

Chapter 11

Resistance as Recovery

Winning a Sexual Harassment Complaint

Carolyn M. West

Sexual harassment is defined by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) as follows:

Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature constitute sexual harassment when (1) submission to such conduct is made either explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of an individual's employment, (2) submission to or rejection of such conduct by an individual is used as the basis for employment decisions affecting such individual, or (3) such conduct has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working environment.¹

Consider these statistics: in a sample of 100 Black women university students, 52% had experienced at least one sexually harassing act that was perpetrated by a professor during their academic careers.² Approximately one-third of female graduate students had received sexual advances, overtures, or propositions that were initiated by a psychology educator, such as a course instructor, academic advisor, or clinical supervisor.³ These studies indicate that sexual harassment is a widespread, well-documented form of sexual exploitation on college campuses, and Black women and graduate students are among the many victims/survivors.

The purpose of this chapter is to attach a name and story to these disembodied statistics. I am associate professor of psychology and the Bartley Dobb Profes-

sor for the Study and Prevention of Violence at the University of Washington. I write, train, consult, and lecture internationally on interpersonal violence and sexual assault, with a special focus on violence in the lives of African American women. But like the anonymous Black women and graduate students in the aforementioned studies, two decades ago, before I became Dr. West, I experienced sexual harassment while pursuing a doctoral degree in clinical psychology at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. The details of the harassment that I endured from February 1987 until the summer of 1990 are laid out in the first section of this chapter. In the second section, I specify how my feminist beliefs enabled me to identify and craft a strategy to address the harassment. Finally, I explain how feminism helped me during my recovery process.

Sexual Harassment

"You look uncomfortable. Perhaps you would be more comfortable lying on my desk." It was September 1989, and I had reluctantly accepted Dr. O. as my clinical supervisor. According to him, I needed "extra supervision" to help me with a particularly difficult client whom I had been counseling. I was a new clinician and beginning to seriously doubt my decision to become a full-time therapist. Although I was apprehensive about the late afternoon meeting with Dr. O., he actually gave me some positive feedback. I felt encouraged. Then he began asking personal questions: "Are you dating anyone special?" "If you were going away for a special weekend, who would you take?" I responded to his interrogation with vague answers. To further add to my discomfort, his eyes seemed to linger a bit too long on my breasts. I pretended not to notice. This was not the first time, nor would it be the last time, that Dr. O. would engage in such inappropriate behavior with me. The "behavior," which I did not label sexual harassment at the time, had begun several years earlier. In February 1987 I was a precocious, idealistic, 23-year-old graduate student who was fulfilling my childhood dream of becoming a psychologist. It was an especially cold Midwestern winter, the perfect time for the annual "Tahiti Party," which was the social event of the year. Graduate students and professors were expected to wear outlandish beach attire, perform skits, and dance. I had never been a big drinker, and I didn't enjoy water sports, so I avoided the margaritas and the hot tub. Unfortunately, I was unable to avoid Dr. O.'s wandering hands and eyes. He danced a bit too close for my comfort, kept trying to adjust the straps on my costume, and continued to question me throughout the evening: "So, when are you leaving?" "Where is your car parked?" I left the party alone. Later, I heard the rumors. This was typical conduct for Dr. O. Apparently, each year he focused his "attentions" on a first-year female graduate student. I was not

interested in being the "pick of the litter," so I decided to steer clear of Dr. O. for the duration of my graduate studies.

For the next several years, my efforts to avoid contact with Dr. O. were generally successful. However, there were a few incidents. In March 1987 he appeared to look down my blouse as I stood at a file cabinet. In May 1988 he stood uncomfortably close as he tried to decipher the message on my t-shirt. In October 1988 he inappropriately touched my "tummy," as he called it, while I graded exams in my advisor's office. In each case, I either pretended not to notice or ended the interaction as quickly as possible.

In the spring of 1989, Dr. O. found me alone in my office. I immediately became tense when he arrived. There was a scheduling conflict, which meant that my request to be supervised by Dr. V. had been denied. How would I feel about accepting supervision from Dr. O.? There was a long, awkward silence. He began to stammer as he acknowledged that his conduct during the 1987 Tahiti Party had been inappropriate. Still, he promised to refrain from any future sexual advances. I had several thoughts after the interaction. First, I felt validated. He had admitted that his behavior was sexually invasive. Then, I felt invalidated. As the director of the clinic, Dr. O. ultimately made the final clinical supervision team assignments. It seemed that my feelings were inconsequential. If I wanted my degree, I would have to survive one year of supervision with him. I was hopeful.

My sense of hope quickly dissipated as I began the fourth year of my doctoral training program. In addition to the "more comfortable on my desk" comment, there were more remarks about my attire and incidents of inappropriate, unnecessary touching. Some of the "jokes" were made in the presence of other graduate students during clinical supervision. For example, "How do you paralyze a woman from the waist down?" Punch line: "You marry her." Generally, I have a good sense of humor, but I could not even muster a polite chuckle. At this point, I found his behavior to be insulting, demeaning, and offensive.

I began to voice my concerns. Initially, I complained to other graduate students. In mid-May 1990 I told two female faculty members, one of whom was the director of clinical training, about Dr. O.'s unwelcome advances. I rejected their suggestions to attend a meeting and explain to him why his conduct was unacceptable. In protest, I refused to pay for summer supervision. Instead, I fled the academic puppy mill and flew to Europe. I danced at the Berlin Wall, which had fallen about six months prior to my arrival, shopped for leather handbags in Italy, entered a yodeling contest in Austria (I didn't win), and ate chocolate in the Swiss Alps. For three glorious weeks, I felt free and safe.

I had endured Dr. O.'s behavior since February 1987. Yet I had not complained to university officials until May 1990. Why did I wait so long before

coming forward with my concerns? There were several reasons for my reluctance to report Dr. O. Like Black feminist scholar bell hooks, throughout graduate school I was told that "I did not have the proper demeanor of a graduate student."⁴ As one professor put it: "I had an attitude problem." That was true. I had respectfully challenged my professors' authority, especially around cultural diversity issues, sexism, and the mistreatment of graduate students. Within the existing academic power structure, that was an unforgiveable offense. Consequently, I was justifiably afraid that Dr. O. and his powerful colleagues would end my career before it had begun by forcing me out of the doctoral program. I knew that I wasn't his only victim. Still, I feared that my complaints would not be viewed as credible. Finally, I was deeply embarrassed. Although his advances were unwelcome, I wondered if I had inadvertently done something to encourage his behavior. So I kept quiet.

Resistance

In addition to my strong faith, loving family, and supportive friends, my feminist beliefs gave me the courage to label my victimization, helped me to evolve into an empowered survivor, and enabled me to transform myself into an activist and scholar. More specifically, feminism helped me to name the sexual harassment and craft a strategy for resistance that involved using the legal system and media.

Naming the Sexual Harassment

Similar to the Black women college students who were surveyed by Mecca and Rubin in 1999, I did not initially identify Dr. O.'s behavior as sexual harassment. Then I began to eagerly devour the emerging literature on sexual harassment in academic settings. For example, after reading *The Lecherous Professor*,⁵ I began to understand the harasser's personality traits, attitudes, and techniques. There was the "Father Figure" who attempted to form a mentorlike relationship with his victim. These men concealed their sexual intentions with pretenses of personal, professional, or academic attention. The "Opportunist" used the physical settings and circumstances such as private meetings to gain access to victims. Then there was the "Groper." His eyes and hands would stray whenever the opportunity presented itself: in the stairway while chatting with the victim, while working late, while attending the office party. Suddenly, Dr. O.'s wandering hands and desire to meet at odd times for "extra supervision" began to make sense. Despite my newly acquired academic language, I continued to refer to him as a "Sexual Harass-hole pervert."

In addition, there were different types of sexual harassment. I recognized quid pro quo sexual harassment. Sometimes, it took the form of trading bet-

ter grades for sexual favors, also referred to as “an ‘A’ for a lay.” Other forms of harassment were less blatant, but equally as harmful.⁶ Examples are *gender harassment*, which includes generalized sexist remarks, offensive jokes, or sexist teaching materials, and *hostile environment*, conduct that creates an intimidating or offensive work atmosphere. For me, Dr. O.’s joke about marrying a woman to paralyze her from the waist down created an unpleasant atmosphere in clinical supervision.

It was especially difficult for me to report *seduction*, defined as sexual advances, unwanted sexual attention, or propositions, and *sexual imposition*, which involved unwanted touching and fondling. People seemed to be more skeptical about these forms of harassment. They asked questions such as, “Could you have misinterpreted his behavior?” This made me almost doubt my own reality. I also encountered a number of people who minimized this type of harassment. One female professor quipped, “Well, he didn’t rape you.” Fortunately, I had not been sexually assaulted. But feminism helped me understand that sexual harassment can occur on a continuum. Although I was not forcefully penetrated, my feelings of sexual violation and fear were still justified.

Mainstream feminist scholars helped me to name my experiences as sexual harassment, but Black feminist scholars enabled me to understand its complexity. During graduate school, I had developed and taught a course on the psychology of Black women. I learned that living at the intersections of multiple forms of oppression, including racism, sexism, and classism, made Black women especially vulnerable to a type of sexual harassment that had distinct racial overtones, also known as racialized sexual harassment.⁷

Women from all ethnic backgrounds who complain about sexual harassment may be stereotyped as opportunistic mercenaries who are seeking financial compensation, scorned women who are attempting to derail an innocent man’s career, or simply delusional. In addition to these stereotypes, I felt haunted by the oversexed, promiscuous Black Jezebel image that is common in American culture.⁸ More specifically, I feared that university officials would assume that, just like my enslaved ancestors, I had sexually enticed my academic overseer. In that case, the myth went, there was no real damage done, since Black women are allegedly “unrapeable” and undeserving of protection.⁹ From time to time, I even wondered if Dr. O. believed that I would be more receptive to his advances because I was a Black woman.

Crafting a Strategy for Resistance

By the autumn semester of 1990, I could no longer endure the sexual harassment. So I told my mother, Ms. Georgia. When I think of my mother I am reminded of the words of Black feminist poet Kate Rushin and am proud to say that “I come from/a long line of/Uppity Irate Black Women.”¹⁰ To illustrate my mother’s character, after she discovered that the roof at my dilapidated

elementary school was leaking so badly that children were in danger of drowning indoors, my mother went on a one-woman crusade to correct the injustice. She stormed into the office of the St. Louis Public Schools superintendent. Without an appointment, she demanded to speak to authorities. "Sorry, there is no money for school repairs" was an unacceptable response. Undeterred, my mother went across the street, found the nearest pay phone, and began calling television stations. The news crews met her at the school for an interview. Somehow, the money magically appeared, and the students at Mitchell Elementary School received a new roof.

At the time, my mother did not see herself as a feminist activist. She was simply a concerned parent of an elementary school child. Now she was the concerned parent of a 26-year-old graduate student, and she was livid about Dr. O.'s conduct. "Mother's love is at the heart of black resistance and emancipation,"¹¹ so I incorporated some of her resistance strategies to deal with my situation. I also turned to the writings of my Black feminist foremother, Ida B. Wells-Barnett. On May 4, 1884, more than 70 years before Rosa Parks fueled the civil rights movement by refusing to give up her seat on a bus to a White man, 22-year-old Ida Wells refused to be moved. She had purchased a first-class train ticket, which entitled her to ride in the "Ladies" car. When a Tennessee conductor ordered her to move to the car reserved for smokers and Blacks, she protested and then physically resisted:

He tried to drag me out of the seat, but that moment he caught hold of my arm, I fastened my teeth in the back of the hand. I had braced my feet against the seat in front and was holding to the back, and as he had already been badly bitten he didn't try it again by himself. He went forward and got the baggage man and another to help him and of course they succeeded in dragging me out.¹²

Ida Wells left the train, minus the sleeves on her dress, which had been completely torn off. She hired an attorney, filed a lawsuit against the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad, and was awarded \$500 in compensation. The decision was reversed when the railroad company appealed to the State Supreme Court. Disappointed, she paid the court costs. But at least she had fought back.

THE LEGAL SYSTEM

Although not widely recognized, Black women brought forth many of the first legal cases used to define sexual harassment case law.¹³ In October 1991, like the rest of the country, I anxiously watched the televised Senate Judicial Committee hearings on Supreme Court nominee [now Justice] Clarence Thomas. Anita Hill, a law professor and his former employee, had accused him of sexually

harassing her from 1981 to 1983.¹⁴ Thomas was ultimately confirmed. I went into mourning for a few weeks. The entire event was painful to watch, and I wondered if anyone would believe my story of sexual harassment. But the hearings had a long-lasting effect on the nation's understanding of sexual harassment. Complaints filed with the EEOC increased by more than 50% between 1991 and 1992.¹⁵ I am proud to say that I filed one of those complaints.

First, I tried to resolve the problem within the university judicial system. Dr. O. was seeking promotion from the rank of associate to full professor. In order to document my concerns, I wrote an anonymous letter to the Psychology Department on October 12, 1990. Several other students also had written letters of complaint, which were sent to the dean of Arts and Sciences. At that point, I contacted the dean and filed a grievance. Several days before Christmas, the grievance committee members ruled in my favor, and Dr. O. stepped down from his position as director of the clinic. University officials began to pester me to sign a statement indicating that I was happy with this resolution. I politely declined. Instead, my feminist friends in the Women's Studies Department and campus Women's Center took up a collection and contacted an attorney. Michael listened to my plight and agreed to take the case.

In early January 1991, a few days after my 27th birthday, I filed charges with the EEOC and the Missouri Commission on Human Rights (MCHR). Four months later, I received a letter. They regretted to inform me that my "complaint was filed after 180 days from the date of the last act of alleged discrimination. This means, under the Missouri Human Rights Act your complaint was untimely." So I contacted the EEOC and requested the Notice of Right to Sue, which was granted on September 20, 1991. My timing was perfect. The Civil Rights Act of 1991 provided for jury trials and increased damages in Title VII sexual harassment suits.

The legal process was long, difficult, and emotionally draining. It left little time to focus on my research and teaching. In March 1992 I decided to resign from my job at the domestic violence shelter to focus on the lawsuit. I was required to complete interrogatories, which were long written statements about each harassing incident. The lawyers also requested my appointment books and personal notes about the case. I will never forget the depositions on August 21, 1992. For approximately seven hours, I sat with the university attorney, my attorney, and the court reporter. Every incident of sexual harassment was discussed. It felt like every aspect of my life was under investigation: Had I been in therapy? Was I a rape survivor? Was I a successful student? Was I credible or crazy? My soul was laid bare, but I had survived by "speaking truth to power."¹⁶ I left with my head held high and didn't cry until I got into my rusty 1977 Chevy Malibu.

My attorney called on November 17, 1992. Finally, he had some good news. The University of Missouri had offered a settlement. After a long discussion,

it made sense to accept the offer. The process had consumed my life and had left me emotionally exhausted and physically drained. I really needed to finish my degree and move on with my life. Because I was a poor graduate student who could not afford to pay my lawyer's legal fees, he took a sizeable portion of the settlement. I went home, took some aspirin, and took a nap.

Next, I decided to pursue the second phase of my legal strategy: file a complaint with the Missouri State Committee of Psychologists. This was another long process, which I had investigated in May 1991. After consulting with my lawyer, we decided to wait until the legal proceedings were completed. The official complaint was filed on December 18, 1991. On February 19, 1993, I made the two and one-half hour-drive to Jefferson City, the Missouri state capitol, for a 10 am meeting.

Then I waited, and waited, and waited some more. On March 11, 1993, May 27, 1993, and February 16, 1994, I received letters from the committee. The report was always the same: "Dear Ms. West . . . No final decisions have been made at this time on this complaint as our investigation is continuing." On June 20, 1995, the investigation was complete, and I received the final letter. At that point, I was no longer Ms. West. I had become Dr. West during the summer of 1994. The letter read: "Upon completing a thorough review, the committee has determined that there is insufficient evidence to establish that Dr. O. has violated the Psychology Practice Act. Therefore, the committee has agreed to close the file at this time."

I was profoundly disappointed. Again, I turned to the writings of my feminist foremother, Ida B. Wells. Although her lawsuit against the railroad had been overturned, her willingness to file the complaint was still heroic. Moreover, despite her successful antilynching campaign, the gruesome lynchings did not completely end. This led me to two conclusions. First, while the Missouri State Committee of Psychologists did not sanction Dr. O. for his conduct toward me, filing the complaint was an important act. Now, at least they knew. The harassment had been documented. Therefore, it was their responsibility to monitor his conduct with clients. Second, despite my best efforts, I could never completely end sexual harassment. Under the circumstance, I had done my best. Eventually, I made peace with the committee's decision. After the case was closed, I lost track of what happened to Dr. O.'s academic career and clinical practice. However, he did not escape unscathed.

ALERT THE MEDIA

My mother contacted the media, which drew attention to the racial and social class inequalities in the educational system. Actually, I never went looking for media attention. Somehow, reporters always found me. For example, a colleague had mentioned my complaint to James Brodie, a writer at *Black Issues in Higher Education*. After my interview appeared in the August 15, 1991, issue, Brodie

contacted the *Current*, our campus newspaper. The student journalists were happy to write a story about my grievance, which was published on September 23, 1991. When the Anita Hill story broke, the local television station began trolling for victims to interview. Someone at the campus clinic gave my name to a reporter. It was uncomfortable to have a camera in my face, but I strolled around campus and discussed the sexual harassment case. University officials responded with, "No comment."

I thought the request for interviews would eventually die down. However, my contact with the media increased when an administrator at the University of Missouri-Columbia campus was accused of sexual harassment. One of my feminist colleagues contacted the city's largest newspaper and informed them that sexual harassment was a serious problem at the St. Louis campus as well. Susan Thomson, a reporter from the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, contacted me for an interview. For several hours, we talked and drank coffee. I tried to forget about the interview. The holidays were coming, and I needed to buy gifts.

On December 13, 1991, a memo appeared in everyone's school mailboxes. It was very brief: "This memo is to inform you that J. O. has resigned from the Psychology Faculty, effective May 31, 1992. He has been assigned to research duties for the remainder of his tenure here." Wow, I thought, this situation is getting serious up in here! I didn't realize how serious they would become until I crawled out of bed several days later. I was still working at the domestic violence shelter as an overnight staff person. I stumbled out onto the lawn, found the morning newspaper, and gasped at the headlines: "Professor Resigns under Fire: Two at UMSL Allege Sexual Harassment." It was Tuesday, December 17, 1991, and the story was on the front page! Throughout the day, all the local television stations aired the story. My attorney decided that I should not give any more interviews until the case had been resolved.

Of course, all my professors and student colleagues were following the media coverage. They had learned two disturbing facts from the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* article: I had filed a lawsuit, and there were many more victims. Tenured professors are not typically dismissed or made to resign for making rude, lewd, or crude comments to graduate students. I was not being "too sensitive." Dr. O.'s conduct was intolerable and unacceptable to me and the other "reasonable women" who were beginning to come forward. He had to be held accountable for his behavior, and the university officials needed to be held accountable for their failure to protect their students and employees. The atmosphere was especially tense that year at the annual department holiday party. That year, I felt like Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer who wasn't allowed to join in the reindeer games. Still I held my head high, looked everyone in the eyes, and tried to be festive. On the way home, I cried in my rusty old car.

As an emerging Black feminist activist, it was important for me to participate in these media interviews. Feminism had helped me to name the sexual harassment, and the media stories enabled me to publicly attach a name and a

face to the victims. I had decided that I would no longer be ashamed of what happened to me. Instead, I would label Dr. O.'s conduct and the university's nonresponsive attitude as shameful.

Equally as important, talking to television and newspaper reporters empowered me and others to come forward. Gradually, other student victims emerged from the past. For years, L. S., my best graduate-school buddy, had endured Dr. O.'s inappropriate comments. Yet, we never shared our stories with each other. She declined to give her name to the reporters, but I appreciated her willingness to join me in the legal battle. After reading my name in the newspaper, one of Dr. O.'s former clients contacted me to share her story. Although she had moved on with her life and did not want to be publicly identified, she was willing to speak to the university officials and support me if the case went to court. Dr. O.'s conduct toward her had inspired me to file my complaint with the Missouri State Committee of Psychologists. I realized that many women had experienced far worse sexual harassment than I had. In fact, during the course of my investigation, the university officials uncovered cases that may have been felony sexual assaults. Perhaps this is why Dr. O. quickly resigned, and the university attorneys were so willing to settle the lawsuit. It still angers me that the "body count" had to get so high before the university officials were motivated to act.

Recovery

When the legal action concluded, I was 29 years old and in my 7th year of an 8-year doctoral program. This meant that I had exactly one year to complete a predoctoral internship and dissertation. The director of clinical training expressed her doubts. While pursuing the lawsuit, and despite my fatigue, I had managed to survey almost 200 participants for my study on dating violence among low-income African American youths. Still, I had to code and analyze the data, write the results, and successfully defend the dissertation. How could I possibly accomplish that while successfully completing a joint-site predoctoral internship at the University of Notre Dame and Oaklawn Hospital? Performing my duties as a therapist would require more than 40 hours or more during the week.

I began to panic. What if she was right? After all, few students had managed to complete both an internship and a dissertation in the same year. After having sued the university, I knew I would probably never be granted an extension to finish my degree. If I failed, I would be dismissed from the program without my doctoral degree. Undeterred, I sold the rusty 1977 Chevy and bought a shiny, new 1993 blue-green Saturn. I illegally parked my first

new car, with personalized license plates that read "GO WEST," in front of the psychology building. This annoyed some faculty members more than my new coffee mug that read, "I love my attitude problem."

In September, 1993, I moved to Notre Dame. When I arrived, I immediately explained my situation to my supervisors. We devised a plan. I worked with my clients during the week. On Friday night, I drove six hours back to St. Louis; on Saturday my wonderful, feminist advisors provided feedback on my dissertation, and on Sunday morning I drove six hours back to South Bend, Indiana. Although sleep deprived, I made it to work on Monday.

When I finished the doctoral training program, in the summer of 1994, my friends, family members, and feminist allies had a huge party to celebrate. Less than a week after graduation, I moved to Illinois State University to complete a teaching and clinical postdoctoral fellowship in the student counseling center and Psychology Department. Of course, I told my supervisors about the lawsuit in Missouri. It was a good year, but in the fall of 1995 it was time to move on to a postdoctoral research fellowship in family violence at the University of New Hampshire's Family Research Laboratory. Two years later, I left New England and moved to the Pacific Northwest to accept a faculty position at the University of Washington.

The road to emotional recovery was long and difficult. In addition to guilt, shame, depression, and self-blame, I had headaches, feelings of anxiety, and difficulty concentrating and sleeping. I was surly and irritable, which strained my personal relationships. There were times when it was a struggle to trust myself and my intellectual ability. Interestingly, when compared to their more traditional counterparts, sexually harassed Black feminist college women reported more psychological distress. Researchers have speculated that "double consciousness may be costly."¹⁷ Put simply, as a Black feminist, I am keenly aware of how race, gender, and social class oppression influenced my experience with sexual harassment. This awareness made it more difficult to deny my feelings of depression. Nevertheless, I was lucky. My family and friends supported me through some difficult times. Dr. Peggy Wood, an excellent feminist therapist, was another invaluable resource. Gradually, I came to refer to myself as a "Healing Victor," a woman who had been victimized but became a survivor and is now working toward healing.

I found solace in quotes by Audre Lorde, a Black feminist, poet, activist, teacher, and warrior: "When I dare to be powerful—to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid."¹⁸ "I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood."¹⁹ Equally as important, "Your silence will not protect you."²⁰ When I finally told someone about the sexual harassment, I

vowed to never stop telling. Perpetrators of all forms of violence, I had learned, relied on our silence, secrecy, and shame to further victimize us. My healing required me to continue to give interviews and lecture internationally on all forms of violence in the lives of women and children.

Teaching, writing, and activism also helped me during my recovery process. Again, I drew on the strength of Ida B. Wells, my feminist foremother who used journalism and activism in the classroom as her weapons against racial bigotry and sexism. Like Ida, the "princess of the press," I never stopped teaching women's studies courses and writing about my experiences. With the help of my mentors and feminist friends, Drs. Suzanna Rose and Beverly Greene, I discovered my academic voice. I now consider it my life's work to articulate how living at the intersections of multiple forms of oppression influences Black women's experiences with the violence in their lives.²¹ Over the years, my participation in grassroots organizing has empowered me. For example, after professional boxer Mike Tyson was accused of sexually assaulting a beauty contestant, Dr. Aaronette White launched an antirape campaign to educate the African American community about sexual assault. Along with other Black feminist activists, I was proud to sign my name to an ad that challenged rape myths and stereotypes about Black survivors that appeared in the local Black newspaper.²²

For more than 10 years I drove the 1993 Saturn. It was getting old and was held together by bubble gum and politically correct bumper stickers that read, "Uppity Women Unite" and "Call the Pierce County Domestic Violence Helpline." On the rear windshield were a rainbow flag and pink triangle, which symbolized my commitment to being a heterosexual ally to all the lesbians and gay men who had fought the good fight with me for the liberation of all oppressed people. Not surprisingly, the old Saturn was keyed and vandalized several times. Maybe someone disliked my politics? Once again, I had made myself a moving target.

Although I wanted a vehicle that was more reliable and reflected my new status as an associate professor, it was somewhat sad to leave the Saturn at the dealership. It was the last tangible thing that linked me to graduate school, since I had purchased it with the settlement from the lawsuit. I gathered my personal items from the trunk, said my goodbyes, thanked little "GO WEST" for her faithful service, and drove away in my new Lexus. I thought to myself, with the clarity afforded by feminist analysis and the support gathered through feminist alliances, I and my "attitude" had won my complaint, mobilized other women, and enabled me and other women to recover from the outrage of sexual harassment. After driving about two blocks, I turned around and raced back to the dealership. I had forgotten my old license plate frame. It read: "Black Feminist Diva"!

Notes

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African Americans Doing Feminism

Putting Theory into Everyday Practice



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