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Deep North: Assistant Professor of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Sonja Tomas Pushes Students to Confront the Uncomfortable

Mareisa Weil

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DEEP NORTH

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR
OF WOMEN'S, GENDER,
AND SEXUALITY STUDIES
SONJA THOMAS PUSHES
STUDENTS TO CONFRONT
THE UNCOMFORTABLE

BY MAREISA WEIL

Sonja Thomas's family was brown-skinned in a vast ocean of whiteness.

This was in eastern Montana, where her father moved the family from Washington D.C. to take a job as a medical doctor at the local VA clinic. Thomas was the fourth of six children in a strictly observant Catholic household. Growing up, Thomas and her family experienced racial discrimination in small and large ways.

"My dad faced a lot of discrimination in the hospitals; from other doctors, from patients who didn't want him to touch them," Thomas recounted. "My mom going to every single one of our basketball games and nobody's sitting by her and nobody asking her to be part of the booster club." In high school, during a discussion about nuclear proliferation, a teacher told the class that "gooks and Japs are out to get us."

But there is, of course, another side to that story.

"There are also people in Montana that I grew up with that are the most hardworking, loving people I've ever met in my life," Thomas was quick to point out. "A lot of professors that I meet

do not come from rural areas. So I have a hard time explaining to them what it's like to be in school with people who get up at four or five in the morning to take care of the horses and the farm stuff, come to school; have school dances every Friday, Saturday night that are mostly country music and everybody two steps."

This dichotomy sparked in her a lifelong passion for justice, equality, and the exploration of intersectional identities that now lights up her classes at Colby.

Thomas's approach to her scholarship is interdisciplinary, with an emphasis on feminist and critical race theory, and she cites scholars Sara Ahmed and Kimberlé Crenshaw as inspirations and influences.

"What I love about teaching at Colby is that I have freedom to do innovative things," said Thomas. "I can put things together that I think are supposed to be together in this interdisciplinary way and come up with assignments that challenge and reward my students." That has meant asking students to write a hypothetical memo to Indian constitution

delegates about minority protections, or a full-fledged grant proposal for an NGO of their own creation.

Thomas teaches a class on critical race theory through the African-American vernacular tradition of tap.

Just as she encourages students to see discrimination around them, Thomas isn't afraid to mine her own life for research inspiration. This fall, she published a book, *Privileged Minorities* (See P. 38), that explores the history of her parents' minority religious tradition, Syrian Christianity, a sect that does not refer to nationality but to Saint Thomas Christians who perform their liturgical mass in the Syriac, or Aramaic, language. Through a feminist lens, she examines the relative privilege of Syrian Christian women compared to other classes, castes, and religions, while also using it as a case

study to explore subjugation and domination of women and religious minorities on a broader scale.

One of the hurdles in talking about structural, systemic discrimination, says Thomas, is people's impulse to defend their own individual actions and belief systems ("I have black friends," "I

teach my kids the importance of diversity") at the expense of examining their place in a system where race, gender, and ability are real factors in people's differing experiences.

She says the biggest thing is for her students to take a risk.

"Teaching race in central Maine, I have predominantly white students, who come into the classroom, who are going to really talk about race."

Many of those white students are uncomfortable, Thomas said. "I hear a lot of, 'I don't want to say something if it's not on the right track.' I have to push back and say, 'Silence is not a right track either.'"

How to guide that conversation?

"I always ask that we steer clear of personal experience as the beginning and end of our analysis," Thomas said. "Rather, if we must start with personal experience, we need to delve further into the ideas the texts/authors are presenting. And not shut down discussion by using our own racial authority and racial authenticity."

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—Sonja Thomas,
assistant professor of women’s, gender,
and sexuality studies