

ADJUNCT AND TEMPORARY FACULTY

The plight of adjunct (part-time) and temporary (nontenured) faculty has been well documented, particularly by contingent faculty themselves. The experience of Ben Satterfield, a former adjunct, is typical. While teaching at the University of Texas, Satterfield recalls that though they “were not shunned like pariahs, the temporary faculty were distinctly second-class citizens, tolerated but not encouraged” (1994, 130). When he moved from UT to Austin Community College, Satterfield’s situation became even worse. He received even less respect from administrators and colleagues and was paid 60 percent less than full-time faculty for teaching the same courses: “Dozens of us shared one small office, occupying desks like shift workers; we were hired on a semester-to-semester basis and denied medical insurance coverage or any benefits that were standard for the regular faculty; we were disdained by the administration and treated like field workers with no rights whatever” (132).

The comparison of adjuncts with field workers—dislocated seasonal laborers who can be easily replaced—has been especially prevalent in English studies. As Cary Nelson and Michael Berube (1994) point out: “Tenure-track jobs in English regularly receive 800 to 1,000 applications. Even the most accomplished young scholars and teachers often remain unemployed. For in the 1990’s, many colleges are finding that they lack the money even to replace retiring faculty members, and graduate programs that had expected boom times suddenly find that they are drastically overproducing Ph.D.’s.”

Linda Ray Pratt, chair of an Association of University Professors committee on the status of nontenure-track faculty, predicted in 1997 that “if things continue unchecked, about 90 percent of the English Ph.D.’s on the market in the next few years will not find a tenure-track job” (265).

She was right. There are simply too many workers and not enough work to go around, with the result that aspiring academics who want to teach in a college or university nearly always settle for less than ideal jobs. Elizabeth Wallace notes: “Those who choose to settle [in a particular area] are often at disadvantage in their search for academic jobs, simply because they are already here: academia much prefers to interview exotic strangers from across the country.” And potential teachers are at an even

greater disadvantage if they are “following a spouse to a full-time job or coming to care for a sick relative or following children in the custody of a divorced partner . . . [these people] have automatically removed themselves from the national academic job market and have entered the local market with no choice in the matter” (1994, 29).

In *Gypsy Academics and Mother Teachers* (1997), Eileen Schell, one of the most prolific writers on the subject of contingent academic labor, examines the ways that the “feminization” of composition has turned it into an underrespected discipline, with no benefits or job security. Schell traces this situation in higher education back to the initial entry of women into the workforce, when many of them became elementary and secondary school teachers. Ironically, this “liberation” resulted in an entrenchment of women in the teaching force and led to lower pay and less respect for teaching in general. And it is not just those outside education who denigrate the work done by teachers of composition and other less-than-glamorous subjects. Both the authors of this book have heard tenured male professors refer to temporary writing faculty as “the little old ladies in the basement”; unfortunately, such noisome appellations coming from those in the upper echelons of academia are not uncommon.

Given the disregard and low wages adjunct faculty can expect to receive, one might wonder why *anyone* would take on the job of teaching writing part-time. Many adjuncts would answer that they love to teach, even if they are slighted by just about everyone. Some adjuncts take part-time work to gain enough experience to make themselves attractive as candidates for full-time jobs. Moreover, even if they are at the bottom of the pecking order *within* the college or university, some faculty receive outside validation, taking pride in being associated with an institution of higher learning. “I teach at the university,” they can tell family and friends—without mentioning that their assignment is one course a semester for a few thousand dollars, or less. And since so few people can afford to live on a part-time instructor’s salary, those who manage to do so have—*de facto*—solved the issue of working for low pay. Either they are single and frugal, or else they have another source of income to supplement their meager salaries.

Despite the fact that colleges and universities routinely disrespect their adjuncts, they nevertheless cannot live without them. According to former Conference of College Composition and Communication chair John Lovas, “Since the mid-1970s, California community colleges have been structurally dependent on the hiring of part-time faculty. The system could not function, its mission could not be carried out, if part-time

faculty work was limited to the original conception of it: some specialists from local industry would offer specialized courses in the evening” (2001, 203). Nancy Sours, an instructor at San Francisco State University, claims that in 2004, nontenured faculty taught “close to 100% of writing classes offered by our English Department” and viewed themselves “as career faculty” (2004, A7). And California colleges and universities are hardly alone in relying on “temporary” labor. Linda Ray Pratt claims that 45 percent of all courses in higher education are taught by part-timers, with the figure at 65 percent for community colleges (1997, 264). Ernst Benjamin, secretary of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), found that “part-time faculty have grown four times (97%) faster than full-time (25%). While the number of non-tenure-track faculty has increased by 88%, the number of probationary [tenure-track] faculty has actually declined by 9%” (Schell and Stock 2001, 4).

Nevertheless, until recently, the subject of adjunct exploitation hasn’t been of much interest to anyone other than adjuncts themselves. Now, however, journals like *Adjunct Advocate* (and its companion Web site, adjunctnation.com) and books like *The Adjunct Faculty Handbook* (Bianco-Mathis and Chalofsky, 1996) give tips on how to strive for the best possible outcome in any given situation. Jill Carroll, an adjunct at several Houston-area universities, writes a column called “The Adjunct Track” for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, which shows adjuncts how to maximize their profits and minimize their workload. Much of this advice is collected in her books *Machiavelli for Adjuncts* (2004) and *How to Survive as an Adjunct Lecturer* (2003). Carroll believes that it is most profitable—and least painful—for adjuncts to view themselves as independent contractors. If you swim with the sharks, Carroll suggests, it’s best to be a shark yourself.

A less individualist variation on this ethic of self-empowerment has been promulgated by unions such as the American Federation of Teachers, which must continually balance the interests of full-time and part-time members. Granted, many adjuncts believe their most powerful weapon is unionization and collective bargaining, but Schell discourages creating an adversarial relationship between full- and part-time faculty. Instead, she promotes the formation of a feminist “ethic of care” to transform working conditions: “With a rhetoric that opposes binaries and encourages agency and coalition building, we are in a good position to articulate a broad educational agenda that acknowledges worker rights and the fundamental need for a democratic, accessible, and diverse system of higher education” (2004, 110).

In part, the inroads made by nontenured faculty in spreading awareness of their plight has meant making their tenured colleagues conscious of the extent to which their fates are linked. Ruth Kiefson argues that most full-time faculty members “fail to see themselves as part of the working class and that they are being assaulted by the same processes that are creating economic and social instability and misery for millions. In general, the individualist training that [full-time faculty] received as professionals . . . dominates their decision making and outlook” (2004, 148). Lovas argues that there are concrete steps full-time faculty can take to improve the working conditions of their adjunct colleagues. He suggests “sharing office space with a part-timer, offering informal mentoring, insisting that all departmental communications reach every faculty member, regardless of status, and arranging department support services convenient to part-time faculty” (2001, 216). Regrettably, while tenured faculty often agree in principle with gestures such as these, when it comes time to actually rearrange their schedules and work habits to accommodate contingent colleagues, very few follow through.

What does all this mean for creative writers? Despite the desperate job situation, most newly minted PhDs in literature still believe that they will be rewarded for their six to ten years of hard work with a permanent teaching position. In contrast, a creative writer emerging from a graduate program in the twenty-first century probably doesn’t expect much from her MFA. Yet, precisely because the MFA has generally failed to be a marketable terminal degree for tenure-track positions, many MFAs have turned to adjunct work to scratch out a living while they pursue their own creative writing. These degree holders may well consider themselves lucky to land a temporary job teaching freshmen composition. If there is an opportunity to teach creative writing—even if it pays poorly and offers no job security—they are more than happy to sign on.

Admittedly, it is just as odious to put the burden of contingent labor on creative writers as on their colleagues in literature and composition. Yet from one perspective, this is a reasonable matching of talents with needs. Creative writers are adept at careful reading of original writing, at offering constructive criticism and shepherding work through multiple drafts. Moreover, if adjunct writing teachers have far less time to write than their tenured colleagues, they do still have relatively flexible schedules. Other than class meetings and office hours, their time is their own. If they are morning writers, they can ask for classes in the afternoon and do their grading at night. If they write best at night, they do the reverse.

Like it or not, though, unless the siren song of teaching suddenly diminishes, a stint as an adjunct or temporary instructor is probably in store for most writers who want to teach at the college level.