

Committee on the Literatures of People of Color

Promotes intercultural perspectives on and comparative analyses of the literatures and languages of ethnic groups historically underrepresented in the United States and Canada.

On Mentoring Graduate Students of Color

Posted on [2014/04/25](#)

The Committee on the Literatures of People of Color of the U.S. and Canada began thinking about advice for mentoring graduate students of color in 2008. Then-members Marissa K. Lopez and Daniel Heath Justice embarked on a journey to disseminate such advice. The CLPC is pleased to present two documents on mentoring graduate students of color ("[Welcome to Wonderland: Advice for Beginning Graduate Students of Color](#)" and "[On Mentoring First Generation and Graduate Students of Color](#)") and the illustrative history of their development.

by Marissa K. López and Daniel Heath Justice

"[Welcome to Wonderland](#)" has journeyed far and wide through the halls of academe to land here before you today. The twists and turns of its journey to *MLA Commons* embody some of the same stresses and pitfalls we hoped to prepare graduate students for when we began this piece in 2008.

When we began, we were responding to CLPC discussions about the need for a graduate student version of the [Guidelines for Good Practice](#) that the CLPC had prepared for faculty members of color, which appeared in *Profession 2002*. We felt strongly that it should be a collaboratively written piece that combined the range of committee members' experiences and serve as a blunt and realistic, but supportive, analysis of the profound challenges facing would-be graduate students from marginalized backgrounds. In particular, we wanted this document to be useful to students of color, Indigenous students, and first-generation students, all of whom are underrepresented in the academy. When we started writing, we imagined, as we say in our introduction "a mixed audience of faculty mentors and their students" to whom we'd offer "a condensation of otherwise available information about graduate school" and gloss it "with strategic advice and observations of how these general concerns specifically affect students of color, especially those who are planning to pursue academic careers." Our goal was not to add to either romantic idealism or bitter cynicism, but instead to offer as clear-eyed an assessment as possible of what minoritized students would face in pursuing this vocation, to do so in a conversational format that was accessible and pragmatic, and to suggest some strategies for long-term success

with health and integrity intact. It was not then, nor is it now, an attempt to be comprehensive, statistically driven, or distanced from personal experience. Rather, our larger purpose was to incorporate honestly our own relevant professional and personal perspectives with ideas gleaned from ongoing conversations with other scholars of color, first-generation scholars, and Indigenous scholars from the US and Canada.

Once the CLPC had approved a final draft we began inquiring at various journals. *Profession* turned it down, though we had initially envisioned “Welcome to Wonderland” as something of a companion to the piece on faculty members of color that had appeared there in 2002. Several other journals turned it down, too. Then *Pedagogy* published a CFP for a special issue on graduate training: we crossed our fingers and sent it off. The special issue’s editor, Leonard Cassuto, accepted the piece, but peer reviews were eventually negative. After looking through several issues of the journal we realized how far afield “Welcome to Wonderland” was from the journal’s usual social science, research-based articles, so Marissa undertook revisions to make “Welcome” look more like the journal’s usual fare.

“[On Mentoring First Generation and Graduate Students of Color](#)” is the result of those revisions. With a full apparatus of footnotes and citations, “On Mentoring” offers, as we say in our introduction there, “a nuts-and-bolts outline to working with PhD candidates who are either first generation or students of color, making readers aware of the issues such students face and offering concrete, practical suggestions on an individual level.” Addressing concerns about who our target audience was, we specified faculty mentors who might share the piece with their mentees (thereby staying true to our desire for a mixed audience), and we “arranged our advice chronologically according to a student’s progress through a graduate program.” Daniel withdrew from the process at this point, feeling that the reviewers’ expectations for Marissa’s careful revision of the piece took “Welcome to Wonderland” too far away from the original intention for him to feel comfortable claiming authorship. The journal addressed its subsequent rejection of the revised article directly to Marissa.

The rejection mirrors the kinds of rejection that first generation and graduate students of color often face as they move through their careers: without knowing precisely *why* the piece was rejected after radical and substantive revisions that met the stated expectations, the rejection sits uneasily in relation to the larger context and concerns of the two pieces. Surrounded by the rhetoric of diversity, marginalized students make their way through degree programs often with qualified, contingent support only to have, too often, the rug pulled out from under them and be unable to complete their degrees for reasons that can be vague, contradictory, or beyond their reach to respond with the relevant resources and institutional capital. The journal recognized that it was important to discuss how we can better support these groups of students, and they acknowledged that we did a fantastic job of starting that conversation, but ultimately it was a conversation that it did not want to have.

We are thrilled that the CLPC is including “Welcome to Wonderland” and “On Mentoring” on its *Commons* blog. This seems an appropriate homecoming, given that the CLPC is where these discussions took shape and where the need for these conversations is understood to be clear, urgent, and supported. Readers will likely gravitate towards one version or another based on their own mentoring style and temperament, but both pieces are written in the same spirit of paying it forward and lighting the way for future generations so that their paths might be less rocky than ours. We hope that readers find both useful and share them widely.

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