**What If You Knew I Was Black?**

[**Tracey M. Lewis-Giggetts**](https://chroniclevitae.com/people/13191-tracey-m-lewis-giggetts)

As soon as she said, “I have to tell you something that you are going to think is so hilarious,” my defenses rose. I couldn’t help it. I hoped this time would be different. In that moment, I wanted to believe that what I was about to hear was a funny account shared by one teaching comrade with another. But I’d already read her body language when she walked in the room and saw *me* sitting there. I’d seen how she stared at me as I spoke to our group about the issues of the hour. And I sensed, from my myriad of “interesting” experiences as a Black, female adjunct professor, that what I was about to hear was far from funny.

I was right.

Let me back up a bit and offer some context. At one of the colleges where I teach, we have teaching circles. They operate like instructor support groups. As an adjunct, I’d rarely participated in them in the past—mostly for scheduling reasons. They are structured with full-timers in mind. However, recently my department tied its periodic observations of our classrooms to participation in these teaching circles. As I have been looking for an inroad to a full-time position, these circles seemed like a good opportunity. I had plenty of experiences to share and knew that there was much for me to learn.

After many scheduling snafus, I finally met with my circle and the aforementioned colleague—I’ll call her Terri. I'd previously communicated with Terri only via email but I looked forward to finally putting a face with a name. It was after the meeting that Terri pulled me aside and told me that she had a “hilarious” story to share with me.

A few years ago, she said, she was doing some advising and kept coming across “all these students” who were raving about an English professor named Tracey Lewis and practically clamoring to get into my courses. She told me that it got to the point where she’d just begun advising students upfront to take my classes and often went as far as helping them find me on the course roster since I was an adjunct and often had irregular scheduling.

At that point, I chided myself for being so defensive. Before I could get too confident, Terri said: "I never knew who Tracey Lewis was, so when I walked into our meeting today, I was shocked. I couldn’t believe that *you’re* Tracey Lewis?'"

In that instant, my hope crumbled. I knew what was coming next.

"You were surprised?" I said.

"Well, I don't know,” she said, “ I just pictured a tall, thin, white woman. Certainly not … you."

How do you respond to that? Really, what do you say? "Sorry to disappoint you," I replied.

I suppose at that point she must have realized how her remark sounded. She began hemming and hawing: "Oh no, no, no … you're really great … but … umm ..."

And this was supposed to be funny? I couldn’t help but wonder: Would she still have guided “all those students” to take my classes had she known I was actually a not-so-tall, not-so-thin, black woman? Somehow I suspect not.

A similar conclusion is drawn in the manifesto of [*Fight the Tower,*](http://fighttower.com) a movement started by people who believe that academic women of color are at a ["crucial crossroad”](http://fighttower.com/about.html) and must claim an "earned place in academia." That manifesto reads:

"As women of color in academia, we are often presumed incompetent, not because of our teaching, scholarship, or service, but because of the biased presumptions associated with our gender, sex, sexual orientation, color, race, national origin, ethnic group identification, citizenship status, accent, age, disability, religion, marital status, motherhood, and personhood. We are perceived as easy targets for discrimination and dismissal based on these assumptions."

Academics like to think they’re above society’s baser proclivities, but the uncomfortable truth is that universities reflect the culture in which they function, and incidents like the one I described are as much a part of everyday life inside academia as they are outside of it.

My colleague’s response to me is rooted in her privilege and her broader beliefs about the competency of black people. My initial defensiveness—anticipating that I would be offended rather than amused by what Terri had to say—was a defense mechanism learned from a lifetime of painful encounters like this one. I carry that cautiousness and skepticism with me wherever I go. It’s likely why I overcompensate in the classroom, sometimes spending too much time trying to appease the privileged students in the room while still seeking ways to introduce a diversity of ideas and ways of thinking and writing to students who otherwise might never consider those ideas worthy.

It’s a frustrating tightrope walk, but one that seems necessary if I want to continue to teach. I’m convinced that until there is a psychological, emotional, and—dare I say it—spiritual shift outside campus walls, there isn’t likely to be one inside of them. I suppose that means that, for a little while longer, enduring “funny” moments like this one is sadly part of the gig.

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Top of Form

Bottom of Form