

Academic Metamorphosis

I started at the University of Maryland in 2005 as an assistant research scientist. For one short year, I toiled in the shadows, conducting research



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and writing papers and grants, while interacting with few beyond my immediate colleagues and collaborators. As soon as I joined the rank of the tenure track faculty as an assistant professor in computer science, I became a new person. Within days of my new appointment, I started receiving invitations to speak from people I only peripherally knew. Students started reaching out to me, looking for possible research projects. I had suddenly become visible, important, and respected.

Everything changed, while nothing really had. I had not published any new papers nor received any prestigious grants or awards. My research had not been recently shown to have a groundbreaking impact on some important societal problem. The research scientist “me” had the same academic profile, knowledge, and experience as

the assistant professor “me”, yet the latter got all the attention and accolades.

My experience is a stark reminder that, all other things being equal, labels carry an undue weight in how people are perceived. I say “labels” and not “rank,” as my new stature seen to be “above” that of research scientists was not due to any advantage I had over them in terms of skills, knowledge, or experience.

On our campus, the difference between professional-track and tenure-track faculty is more substantive than just prestige. Professional-track faculty, many of whom are scientific leaders in their own fields, can only be appointed as “associate members” of the Graduate School - a position that prohibits them from chairing dissertation examining committees or directing doctoral research with-

out the supervision of a “real” faculty member. A recent suggestion that the policy be amended to allow professional-track faculty to have full rights within the Graduate School was met with a surprising amount of opposition, at least in my college. The arguments boiled down to the fear that the academic class system would somehow be compromised - the difference between an assistant professor and an assistant research scientist (or any other kind of research scientist) is a fundamental chasm carefully guarded by the chosen few.

This class system is apparent and perpetuated in our undergraduate programs, even if not institutionalized through campus policies. Lecturers are rarely included in discussions and decisions about curriculum, and despite their tremendous experience

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Emily Saunders Plummer, Once Enslaved in Prince George’s County, Honored by the Maryland Women’s Hall of Fame 2018



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In a ceremony in Annapolis on March 15, Emily Saunders Plummer joined a distinguished group of women that includes Donna Edwards, Harriet Ross Tubman, Virginia Beauchamp, Katie Ledecy, Barbara Mikulski, Jill Moss Greenberg, and dozens of other important Maryland women. Each year since 1985 the Maryland Women’s Hall of Fame has recognized up to five Maryland women who have made “unique and lasting contributions to the economic, political, cultural, and social life of the state and provide models of achievement for tomorrow’s female leaders.”

For 2018, I nominated Emily Saunders Plummer, a relatively unknown Prince George’s County woman. What follows is an explanation of who she is and how I framed my nomination, but more importantly, why I nominated her.

Sadly, the legacy of slavery remains with us, for despite the removal of legal barriers, we have yet to truly overcome the color line that runs through our nation’s schools, churches, and neighborhoods. As we struggle to come to terms with aspects of that legacy, we explore and recover parts of it and honor what we can. We work to right wrongs by renaming buildings and streets, removing statues, and memorializing people like Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman. And we try to recover and share the stories of enslaved African Americans.

The poet Nikki Giovanni writes that “whatever human beings are, we are storytellers. It is our stories that give a light to the future.” And that is especially true for antebellum enslaved Af-

rican Americans. Telling their stories offers a way to recognize and honor them, to grant them respect and dignity, and to see them as inspirational role models. The unfortunate part, however, is that we have so few stories to tell. Because literacy empowers people, it was discouraged and even outlawed among slaves. As a result, the stories—both sad and triumphant—of most enslaved women remain untold. But with Emily Saunders Plummer, the situation is different.

Born in Lanham around 1815, Emily was enslaved in Prince George’s and Howard Counties, and for several years in Washington, DC. Devoted to family and faith, she demonstrated extraordinary spirit, resilience, and courage. Fortunately, we can access much of Emily’s story, but her illiteracy means that we learn it indirectly. We have a diary kept by her husband, Adam Francis Plummer, begun on their wedding day, May 31, 1841, (now at the Smithsonian’s Anacostia Community Museum and available at http://anacostia.si.edu/exhibits/Plummer/Plummer_Home.htm). Even more detailed is the 1927 spiritual memoir penned by Emily’s youngest daughter Nellie Arnold Plummer, *Out of the Depths or the Triumph of the Cross*.

Plummer family descendants call Nellie’s memoir “The Book,” and what a treasure it is! Nellie relates stories about her family that allow us to know Emily, Adam, and the eight of their nine children who lived to adulthood. Much of what Nellie relates is family lore, and so it is biased and, yes, sometimes flawed (dates, spelling—not always accu-

rate). But it is the best we have, and we can support much through research in federal documents, state and local archives, and newspapers.

On its own, Emily’s story is special for its ordinariness—she’s a devoted daughter and sister, then a happily married and loving mother, coping with the daily trials and tribulations that make up anyone’s life. But it is also special for the extraordinary awfulness that is part of that life because she is a slave who not only suffers herself, but also sees loved ones mistreated, sold away, and separated from one another. Nellie’s recounting offers hope that even those “discouraged from a different cause might prove faithful by doing right, and thus overcome.”

The institution of slavery victimized everyone associated with it, and in particular ways, women. All Southern women faced gender and class issues, and African American women dealt with the additional and significant issue of race. There is much to be learned by exploring how enslaved women like Emily lived and coped with life, dealt with happiness and sadness, and, most importantly, found power and strength. There is also much to honor as their compelling stories provide inspiration allowing them to serve as role models. For these reasons, Emily Saunders Plummer is an important addition to the Maryland Women’s Hall of Fame, not just for the telling of her own story, but as a representative for other Maryland enslaved women. Through her, we can also honor the memory of those women whose stories cannot be known.

THE FACULTY VOICE

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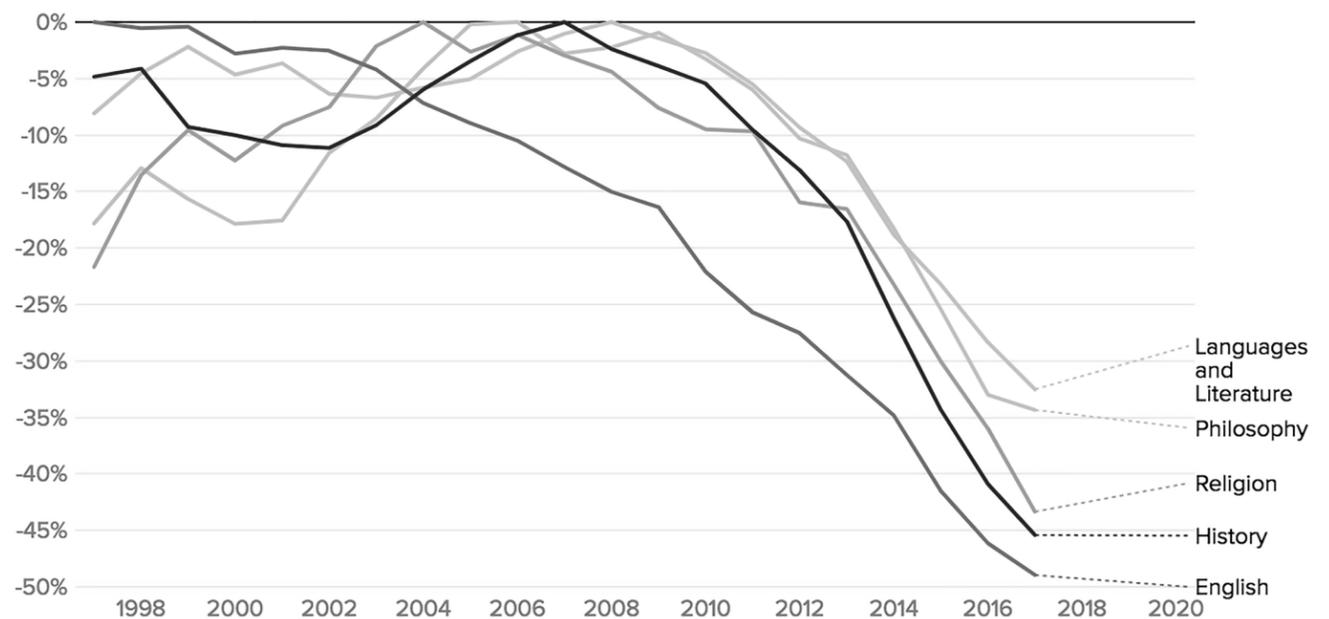
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News and Notes

The realignment of curricula and reshaping of the educational programs at colleges and universities continues apace. A few terms entered into an internet search will reveal an abundance of discussion of cause and effect, pro and con, of such things as a significant decrease in humanities subjects (e.g., <https://www.humanitiesindicators.org/>). The data is there to demonstrate it is a real phenomenon, especially over the past decade, as students opt for majors with (real or perceived) “clear career pathways.” By now, this is effecting restructuring of courses and departments, with more allocated, for example to STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields. It is occurring in all types of institutions. For example, several years ago, Stanford reports 45% of the faculty in the main undergraduate division are in the humanities, but only 15% of the students (<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/31/education/as-interest-fades-in-the-humanities-colleges-worry.html>). It is not only humanities taking a hit. The “M” in STEM, mathematics, is being dropped as a major at some institutions, as well as some types of science.

Change in Share of Humanities Majors in All BAs at U.S. Institutions, Relative to Peak



The Atlantic

Two recent local examples: Goucher College, a well-regarded liberal arts institution just north of Baltimore, is phasing out majors in mathematics, music, physics, religion, Russian stud-

ies, studio art and theater, among others (<https://www.goucher.edu/learn/provost/academic-revitalization/>).

Five years ago, the University of District Columbia (UDC) eliminated de-

grees in some mathematics, sociology, physics, history, economics, and several areas of environmental science.

Chart source: *The Atlantic*, August 23, 2018, data source IPEDS.

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and pedagogical skills, they are not involved in peer teaching evaluations of professorial faculty. Why would they? They are not “peers.”

The voice of a fresh Ph.D. assistant professor is often louder than that of the most experienced lecturer or research scientist on our campus.

It is high time for a change. Our campus cannot excel if we continue to ignore and undervalue the many faculty who shoulder the bulk of our teaching, and who represent a critical driving force in our research programs. Whether professional or tenure-track faculty, we are all faculty. The only real difference between us is the source of our salary, and the protections offered by tenure. As teachers and researchers we are equal, and our policies and attitudes must change to reflect this fact. And I would argue that it is exactly the privilege of tenure that makes it the responsibility of us, the tenured faculty of the University of Maryland, to fight in order to effect this institutional and cultural change.

As a closing thought - academic labels are not the only thing that defines our position within the academic class system. Gender, race, ethnicity, and many other attributes have been and are being used as a proxy for intelligence and expertise on our campus and in our society. Research scientists have one thing to be thankful for - like I did some 12 years ago, they can change their “label” and join the ranks of the ruling academic elite.

New Reflections on the “Arab Feminist Spring”

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both judges and lawyers, well before other Arab countries.

Building on many years of civil society activism by feminist groups in Tunisia, which have been struggling to secure gender equity on all political, economic, social, and legal levels, Tunisian women were able to consolidate solid gains and to achieve tangible successes and accomplishments, not only for themselves but for generations to come.

One remarkable example that is worth highlighting in this regard has been the passing of a groundbreaking law which fights violence against women. This historical and remarkable law number 58, which was passed on July 26th, 2017, has been hailed by feminists and activists from all walks of life for its comprehensive and holistic approach to tackling the issue of violence against women by defining it as any attempt to harm women, whether physically, sexually, economically, socially, or politically.

By doing so, this innovative and daring law, which is the first in the Arab world and the 19th in the world, expanded the definition of the term “violence” in a way that safeguards and protects women, not just in the private sphere of the home and the family, but also in the public sphere of the workplace, the political polls and political parties, civil society organizations, as well as in all political, social, and economic domains simultaneously.

It would not have been possible to successfully pass such a law had it not been for the tireless efforts of educated, empowered Tunisian women activists, who were able to effectively bridge their differences and narrow the gaps between them despite their varying ideological positions and political orientations, which varied from liberal secularism on one end of the spectrum to conservative Islamism on the other end of the spectrum, with many shades and variations in between.

Unsurprisingly, the passing of such a law is now creating a ripple effect in many parts of the Arab world, as it is starting to be echoed in other Arab countries, including Lebanon and Jordan, two non-Arab Spring countries, which are now proceeding to issue their own laws to pro-

tect women’s rights and to safeguard women’s wellbeing and welfare in much more effective ways.

There are certainly a number of useful lessons to be learned from this unfolding spectacle. First, we can never divorce the issue of women’s rights from the broader issue of “human rights.” Indeed, women’s rights are very much part and parcel of the overall human rights context and condition in any country or society, and they are both closely related. Whenever there are violations of human rights, due to autocracy, dictatorship, corruption, or anarchy and chaos, women are most likely to be negatively affected, usually more so than men, due to gender inequity, misogyny, and patriarchal power structures which disfavor women, and which are still well-entrenched in many developing countries, including Arab societies.

Second, the realities and challenges faced by Arab women are very much part and parcel of the socio-political realities and challenges of their respective countries, which have their own unique power dynamics, paths to democratization and reform, and recipes for modernization and transformation. Therefore, as the varied outcomes following the “Arab Spring” uprisings teach us, there is no such thing as a “one size fits all” path to democratization, in general, and to addressing the challenges facing Arab women, in particular.

Third, it is useful to remember that Arab women’s varied forms of activism(s), resistance(s) and struggle(s) were not born with the “Arab Spring” uprisings; rather they well preceded these uprisings by many years, and will continue to outlive them for many years to come. In other words, as much as we are tempted to hail and glorify the historical moment which accompanied these uprisings, and which brought to the forefront iconic images of Arab women’s heroism, bravery, and courage on all fronts, it is wise to remember that it is only one among many chapters and phases of Arab women’s continuous struggles on multiple levels for many decades. In fact, although Arab women played very significant roles in the midst of the “Arab Spring” uprisings, as previously mentioned, with the exception of Tunisia—the only apparent survivor

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