**Women on the Faculty: A Dartmouth Centennial Conference**

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**Occom Commons, Goldstein Hall**

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**“A lifetime on the margins”**

**Judith A. Byfield**

**Cornell University**

**Department of History**

• I would like to thank John and Sienna for inviting me to participate in this program. It has afforded me an opportunity to just reflect on my long and complicated relationship with Dartmouth as a student, alumni and faculty member.

• I was in the last group of the Bridge Program that arrived in Hanover in June 1976. The Bridge Program had been created to help students of color acclimate to being in college and being at Dartmouth before we formerly matriculated.

I arrived several weeks late because I had performed with a group that sang with jazz trumpeter Dizzy Gillespsie at the Newport Jazz Festival that year. The *New York Times* music critic described our group as an encumbrance to Mr. Gillepsie’s performance, but the experience of performing at Carnegie Hall with Gillepsie and watching Thelonious Monk from the anteroom, dissipated any intended sting!

We performed on Thursday night and Saturday morning. Dean Ed Cottrell met me at the White River Junction train station.

Everything about that transition was a shock to my system. I went from imbibing good jazz with my friends to being in a part of the US I had never seen before. I had only been in the country seven years and in those years, we left New York once to visit relatives in New Jersey.

That Saturday was the first rehearsal-free Saturday I had had in months and I literally didn’t know what to do with myself. My first friend, an African American student, Joyce Booth, showed me around the campus and stayed close as I struggled to make sense of this new landscape. Joyce and I remained good friends our entire time at Dartmouth.

My Dartmouth experience contained many firsts. It was the first time I lived around Americans 24 hours-a-day and in a predominantly white setting. It was the first time I was exposed to and experienced the psychic violence of being called “nigger bitch.” Thankfully, my sister was with me when those young white men screamed the term at us as they drove by, so we processed it together.

In the 1970s as a black woman at Dartmouth, it was hard not to feel besieged. We were constantly reminded by our white peers that we did not belong here, we were ‘guests’. The student paper, *The Dartmouth*, did its part by carrying cartoons about co-hogs that dogs mistook for fire hydrants, and Sambo, while young men did the Indian cheer at ice hockey games.

These constant reminders of our not belonging put a premium on spaces where we felt comfortable – the meetings and parties at Cutter-Shabazz, the Gospel Choir. Those conversations in the AM lounge where we shared information about professors to avoid because black students never got anything above a “C” from them, and which families were safe for us to live with on LSA programs.

The search for comfort also informed the spaces we did not explore. The fraternities! Joyce and I both eschewed the fledgling black sorority that began forming our senior year. We were both interested in feminism, but neither of us thought to seek out Women’s Studies courses because we were convinced that white feminists didn’t understand race.

Dartmouth was also the first place I fell madly in love and learned some of the euphemisms African-Americans had for interracial relationships—“You like milk in your chocolate”—and the strong negative feelings some black students held towards interracial dating. During a class discussion on Haki Madhubuti one of my best friends shared that she didn’t think interracial couples should have children. Hurt by all this honesty, I still maintained my relationship and my membership in black spaces.

I don’t remember a conversation or a specific moment, but I began trying to figure out where my Jamaican-ness fit into Dartmouth’s contentious social landscape. In time, it came to matter a lot that I was from Jamaica, a former British colony, part of the “third world.”

I had lived in Jamaica, where I was born, until I was ten. Even when we moved to New York, it was at a time when many other Jamaicans were migrating to the US, so our neighbors included families I knew from Kingston.

Jamaica in the 1970s was in the midst of major political and social transformation under the leadership of Michael Manley. As head of the People’s National Party that had jettisoned its socialist platform in the 1950s, Manley reanimated the party’s socialist history. My Jamaican-ness was the space from which I could comfortably explore critiques of capitalism, colonialism and the American empire. It was as a Jamaican that I bonded with the Ghanaian students on campus who had been inspired by Kwame Nkrumah.

I had the good fortune to be the work study student in AAAS when Bill Cook was chair. In this space that some faculty and students considered marginal to the real intellectual work of the college, I learned how to make my marginality a generative intellectual experience. Bill gave me the confidence and support to create a special major in AAAS and Education and later to apply to a graduate program in African History, though I had taken only one History course – an American survey taught by Berky Nelson. The intellectual home in AAAS allowed me to explore topics such as black feminist writers, Nigerian art and literature, and nationalism in Cuba, Haiti and Jamaica.

• These topics stayed with me in graduate school and ultimately shaped my focus on Nigerian women’s political activism and social and economic history. African History at Columbia was a marginal field within History and the larger institution, nonetheless it happened on a larger scale. There were institutes of African and Latin American/Caribbean Studies. A large cohort of students that cut across regional specializations in the History department shared interests in social justice, subaltern studies, class, racism, feminism and colonialism. We belonged to study groups in the university and in the larger community. We all attended talks by Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Amiri Baraka, Tom Holt, and Gayatri Spivak.

Moreover, we were not restricted to Morningside Heights. We hopped on the subway to attend talks at Hunter College, CUNY, NYU and the New School where I heard Paolo Freire, whose *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* I had devoured in Ed 1. Caribbean politics was especially vibrant because Michael Manley’s electoral defeat in 1980 brought a wave of Jamaican radicals from the PNP’s youth wing to New York. Manley also spent time teaching at Columbia and I took his class. We all followed the Grenadian revolution closely and were heart-broken when the experiment ended with Maurice Bishop’s murder and the American invasion.

I attended so many political meetings across the city, that my adviser called me in for one of those come-to-Jesus conversations. More importantly, she also modeled for me that the relationship between political engagement and scholarship took multiple forms - the questions that you ask, the creation of new knowledge, mutual collaborations with African scholars, sharing of resources, and being a good citizen of the African Studies community.

• My return to Dartmouth in 1991 surprised me and a number of my former classmates. I needed to finish my dissertation and to figure out what it meant to be a black, female professor of African and Caribbean history. Leo Spitzer helped me to realize that Dartmouth could actually provide that space for me.

Time and rose-tinted memories also helped. They had smoothed away the sting of the rank racism I had experienced. My brothers had also attended Dartmouth (’86) and I came to Hanover for vacations while they were here. Through my brothers I met Aileen Chaltain and I knew of Ivy Schweitzer, Deborah King and Rev. Gwen King. In addition to Leo, Bill Cook, Nelson Kasfir and Keith Walker were still here.

As a faculty member, Dartmouth was a much richer environment than it had been as an undergraduate. I had many more intellectual homes – History, AAAS, LALACS, WGST. Still the interdisciplinary programs suffered from marginality. Their budgets were meagre and some students, alumni and faculty discounted them by calling them Victim’s Studies. Some students took our classes to confirm their disparagement but were pleasantly surprised like the young man who expressed his enjoyment of my pre-colonial survey course and surprise that it was a real history course.

However, many students took my courses because they saw it as valuable to their intellectual and personal growth. Some were children of parents born in Africa or the Caribbean; some were Native American students who wanted a comparative understanding of colonialism. Some were preparing to do the Environmental Studies study-abroad program. Others reflected the multi-racial and multi-ethnic community of Reggae fans and others were just curious about marriage and divorce or cloth and dress.

The intellectual bounty that excited me as a member of the faculty, proved to be a double-edge sword. I learned that marginality exacts its own costs. I tried to model the support that Bill Cook had provided to me. The word got around that my door was open to all students and I was accessible. Even if I ultimately directed them to counseling, their class dean or financial aid, it took time to convince them that seeking help was not a sign of weakness or failure. It took time to build a confidence that had been undermined or to encourage pursuit of a passion that seemed fanciful. I was having similar conversations with other faculty members as we mutually tried to bolster each other and figure out how to achieve that ephemeral work-life balance while producing scholarship that mattered.

The emotional work I provided to students and colleagues did not outweigh the commitment to my scholarship. I created collaborative projects with African universities that sent Dartmouth scholars to Nigeria and brought Nigerian scholars to Dartmouth. I organized conferences, brought African scholars to campus, and I was elected to the executive board of the African Studies Association. Soon enough every cell in my body was exhausted. If you asked how I was doing, I was equally likely to say “fine” or burst into tears.

I was prepared to push through and find that elusive balance, until I was forced to realize that my efforts did not decrease my marginality. When Leo Spitzer announced his retirement, I was asked to take over the South African history course and told that the department would not hire another Africanist. For me that translated into Africa is not important enough for us to have two Africanists in the department regardless of all that you do. It is hard to recapture the range of emotions that flowed through me at that time but anger was very high on the list.

Still, leaving Dartmouth was very hard. I had made many life-long friends here. I value the intellectual comradery I shared and continue to share with many people. I have an even greater appreciation for what happens across classrooms on this campus. Dartmouth students who have applied to the graduate school at Cornell have been impressive.

My time at Cornell has also helped me to see that some of the issues I thought were unique to Dartmouth are not. It is equally, if not, more difficult to find balance. The interdisciplinary programs at Cornell also struggle with meagre budgets and African Studies has few champions. In this Trumpian moment, faculty and students of color are forced to be hypervigilant because many people feel empowered to express their disdain for our presence in these institutions, the work we do and the resources expended for the support and retention of faculty and students of color. While I don’t have any quick or easy answers to how we resolve these issues, they need addressing because life on the margins has become more complicated and pressured. Burn out is real.