correspondents at large

Here on the Margins: My Academic Home

PATRICIA A. MATTHEW

To create space where there is unlimited access to the pleasure and power of knowing

—bell hooks

IT'S NOT NEWS, OR IT SHOULDN'T BE, THAT THE ACADEMY IS STRUCTURALLY HOSTILE TO MEANINGFUL DIVERSITY.[1] THE REASONS FOR this are numerous, and many of them are represented in *Written/Unwritten: Diversity and the Hidden Truths of Tenure*—an anthology I edited that features essays and interviews with academics of color. It includes interviews with Houston Baker, Jr., a past MLA president, and Cheryl Wall, Board of Governors Zora Neale Hurston Professor of English, along with an essay by Wilson Santos, an artist, poet, and adjunct professor. I framed the collection with an introduction that shows how the rhetoric of merit used to deny faculty members of color tenure was once used to deny them employment at predominantly white institutions and a conclusion that explores how social media are reshaping how academics of color cope with institutional racism. It's not work I planned to do, and until I stumbled on bell hooks's writing about marginality in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* during my research for the project, I had mixed feelings about it.

On one level, the work felt vital. A slew of denials of tenure to qualified faculty members of color around the country made it clear that the personnel problems I'd experienced and seen were not about individual shortcomings but a sign that institutions were getting diversity wrong and not just in areas of the country where we like to think racism lives. I considered the anthology a service project for the humanities and for faculty members of color who are regularly made to feel that they don't belong and, worse, that it's their fault. What my project meant in practical terms is that I was turning my back on the kind of career I planned when I first became a professor—or, to be more precise, the kind of relationship I imagined I would have with the academy as a scholar and a teacher.

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Trust me when I say that not many white academics want to have an in-depth conversation about diversity. It makes them uncomfortable at best and resentful and angry at worst. I figure they know a person of color from their graduate program who got a job they felt entitled to, or, assuming a level of professional mobility that ignores the limited number of diverse communities where academics of color can live, they believe that after a dismissal we'll "go on to become diva[s] somewhere else," as a white female colleague told Sarita See a few days after See was denied tenure by the English department at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (Matthew). We are all of us masters at complaining about our lot—the job we missed out on, unprepared students, administrators who don't believe how hard we work. We complain that nobody reads (insert here a canonical figure, a period, or a genre) anymore. It's one of the ways academics bond. However, those common woes can ring hollow when shared with colleagues who face an academy that regularly assumes they are administrative assistants, student workers, or, as a young woman told me at the 2014 College Language Association convention, housekeepers. It's certainly disappointing if, say, one's essay on hermeneutics and Austen is rejected, but that setback pales in comparison to the experience of three doctoral candidates at Northwestern University, who opened the *Chronicle of Higher Education* one day to find a Harvard-educated columnist dismissing their entire field by mocking their dissertations one by one (Riley). These are not the woes that make for easy banter before department meetings.

Deciding to split my research time between Romantic-era literature and work on diversity issues meant embracing a kind of marginalization I imagined would be a transitional phase I'd survive on the way to tenure. Choosing to confront these problems has meant forgoing a fairly neutral professional identity as a specialist in Romantic-era fiction. I meant to be in the pages of *PMLA* talking about Shelley's *Valperga* or Edgeworth's *Belinda*, or this theory I'm trying to hammer out to describe why and how women novelists in the early nineteenth century borrow from other genres (theater, poetry, pamphlets, etc.) to save unruly women from narrative censure. Like many scholars of color, I knew I would have activism as part of my professional career, but I thought my activist contribution would be working with at-risk youth in local high schools. My first book was supposed to be a monograph about the intersections of the history of the novel, disease discourse, and cross-genre narration, not an anthology focused on the experiences of faculty members of color.

As a result, my career is unfolding on the margins, and, after struggling with what that means, I've realized I quite like it, in part because of the colleagues of color I've met along the way and in part because bell hooks helps me reconsider marginality: "Marginality [is] much more than a site of deprivation; in fact . . . it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance. . . . I was not speaking of marginality one wishes to lose—to give up or surrender as part of moving into the center—but rather of a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one's capacity to resist" (149–50).

I am an Air Force brat who moved every eighteen months during the first half of my life, so I learned early to try to get along. I've also always had what people call leadership skills, so by the time I was finishing graduate school, professors started coming up to me at random moments, wanting to be the first to tell me that I would be a university president someday, or a provost, or a dean. I didn't have such aspirations and imagined I would be content doing meaningful work as a member of the faculty. I believed that consistent hard work and professionalism would result in respect, or at least the benefit of the doubt. It has taken me years to figure out that this is not true. No amount of hard work and

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collegiality can make someone part of a profession designed to exclude her.

It's been a painful process (I will never forget one dean who spat at me, "That's not true," when I told her I'd drafted three chapters of my book) and a maddening one (the dean who responded to my suggestion that our college could be a perfect site to develop a pre-graduate-school program for underrepresented students with, "Yes, we can teach them how to dress") and one that has offended my common sense (the now retired provost who explained that he didn't want to tell us on the faculty that "in print" was the standard for tenure because then we would want to know how many publications he was looking for). Managing the painful, the maddening, and the offensive has shown me the degree to which what passes for merit in our profession is a construct. Throughout the personnel process, committee work, and the evaluation of teaching, faculty members and administrators use criteria and coded language that are presented as neutral and rigorous but are actually much more subjective and capricious than many want to believe. Patricia Williams describes a troubling disconnect in her criticism of the law: "much of what is spoken in so-called objective, unmediated voices is in fact mired in hidden subjectivities" (11). Ilan Stavans puts it more bluntly: "Everyone knows the formula: Academics + power = mendacity." Understanding this formula was depressing at first and then, astonishingly, liberating.

After ten years of trying to fit in, here's the calculation I worked through. It's entirely possible that I've brought the painful, the maddening, and the offensive on my own head. It's possible that I'm not an honest person, dress badly, and can't be trusted with information about how my work will be assessed by faculty members and administrators. But what if this is not the case? If merit is a myth, if "academic judgment" actually means academics trying to institutionalize their own experiences at the expense of their colleagues, and if the specter of "uncollegiality" is usually raised when I won't do what people want, then perhaps I was free to pursue whatever work seemed meaningful to me.

As someone raised on respectability politics—the notion that success and respect will accrue to black people if they just work hard, act right, and keep their pants pulled up—I was initially devastated by this realization. And then I wasn't. Wiser black women, and my favorite colleague, Janet Cutler, understand this as Audre Lorde's oft-repeated claim about the limits of using the master's tools to tear down the master's house. I've come to think of it as an invitation to develop entirely new communities, in new spaces, with a fuller understanding of Lorde, in the spirit of hooks: "Black women resisted by making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts . . . where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public world" (42). She is talking about home as a physical space, but I think of it as an intellectual space and the virtual community I built while doing the work for the anthology and sharing that work through social media.

I've found a home here on the margins. I've found a space to explore what is best about the different forms my work takes. In the spirit of the proverb "Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend" (*New Marked Reference Bible*, Prov. 27.17), I have found other scholars who are black like me, who affirm and challenge me at the same time, who strip me of my easy narratives about myself. They help me determine which of my feelings I should give license to and which just need a rant. They save me from the professional isolation that comes when there are too few people who are black like me in classroom after committee meeting after conference room.

In this home I've found an outlet for my need to teach and mentor beyond the class-

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room. Hooks writes, "When black women renew our political commitment to homeplace, we can address the needs and concerns of young black women who are groping for structures of meaning that will further their growth, young women who are struggling for self-definition" (48). I read this as a call for mentorship, and I take it seriously. Faculty members of color now seek me out for advice and support, and this has me reimagining how I can contribute to this community I've pulled together. What, I've asked myself, if I apply my "leadership skills" not to institutional work but to helping colleagues of color manage the microaggressions they face in their departments? I find myself daydreaming of organizing programs for new PhDs of color, and as I edit this essay, toning down the rage while sharpening the critique, I'm preparing my first series of teaching workshops for graduate students of color.

And here I've found the mentors I have needed over the years. I've mostly figured out the land mines of the academy, but it has been harder than I imagined to be a black Romanticist. No amount of self-confidence can mitigate the unbearable whiteness of the annual meeting of the North American Society for the Study of Romanticism. I've met colleagues who have offered invaluable support (Steven Behrendt and Bonnie Gunzenhauser come to mind immediately, and Miriam Wallace's commitment to diversity is deep and unwavering), but there's been nothing like the relationship I've had with Kim Hall, a senior scholar of color I met while conducting workshops on racism and feminism at Barnard. Before and after each workshop, Kim was there with an institutional perspective that confirmed that the narratives in *Written/Unwritten* are more than anecdotal. The author of *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* and the editor of the St. Martin's edition of *Othello*, Kim is also a natural mentor and genuinely interested in my work with Romantic-era fiction. Our conversations are a mix of both of the fields I've come to call my own.

Having completed *Written/Unwritten*, I've turned my full attention to my Romanticism book. In addition to chapters on *Belinda* and *Valperga*, I want a chapter on metaphors of slavery. I was describing this chapter to Kim over dinner one evening, going on about all I planned to include in it, when she stopped me and said that I didn't have a chapter so much as an entire book project. I've engaged in different kinds of writing groups and communities over the years, but to sit and talk about this book with someone who understands both my field and my experience as a woman of color in it is rare. It is a gift. The chapter topics came to me as I practically jogged home to write them down. So here, on the margins, I have found a third book project: bringing my two foci together in ways I could never have imagined near the center where I thought I wanted to be.

Note

1. See Stephen Cesar's "Study Faults UCLA's Handling of Faculty's Racial Bias Complaints"; Stephanie Evans's *Black Women in the Ivory Tower, 1850–1954*; *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia*, edited by Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs et al.; Pamela Hagg's "Is *Collegiality* Code for Hating Ethnic, Racial, and Female Faculty at Tenure Time?"; *Mentoring Faculty of Color: Essays on Professional Development and Advancement in Colleges and Universities*, edited by Dwayne Mack et al.; Christine A. Stanley's "Coloring the Academic Landscape: Faculty of Color Breaking the Silence in Predominantly White Colleges and Universities"; Jennifer Lisa Vest's "What Doesn't Kill You: Existential Luck, Postracial Racism, and the Subtle and Not So Subtle Ways the Academy Keeps Women of Color Out"; and *Telling Histories: Black Women Historians in the Ivory Tower*, edited by Deborah Gray White.

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