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Promotion and Tenure Committee  
College of Media, University of Illinois  
18 Gregory Hall, 810 S. Wright Street  
Urbana, Illinois 61801

**Letter of Recommendation for Dr. Janice Marie Collins**

I am writing to support Dr. Janice Marie Collins' application for tenure.

I am a retired history professor who has spent more than forty years studying the Gullah people of coastal South Carolina and Georgia, many of whose ancestors came from a region of West Africa centering on the Republic of Sierra Leone. The Gullahs have preserved more of their African language and cultural heritage than any other group of African Americans, including a storytelling tradition, a distinctive cuisine based on rice, spiritual beliefs, baskets and other handicrafts, etc.

I taught African and African American history at James Madison University in Virginia and at the University of Sierra Leone in West Africa. I have served as an advisor on Gullah history and culture to the US National Park Service. I also served for two years as Scholar in Residence at Penn Center on St. Helena Island, South Carolina, the oldest and most prestigious Gullah community organization. I have made two award-winning documentaries on the Gullahs' family ties to Sierra Leone, called "Family Across the Sea" and "The Language You Cry In." Both have been broadcast on PBS and purchased by hundreds of universities all across the United States.

I got to know Dr. Collins after seeing her documentary films, "A Taste of Gullah" and "Journey to My Mother's Land," which cover material similar to my own films. I was immediately struck by her skill in cinematography and storytelling. Her ability to capture the viewers' attention and bring them into the story is impressive. But even more striking is the fact that she does *everything* connected with filmmaking – the producing, researching, writing, interviewing, videoing, and editing. After seeing those videos, I was not surprised to learn later that she has earned several Emmy awards for her individual work, and several more for her work in joint productions.

As I got to know Dr. Collins, another aspect of her character emerged: her devotion to social justice. She is committed to using her technical skills to give a "voice to the voiceless," as she says. She wants to tell the story of people "on the margins" of our society whose history has been neglected and whose contributions and accomplishments are unknown to the majority. My own motivations are quite similar, so after getting to know Janice and her work, I suggested we

collaborate on a new educational video on the Gullah people filmed partly in the US and partly in West Africa. Having worked with filmmakers before on similar projects, it is obvious that she is the best possible collaborator for me, as she combines technical prowess and social commitment.

I must also acknowledge Dr. Collins' attributes as a teacher. Having taught at university level for 17 years, myself, I know that students doing professional degrees (architecture, graphic design, journalism, etc.) greatly value professors who gained success in the professional world before entering academia. Dr. Collins' Emmys and other national awards – earned during 20 years working as a professional journalist before studying for her Ph.D. -- speak for themselves. Janice is also an excellent teacher judging by the awards she has won in that field; but beyond appreciating her for her classroom skills, her journalism students will always boast of having been taught by a multiple Emmy winner. Students also look up to professors who stay up-to-date on the technology of their discipline, and Janice is now producing videos aimed at the internet that are attracting tens of thousands of hits, demonstrating the continuing relevance of her work beyond academia.

For all these reasons, I recommend Dr. Janice Collins without reservation for tenure at the University of Illinois. Recognizing her in this way would be in the interest of the university, itself, your media students, and the important causes that Dr. Collins has served for so long. I believe that any university would be proud to have a person of her stature as a tenured faculty member.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'JO' followed by a stylized flourish.

Joseph Opala