also the students I have taught. I like to think that I and my students have had an impact in opening up the fields of European and French history in American universities, and that by making them more inclusive we will have helped improve their quality. I will be more than satisfied if a professor of European history asks in the future “who is that black student in my class?” and the response is “Which one?”

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