

Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education

Volume 18

Issue 1 *Breaking the Silence: Telling Our Stories
as an Act of Resistance*

Article 5

September 2019

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Recommended Citation

Simpkins, L. M., & Hicks Tafari, D. (2019). On Being an Academic Side Chick: Tales of Two Adjunct Faculty in the Academy That Trained Them. *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*, 18 (1). <https://doi.org/10.31390/taboo.18.1.05>

On Being an Academic Side Chick

Tales of Two Adjunct Faculty
in the Academy That *Trained* Them

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While communing at a barbeque after a long hard academic year, we laughed and joked about our positions in the academy. Both of us, sitting beside our significant others, recounted the many acts of work and all the ways in which we had given of ourselves tirelessly to be seen as equals at our respective institutions. This conversation was all too common these days, especially with those we trusted. As we further laughed and joked, it became painfully clear that the joke was on us. All the work but little to no recognition; being invited to sit at the table, but quietly; being in the building but not at the meeting - we were the hidden, the forgotten, we were the side chick. Side chick is a colloquial term, which describes the other woman who is involved in a relationship with a man who is already intimately attached to another woman, usually his wife. In general, we despise this type of woman, and although we have never been her, we unassumingly and begrudgingly found ourselves as *her*, an *academic side chick*.

Teaching at universities as a Visiting Assistant Professor and as an Adjunct Assistant Professor in departments full of senior faculty was a traumatic experience for us. Moreover, not leaving the university and, instead, justifying the lack of reciprocal commitment with a narrative of respect was self-violence. It took three to four years to realize that we were living the un-nameable: we were the live-in

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girlfriend stuck in the quicksand of cohabitation without hope of ever getting a “ring on it.” In our stories, we share the struggles associated with being, what we describe as, a “live-in girlfriend stuck in the land of cohabitation.” We were stuck in positions where we constantly dreamed of “TenureTrackLand”—being at a university that reciprocates the commitment that we gave to it. We both had dreams of being offered a tenure-track position at some illustrious university and living out our academic lives happily respected wearing that glorious ring of tenure. However, for our first 3 to 4 years as Ph.Ds, that was not our reality. Indeed, we were both serving at illustrious universities. One of us did in fact feel very respected and loved—the other one, not so much. This story recounts two women’s journeys through the rough terrains of being adjunct faculty.

Narrative One: Adjunct or Tenure Track We are all credentialed, so why the difference?

Today, I erased my past. I opened a book entitled *Me: Five Years From Now—The Life Planning Book You Write Yourself* and saw my life five years ago. I am not that person anymore, so I erased it. I have a new reality, and it is the one that I want to talk about, write about, and actually live. It was so simple to take my pencil and erase all the things that are no longer me. I wish that it were really that simple. If it were, then I would erase my experience as an adjunct faculty at my last institution.

Adjunct faculty make up a significant part of most university faculty, especially given the decrease in full-time tenure track positions (Langen, 2011; Komos, 2012). Coming right out of my Ph.D. program, I was fortunate to land such a role. It was the perfect scenario for me, as my goal after my terminal degree was not always to teach. I was an administrator, and I was good at it; thus, I thought that would be my trajectory. As such, publishing and going to academic conferences was not high on my list of priorities. In fact, it was not important to me at all. I did and still do have my qualms about the publishing process, especially once I acquired a strong sense of the political nature behind it. Nonetheless, an adjunct position was perfect for me, as I was able to assess if I, in fact, wanted to be in the classroom.

After only one semester as an instructor, I knew that I had found my calling. Much like my days as an administrator, I felt the immediate impact that I had on students, which further validated not only my decision to get my doctorate but also to utilize my doctorate to teach. I was all in. I taught 3-4 classes each semester, advised the majority of the students in my program, attended faculty meetings, and even found time to participate in professional development. I was very excited about my new journey.

My first year was much like a roller coaster. I had many highs, turns and twist coupled with a few dips along the way. Although I was classified as an adjunct faculty member, my department chair treated me as if I were tenure-track. As such, others around me treated me the exact same way. At the time, I did not know that

being an adjunct (in some colleagues' eyes) meant that I wasn't equal to tenure-track faculty members, but I was soon to find out.

After the administration changed a few times, so did the way my colleagues received me. People who were once kind to me began to distance themselves from me. Where I was once invited to faculty meetings, I began to be conveniently left off e-mail listserves that announced these meetings, along with other pertinent departmental information. Students even began to receive me differently. I later found out that they were misguided by another faculty member to believe that adjunct knowledge was different than tenure-track knowledge: a senseless concept that has no substantial evidence to sustain it.

To exacerbate matters, as people began to distance themselves from me, an ill-intended colleague befriended me in a manner that I later found to be unacceptable: a manner that felt like and qualified as sexual harassment, to be exact. It was his strategy to be my eyes and ears in the inner circle, but it came with a price. After numerous inappropriate comments and a bold statement of "if I got a tenure-track position, it would cost me," I knew that my time at my current university was winding down. No position was worth my integrity. Things quickly worsened for me shortly after I informed the necessary entities of my harassment. Not only was my personal character publicly attacked, but classes were stripped from me and given to friends of the person in charge. Although everyone around me could see what was happening, I was left in isolation to fend for myself, which can be very difficult, as adjunct faculty tend to have very little, if any, social capital. It appeared the plan was to discredit me and silence me. It worked.

My once respected position became an entryway for people to tangle their emotional issues around my academic career. I quickly had the awakening of the darker side of what it meant to be adjunct faculty. The politics that I once understood to be true regarding publishing were also true with working as an adjunct, at my institution at least. After a few years of working in my role with no promise or desire to be tenured at my institution, I sought other opportunities. I started my position with enthusiasm and perhaps a naivety that allowed me to remain in the role as long as I did. I left with a disdain for the process but also an imprinted memory of my experience. One that reaffirms for me that no matter the position of a person at a university, we all are equal and should be respected as such, if only everyone felt that way.

As I uncover my ugly truth it is important to state that I speak it as my lived experience. I am in no way positioning my experience as one that should be accepted as absolute for others. In fact, my colleague who I once laughed and joked with about us being *academic side chicks* had a completely different experience.

Narrative Two: If They Like It, Then They'll Put a Ring on It.....Right?

As a single woman, I always swore that I would never be someone's live-in

girlfriend. I had always been the one sharing strategies with my single friends on how to ensure that they get that ring instead of just the invitation to live together. Cohabitation was never on my list of things to do. In fact, it was a no-no. I mean why buy the milk if you can get the cow for free, right? This is how I felt, and I stood my ground...until I earned my doctorate. Hence, my name is Dawn Hicks Tafari, and for the past four years of my academic career, I have been a live-in girlfriend. Yup, I'm a cohabitor. I have been giving away the milk for free, so they dragged their feet in buying this cow—no matter how fly and fabulous she is. But the truth is: I am an academic side chick.

Our love affair began in June, 2013. I had just graduated with my Ph.D. one month earlier, and I was hungry for all of the “fame and fortune” that I dreamed a doctorate would bring. And they came looking for me. They were searching for someone part-time, but after reviewing my CV, they thought I would be ideal for a full-time fixed term position that had just become available because a tenured professor had just retired, so they interviewed and hired me. It was nice to be and feel desired. I was brought on board as a “Visiting Assistant Professor,” given a gorgeous office with mahogany furniture, and three classes to teach. I did not have any advisees because that was outside the scope of my duties as a visiting faculty member. My main responsibility was to teach. I could handle that. Teaching is my passion, so I was eager and excited to do the very thing that I loved doing most. I attended department and school-wide meetings, I taught great students, and I felt valued. Most importantly, I was promised that the tenure-track position would be posted in the fall, and that I could apply for it. I was thrilled; I felt so wanted.

But as the fall of my first year at the university came to close, there was no job posting. There was no search committee being formed. I asked my chair about this; I asked him if I should be looking elsewhere. He talked to me about budget cuts and promised me that I belonged at the university. He seemed disappointed—as if he genuinely wanted me to stay, but it was what he did next that shocked and comforted me: he amended my one-year contract to cover three years. He asked if this gesture of “security” would help, and to be honest, it did. I felt wanted again. I felt needed. I mean, after all, he did not have to extend my contract for a “guaranteed” three years, right?

During those three years, I taught four courses per semester, developed a new general education course about Black males, gained dozens of advisees, and traveled to conferences via university-sanctioned professional development funds. At the end of my second year, the administrator above my chair informed me that she would be submitting a “waiver of search” to the dean for approval. This waiver would allow the department to fill the vacant tenure-track position with me without conducting the traditional search. This seemed only right to me as I had been doing the job and had proven that I was not only capable but also a good fit for the department. This administrator advocated for me, and I was hopeful. However, the dean, who was hired the same year I was, did not approve the waiver, saying that I needed to

go through the formal process. This felt like a slap in the face. I was disappointed and let down. I felt like the upper administration did not see my value.

Then, at the beginning of my fourth year, I was offered the opportunity to move into an office WITH A WINDOW at the end of the suite (newly vacated by the retirement of another faculty member). Of course, I jumped at the opportunity to have an office with a window; that meant I was moving up in the world, as only the more distinguished faculty have offices with windows! Everything was going great, but my three-year contract had ended, and I had yet to be offered a new contract—only *assurance* that a contract was “coming.” Even further, as I was beginning my fourth year at the university, there was still no tenure-track position posted. And this time, the new chair offered me a one-year contract with the assurance that the position would, indeed, be posted the corresponding academic year. On one hand, I felt valued and wanted and respected and appreciated; on the other, I felt like I was being jerked around. I did not understand why they were keeping me on this chain, dangling this carrot for four years. If they did not see me as a permanent fixture at the university, then why wouldn’t they just let me go? But I understood: they liked the benefits that my ‘Visiting’ status afforded them. The university did not have to make a commitment to me. They did not have to pay me a tenure-track salary, even though I was doing tenure-track faculty work.

My ScholarBrother encouraged me to leave, to look elsewhere, to be open to moving for the commitment, but at first, I refused. I told him that I felt valued, that even though they had not made the commitment by creating the tenure-track position for me, they “took good care of me.” And as the words flowed from my lips, I realized that I sounded like a battered woman defending her abusive spouse and trying to justify why she stays in the unhealthy relationship. I told my ScholarBrother my revelation, and he agreed. That was a difficult moment for me. It was the moment that my staying in the Visiting position against my desires began to feel like self-violence. It felt like I was giving the university a power and control over me that was not empowering.

I did try to leave: but I did not want to relocate my family, so I only applied to universities within a 50-mile radius of my home. I even went on one job talk; however, I was not offered the position. That did not help my self-esteem and confidence. I started to feel stuck, like no one else wanted me, like I needed to be grateful that my university wanted me enough to string me along for this long. The narrative in my head was the same that I had heard in movies—the stories that abused women tell themselves about their relationships, the stories that the abuser tells the person being abused. I was unhappy but content. To be completely honest, I was not sure how to feel about my status. There were times when I felt fully valued and respected, and there were times when I felt like the side chick—the girl on the side who you go to for comfort and fun but never make a commitment.

But my story does have a happy ending. In the fall of my fourth year, “my” position was posted. I applied, completed three interviews and a job talk, and was

offered the job a few weeks before the spring semester ended. Therefore, I started my fifth year at the university on a tenure-track with two years of credit towards tenure (that was disappointing, but I accepted the position anyway... I guess they trained me well, huh?).

Final Reflections

Reliving these stories was not easy for us. Taking off our mask, especially understanding that others will see our *nakedness* is scary. This is particularly true because of two major identifiers: our Blackness and our Womanness—in that order. Fortunately, our lived experiences provide us with an understanding that strength lies within sharing our narratives (Collins, 2003). Silence conceals our experiences and somehow validates them as normal. Furthermore, we have the power of two: a bond of SisterScholars that allows us to stand in solidarity with our experiences.

Both of us were in temporary positions with possible long-term commitments. Our experiences in those positions, however, were very different. We are not asserting that being an academic side chick will yield the same results. For one of us, the experience was littered with sexual harassment, bullying, and public humiliation by colleagues and students. For the other, the experience was a roller coaster ride of genuine support and candid disempowerment. The presumption is not that the adjunct role caused all of our negative experiences. It did, however, make us more vulnerable to a hostile work environment and wavering administrative backing. Albeit true, our stories both have a happy ending. But much like our experiences, they were different. Through it all, we both learned one valuable lesson: there is no blueprint to navigate the rocky academic terrain. Though we succumbed to the lure of being academic side chicks, we both survived our tenure in that role. Faith, persistence, and trust in our internal moral compass led us to our current roles, and we could not be any happier.

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