

## MELISSA NOBLES

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I grew up in New York, first in the Bronx. I was born in Harlem, in Sydenham Hospital. My mother was a social worker for the New York City Department of Social Work. My father was a police officer, a New York City police officer. I have one brother—a younger brother—and now a half-sister. I was raised mostly in the Bronx.

I spent some of my junior high school years and all of my high school years in New Rochelle, New York, which is a suburb of New York City. At all times I've attended public schools, in both New York and in New Rochelle. I guess what made a difference for me in both junior high school and then especially in high school were a number of black teachers. There weren't many, but the ones that were there were quite important to me. They always encouraged me and gave me insights when I needed them. There were some very important white teachers who made a big difference in my life, when I was a high school student. Their efforts would probably go unnoticed. They didn't do extravagant things, but they were always very helpful when I needed them and I am appreciative of their extra encouragement that they provided along the way.

*In that same period, what would you say about role models and mentors?*

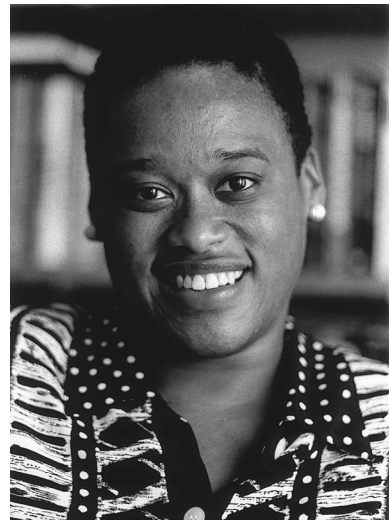
I'd say that in terms of role models, in certain ways my parents were role models to the degree that they were both very demanding about school, my father especially. If I came home and told him I had gotten a 91 on a test, he would go, “Mm-hm? That's good. Were there any 100's?” “Yes.” Implicit

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in that was wondering why I wasn't one of the ones who got the 100. So he was always quite demanding. My mother was too, although my mother died when I was a child. Consequently, I don't know how she would have been when I got to high school, but my suspicion is that she would have been as demanding as my father was. I came from a home that very much expected that my brother and I would do very well.

*Is there anything, when you think about your high school days, that just simply comes out right away as being significant in some way?*

Well, there are two things that come out in high school. One is very positive and one is very negative, so I guess I'll say the positive one first. The positive one was that I was active in school politics and was involved in school activities. I was president of my high school black culture club. I was also pres-



ident of my class for three years that I was in high school. I was active in a number of different honor societies and all of those kinds of things, in addition to doing well in my classes, so I had a wide range of interests. I wanted to be well rounded, which was also something that my parents always encouraged. They said, "It's important, of course, to do well in school, but that's not all that you are and so you have to develop all parts of your person." My high school allowed me to do that.

The negative side of that was being in classes, especially in my eleventh and twelfth years, where I was oftentimes the only black student, although my high school was probably about twenty percent black, maybe twenty-five percent black. There was a fair number of black students. But oftentimes I was one of maybe two or three, and always had my abilities second-guessed even though I felt I had proven myself. That second-guessing oftentimes did not come from teachers, but came from fellow students who were suspicious of my abilities, always trying to undercut everything I did.

For example, as I said, I was class president for three years and each time I would win, they would say, "Oh it's just a popularity contest." But of course if they were winning, they would love to be popular first of all. But second, somehow it required no talent, it required no kind of gumption, no organizing, no trying to get out and get students to support me—as if I had just won because I put my name on the ballot. It required no effort on my part. So there was always an attempt to undercut my efforts and to devalue them when, had they been doing it, then it would have been so wonderful and so valuable. My high school years were always tainted by never being fully appreciated.

There was actually one final thing that kind of stands out and that's connected to an underestimating, which also applied to guidance counselors. It wasn't the teachers, it was a guidance counselor. It was actually quite a big deal. I went to talk to my guidance counselor in the beginning of my twelfth year asking him which colleges I should apply to. I guess this isn't a thing that many black students can appreciate. So I go in and I go talk to him and I tell him a list. There was Harvard, Swarthmore, Brown, Yale. Where else? I think those were the main schools. He said, "Well, you shouldn't have any problem getting into Swarthmore. You won't get into Brown. You won't get into Yale." And he

was the person who was going to be writing one of my letters of recommendation. Of the letters of recommendation, one has to be from a guidance counselor. I said, "Well, how is that possible, Mr. Gaston?" Out of a class of 851 students, I was ranked number 55. My grade point average was 96. I was president of my class and my SAT scores were competitive. I didn't understand why I wouldn't get in. He said, "Oh, you know, it's very competitive."

I was very upset by that and I went immediately to speak to the principal of the school, who by the way was a black man. He was very supportive of me. I said, "Dr. Gaddy, this is what Mr. Gaston said. I don't believe it. I think he's racist. But more importantly, I want you to write a letter of recommendation for me because I don't trust what is going to come out of his office." He said, "Okay, I will." So he made sure that his letter superseded that of my guidance counselor.

Of course, I got into Brown, which is where I ended up going, no thanks to my guidance counselor. Now it just so happened that I felt comfortable enough with Dr. Gaddy to do that. A friend of mine had a similar experience with his counselor, where he wanted to go to Pratt Institute to become an architect. His guidance counselor said to him, "You'll never make it. You'll never get in." Well, this friend took a week off from school and made this huge model of a house that was basically the size of his dining room table. And, of course, he got into Pratt and now he's a licensed architect.

So neither one of us listened to our guidance counselors, thank goodness. That is kind of an outstanding experience of mine, and I would think that a lot of my black friends went through similar experiences.

*That's very important sharing of information about something that is quite revealing, frankly. You went to Brown.*

Yes.

*Did you have other choices and, if so, what made you decide to go to Brown?*

I had a lot of choices. Both of my parents went to all-black schools. My father went to Tennessee State University and my mother went to South Carolina State. My father had no particular preference. He thought I wouldn't like to go back to the South; he was probably right. I had been raised in

the North. I used to spend my summers in Tennessee, but I don't think I would have known what it would have been like to go to college in the South. He didn't encourage me one way or the other to think about black schools, although he might have had a preference. If he did, he didn't express it. He left it up to me.

My thinking was more of, one, staying in the North, but two, I saw myself in certain ways consciously competing against white students because I felt that if they wanted to go there, so did I. That was guiding my thinking. I visited a number of different schools. I visited Brown and I liked it the most, so that's why I chose it in the end.

*When you look at Brown, when you look back on it, what were some of the highlights in your experience on the undergraduate level?*

It actually was a fantastic experience. It had problems, of course. I was again involved in student politics and there were a number of issues going on with some actually violent incidents—it's kind of unbelievable to think about now—between black students and white students when I was there. In fact, my first year I was—myself and some other people—walking home from a party and a white student began to throw bottles at us from a dorm.

*What years were these?*

It was 1981—my first year on campus, my freshman year. He was a freshman, I was a freshperson. We were all there our first year and we were walking home. A number of black students were walking home from a party and, as kids are, we're loud and we're laughing, joking. There was a whole lot of us coming from this party. It was the weekend whereby there were newly admitted black and minority high school seniors who were visiting and considering the campus. They had been accepted and invited to come up for this weekend.

We, as students who were already there, were their hosts. We were taking them around the campus. There was a party for them. We were all walking back from the party and these bottles came out of nowhere from this dorm. It was a freshman dorm. We all knew where it was and I happened to be one of the people. I counted up the floors and we had some guys who went up to straighten it out. It ended up being rather violent, as it turned out. Punches were thrown. Of course, as we were standing there trying to get the guys to calm down, we told them to leave. By the time security

got there, they were gone. So the first thing the security guard asked us was, did we go to Brown? He didn't ask the white students in their rooms if they went to Brown, but of course our being there was suspicious. So we said, "Of course we go here. We are here walking from a party."

It ended up being a huge thing on campus, with lots of protest and the like. Around that incident, not many white students but enough began to voice the opposition that they had to black students being on campus in the ways that we were—that is, organized, fairly cohesive, typical things I imagine go on here at MIT and most other majority white schools. "Why do all the black students sit together? You all seem self-segregating." There was a special program at Brown which allowed minority students to come up a week beforehand. They have something like that here at MIT, I've heard.

*Yes.*

It causes, I imagine, similar kind of dissension among white students as it did when I was in a similar program at Brown. "You all get to make friends before we do. We don't have our friends," blah blah blah. All of the antipathy that they had against that program, as well as our mere presence, began to come out around this bottle-throwing incident. Quickly, public discussion on campus went from the particular incident to the larger issue of how black students in particular were perceived, although there was some animosity towards Asian students and Latino students for other reasons.

So that framed my experience at Brown always. What it had the end result of doing was making black students a bit more cohesive in certain ways. That caused us to have to think about why we had these programs, what was going on, what was the history of Brown. At most of these elite schools, they until very recently had not had black students. In fact, Brown did not start to admit black students in any appreciable numbers until 1970. Prior to that, they had maybe one or two a class. In my class there were, I think, one hundred—still small out of a school of six thousand students, so it wasn't like it was just a huge thing. I guess my feeling about Brown was positive educationally, positive in terms of my relationships with other black students and with some white students, but then negatively colored by that experience of the violence my first year there.

*Sounds very similar to an experience we've had here. You may know or have seen some of the "Intuitively Obvious" series, the films that we've done?*

I think I've heard of them, but I don't know if I've seen any yet.

*We should make sure you get a copy. But let me come back to Brown and ask the question about your career at that point. How did you decide or had you already decided what kind of area you were going to pursue? In doing that, were there any very influential people who helped you to move in that direction?*

I had always had an interest in politics, even from my high school years and now in college. So I figured I might study political science, but I ended up being a history major as an undergrad. In fact, at Brown we had no distribution requirements at all. You could major in whatever you wanted to and only take courses in that subject.

*Very unusual.*

Very unusual. So as it turns out, I took no political science as an undergraduate at all. I only took history courses, some Afro-Am, some English courses. I was a liberal arts major, very few sciences. My freshman year I think I took maybe a math course, a science course, in keeping with this idea that I wanted to be well rounded. But after my freshman year, that was it. I was like, "Well, I'll be narrow." I wasn't as adventurous as I had been my first year.

But it was all part of Brown's approach and I appreciated that. I didn't take any political science, so how I got to political science is somewhat separate, but early on I figured that I wanted to be an academic. I considered law, thought about it for awhile and wasn't quite sure. I kind of toyed with it in the back of my mind. I had an Afro-Am professor, Wilson Moses, who was very demanding of us. If you came to class late, he'd say things like, "Late, you hold the race back."

*He used to get on your case, right?*

White students wouldn't know what he was talking about. Black students would bust out laughing.

*They knew and he knew.*

He knew. Anyway, one day he called me to his office early one morning. I resented it. It was an eight o'clock in the morning meeting. He said, "It's the only time I can meet—get up." This is my sophomore year. I went to his office and he said, "Your papers are very good. Have you ever con-

sidered a career as an academic?" I said, "Well, I'm not sure." He said, "You really should consider it. Don't do law. You should really do this." He had a dean talk to me and then the dean called me in.

So Professor Moses was quite instrumental in putting the bug in my ear, although it wasn't until years later that I ended up actually coming to graduate school. I took time off between undergrad and graduate school. I didn't go directly. He just took the time to talk to me. He forced me to go to that meeting—as I said, I wouldn't have done it otherwise—and suggested that I do it. That suggestion stuck with me. As I said, in certain ways since in high school I had been thinking about law or a Ph.D., but it helps when a professor kind of says to you this is something that you should do.

*Absolutely, and that you're good at it.*

Right, you should do it.

*You mentioned you took some time off. Could you say a little bit more about that?*

I graduated in '85. Having decided I was going to go to graduate school and not law school, then the issue was, "Well, do I really want to go to graduate school? If I didn't study politics, why don't I do politics—that is, actually run for office or something like that?" So I moved back to New York and I was involved with a fellowship known as the CORO Foundation.

I did that for a year. I worked on a political campaign. I did a number of different things as a result of that CORO fellowship. I thought, "Well, maybe I should really just do politics," which would have meant—I was living at home at the time with my grandmother—staying there and perhaps running for a Congressional seat. I considered that for a while and thought that if I stayed long enough and became part of the Democratic politics that in the end I would want to challenge Rangel—Charles Rangel—who I thought needed to change. But I talked to enough people who said, "Hmmm, what war chest do you have?" It would have taken a lot to make me—a Harlem transplant—a viable candidate for his seat, so I ended up not doing that. I thought about it for a while and decided in the end that I wouldn't do that.

Instead, I worked for two years with a union in New York City, one of New York's Teamsters, Local 237, which represents workers who work in the public housing projects. I was in their main local running a program that they had for union

members' kids to get jobs. It was a position in the Job Training and Education Program. I was director of that for about a year and a half. That didn't work out because all the union members were bringing their kids, thinking that of course the union had a job lined up for them. That was the assumption, "whether my kid can read or write or not." Many of the kids couldn't write, so they were a real product of the failure of New York City public schools for the most part. It was discouraging on the one hand for these kids to be unable to get the jobs that their parents had, and the parents not understanding that. Whether the union could get the kids a job or not, the kids still had to know how to fill out a job application, they still needed to do basic math, and they were unable to do that.

I was discouraged by the magnitude of the problems that I was seeing. That was discouraging. Secondly, the president of my local was at the time in a feud with the then mayor of New York, Koch. Every time I had to go down to the Bureau of Youth Services in New York to get money, there was always a problem because they were feuding. I wasn't getting money, "I'm young, why am I here?" So I left and said, "Enough of putting my life on hold." That's when I applied to graduate school.

*I see. And in applying to grad school, did you go through the process similar to undergraduate?*

Actually, I didn't. One thing I didn't mention, I was taking graduate courses at night in political science at Brooklyn College. As I mentioned, I hadn't taken any political science as an undergraduate and I needed to have political science in order to pass the GREs. So I ended up taking courses at night—working in the day, taking courses at night, working towards a master's degree that my union was paying for. In the end, I didn't get the master's degree and I really didn't want it. I wanted to take the course to prepare me for the GREs. So that's what I did at night. I kept in contact with certain of my professors from Brown and I met some professors at Brooklyn College who supported me. Then I applied to grad school. So it was a very different experience from my undergraduate.

*Where did you go? Say a few words about the experience there.*

I went to Yale. In a word, I met three professors I liked. They served as mentors of sorts and continue

to be. Overall, I didn't like graduate school very much, but it was different than undergrad altogether. I was being professionally trained. I viewed it as such. My life was more complicated. I just approached it as professional training and wasn't looking for very much more than that. I think I got what it was that I came in there for, but it wasn't a pleasant experience. I was always trying to get out of my graduate program as quickly as I could.

*Can you say anything about mentoring in that process, even though it was a program that you wanted to get out of?*

Let me qualify why I wanted to be out so quickly. You're so low on the food chain. You're not a professor and the professors let you know that. You do TA-ing and the undergrads let you know you're not a professor. So it's kind of, I guess, what medical students go through when they're residents. You're in this never-never-land and your status is uncertain. You don't know whether you're going to finish the dissertation, so you're plagued with self-doubt even as you're working toward it. It was kind of an unpleasant experience in that regard.

In terms of mentoring, I did have some mentors—my dissertation advisor, one woman, and about two or three men who were quite helpful to me. Racial politics changes and gets a bit more complicated at the graduate level. There were fewer black faculty and the ones who are there you don't quite know about. That was my experience at graduate school, certainly. I tended to judge faculty members on how well they delivered. The ones who delivered I stuck with and those who didn't I didn't bother with.

*That's very understandable. I think that's an excellent way of describing a very high-level type of graduate program that I think exists in schools like the one you went to. What did you focus on in terms of your academic dissertation? I guess since then that's probably the area you specialized in.*

Right. I ended up doing work on Brazil as a regional specialization, but my theoretical-conceptual specialization has been about the politics of race, as it turns out, looking at the U.S. and Brazil. My dissertation itself looks at race categories on censuses in the U.S. and Brazil, the origins of the categories. In both places there's a very deep and important history that's obscured, about where the categories came from and the purposes to which they have been put on censuses and now

the current debates in both countries on changing those categories—that is, here in the United States adding a multiracial category and in Brazil getting rid of a category that is used to connote “mixed race.”

I was interested and wanted to talk about race, but wanted to find a different way to discuss it. One institution that I thought had not been examined at all were census bureaus. They seem fairly obvious. It’s just counting, but it’s much more than that. The categories themselves are fought about as much as the numbers are once they’re produced. So I thought that there wasn’t enough attention paid to, “Where do these categories come from?” The book that I’m writing, that I’m completing now, looks at that systematically in the U.S. and Brazil.

*I recall, I guess not too long ago, a whole issue that related to how the U.S. was going to count people from integrated backgrounds or from, for instance, a person with a mother who’s white and a father who is black or vice versa. Finally they decided, I do believe, that they would let it stay like it was in the past. That was kind of the way they do it. Have you come across anything that relates to that kind of discussion?*

Yes, absolutely. What the Census Bureau decided was unlike any other census, so there was a change. With the year 2000 census, a person can check more than one box. In the past, a person could only check one box. In fact, it has only been since 1970 that the method has been one of self-identification, meaning that one can himself or herself check the box. Prior to that, it was done by census enumerators who were given instructions. Some of what my book also discusses is these instructions, which are themselves revealing.

So it’s really since 1970 that there has been anything approaching self-identification and now, with the year 2000 census, a person being able to choose more than one box. The issue that has yet to be decided is how, in the end, that person will finally be tabulated. Let’s just say a person chooses black, white, and Chinese. They could be counted three times, but that brings the total number of persons over 100%. Do you do it by fractions? One-third each group. Do you weigh certain fractions more than others? That is, do you make the person count two-thirds black, one-third Chinese, and no white, which is something that they are considering? As one would imagine, every single

formula that the Census Bureau comes up with is hotly contested because the political stakes that are attached to it are quite high. Some of what I’m examining is how we got here and, as importantly, where the Census Bureau is likely to end up. It’s kind of a behind-the-scenes negotiating that’s going on now.

*It sounds like you’re really right in the thick of things in terms of an issue that’s related to that agency, which directly relates to a lot of things. It’s very much related to a lot of very key things that the average person may not take under consideration. Could you say a couple of things about that?*

Well, what’s at stake in census categorization are all of the social policies that hinge on it—census data—from affirmative action policies to voting rights to medical research, any number of things that hinge on census data. It’s not only racial categories as such, but we rely heavily on numbers and there’s a certain self-evidence and supposed truth in it. We make them truthful and make them important because we use them. It’s a self-evolving kind of thing where we use the data, we make up the categories, we say the category is important, we make them important, so we have to keep on having them. There’s a lot that’s at stake in it, which is why people are wrangling over it now.

There has been some discussion that the census ought not have the question, it only serves to divide, a color-blind society requires color-blind remedies. I mean, there are a variety of views. How one comes out on the census question is in many ways tied to one’s ideas about these larger social issues. But whether one is supportive of affirmative action or not, whether one thinks that the census should have the question or not, to say that the census is now political is disingenuous. The issue is that the census has always been political. What the book shows is that census categories, race categories, have been put on the census to serve particular political ends. At no point in American history has it been just counting. So the issue isn’t whether it is now. The issue is what kind of politics the census data are being used to support, and that’s what people don’t like. But to say that the census is somehow being corrupted—no way. If people consider politics corrupting, it has always been corrupt.

We’ll see what happens. But I suspect that the book will actually be—at least this is my hope and

my suspicion—quite explosive and probably cause a lot of discussion, at least the part about the history of the categories. This will be the first time that any of it has ever been written. When I was at the U.S. Archives doing this research last summer, the archivist said that no one ever asked for the census papers. I was the only person in there, as incredible as that sounds, given how much people use census data and how available it is. In Brazil, it's not nearly as easy to get the materials that I've been able to get here.

No one has ever looked at the census and just really examined it. In that regard, I think that the book will be an important contribution to American historiography. But in addition to that, it will probably cause a fair amount of trouble on a lot of sides. A lot of people will be disturbed by what is written, I think.

*Well, it sounds like it's going to be a very exciting book. I think so.*

*I look forward to having a copy of it. When is it due out?* It depends on how quickly I can get it to the press. We hope to get it out before the year 2000 census. The year 2000 census begins on April 1, 2000. Although it seems like you have plenty of time, you really don't when you consider what it takes to get a manuscript ready to be out in a bookstore. I'm working under a deadline and I'm hoping to meet it.

*Let me come back and at least try to see if we could talk a little bit about how you got here. How did you get to MIT and what were your first impressions of this place?*

How I got to MIT is not very glamorous at all. I'm not quite sure what's particularly exciting about it. I was writing my dissertation and I had about two chapters written. I was living here in Boston. Although I went to school in New Haven, I moved up here to Boston. I wanted to get away. I was mostly concerned about just getting good chapters written. I had the full support of my committee, which was very important. They wrote very strong letters for me. I saw an ad in the *Political Science Newsletter* about a job here in comparative politics, and I applied. I got a call saying that they wanted me to come in for a job talk. So I came in and I gave my job talk. Shortly thereafter they made me an offer, which I tried to take slowly and coyly and tried to get as much as I

could prior to saying yes, although I had no competing offers. That worked out fairly well.

I thought it ironic that I would end up at MIT, considering that my dissertation, and now my book, look at census data—you know, numbers, at a place like MIT that worships numbers—but in a highly critical way. I thought it ironic, but I found that the faculty in this department—and I get the sense from the Institute at large—more than anything it's a critically thinking faculty. At least here, rather idiosyncratic, everyone does his or her own thing. In that regard I noticed a certain freedom, at least intellectual freedom, that made them interested in my project.

A lot of other schools now think what I'm doing is interesting because all of the stuff about the year 2000 census is starting. But when I first started in the early '90s, no one thought that the census was a topic. My faculty at Yale, one of them in fact told me flat out she didn't know whether I had a project. I then dumped her from my committee, of course. But that my faculty at Yale and now the faculty here at MIT had some foresight was encouraging. I sent out my application to a number of schools, but MIT was the only place that offered me a job talk.

*Interesting. You sense that MIT seems to be a place where people have a certain amount of freedom just to do their thing. Clearly, this is after two years, right?* Actually, now I'm into my third year.

*Okay, three years. That's even more impressive in terms of what you are saying. Reflect, though, on your overall experience here. Identify what you consider of special significance in your academic, professional, and social life here. In all those respects, when you look at it overall, what would you say about it?*

These are the early impressions and they are deeply informed by being a junior faculty member. Where one is trying to figure things out, one doesn't want to have too many institutional allegiances because you don't know whether you're going to be here. Nor do you want to act as if you don't want to be a part of it because you don't want to send messages that are contrary to what it is that you want. You want to be a team player, such as it is, and not overdo that role but neither underplay it. That is kind of a tightrope that we all walk.

So my feelings about MIT have been formed by that. They also have been formed by being in a

department that is relatively marginal to the overall functioning of the institution, that is, as a school of science. The main schools are engineering and science, as everyone knows, and I'm coming from two major liberal arts institutions—Brown and Yale—where I'm unaccustomed to being really part of science. I'm marginally connected to the overall mission of the Institute, so it presents a weird kind of dynamic. But ironically, that is what I find attractive. It's where I find the freedom, because you can work in relative obscurity, not having to worry. I mean, you have to worry about Institute politics, like all departments have to, but there are ways in which I feel as if I'm just allowed, and I've assumed that my main job is to do a good first book and to make my place, kind of claim my place without being overly concerned about department politics in ways that friends at other kinds of institutions have to deal with.

So in that way I find it an interesting place and a freeing place relative to where I could be. Now I'm thinking about other friends who are at other kinds of institutions where department politics are much more on the surface, which is not to say that there are not department politics here. Of course there are. As a junior faculty person, though, I try to lay low. I see what's going on and always calculate and figure out what will hurt me to get near it, what won't hurt me to get near it, and what might help me. That's how I make my determination. But the helping is always connected to how will it further my projects, whether it is getting money for my research, getting me more visibility. It's always connected to improving the quality of my work and less concerned about making friends as such. If people want to be my friends, they'll be friends with me because they think I'm doing good work. I found that that's the only way that I can operate because at least it gives me some security. It might be illusory, but it seems more secure than just trying to make friends.

*What would you say has been best about your experience here and what has been worst about your experience here?*

Not to be too repetitive, it's the freedom I think that is the best here, the material, the entire resources that are available—from low teaching loads, small numbers of classes to lots of time and relatively abundant resources. Those are the best things.

The worst things, there are two things that are troubling. One is an overarching concern, which is that there are not enough black faculty—which is an ongoing issue—and a relative lack of cohesion among faculty generally and then black faculty in particular, though there are efforts being made from time to time. Once the rigors of the academic year start, I fully understand why it's so difficult for people to come together. I don't begrudge that too much, but I'm always heartened when the university looks like they're making efforts—aggressive efforts—at recruiting black faculty. One would hope that it would go beyond lip service. So whether it would be the MLK visiting professorship program—I sat on that subcommittee, attended meetings not very regularly—nonetheless the idea is that there is this program that's been established and that's helping.

I don't know if it's the worst thing about the place, but what makes it a challenging place to be is that it's such a competitive institution. There is no down time. That's part of the territory being here, but it takes its toll from time to time.

*Based on your own experience, is there any advice you might offer to other young blacks who would be entering or who thought of pursuing not only MIT but your kind of field? If you had to give advice to a young person starting out, even at the level of an undergraduate, what kind of advice would you give?*

I would tell them first to make sure that if they want to do a Ph.D. in political science and become a professor, they really, really need to be interested in politics. That might seem to be obvious, but oftentimes people choose professions because they think that they should or they have to—that it's the right thing to do, or “I do well in my poli sci courses.” But that and being interested in poli sci are two entirely different things. One could really do well in courses and still not be interested in it, not have any kind of deep interest. In the end, that interest is what gets you through writing the dissertation and gets you to work every day. If you're not interested in it, then don't bother. That would go for anything—law, medicine—prestige, money, the lure of all those things in the end don't get you there. At least they don't get you there happily. There are many people I know who are professors, doctors, and lawyers who are unhappy, and they are unhappy about the career choices that they made. They are, in effect, life choices as well.



So the first thing I would tell people to do is to make sure that whatever they do, they are interested in it and that that interest is separate from money, prestige, et cetera. Assuming that there is that interest, then one should take as many courses as one can and do well in them and read a lot and prepare and engage in independent preparation in addition to whatever faculty tell you to do.

The obvious thing, finally, is to find some mentors. Some of my mentors that I have found I have found them in spite of myself. They found me, jumped in my face. I haven't always been the most aggressive seeker-out person. I never aggressively sought out mentors, but when I have it's been a rewarding experience. Upon reflection, those who sought me out made a big difference in my life. My thinking would be to tell someone to look for a mentor, or put yourself in a position for someone to find you.

*My next-to-last question is related to suggestions of ways that you would give to MIT on how we could improve or enhance the experience of young black faculty members coming to an institution like this.*

One thing that I think MIT does fairly well, though I might be speaking out of turn here, is at providing invisible supports—that is, money and those kinds of things that will get people here and keep them here. Since everyone talks about there being so few black faculty, black graduate students who are graduating from graduate school—and while there does appear to be a paucity, there are some, there are not *none*, but there perhaps are not as many as one would like—those that are out there are in turn quite desirable. People want them. So MIT, I think, has to continue to offer money like most schools do.

The second thing that they need to do—in political science, I can only speak about political science—is accept more black graduate students so that you can produce black Ph.D.'s, if this claim is partly true at least that there are a small number of qualified black graduate students in the end that are coming out with Ph.D.'s from institutions that MIT hires from. There are only about five such institutions. Every time I look at who gets invited here for job offers, they only come from about five or six schools. If you're not coming from certain schools, there is a built-in bias against you. So if that is the case, then black students should be coming out of those schools. First, black students

should be accepted into those schools, and second, once they are there, given the proper kind of mentorships and the like.

Let me go back just for a minute. When I was at Yale as a student, one faculty member said, "We're going to have a meeting to talk about black graduate students." The subtext of that meeting was, why are there so few? In my class, there were two. Out of a small class, a class of twenty, there were two of us. The other student was from Stanford. So Dean and I came to this meeting and the meeting wasn't just about black students as such. It was about how to diversify our department or something. It was open to all faculty and all students, graduate students in particular. Of course, no faculty showed up except for this one guy who ended up being one of my advisors—a white guy—and myself and Dean, both black students.

So we came to this meeting and we said, "Okay, we're going to have a meeting if there's only three of us." The faculty member asked, "Well, what can we do to get more black graduate students?" I said, "Well, one thing we can do is to start identifying early on talented undergraduates." I recounted the story that I told you about the faculty member who pulled me aside. And I said, "I've sat in on enough classes as a TA and I've seen enough students, black students, who are taking political science courses and some who have done quite well, so I see no reason why they can't be approached and at least encouraged to think about graduate school—although if these students are so talented, many of them will choose more lucrative professions like law, mostly, or business. But nonetheless, that should not preclude our asking them to think about Ph.D.'s."

He listened and he said, "You know, I have to be honest here. Many white faculty are scared of black students." I said, "Excuse me? What do you mean by scared?" He said, "They are afraid to approach them." Then I asked him, "Do you think these students are going to rob you? If you don't want to talk to these black students at Yale, some of the most deeply assimilated wanna-be black students"—I told him this, perhaps impolitic—"if you are not willing to accept them, you don't want to meet black people. I mean, you don't because you can't get any who are safer than the ones who are walking into these classes and who are nearly, some of them in their class backgrounds and more importantly with their physical demeanor and affect,

indistinguishable from white students with the exception of their skin color, frankly.” I used to hear them talk and I didn’t know who was talking. “So if you don’t want to talk to these black students, you don’t want to talk to black students at all.”

*One of them needs to meet a brother down in Harlem.* That is what I’m saying, you know what I mean? “If you won’t talk to them . . .” Now we’ve got some black people walking around in New Haven. “Evidently you don’t want to deal with black people, period, because you won’t meet any who are more capable of meeting you on your terms than the students who are in this university today. So what is it? None of this business about qualifications. That has nothing to do with this because you can’t find a more talented pool of black students ready for graduate school than certain of the ones who are sitting in these classes.” This notion of qualifications whirls around, and we don’t have a large enough number of qualified black students. But that really isn’t the problem because, even when confronted with qualified people who meet the standards on their terms, there is still resistance, and that resistance is somehow connected to race in ways that white people are generally unwilling to acknowledge, but that is part of the interactions.

I’m not sure how one gets beyond that. That’s really, I think, what most black professionals now are facing in the post-civil rights or at least post-segregation era—being in situations where everyone thinks you ought to be there, slightly convinced that you should be there, although when they don’t like you then all of a sudden you become the affirmative action hire used in a pejorative way, not in the positive way that affirmative action policies are intended for. So you’re always in this limbo where they’re not quite sure what to make of you. They want to like you but don’t know how. Some are still afraid. You might have been the only black friend they’ve ever met. And all of these dynamics are a part of professional life.

In that sense, I don’t know what MIT as an institution can do, but I do think that the pronouncements from President Vest have been very encouraging in the sense that he frequently says that we have talented people here, that everyone is a part of the MIT community, and his constant pronouncements that everyone is talented, every-

one is qualified without making these qualifiers—“including our black students, including our Asians, including our Hispanics,” although Asians’ qualifications never seem to be questioned in the way that Latinos’ and blacks’ are. But as long as there is a way in which everyone is thought to be a part of the institution, it seems to me that it undercuts in a subtle way people who want to start singling out different groups of people.

We’re all here. It’s important that the president sends a message that this is a place where everyone is welcome, that your talents bring you here, and that your talents keep you here—“We’ll make every effort to keep you here and we are aggressively looking to bring in more talented people.” The rhetoric is important. Of course, it has to be matched with action and that appears to be where MIT is stalling, or at least not as aggressive as it should be. That’s discouraging.

But I guess I’m encouraged and discouraged at the same time. I’m kind of speaking out of two sides here. I talk to my friends at other places and MIT certainly never comes out any better, but it doesn’t come out any worse either. It comes out about on an even keel—in some ways a little bit better, in some ways a little bit worse. So in the end, I feel like it’s making progress inasmuch as the nation is making progress. It doesn’t appear to be a trend-setter, but it doesn’t appear to be behind the trend either. It tends to be in the bunch.

Now whether that’s acceptable for MIT is another story. We certainly aren’t stellar in this regard. MIT appears unprepared to do what Harvard is doing, which is basically giving someone a whole lot of money and getting him out there to recruit every talented black faculty they can find. It requires a certain aggressive policy. Harvard has been able to get so many talented people because they have given Skip Gates the money to do it.

*Do you approve of that?*

I don’t know what I think about it, frankly. The problem with the superstar thing going on at Harvard—and I can speak a bit about that more in the social sciences—is that Gates and company don’t look for any junior faculty, so it’s not like they’re trying to grow anybody. The people they get are nurtured somewhere else. So the question remains, how do people get to where they are on some kind of map such that Skip’s radar finds

them? They are making no attempt there to bring on any junior people, as far as I know, and extraordinary amounts of money are being spent on one or two people. So in the end, the goodies aren't being spread widely. There are just lots of goodies going to a few. Some of the guys are doing good work over there, some of them aren't. But whatever they're doing—if it's selling, if it has a kind of popular appeal more than academic worth—then apparently popular appeal is more important at the moment for Harvard, particularly for the W. E. B. DuBois Center. They want to have superstars there.

It's not my taste. No benefits have come my way directly. An indirect benefit might be that now faculties all over the country are looking for black people. A flip side of that has been, well, maybe we ought to have at least one black faculty member. That might benefit some people, but on the whole the goodies have not been very widely spread and certain quality scholarship still remains to be done. I'm not sure if all the people over there are willing to do it.

*That's a very important topic that I know you probably could talk more about because of your field, and most of those people are in the social sciences.*

And humanities.

*And humanities. It's a real big issue. I think it's certainly an issue that even black scholars need to talk more about because whether you like it or not, it's changing the course of the game, so to speak.*

Yes, it certainly is.

*I don't think we're talking enough about it. There are some people, I think, who are not that positive about our welfare who can use it to their advantage in the long run to limit the number of people we have coming into academia.*