

1987 PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

"Campus Stories, or The Cat Beyond the Canvas" Patti P. Gillespie

Jane Blankenship told me that the best part of being an SCA president was the opportunity to travel about the country giving epicurean addresses. I have concluded, regretfully, that I lack Dr. Blankenship's talent for epicurean. In the absence of inspiration, I have tried to substitute perspiration. I first followed the published advice of Campbell and Jamieson and read past presidential addresses, hoping to discover the genre in order successfully to emulate it. Borrowing from Fisher, I explored narrative, seeking help from Osborn. I studied metaphors, and from Bormann, fantasies.

Although each of these exercises gave me great personal pleasure, none gave me a subject, the thing that I most craved. Normally, I would seek a subject from my own area of research, but my situation is complicated here, because my own research is at some distance from yours: I work in theatre's theory and history, fields that are increasingly distant from even the most generous definition of communication.

Just when I had begun to despair of finding a suitable subject, my students inadvertently came to the rescue, as they so often do. Their views, together with those of some public officials, have brought me again to the subject of education within colleges and universities, and I want to move to that subject indirectly and begin by telling you a personal experience, an experience that gave me the title for these remarks. I have called my talk *Campus Stories, or The Cat Beyond the Canvas*.

As some of you know, I try to spend part of every other summer camping in Kenya. During my last trip in Amboseli, I was awakened just before daybreak by the sound of furiously pounding hooves that grew closer and closer to my tent. There was a horrible cry that intermingled with growls until both seemed within a few feet of where I was lying. Suddenly the cries and growls stopped, and all I heard was a very deep vibrating sound, not unlike soft growl, or perhaps—ominously—a soft purr. Not daring to open the tent to look out—that 1/16 of an inch of canvas being all that protected me from whatever was going on right next to me—I tried to decide what I had heard, what had happened.

Gradually, as I thought about it, the sequence became clear to me. A zebra had been fleeing a lion, who had caught it just outside my tent and was now feasting on it. The five of us in the camp would remain hostage inside our tents until the heat of the day when the lion, satisfied and sleepy, would move away from us. Very well, I thought, I will try to calm down and wait. I waited. I had only begun to regret my last night's beer when I heard what sounded like human footsteps—yes, they were human because I next heard the unmistakable sound of pots and pans. The cook was out of his tent. Thinking him slightly mad, I dressed hastily, looked out carefully, and then joined him hurriedly at the fire. "Where was

the lion kill?" I asked in butchered swahili. "No lion," he said, "hyena fight."

Embarrassed as only a tourist can be, I resolved not to make such a silly error again. A couple of weeks later, on a hillside outside Maralal, I was awakened to hear a horrible replay of those same noises, again quite close to my tent: pounding hooves, loud growls, low purrs. This time I remained proudly unafraid. Although the cook seemed a bit late in rising, as soon as I heard him up, I joined him at the fire for coffee. "Hyenas," I said, confidently. "No, he said," pointing not very far away, "Lion kill."

This tale is cautionary: things may not be as they seem; things may not be as we hear them to be. And indeed, some things are not as we hear them to be in higher education.

For example, for complex reasons that are irrelevant to my point, we at Maryland have been lately called to discuss—to reconsider—the role of blacks and women in higher education. As I have participated in such discussions, I have discovered that most of my students now strongly support equal opportunities for black and women faculty and students. Most concede that equal opportunity probably did not exist before about 1970 but that, since then, such equality has been achieved. On the other hand, they generally object to affirmative action, arguing that such efforts fundamentally discriminate, favoring women and blacks at the expense of more qualified candidates (about whose race and sex they are mute). They are mostly bored by references to feminism because they are convinced that capable women in the colleges and universities of 1987, unlike those in the 1960s and early 1970s, are equitably treated.

Thinking that—no, let me be perfectly honest—hoping that my students' views were the result of youth's idealism, I asked an entirely unscientific sample of my faculty colleagues how they felt about these issues. From one I learned that making special efforts to recruit women and black faculty had been rendered illegal by recent decisions of the Supreme Court; from another I learned that GRE scores were the best way to make admission decisions because of their objectivity; and from a third I learned that the University's new policy on sexual harassment threatened to prevent the use of the exclusionary male pronoun *he* in classes.

For those here who might not understand my dismay with these responses, let me explain that recent Supreme Court decisions have upheld affirmative action plans; that GRE scores, which supposedly predict academic success, rate women consistently lower than men even though women, as a group, make consistently higher grades in graduate school; and that Maryland's new sexual harassment policy threatens no such thing (though one might wonder why a faculty member would persist in the use of the pronoun *he* when over 50% of the students are now likely to be women).

The more I talked with people I knew, the clearer it became to me that all the hoopla over equal opportunity and affirmative action has created the illusion of a profound change in colleges and universities, a change that simply has not occurred. Most of my students—and

at least some of my colleagues—are, in a sense, living inside my tent in Kenya, hearing noise and constructing a story accordingly. But these stories, like mine in Kenya, little resemble the reality, the colleges and universities that you and I work in.

The colleges and universities that we work in have fewer black undergraduates in them today than were there six years ago, in terms of both percentages and absolute numbers. The absolute number of black graduate students is declining, as is both the number and the proportion of black faculty members, of whom nearly half are still employed in historically black institutions. Indeed, between 1977 and 1984, the percentage of black faculty at all four-year institutions in the United States declined 3/10 of one percent; during the same period in Illinois, the percentage plummeted 9%.

Statistics at leading, prestigious institutions are especially sobering. At Ohio State, for example, about 2% of the faculty is black; at the University of Michigan, which boasts the best record within the Big Ten, about 3%; within the Ivy League, "only Columbia had more [than Michigan], with slightly over 4%." Moreover, the rate of this decline seems destined to accelerate because the number of black students in colleges and universities has dropped. And among those blacks who enroll in colleges, a disproportionately high percentage do not finish. At the University of Maryland, for example, only about one fourth of the black students who enrolled in 1981 had graduated by 1986. The American Council on Education concluded in its most recent study that "the participation [of blacks] in education at every level is declining," this at a time when the proportion of both blacks and hispanics in the general population is growing. These trends have caused the ACE to declare an educational crisis and to move minority participation in higher education to the top of its agenda for action.

By several measures, then, it is clear that black people have not made the tremendous strides in our academies that my students are attributing to them. Perhaps women have. Let us therefore turn to consider briefly the status of women in these same academies. Here I will confine myself mostly to my own university, not only because I know it best and because I am quite proud of many parts of it but also because its chancellor has set as his top goal the recruitment and retention of women and blacks, and he has exerted both leadership and pressure during his four years as chancellor to move our university toward this goal. He must now have been reasonably successful, for Maryland has a better record with regard to women than any of its peer institutions, a comparison our public affairs office trumpets with considerable pride.

Although we are proud to be number one, we would be less proud, perhaps, if we looked more closely at how little it took to win the contest. In all modesty I tell you that you see before you on this podium at this moment exactly 50% of all female department chairs at the University of Maryland, whose student population stands right at 40,000. The other

fifty percent heads the old Department of Home Economics. Maryland has no women deans, vice presidents, provosts, or chancellors, although it has many assistants to or associates to such positions.

In the past five years, the percentage of women faculty at all ranks has risen by .3 of 1% so that, in 1986, women faculty at Maryland represented 17.5% of the total. If my mathematics is correct and the speed of change continues at its present rate, women at the University of Maryland will reach their appropriate representation in only another three hundred and ninety five years.

We in the arts, humanities, and social sciences are often quick to point the finger at fields like engineering and physics for having too few women, while assuming that fields like our own are more enlightened. But Maryland's College of Arts and Humanities, which administers fields like ours, has only ten percent full professors, roughly the percentage of women found in that supposedly male preserve, the United States Military.

Let us consider another kind of measure. In keeping with its commitment to equality, Maryland has, since 1980, undertaken each year a study of faculty salaries. In this study each female faculty member is matched with a male faculty member whose credentials resemble hers most closely in terms of field of research, year of degree, rank, time in rank, and so on. Every year since 1980, the study has concluded that, on average, equivalently qualified women were recommended for lower salaries than their matched men, and so every year since 1980 the university has required adjustments to eliminate disparities that seem explainable only by gender. Again this last year, 1986, the study ended by making total dollar adjustments of about \$40,000 to 27 women and \$150 to 2 men. Stated another way, those disparities inexplicable except through gender averaged about \$1500 for the women and about \$75 for the men. If after six years of annual salary reviews such discrepancies still appear annually, what must we conclude about the pervasiveness of salary inequalities at universities where such corrective measures are neither in place nor advocated by the university's chief executive officer?

I do not intend to place blame for the failure of our affirmative action programs, although I am confident that there is plenty of blame to go around. And I do not have the wisdom to suggest a new course of action which, if embraced, would result in a faculty that was more equitably hired and more representative of the world in which we live. Instead I want you to join me in considering the peculiarity of the discourse that surrounds affirmative action programs. In a way, I want us to focus our attention on that one sixteenth of an inch of tent canvas that prevents our seeing what is going on around us. I want to explore why some people imagine great changes to have taken place in the academy when, in fact, pitifully few have come about.

Those of you in mass communication will be delighted to learn that we cannot use mass media to excuse our failure to see and under-

stand. Features in the press and on radio and television regularly carry stories of continuing inequities in salary, continuing imbalances in personnel, and occasional instances of outright racial and sexual harassment in colleges and universities. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Academe*, the *ACA Bulletin*, and National Public Radio all regularly provide statistics relating to demography and salary, and all statistics show that neither blacks nor women appear poised to take over the universities.

If not the media, from where do we get the sense of radical improvement? We get it, I think, from our own anecdotes, from the stories that we tell one another. Let me illustrate with only two examples, snippets of conversation that I have heard at academic gatherings of the last year. I suspect you'll find some version of each familiar.

I recently heard a male senior professor say with considerable pride that on his faculty there were now an equal number of men and women. His observation was quickly affirmed by one of the junior men in the department. Because I knew the department and could not get the figures to tally, I asked that we go through the faculty list together. Both men were surprised when we discovered that, by actual count, the current faculty consisted of nine men and five women, that is almost two men for each woman. This conversation is instructive in two ways: first, it suggests that had I not been there both men would have convinced themselves (and perhaps their colleagues) that the department had achieved parity, with predictable consequences to later hiring efforts; and second, it suggests that in educational situations where women and blacks have been so dismally underrepresented, their presence in even modest numbers echoes visually, multiplying images like repeating mirrors, to distort the picture of their representation.

My second example is in many ways both more telling and more disturbing. I overheard a female faculty member respond to an affirmative action officer. "I thought surely the days when we had to hire women because they were women was over. Surely now we are looking for the best qualified person." She later commented to me privately that she hoped she had not gotten her position because she was a woman.

This conversation, like the first, contains valuable clues to understanding both our failures and our discomfort with affirmative action. The faculty member is talking as though, because of affirmative action, opportunities are no longer equal; as though, because of affirmative action, faculty positions are now being awarded on the basis of race and sex; as though, because of affirmative action, race and sex have become an important part of the process of making decisions in universities. The underlying assumption embedded here is that in the good old days, positions in American universities were awarded solely on the basis of merit, that they were awarded to the best qualified person.

But of course that assumption is quite wrong. Academic positions in this country have historically been awarded on the basis of race and

sex: the race was white and the sex was male. Put another way, for years men routinely got jobs because they were men, whites because they were white. But in those earlier days the practice of hiring based on race and sex was so pervasive, so common, as to be invisible. What affirmative action did was to make the criteria of race and sex visible for the first time. Or, to restate another way, the innovation of affirmative action was not to introduce race and sex into the hiring process, but to make those criteria for hiring explicit.

And now, I think, we are getting close to the nature of the canvas that allows us to confuse a lion and a hyena, close to seeing why we imagine changes that have not occurred and why we find affirmative action so threatening. The answer is this: *Through our stories, we have invented for our academies a culture that does not—and has not ever—existed. Before affirmative action we told ourselves that we hired only the best qualified people. The power of this story remains strong, both because America has always prided itself on fairness and because many of us, hired before the days of affirmative action, have a great personal investment in its vision. Since affirmative action we tell ourselves that we have corrected whatever inequities existed. The power of this story is also strong, again because America prides itself on fairness and because Americans believe themselves capable of solving even intractable problems.*

But the best stories in the world do not make lions out of hyenas. Affirmative action has not markedly changed the face of the Academy. As scholars who understand the social force of communication and the power of language, we have a special responsibility to call a hyena, a hyena. We have a special responsibility to confront the nature of our own perceptual canvas and then to help others see it. Only through confronting the falseness of our own stories can we ever achieve in reality the academy that we have so long imagined in our minds.

Endnotes

¹These statistics on Blacks in higher education were cited in Robert H. Atwell, "Message from the President," *ACE Annual Report* (1986): 3.

²U.S. Equal Opportunity Commission, as cited in *Black Issues in Higher Education* 4, 14 (1 October 1987): 5.

³*Ibid.*
⁴Office of Institutional Studies, University of Maryland.

⁵Atwell, p. 3.

⁶Office of Institutional Studies, University of Maryland, as cited in Barnabas Fadope, "Minority Retention Programs Weighed," *The Diamondback*.

⁷Office of Institutional Studies, University of Maryland; Judy Mann, "The Salary Gap," *The Washington Post*, 14 October 1987, B, 3.

⁸Office of Institutional Studies, *FY 86 Faculty Salary Review*, p. 2.

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