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Dr. Michael Thornton Retires from UW-Madison After 30 Years

Journey of Thought & Place: Dr. Michael Thornton was one of the the first professors at UW-Madison to incorporate service learning in his class curriculum back in 2000.

By Jonathan Gramling

Part 1: *Capital City Hues*, May 4, 2020 – Johnathan Gramling

In some ways, Dr. Michael Thornton has been on a journey of thought and place. A self-described army brat, Thornton lived in four foreign countries and 15 states by the time that he was set to go to college.

“Looking back, I can’t imagine growing up that way,” Thornton said. “But we all adjust to what is considered normal. For me, living someplace longer than six months felt really weird. I read this book called *Brat*. It’s a derogatory term for military kids. I was doing things that all brats do because we were so used to moving. I would be in an apartment, for example, for a year and I would move my furniture 4-5 times. That was moving. Sometimes I would do it unconsciously.”

Michael comes from a self-described working-class background and branched out to enter the world of academia. He got a B.S. from Michigan State University and a master’s and Ph.D. from the University of Michigan in sociology and Asian American studies. He was primed to enter academia and felt that he had made it when landing a tenure-track position at Cornell University, an Ivy League school.

“When I went to Cornell, I thought I had died and gone to heaven by being hired there,” Thornton said. “I thought God blessed me and all sorts of things.”

But Thornton’s heaven turned into hell.

“There is a part of campus there that is called ‘The Plantation,’” Thornton said. “That was instructive of how they often treated many of the faculty of color there. I had cross burnings at my door. I had death threats on my answering machine. My colleagues in the department would say things at faculty meetings like, ‘His work is s**t.’ I was a junior faculty and so I felt somewhat intimidated, in part because as a working-class person, I grew up kind of respecting authority and actually accepting a lot of the crap they put on me. I was paralyzed there. It was during that time where I was sent a review and they told me, ‘We think you need to think about going someplace else.’”

Franklin Wilson, who had been chair of the UW-Madison Sociology Department, contacted Thornton about coming to UW-Madison where he was hired in the Afro American Studies Department with affiliation in Asian American Studies and Sociology. After a long academic journey, Thornton had found an academic home at UW-Madison where he stayed for the next 30 years.

“I got here and they loved what I did,” Thornton said. “It was the first time in my career — because my career started at Cornell — where I thought, ‘Maybe I am doing something worthwhile.’ This place is far from perfect, but in contrast with my time at Cornell, this was heaven.”

For the most part, Thornton was the only sociologist in the Afro Am Studies Department. He taught courses like Introduction to Contemporary Afro American Society, Mutual Perceptions of People of Color, and Race and Policing. He also spent three years as the chair of the Asian American Studies Program.

Thornton loves UW-Madison and appreciates all that it has done for him over the years. And yet he has also experienced and witnessed the issues of race, class and ethnicity that are, for the most part, endemic to any institution of higher education in America. And that took the luster off of the “heaven” that Thornton had found when he came to UW-Madison.

“This has been a very, very frustrating place in the sense that I think its ideology is wonderful in terms of diversity. In many ways, it’s been a leader in the nation in terms of stuff like ethnic studies and being persistent about that. At the same time, the best things about diversity on campus are its pockets. There is no real leadership at the top that really pushes that in terms of the top administrators like the chancellor and the provost. They delegate that responsibility to the rest of campus. What that ultimately means is that there isn’t a lot of incentive for people outside of the norm to do anything special. So diversity usually means that certain people in certain departments and certain parts of campus will be doing 90 percent of the work. That’s the truth for Year One for me and it’s gotten a little bit better over time. It’s more oscillating up and down. Some years are better than others. That’s been the most frustrating part. Some of it is that it is very naïve of me to think that any kind of institution like this would be consistently improving over time. There has been a lot of resistance to diversity from Day One and continues today.”

The place of the ethnic studies programs and department on campus has often been up for discussion as if they were more of a transplant on campus than an integral part of the university’s foundation. And discussion came up from time to time on whether they should be consolidated or remain separate entities. With relationships and responsibilities in both Asian Am and Afro Am, Thornton was on the fault line of many of those discussions.

“Over time, the discussion has usually oscillated around either we try to build up each of the entities separately,” Thornton said. “That’s never worked because that is a lot of resources. The more recent iteration of that was, ‘How do we combine them into one?’ That has become very

controversial. And the sad part to me in that controversy is it opened up a lot of fissures between the different ethnic studies entities. In some ways, I was in the middle of all of the stuff because I was with Asian Am and Afro Am and I took a little bit of leadership in terms of the discussions on a campus level. I would sometimes be running between my families, Asian Am and Afro Am. Asian Am people among one another were talking about, 'How come you people are the ones who are causing all of the problems?' 'You people' being, the assumption seems to be amongst some of the faculty in Asian Am that Black people wanted everything consolidated, so therefore, we would have all of the power if that were the case. Those kinds of fissures developed over time. And for me personally that meant I became more alienated from Asian American Studies. That is part of the result, I think, in terms of how up and down diversity was on campus. That often happens when you talk about people who have started fighting amongst each other. It's directing the energy against people you shouldn't be. Naively on my part, but you would think that academics should be more sophisticated about that. But I found out that we all have biases and blind spots as well. We often don't see our shortcomings. That disheartened me. It broke my heart in many ways. And it really came to the fore about 4-5 years ago for me, so I've been kind of, in some ways, coasting in terms of putting much of my effort into stuff like that. I knew the end was coming and I didn't know how much more to put into it and get further disappointed. That's kind of the downside to my experience here."

While Afro American Studies is primarily about the African American experience, many of its students are Euro-American with little experiential or emotional connection to the course content even if their hearts are in the right place.

"One of the things that I pride myself on is I have a lot of integrity," Thornton said. "And so, I didn't want to be paid half my salary to teach someone and do garbage stuff, even though I could be evaluated as a good teacher without doing anything extra. That made me think about how do I get them to touch other people. How do I get my students to touch other people's lives where, at the very least, they have additional information to back up what I am saying, so they can't dismiss my opinion, but also to get them to carry the understanding of the human beings as real people for the rest of their lives?"

Part 2: *Capital City Hues*, May 18, 2020 – Johnathan Gramling

In some ways, Dr. Michael Thornton has been on a journey of thought and place. A self-described army brat, Thornton lived in four foreign countries and 15 states by the time that he was set to go to college. Thornton earned his Ph.D. in sociology and Asian American Studies at the University of Michigan and came to UW-Madison for a tenure-track position in the UW-Madison Afro American Studies Department after an unsatisfactory stint at Cornell University. Thornton is deeply appreciative of his stay at UW-Madison although he experienced micro-aggressions and the negative climate that can exist for people of color on the campus.

In 2000, after he obtained tenure, Thornton focused more on the content of his classes and how he could make the experience in his Afro Am classes more real to the predominantly Euro-American students whom he taught.

“One of the struggles I always had was, ‘How do you get them to understand what that feels like to be a Black person in an environment of mostly white people even though most white people aren’t going to be bad to you,’” Thornton asked. “They ignore you. They act as if you don’t exist on the positive side. What does that feel like?’ I did the traditional things, as I describe it, where you take the students to the ‘zoo.’ You bring people in and they observe them and they talk about themselves and then they go away and you never see them again. And I noticed that the students were able to hide some of their emotions. If someone comes and talk, maybe you understand them intellectually, but you never have to dig deep to understand who you are. It doesn’t test who you are in terms of prejudice. Most white folks say, ‘I’m not prejudiced.’ And they can honestly believe that of themselves because they are never tested.”

Thornton turned to service learning as a component of his classes where the students would gain real-world experience that would make the intellectual content of his class more personally understandable.

“I got in touch with the Morgridge Center and I talked to Randy Waller, who was associate director at the time,” Thornton said. “That opened up my eyes to service learning, so I’ve been doing that for about 20 years now. That led me to really focusing much more on teaching because — to be honest and I think this is true of most people who like to teach — you get a lot more feedback, a lot more immediate feedback and satisfaction in that process because it’s a human process as opposed to a research process where maybe, if you are lucky, 100 people will read whatever you wrote. But you don’t see or feel any tangible difference. I’m not one of those stellar scholars. I have some groupies, but not a lot. I hear from them, but it really isn’t satisfying. But teaching, in that sense, became much more satisfying.”

Given the sense of journey that has pervaded his life, it is not surprising that Thornton and his wife will be moving to the Tampa Bay area once the bulk of COVID-19 is behind us. He has plans to find a lot to do.

“If I just laid in the sun in Florida, I would be dead within a month and I’m not ready to die yet,” Thornton said with a laugh. “I still like my research, so I’m going to continue to do that. That’s half of what I am going to do. The things I’m still working through is I want to work with non-profits. I want to use my expertise to help them. Maybe I can do research. Maybe I can do a lot of other stuff for them. At the same time, I don’t want that to be my main focus. I want to get involved in community there, if nothing else, to dig into the community in a way that perhaps I didn’t do here and get closer to the community. It’s kind of like going home again because that is the population that I grew up with. I still struggle. Inside I’m working class.”

In some ways, Thornton will have come home again in the Tampa Bay area that has a large working-poor community and is home to MacDill Air Force Base. And he will continue the struggle.