

The Job I Wanted to Get

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BEFORE I discuss the process that led to my current position, I want to put my situation in context. My institution has a short tenure clock so, although I finished my dissertation and joined my department in 2003, I submitted my tenure portfolio in September 2007. As a result, the job search experience is very fresh in my mind at the same time that my upcoming tenure review has me reflecting on the pleasures and challenges of seeking and finding a position as an assistant professor. I've divided my thinking about my job search into several parts: preparing for the search and writing the job letter, preparing for the MLA interview and the campus visit, my first nine months as a new hire, and my status as a faculty member of color.

I consider my job search experience successful not simply because I was offered and accepted a tenure-track position my first year on the job market but because I found a job that had all the elements I was seeking when I began my search in October 2002. Although I started my doctoral program with the idea that I would teach at a small, private liberal arts college, I realized near the end of my graduate career that I was more interested in teaching at a public institution. I listed a few other requirements for my ideal job: I wanted to be in a large department, at a college or university that was big but not so huge that I would feel lost and have few opportunities to participate in a community outside my department. I wanted to work in a department with an MA program that valued educating teachers, and I wanted this ideal department to be near New York City. While I could see the appeal of teaching at a research university, I knew my temperament wasn't yet suited to the publishing pace at such institutions.

My reasons were political, professional, and personal, three dimensions that were and still are intertwined. While I loved the small, private college I attended, I had come to believe, perhaps naively,

that having excellent teachers doing innovative research at public institutions was one way to ensure that the larger citizenry would have the opportunity to be as well educated and well rounded as the lucky few who got to attend liberal arts colleges or large elite universities. I wanted to be in a large department because my temperament seemed better suited to a department where I wouldn't brush elbows with the same people every day. I lived in the South for eleven years and enjoy pleasant chatter, but I also need a measure of privacy, something that seemed in short supply in the ethos of small, liberal arts colleges. I wanted a larger school because I believed it would be easier to try new things in the classroom, to introduce new texts. In a department of six to ten people, the onus to teach certain texts, and sometimes only those texts, seems greater than it does in a larger department. I am a Romanticist, but I work with the novel and, to make things more complicated, with under-read fiction most people have never heard of, never mind studied. I wanted to be able to include those novels in the traditional Romanticism courses I knew I would be called on to teach. It was also important to me that I live in or near New York or some other metropolitan city or, barring that, a city that was interesting and had really good food and music. Finally, I needed to be someplace where black people and people of color weren't as rare as they were in western Massachusetts, where I lived while I completed my doctorate.

When I sent my job letters out, I had drafted two chapters of my dissertation and given confer-

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ence versions of another two. I said in the letter that I was going to defend in the summer of 2003 and that, although I thought defending the dissertation later in the year would be ideal, my committee thought a July or August defense was a distinct possibility. My plan was to go out in the 2002–03 market year and see how things looked. I didn't expect to get a job, but I thought the experience would position me well for my second year out and allow me to defend in November 2003, giving me the spring to prepare a few pieces to send out so that I could start a new search in 2003–04 with some work at different stages of completion. That's not precisely what happened, and the results have been mixed. On the one hand, I received a job offer from a department that met every requirement I wanted. Montclair State University is a regional public institution located twelve miles west of midtown Manhattan. The English department has thirty-two full-time faculty members, approximately six hundred majors, and an MA program. The 3/3 teaching load is heavy, but the vast majority of my teaching is in my area of specialization. In 2006–07, a typical year for me, I will have taught three sections of British Romanticism, the department's required course in theory and interpretation, and two courses for the graduate program—a research methods course and a Jane Austen seminar. On the other hand, launching a research agenda while teaching three courses a semester at a school with limited resources for research is a challenge, especially when there is a short tenure clock. But I didn't know all of this when I started my job search.

To cope with the anxiety and stress of the whole process I did two things: I read popular fiction (Nick Hornby's *How to Be Good* seemed particularly soothing while using the stationary bike at the gym), and I started brainstorming about jobs I might enjoy outside the academy. Both exercises were important, but the second one kept me centered throughout this incredibly destabilizing process. As much as I loved my work and felt I was made for the university classroom, knowing I had skills that would be welcome in other fields helped me feel more in control—if not of the job search process, at least of my own life. I had decided that I didn't want to be a person who spent so many years seeking a job that she couldn't enjoy it once she got it. In fact, my plan for my sec-

ond year on the market was to look in and out of the academy simultaneously.

The Letter

I didn't prepare as much as I should have for writing the job letter. The process was paralyzing. I had no idea how to talk about myself, what I should include, how to describe my research, and what I should say about my teaching, which I felt was my greatest strength. Fortunately, I had done some serious thinking about what kind of job I wanted, and although I didn't limit myself to the scenario I described above, I did approach the *MLA Job Information List* with a clear sense that I wasn't going to apply for every job available. It helped enormously that this was my first job search. I felt I had the luxury to be picky, and I was. In the end I applied for only fourteen jobs, a fact that shocked my advocates at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. I will always remember a favorite professor stammering, "So, this really, truly, is just a trial run. I mean, I think you have a lot of promise, but, really, you have to apply to so many more positions than this." Not only did I apply for only fourteen jobs, most of those positions were at colleges and universities in and around New York, Los Angeles, or Chicago, some of the most competitive geographic areas in the country. The risk I took seemed worth it, though, because it allowed me to shape my letter to a specific array of jobs rather than simply change the address at the top of a template. Applying selectively made it possible for me to overcome my paralysis by describing why I wanted each job, and since I was applying for many jobs that had the same characteristics, it didn't take that much work.

I made sure to have everyone who was going to write on my behalf read the letter and offer feedback. I worked hardest on my dissertation abstract, sensing its usefulness for the future grant applications that are essential to someone whose work relies on finding and working with out-of-print texts. I also consulted with my adviser on a problem neither of us anticipated until we saw the job list—the fact that I didn't actually fit into the field in which I was seeking a position. When departments advertise for a Romanticist, they generally expect someone whose work asks new questions about the poetry of the period. By and large, they

believe that there are six major literary figures in that period, and I had paid attention only to one of them, Byron, and then only because Mary Shelley appropriates his hero in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* in her second novel, *Valperga*. The biggest struggle for me was to be clear and honest about my interests and research while still showing that I was able and willing to teach Romantic poetry. Fortunately, I had taught a section of a British survey course and so had some experience with the traditional Romantic canon. But since I really wanted and needed to be in a department where I could include the novel in my teaching and where my research on the topic would be accepted and supported, I decided to focus my letter in that direction. My instinct was to present myself as someone who had specialized in the Romantic novel but had a secret passion for teaching the poetry. I did, after all, want to get a job. In the end, however, I opted for perfect honesty. I decided there was no use pretending and wasting everyone's time if what the department wanted was someone whose focus and passion was Romantic poetry.

The MLA Convention

My letter and dossier resulted in two interviews at the MLA convention—one with a university in Los Angeles and one with Montclair State University. In addition to setting up a mock interview with my graduate director and two other members of my department, I attended an information session about the job search process organized by the graduate director of my program to hear horror stories, anecdotes, and sound advice from people who had survived the experience. Honestly, the only thing I remember from that session was that a very cool new hire at Amherst College had worn a leather skirt to her interview, and that fact seemed to carry more weight with everyone at the session than any other piece of information shared. The buzz her account created made clear to me how arbitrary and absurd the job search process can be. (For what it's worth, I didn't buy a new outfit and refused to wear one of those banker's suits I see women wearing at the MLA convention. I didn't wear leather (not my style); but I did buy a really great pair of shoes and polished my briefcase.) I also reviewed my dissertation bibliography to see which critics I engaged with the most so that I could talk

specifically about who influenced my work and whose work I saw my dissertation responding to.

I looked at the course offerings of the departments I was interviewing with and did some research about the faculty members on my committee and about those in the department. What I didn't do was think more concretely about teaching Romantic poetry, and that I should have done. Although I had taught the major Romantic poets, I hadn't reflected on how I taught them or what it means to teach them to undergraduates. I certainly had read their major works, but I hadn't seriously thought about them in years, and I could tell that this fact made my interviewers anxious.

As for the actual interview, there's no way not to feel like a call girl when you go to the hotel phone and ask for the room where the interview will be held. And the bed is weird. It's strange to talk about Mary Wollstonecraft in someone's bedroom, and there's simply no getting around that. My interviews were very different from each other. On the whole they went well, but the most disconcerting moment was when an interviewer read from a letter of recommendation a description of one of my dissertation chapters. I hadn't seen the letter and had no clear idea what my dissertation-committee member was talking about when she explained how my interrogation of the body was a central theme in the history of the novel I was writing. It is wonderful for dissertation committees to have ambitions for their advisees, but I would advise job candidates to ask to see any paragraphs discussing their research so that they can know how their research is being described. I had a list of questions ready for my interviewers, though I promptly forgot them all. I do remember being curious about the student population. I wish I had asked more questions about how junior research was supported.

I left the MLA interviews convinced I had failed. My thinking about my research felt sketchy, and I didn't believe I was enough of a Romanticist for either committee. Additionally, I tried to make a joke, offering, if hired, to bring a big stick to beat up the chair of another department (jokes can fall flat in MLA interviews, not because they're not funny, but because good interviewers want to treat each applicant the same and want to appear objective). When I returned from the MLA, I wrote to my adviser that I had put the search behind me for the year and was soothing myself by working on the dissertation. This was true. I found the process of

talking about my research invigorating, and I suddenly wanted to finish the dissertation as soon as possible so that I could start publishing my work.

The Campus Visit

I was stunned when I received an invitation for a campus visit to Montclair State University. My campus visit consisted of interviews with the search committee, the chair of the department, and the dean; a teaching demonstration; and an informal meeting with the faculty. I also had to get through two meals. I did buy new clothes for that visit, and I wore them as I practiced my teaching demonstration in front of seven friends, including my neighbor who worked as an accountant and a friend's partner who was a doctoral candidate in psychology to see what kinds of questions nonmajors might ask. Practicing in front of my friends might have been the smartest thing I did in this job search. They eagerly accepted the role of student, and the accountant and doctoral candidate asked precisely the kinds of questions one would expect from undergraduates. The other thing I'm glad I did was send a list of reading questions for the students in my demonstration class to the committee chair ahead of time so that the students would have some guidance as they completed the reading for that day. I also made a list of courses I thought I could teach if I were hired.

Instead of saying what I did on the campus visit, I think it will be more helpful to point out things that candidates should look at and listen to carefully. Some of this I thought to do; other parts were beyond my ken. Candidates should think of the campus visit as a mutual interview but approach it with the grace of a houseguest. I'm grateful I thought of the visit as a chance to have a conversation about the department. I worried less about showing I was qualified than about exploring whether or not this would be a good fit for both me and the department. In other words, I wanted things to work out, but I was prepared to walk away if the job didn't feel like a good match. I realize this is a difficult way to approach a job when each campus visit seems like one's only chance for the prize in the job search: a tenure-track job. However, accepting a position in a department that isn't a good fit for all parties concerned is unfair to the candidate, the department, and the students.

Mostly I was myself, and I remember feeling distinctly that while there were certain things I had to demonstrate during this visit such as competence in the classroom, an ability to express myself well in formal and informal situations, and a clear sense of my research projects, at this point I didn't have any more to prove. I think this approach saved me from some of the pitfalls I've seen others make during campus visits. It seems that the minute job candidates try to prove they're good, one of two things happens: arrogance comes racing to the surface and people say and do off-putting things—like pointing out that they have published more than some of the search committee members—or they retreat into silence and undermine themselves. Ideally candidates need to be open to learning about the institution to which they are applying and to discussing whether or not their research goals and pedagogy will be supported. They should also try to find out the following information:

- the department's relationship to the administration and the rest of the institution
- how the recommendations of the faculty are used in the administration's assessment for reappointment and tenure
- what the expectations are regarding service, according to the department and the administration
- what experiences newer faculty members have had
- how the university will respond to requests for research support
- the makeup of the student population and the kind of teaching students respond well to (e.g., a sage-from-the-stage lecture type or something more informal)

My campus visit went well, and I left feeling confident not that I would necessarily receive an offer but that I had been well perceived by members of the department. I remember telling my adviser that their decision would probably rely on their faith in two things: whether I would actually finish the dissertation in the summer and whether I could really teach courses in Romantic literature. She told me later that the department chair called and asked her those two questions and little more.

The dean e-mailed me on Valentine's Day to inform me that an offer was forthcoming. Friends and professors told me to ask for more money. All those who had gone through the job search process and advised me said the same thing: they had been

so excited just to have an offer that they did not think to ask for more money, an oversight that affected their earnings for the rest of their careers. I did ask for more money (nervously, but clearly), and I, still a doctoral candidate and green as a pickle, got more. No one could really give me advice about how to ask for more money, but I explained to the dean that since the department didn't regularly offer research support for junior faculty members, I needed to earn enough money to support myself during the summer months. I took a week to make the decision, and I asked for more money to move. (I had an estimate from a moving company that was a bit more than the university offered. The dean was fine with it.) But most of that week was spent wondering whether or not this was really the right job for me, since I had some concerns about administrative relations, my freedom to teach outside the canon, and the salary.

Finally, the job's appeal far outweighed my concerns. I liked the way the members of the committee interacted with one another and with me—they were rigorous but I still felt they were rooting for me as best they could. The students were absolutely wonderful, the curriculum was progressive and had been carefully planned, and the town seemed diverse. I wasn't interrogated during my meals, and, most important to me, the department was enthusiastic about my research. Faculty members were genuinely interested in my research, and even now I regularly meet with the senior colleague in my field to talk about my work. He has read the under-read novels that are the focus of my research and asks me insightful questions that help me with my writing. My adviser, who had been good about not overwhelming me with her opinions, did offer one: she told me that she was confident that I would do well in a second-year search and that I did not need to feel this was my only chance for a tenure-track job. This knowledge helped me think clearly about what I wanted. I realized that if I were to go out a second year, I would be looking for a job that was just like this one, and so I said yes.

Year the First

I have found that the biggest struggle in the first year is to determine the values of the department and the values of the institution as a whole. Ideally they complement each other, but they can also dif-

fer, and new hires need to figure that out as quickly as possible. Everyone claims that teaching and research are equally valued, but it's important to understand how true that claim is. New hires also need to realize two things when starting a new job: departments have histories, and it's the responsibility of new faculty members to learn those histories, and people will probably form their opinions of new hires by Thanksgiving or sooner. Their early opinions might change, but not by much.

As graduate students, we are overprofessionalized—we have been to conferences, published, served on department committees, and may have had one-year appointments. This professionalization can lead people to the false sense that they know more than they actually do when they join a department. The only advice I can offer is a line from Al Pacino's speech to Kevin Spacey in *Glengarry Glen Ross*: "You never open your mouth until you know what the shot is." Obviously, this is overstating it—silence is not always golden, but it can be a friend. I have a theory about the first months on the job: the strange mixture of relief, terror, and excitement amplifies our most troubling characteristics. Those who have a tendency to be a little bit arrogant may find themselves speaking out before they understand how the department and institution works, stepping on pedagogical and ideological toes every step of the way. Those who are like me—a bit cynical and a bit wary—may end up responding to almost every request with "Are you serious or are you hazing me?" My natural irreverence popped up at the wrong moments more times than I like to remember. Thankfully, I'm in a department where most people have a sense of humor and are forgiving of new hires whom they see as honestly trying to contribute to the department.

I had *Glengarry Glen Ross* in mind when I started this job. So although I have a lot of opinions and am comfortable speaking in meetings, I realized that as a new member of a department I had a lot to learn. I also knew that, although a committee, my chair, and the dean had selected me, I now had a whole department to work with and that someone might see me as someone else's ally, whether I was or wasn't. To avoid this situation, I accepted more invitations than I do now in my fourth year: I went to lunch with people and listened, I attended committee meetings and asked a lot of questions, I didn't miss a faculty meeting my first two years, and I was fairly careful about not shar-

ing negative views with people. I tried to guard my time—attending meetings but not volunteering to take on any projects even when people told me it would be good for my career. Although I was tempted to try a lot of new teaching, I've done my best to keep my teaching fresh by developing new questions and assignments for the texts I regularly teach rather than adding new texts each term so that I can concentrate on my research.

I was unprepared for what it meant to teach English majors. I had taught my way through graduate school, but most of my classes had been first-year literature courses, with a population of students I never saw again. Suddenly I had students who talked to other students about me, and it was strange. After a rocky first term, I met with a senior colleague and then followed most of his advice. Learning about the student body wasn't easy, and I found I had to listen to what my students were telling me in their meetings with me during my office hours and in casual conversations after class. Even if an institution values research over teaching, knowing and respecting the student population is not only ethical but practical as well. Regardless of the messages we all receive about the importance of research, we have an obligation to our students. Listening to students and to what colleagues say about their experience with those students makes us better at teaching, which leaves us more energy for research.

Learning to manage my time has been tricky, and making the transition from dissertation to publication has been frustrating. It is essential to have the help of a more seasoned scholar while making this transition. I joined the Keats-Shelley Association just before it started a new mentor program, and that program has helped a great deal. Talking to someone outside of my dissertation committee and my department has made me feel part of a scholarly community and helped me send things out more quickly. New hires should try to find that kind of guidance and support from the moment they submit the archival draft of their dissertation.

On Being a Black Woman in the Academy

My experience as a woman of color in a field not related to ethnic studies is worth noting. According to the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, African Americans compose approximately

5.3% of the professoriat, and half that number teach at historically black colleges and universities ("Snail-Like Progress"). Here are some pertinent facts about my experience as one of the 5.3%. While I was a graduate student, the general feeling seemed to be that as a black doctoral candidate, all I would need do was wave my CV from my window and MLA interviews and multiple job offers would appear. My own fear was that I would get interviews only so that departments could feel comfortable knowing that they had tried to hire a person of color. In response to the first, badly written draft of my job letter, one well-meaning but misguided reader told me that I wasn't ready for a tenure-track job and that the only reason I would be hired for one was because I was black.¹

Although I have two diversity fellowships listed on my CV, I saw no reason to discuss my race in my job letter, and, as far as I know, none of my recommenders did so either. I thought seriously about discussing how I see my role as a person of color in the academy but feared I would be judged as playing the race card and that the strain of resistance against affirmative action that I regularly encounter in the academy would rise to the surface and work against me. I also had no idea how to discuss the topic, no model to turn to, and no senior person of color who could offer any advice. I am still working out what it means to be a person of color in the academy, so I certainly couldn't discuss it in a job letter when I was still a graduate student.

It doesn't feel that different now that I have a tenure-track job. I know my experience is different from that of my white colleagues, but I also know that the experience is largely invisible and that any conversation about the topic with a white person, regardless of who initiates it, results in the sad, knowing nod of the well-intentioned liberal or the mostly blank, slightly anxious stare of the white closet conservative. A sense of limited resources, a suspicion that "we" are just oversensitive, a fear that the imaginary standards of the academy are being lowered in the name of political correctness all seem to lend themselves to a peculiar silence on this issue.

I have the support of the people in my department and feel comfortable at least talking about the fact that I'm black in an overwhelmingly white profession, but no one has quite figured out what I need in order to overcome the obstacles that come with being female and black at the same time. I do not believe that I have been asked to serve on

committees to make them more diverse, and when I have faced blatant racism in the classroom, my colleagues and department chair have offered sympathy and practical solutions. For this I feel lucky. But I also worry.

Each year in my reappointment materials I discuss what I can prove about my role as a woman of color in the academy: that I am called on by students of color to serve in capacities well beyond those of classroom instruction; that increasingly students of color see me as evidence that advanced degrees are attainable and so, regardless of what field they intend to pursue, they come specifically to me for help approaching the process and assistance with their writing samples and personal statements; that I have been asked to speak on the issue of education and race. I hope that my active contributions to my institution's official commitment to affirmative action are not sacrificed in the course of the portfolio review process to a race-blind vision of performance equity.

This possibility troubles me because I chose the path of university instruction to ensure that when the students of color we tell to pursue higher education get to my university, they will benefit from having faculty members of color there to help guide, push, and pull them through. I also think it's essential that white students work with faculty members of color; affirmative action policies benefit everyone. What carries me through rough moments is rereading Barbara Omolade's *The Rising Song of African American Women* and Patricia J. Williams's *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*. Both of these books help me realize that I am participating in a long tradition and that my success relies on taking the long view and deflecting, as much as possible, the regular indignities all members of marginalized groups face. Getting tenure is the first goal; from there I hope that the work of being a substantial force for positive change as a person of color in the academy can begin.

From this vantage point, I can see how I might have avoided certain mistakes in the search for this job and in my first year in the department, but the

largest truth I learned and am still understanding is how much what is described as success in the job process is a reflection not so much of individual qualifications or abilities as of how people fit or don't fit with different departments. Understanding this truth can help job seekers regain the sense of agency that is lost when they realize how many people are applying for any given job and how much pressure we all feel when we reach the end of our graduate career and start on the profession. I can tell you that it's worth it to take a job for the right reasons. My honeymoon period with academe ended when a friend was denied tenure in a brutal way. It's a sad reality of the job that some people will leave either willingly or because of conflict with their institutions; such departures can throw one's sense of one's workplace into negative relief. But in preparing this essay and wondering what opportunities a second year on the job market might have brought me, I do think that having accepted the offer because I wanted this particular job has been an enlightening and overwhelmingly positive experience.

Note

1. My sense is that my well-meaning professor thought he was echoing my own concerns about hiring practices. He wasn't. His ill-stated concern was partly a reflection of the distinct unease we have in the academy when the specter of affirmative action rises. Simply put: because we don't talk about these issues, we don't know how to talk about them.

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