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The Blessed Life of a "Visiting" Assistant Professor

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I don't pretend that my good fortune is a singularity in the academic universe, for I am but one of thousands of newly minted Ph.D. holders who are eternally on the make in an inferno whose torments would have inspired Dante. Nor is my fortune particularly good, if one thinks in strictly economic terms, for my full-time salary is roughly equivalent to what our department secretary makes, and she doesn't need a Ph.D. to earn it. I knew of course when I started my Ph.D. program that having a completed degree would not land me a six figure salary. But I hadn't anticipated that my take-home pay as a "visiting" professor would be roughly equivalent to what I managed to cobble together with extra part-time jobs as a graduate student. Perhaps after four years of applying for everything anywhere to win that elusive MLA interview--there being only one tenure-track opening in my field each year--it's easy to start applying graveyard humor to the job market as well. While we're on the subject of applications.

My colleagues who are working as adjuncts try to buoy up my spirits by reminding me that as a full-time academic contract laborer at least I have health benefits, I no longer have to spend my summer months working for temp agencies, and I am contributing, finally, to a pension fund. Some comfort, I think to myself: there's always someone lower down the totem pole who is jockeying for your job, no matter how little you get paid for it. But for the most part I agree with them. I am lucky to have full-time work teaching Italian that enables me to live in a city where I am happy to live. This sort of dogged optimism works . . . most of the time. On some days of course it gets to you, as on the day at a recent faculty reception where someone from the development office innocently asked me where I was "visiting" from, I smiled and replied, "Nowhere."

Okay: let's try again. I am lucky first of all because I managed to complete my Ph.D. in medieval Italian literature with less than \$12,000 of debt. This is remarkable, given the fact that I had no savings to fund my graduate education when I started, no wealth in the family, and my partner, who had been caught like a limed sparrow in the down sizing frenzy that overtook corporate American in the early nineties, was chronically out of work. I did it by picking up an extra job or two each semester to supplement my annual T.A. stipend of \$9,000. One year, the year my partner decided enough already, it was time to go back to school and retool, I picked up three extra jobs.

Second, I finished the degree. It took me an extra year or two, and my relationship failed to survive the stress of dealing with two impossible job markets at the same time, but I finished.

Third, I supported myself on a T.A. stipend of \$9,000 while living in New York City--a place where almost everyone has to work sixty hours a week just to afford to live. I admit that I was too poor and usually much too harried to enjoy what the city has to offer (apart from its libraries, of course), but I did try to acquire a bit of cultural capital whenever I could. The doo-wop trios riding the subway trains, for example, sing for free.

Fourth, I don't have to move around the country from school to school chasing down short-term, non

tenure-track jobs. My contract is renewable on an indefinite basis, so I get stay here in New York in a holding pattern until I find a real (i.e., tenure-track) academic job. Or until my department chair is told that he has to make some cuts in his budget and fires me.

The firing part keeps everyone mindful of what "flexibility" means to an academic administrator. For those with still-to-be-renewed contracts, it means being patient, long-suffering, and very very agile. Above all, it means mastering the art of timing. We walk with wet fingers in the wind, for the slightest political mistake can spell an abrupt end to a promising academic career.

Bad timing has happened to several of my friends, in one case without advance warning, and the individual involved had no one to whom he could appeal the decision. It was purely a budgetary matter, this year we have to make cuts, etc., and he was told about it in the hallway, in a sentence that began with the words, "By the way. . ." and with no thought to throwing in even a gratuitous apology. The news of it left me feeling the blade swinging back and forth above my own neck. For the fact of the matter is, my contract exists, and continues to exist, as a miracle of good timing. In the world of academic contract labor, it doesn't matter if you are brightest scholar to appear on the horizon since Harold Bloom. To survive, you have to be in the right place at the right time and know the right people. Timing is the only thing that counts.

If anything, my particular situation illustrates how the decisions of a single faculty member can impact someone's survival. A few weeks before I was offered a full-time job, I had decided to give up my academic career and look for work as a high school teacher. It was a matter of simple economics. No one in New York City can survive on an adjunct salary. My two part-time jobs as an adjunct (yielding a total of six courses per year--a full-time teaching load) were giving me a gross annual salary of around \$16,000. After six years of graduate school and a completed Ph.D. I was making poverty level wages. I was doing the work I had been trained for, and I couldn't make a living at it. I was ready to give up.

The faculty member in question, someone with some political clout and a conscience, was concerned lest the administration succeed in its plans to make further cuts in our program. The dean at that time was reportedly unenthusiastic about the study of foreign languages, and had reduced our classroom contact with students in first year language courses to three hours a week. While not quite as heavily dependent on adjuncts as the freshman writing program, it was clear that we were expected to do more with less by hiring more adjuncts. But it is difficult to build a leaner and meaner department with adjunct labor, because sooner or later you get what you pay for. Adjunct faculty tend to contribute only what they are paid to contribute--they teach and split. They have to, in order to show up on time at their next teaching gig. A few will take the time to learn something about the department's sequence of language and literature courses, just in case someone asks them after class what courses they should take next semester, but most feel like second-class citizens and are resentful of it, and many don't give their students the impression that they have time for casual conversation.

Overuse of adjunct professors thus inevitably creates morale problems for the whole department. In a department with a skeleton crew of tenured faculty, the lion's share of department service work can fall on the shoulders of the younger faculty, who need to be publishing instead of doing administrative work. Since the older tenured faculty have little classroom contact with potential majors (introductory courses being taught by adjuncts), the students don't turn to them for advice. Instead they talk to their adjuncts, who often don't know department policies and create worse problems by giving out bad suggestions. And in any case, in departments where there is too much administrative work and not enough full-time faculty to do it, all faculty members, tenured and untenured alike, quickly learn to spend as little time in the office as possible. The empty faculty office is a symptom of a dysfunctional work space whose first rule is learned quickly and observed by all: stay out of the department if you want to get any serious work done. Who is left to run the language program? Not me. I have an article due next week.

Adjuncts sometimes feel more loyalty to their students than the tenured faculty, but because of their precarious employment conditions they give notice the minute a better paying gig comes along for the simple reason that they have to. The better they are at what they do, the more likely the department will lose them. As a result, each semester hours and hours of the department chair's time is devoted to interviewing a new crop of adjuncts--quite often at the very last minute. When the semester starts tomorrow you take what you can get. One often ends up with a number of adjuncts who can't find work elsewhere, and sooner or later the poor quality of their teaching comes home to roost on the department chair's doorstep. A bad attitude inevitably infects one's teaching. The students themselves are the first to feel the effects, they don't like the program, they complain about their language teachers to their advisors, word gets out, and enrollment in upper level courses drops.

Trying to cut expenses by hiring adjuncts to teach beginning language courses ultimately means that the number of juniors and seniors who are both enthusiastic about language study and are adequately trained in the target language for upper level literature courses dwindles to the point where it becomes difficult to justify the few tenure lines that haven't yet been replaced by part-time faculty. When all that matters to the administration is numbers, it is only a matter of time before senior faculty are feuding. They will feud anyway, but the law of diminishing returns means that the feuds become more vicious in direct proportion to the rate at which the pieces of the pie shrink.

These were the arguments that this particular faculty member, the one to whom I owe my job, used to draw the dean's attention to what was happening in the department, and he asked his support in reversing the pattern. Specifically, he asked that our department be allowed to rely on full-time contract hires rather than on adjuncts. While both represent a threat to the tenure system, clearly a full-time renewable contract with an "adequate" stipend would give the department better control over the quality of teaching in the beginning language program. When the dean indicated that there was no money available for additional full-time hires, this faculty member then told him that he wanted to resign his directorship of a project that was dear to the dean's heart in order to devote more of his time to undergraduate teaching. Someone on the tenured faculty, he said, has to start minding the store.

There are dangers, of course, in sanctioning the practice of hiring non-tenured faculty to do the work that previously had been done by the tenured. The most obvious is that it brings down starting salaries throughout the ranks of the tenured faculty. But tenured salaries will continue to fall anyway, as long as there is an abundant supply of graduate students and adjuncts to do the bulk of the department's service teaching at poverty level wages. If the choice is between hiring a new assistant professor on a tenure-track line or hiring a "visiting" assistant professor on a renewable contract, then it's obvious which choice should be made. But if the choice is between hiring full-time vs. part-time temporary employees, then one cannot insist that hiring a full-timer is a threat to the tenure system, for it is the part-time salary, and the fate of the adjunct, that frightens everyone into silence about their working conditions.

The point being, that salaries at the bottom levels of the faculty hierarchy can only fall so far below the level of tolerance before the collective anger of those who can no longer be intimidated by the fear of losing their academic careers begins to disrupt the tenuous network of collusion that has enabled the dysfunctional academic job system to lumber along for twenty years with only minor adjustments. In many departments, the division between tenured and non-tenured faculty is structured in such a way as to insure that new tenure-track hires would automatically side with the tenured faculty in a labor dispute. In a politically charged environment, the junior faculty understand that they must keep their mouths shut, their heads down, publish, and make as few enemies as possible. As the labor crisis deepens, however, and more and more new hires come into a tenure-track position after having spent several years as adjunct or contract laborers, this is no longer the case. They have been dealing with the job market on a long-term rather than a short-term basis, frustration levels are high, many have been publishing consistently for a number of years, and their "proletarian" identity has hardened. If we up the ante on publication and service requirements any higher, the law of diminishing returns will kick in, at which point the fear of losing a

chance at tenure will no longer enforce conformity to the status quo.

Perhaps the most serious challenge to the future of the profession, however, is the fact that junior faculty in the humanities can no longer support a family on their salaries. Unwilling to view the cracks in the foundation for what they are, we continue to believe deep in our souls that intellectual labor is a sacred calling rather than a job and resign ourselves to our stagnating salaries. We have acceded to the decline in our standard of living in part because of the mistaken belief that the "pleasures" of the intellectual life must be limited to an elite group of individuals who know how to behave like gentlemen. But whereas thirty years ago one's membership fees to the gentleman scholar's club could still be paid on a faculty salary, today the faculty club dining room is empty. Instead of living like gentlemen, we live like monks. Many faculty members, having acquired an ascetic lifestyle during graduate school, will continue their monkish regimen of self denial even after they have been promoted to full professor. "We all make choices" are their words of warning to a junior faculty member who might wish to start a family or have a personal life.

Granted, those in the banking industry who put in an eighty hour week may not have much of a personal life either, but at least they earn enough to pay for a nanny and can reproduce themselves without apology. In academe, the puritan work ethic is oddly "catholic," in the sense that it is universally enforced by impossible standards of perfection and productivity. Married graduate students without children are expected to postpone starting a family until after they have won tenure. If they are single when they start graduate school, they are encouraged to choose a partner who can be flexible in terms of his or her job location, since the non-academic partner will be expected to move when the tenure-track offer comes in. Most important, the spouse or partner must bring in a "decent salary" if there are children involved, especially at the beginning of one's career. This sort self-denial is expected of an apprentice scholar until after the tenure review. Of all the factors which are contributing to the ghettoizing of humanities teaching, having to live like a monk on poverty level wages for fourteen years is one of the most insidious.

Sadly, many individuals outside of academe, public officials included, seem unaware of the danger posed to the quality of higher education now that the best among us are being driven out of the profession by economic necessity. Indeed, most Americans still think of university teaching as a lucrative profession. Even the unions and professional associations like the AAUP are failing to inform the American public that the blight which has infected our public schools has spread to our public universities. Professional organizations within the humanities such as the Modern Language Association have been more active in bringing part-time faculty working conditions to the attention of the press, but usually they are presented as a product of a "glutted" teaching market, where the focus becomes the plight of the non-tenured rather than the long-term impact on the quality of higher education when administration's primary goal is to cut labor costs. But even within the MLA many faculty members still prefer to see the problem as a classic case of supply and demand. Last fall the president of the MLA admitted frankly to the organization's graduate students that, given all the sacrifices one is expected to make these days in order to pursue an academic career, she doesn't know if it is worth it anymore to start graduate school. Graduate students were being told, in effect, "If you can't find an academic job, try Wall Street."

The bright spot in all of this is that academics now have a common cause. We are like doctors, united in their hatred of the HMOs. Any two academics who meet by chance under almost any circumstances will bring up the subject of the deterioration of our working conditions, no matter what their stance on the culture wars. Accordingly, the job market crisis has become the one single policy issue common to all academic professional associations. It has certainly become the major subject of conversation at the MLA. But is the MLA ready to move from twenty years of worried and ineffectual hand wringing to serious action?

I remember well when the moment of truth came for me, the moment when it dawned on me that I would have to become an activist as well as an educator if I wanted to stay in the profession. I was on the train,

traveling to my first MLA convention, and I struck up a conversation with a fellow Columbia grad who was seated next to me. We soon found ourselves comparing notes on how we had managed to finish our degrees while living in New York City, and her answer, when I asked her how she liked her tenure-track job, brought into clear focus the dangers facing our profession. It suddenly became clear to me why the completion of the degree, and not completion of one's preliminary exams, had become the point at which economic hardship begins to drive you out of the academic job system. The system expels you at precisely the moment when it can no longer justify denying you a living wage.

One of the lucky few in the English department to land a tenure-track job the year before, she told me about all the extra work her department had piled up on her during her first year of full-time teaching. She had no time for her boyfriend (who was of course living in a different city), she had no time for her friends, she had no time for a personal life, no time for anything but her teaching. And though she loved it, teaching had been more fun in graduate school, she said. She not only had more time to prepare her lessons well and put decent comments on her student's papers, she also made more money. In fact, what with her student loans coming due, she found herself actually missing her "on the side" job in New York as a waitress. Oh, those handfuls of change to dump on the dresser each night! She had given up her "relaxed" life as a grad student in New York for a job in the Texas prairie as a starting assistant professor, and she could accept the fact that her job would bring with it fewer professional satisfactions--setting aside entirely what had happened to her personal life. We all make choices, but at the very least, she ought to be making enough money to pay off some bills.

My intellectual labor, I realized as I listened to her, was valuable to the system in proportion to my right to demand a living wage. Once I had "earned" the right to a decent salary, the system no longer wanted me. My purpose had been served the moment I finished graduate school. When I arrived at the convention, I immediately sought out the members of the MLA's Graduate Student Caucus, where soon I found myself engaged in serious debates with "activist types" and professional union organizers who gave me deepened understanding of the complexity of the academic "job system" whose "waste product"--as Marc Bousquet likes to call it--has become the Ph.D.

The degree to which faculty salaries have stagnated became even more shockingly clear to me last fall in a heated on-line debate between the members of the Graduate Student Caucus and Elaine Showalter, then president of the MLA. Professor Showalter was hoping to find some common ground with the MLA's graduate student membership in order to defuse some pre-convention tensions, and in one of her posts to e-grad she noted that she too had once worked as an adjunct at the beginning of her career in the late sixties. Her stipend in 1968: \$1,600 per course.

Thirty years later, this is still the going rate for many jobs as an adjunct. How many companies are there in the United States today who expect an employee who holds a Ph.D. to work for 1968 level wages? One inevitably asks why a group of intelligent young adults--and we assume that entrance into graduate school is to some degree a recognition of one's intellectual accomplishments--would buy the argument that since teaching is a "privileged" form of labor, we ought to do it for at sub-poverty-level wages. Anything to avoid having to work for corporate America, we say. But shouldn't we at least expect our wages to keep up with inflation?

The fall in the market value of intellectual labor has created a chronic siege mentality in many language departments. For several decades, whenever the administrators of the undergraduate college have initiated a period of cost cutting, language programs are among the first to fall under the axe because of the small number of majors in all foreign languages except Spanish. While committed, at least theoretically, to the value of a liberal arts education, during a budget crisis the administration will favor the law and business schools and expand programs in continuing education at the expense of the humanities programs for the simple reason that they bring in the cash. It is hard to bargain from a position of power when the administration is constantly reminding you that someone else has paid for your chips.

But more is at stake than the relative merits of a truly humanistic as opposed to vocational education. In today's global economy, competency in a foreign language gives one an edge in the job market that is obvious to all, despite the fact that English has become the lingua franca of the business world. Whenever the administration decides to reduce the amount of required course work in a foreign language, faculty will have fewer contact hours to lure potential majors and minors in their programs, and thus fewer literature courses to teach. Having a less qualified pool of potential majors and minors meant that our upper division literature courses suffered from chronic under enrollment, which leads in turn to further cuts in programs. Furthermore, attaining competency in a foreign language requires a great deal of self discipline--more than most other majors require--but unlike in the physics department, where faculty research tends to bring in a considerable amount extra cash from government agencies, language faculty have to rely on enrollment figures alone to justify their existence. This situation is naturally exacerbated by the expense as well as the difficulty of attaining reading, writing and speaking competency in an acquired language. Most of the majors and minors who do not speak a second language in their homes must of necessity spend a considerable amount of time abroad learning the target language, which adds to the financial burden of an already too expensive undergraduate education. And thus fewer majors.

In language departments with a graduate program, the beginning language courses are usually taught by graduate students who design and teach their own syllabi without much input or supervision from the senior faculty. Often the language program is administered by a language coordinator whose sole responsibility is supervising the undergraduate language curriculum, thus freeing senior faculty to teach literature courses in their specialty to upperclassmen and graduate students. Where that is not the case, the majority of the faculty teach one or two language courses per year, usually at the intermediate or advanced level, and the bulk of the beginning language courses are taught by persons who do not hold tenure-track lines. Many of these individuals hold Ph.D.s, but for various reasons have chosen not to pursue a tenured position. Others, on the other hand, have been on the job market for too many years for tenure to still be an option, but they refuse to consider an alternative career because they love to teach and are resigned to living on the edge of financial disaster, provided that every now and then the opportunity to teach an advanced language or literature course come their way. Since these positions come with lower salaries and the bulk of their teaching consists of beginning and intermediate language courses, the senior faculty do not expect them to publish or to help with the administration of the department. If the individuals holding these positions do choose to publish, their achievements will often be recognized by the department, but the decision to do so is self-imposed, and failure to publish does not guarantee the termination of one's employment in the department.

Which leads me back to my original dilemma: given the dismal status of my profession, do I or don't I consider myself to be lucky? In my department, while the salary I make as a contract academic is lower than that offered a starting assistant professor, there is no pressure to publish and no obligation to help with the department's administrative workload. This means that, because I am not expected to sit on any department committees and have no other responsibilities but my teaching, if I am deliberate about it, I can manage to spend more time in the library each week than most other faculty members can manage in a month. I do not have to advise students in any official capacity, my grading load in a beginning language class is usually pretty light and prep time is minimal, and my research interests, mostly unrelated to the material I am teaching, can veer off in whatever direction I please. Since I am not a candidate for tenure, I pose no threat to anyone, and most of the time I am left alone. While I have to share my desk, computer, telephone, bookshelves and file cabinets with the adjunct faculty, since I prefer to do most of my work at home this does not pose any problems for me. The only serious disadvantage I find myself facing is having to pay travel and hotel expenses for participate in conferences and the like on my own. Thus I try to submit proposals for papers only in the New York City area so that I don't have to pay air fare or hotel costs. And there are usually a large number of prestigious conferences at local schools each semester to which I can send off an abstract.

I am also aware of the fact that as far as the administration is concerned, my work as a language teacher is perhaps more vital to the department's survival than my work as a literature teacher, though to a large degree this distinction is specious on all fronts except the balance sheet, where the language requirement brings in the cash. The truth is, I devote the same amount of time to classroom teaching and lesson preparation as would a tenure-track assistant professor. Furthermore, I am not just doing "service" teaching for the department, but when asked to, I occasionally teach a literature course. Many academic contract laborers are limited by their contracts to teaching language courses only. So I have, in a sense, all of the pleasures that teaching should afford me, without having to shoulder my share of the department's administrative work. And I don't have to worry about tenure.

How many hours are my colleagues in tenure-track lines devoting to the department's administrative work while publishing, publishing, publishing to satisfy the requirements of tenure?

It is because I know the answer to that question that I consider myself underpaid, yes, but lucky. If the word "visiting" were taken from my job title, I fear that I'd feel a lot less lucky, and I'd probably like my job a lot less.

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