



Chapter 4. Countering Prejudices

In his book *The Adjunct Underclass*, Herb Childress reiterates many of the common perceptions about how contingent faculty are treated today:

There are innumerable terms in use for the vast army of temp labor within higher ed—adjunct faculty, part-time lecturer, visiting scholar, postdoctoral fellow, professor of the practice, artist in residence. They all mask the unified underlying condition: working course-by-course or year-by-year, with no guarantee of permanence, often for embarrassingly small stipends, and often for no benefits. The polite language makes the facts harder to see, so let's state it simply: College teaching has become primarily a pickup job, like driving for Uber or running chores for TaskRabbit. (5)

Although I believe it would be wrong to deny that many—if not most—precarious faculty are faced with the conditions Childress describes, it is counterproductive to overgeneralize and thereby exclude contingent faculty who have very different working conditions. Not only does Childress' representation serve to reiterate destructive stereotypes, but by denying the existence of more progressive alternatives, it may undermine the desire of people to fight for better working conditions, as Kezar and her colleagues describe can happen in “Challenging Stereotypes That Interfere with Effective Governance.”

As I have shown in my descriptions of the working conditions for contingent academic labor in the UC system and other institutions, not every contingent faculty member is hired on a short-term basis, and many do have access to benefits and professional development funding. Therefore, by ignoring some of the better working conditions for contingent faculty, Childress' portrayal may rob adjunct faculty of any hope that things can improve, and it also may send the message to administrators and tenured faculty, many of whom mistakenly believe that higher education is a meritocracy (Schwartz 506), that this category of workers should only be treated in a negative way. In fact, on numerous occasions, I have had to tell professors and administrators that the contingent faculty members they work with don't just teach and that they are not all hired on a course-by-course basis. Even in departments that are staffed by mostly NTT lecturers, some professors deny the situation and only see contingent faculty through the same overgeneralizations that Childress reiterates.

It is important to stress that we need to recognize the bad treatment of precarious academic labor that Childress presents, but we should not be blinded by overgeneralizations that reinforce stereotypes and prejudices and that can serve to naturalize contingent social constructions. In other words, people should know that things can be different. For instance, the following statement from Childress does not allow for a recognition of the diversity of working conditions

for contingent faculty: “Academia essentially lays off all of its contingent employees at the end of each contract” (13). Once again, it is true that many precarious faculty are hired only on a short-term basis, but this is the worst practice that is countered by many other contractual arrangements and institutional policies and practices (Maxey and Kezar).⁷

As I have documented in my depiction of the UC system and other institutions, contingent faculty can earn continuing appointments with no end date, and in situations like this, they can be hired for at least one year at a time during their probationary period. There is thus a middle ground between tenured faculty and the type of faculty that Childress describes, yet he never addresses this alternative. Instead, he insists,

There is a second order of the faculty class, though . . . : the non-tenure-track or NTT faculty. They differ from the TT in several ways. There is no expectation of permanence; indeed, the expectation is for impermanence, for contracts lasting from one course in one semester to a few years at most. NTT faculty do not set curricula, and may not even set the syllabus for their own courses, instead delivering a standard package designed by others. They are not supported to teach and do research, but instead do one or the other exclusively. They typically get little or no professional development, nor are they supported for conference travel, professional memberships, or publication expenses. (20)

I know for a fact that thousands of contingent faculty inside and outside of the UC system have working conditions that counter every aspect of Childress’ description; for example, I have helped other unions write contracts that give contingent faculty continuing appointments, professional development funding, and academic freedom rights (Rhoades and Maitland). Unfortunately, it is very difficult to find reliable data on how many faculty work under particular conditions, and although admirable work has been done on trying to document this information, one really has to look at the facts on the ground to see what is really happening.⁸ I hope this book contributes to this process by giving detailed descriptions of actual practices. If we do not do this work, people will be left thinking that contingent faculty members only teach courses designed by others.

I fear that by focusing on the worst situations, activists such as Childress participate in a form of victim identity that limits the hope for progressive social change (Cole 7). For instance, in the following passage, Childress disregards the important contributions to academic research and service that many contingent faculty make on a daily basis and instead portrays contingent faculty as victims:

7. A long list of books and articles document the exploitative treatment of precarious academic labor. Some of the most important works are Nelson; Ross; Giroux; Bousquet, *How the University*; Donoghue; Lee and Kahn; and Slaughter and Rhoades.

8. For research on the diverse working conditions of contingent faculty, see Spaniel and Scott; Donhardt and Layden; and Boldt.

“What they can’t provide is a substantial contribution to the larger academic discourse within which they were trained. NTTs are content providers accomplishing a constrained task” (21). However, unlike Childress, who sees things in an extreme black-and-white way, we have to look at the complexity and diversity of actual working conditions. It has been my experience that administrators often use the argument that contingent faculty only teach to justify paying them less and excluding them from other benefits and responsibilities. For example, I have had to correct many institutional documents in the UC system that wrongly claim NTT lecturers are assessed only for their teaching. The truth is that lecturers often are evaluated also for their service and professional development. My fear is that one reason why university officials are able to ignore what is happening in their own institutions is that they rely on the type of stereotypes that Childress and others continue to circulate.

At one point in his book, Childress does appear to present a more complex and nuanced representation of NTT faculty:

Nationwide, data collected by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* shows more than half of the full-timers are themselves impermanent, hired for limited terms with no expectation of renewal, not welcomed into the larger conversations of institutional mission. The American Association of University Professors shows a different proportion, with about a third of full-timers being NTT. Either way, colleges have a large block of faculty who live in a middle ground of contingency, a community claimed as members when the institution wants to look good to accreditors and renounced when it comes time to grant them the privileges of TT life. (23)

On the one hand, Childress does acknowledge the fact that not all precarious faculty are part-time, but on the other hand, he quickly dismisses the value of these positions. As seen in the following passage, his rejection of the importance of FTNTT positions is due to his over-generalized and stereotypical way of seeing these jobs:

Although the full-time NTT have little say in the design of courses or the larger curricula within which they fit, they are often given some administrative work to do (in exchange for a twelve-month contract, meaning that their summers are no longer available for the research and writing they might otherwise have taken up as part of their career development). (26)

This claim that contingent faculty have little say in the development of their courses is countered by the fact that many NTT faculty inside and outside of the UC system develop their own courses (Elman; Thompson, “Contingent Faculty”; and Ehrenberg 195). To deny this fact is to dismiss and belittle the labor of thousands of faculty members.

My point here is not to single out Childress for his stereotypical representation of contingent faculty; rather, I view his work as indicative of a very common

way of seeing NTT faculty in a very limited and negative manner. Of course, his intention is to reveal the bad treatment of these teachers in order to help them make a claim for better working conditions, but by ignoring the reality of the diversity and complexity of these positions, he cannot help but reinforce the worst negative depictions of these positions. For instance, in the following passage, he repeats some of the most destructive views regarding undergraduate teaching, and as we shall see, it is often hard to determine if he is stating what he thinks other people think or if he actually has internalized these negative views:

Writing instruction is highly reliant on contingent faculty, as are lower-division math courses, science-for-nonmajors “breadth courses,” and introductory social science and humanities courses. These are the courses that are treated as commodities, one product being the same as any other, produced and consumed in every landscape, teachable by faculty with less specialization and expertise. The departments often disparagingly refer to them as “service courses”—courses that fulfill larger institutional needs rather than being explicitly for students within their majors, and which thus don’t deserve precious departmental resources. (78)

Although it is true that some faculty and administrators do consider required undergraduate courses to be less valuable, many other people see them as essential.⁹ However, by only representing the most negative view, Childress simply re-circulates a destructive stereotype and prejudice.

A major reason for Childress’ unintentional destructive discourse is that, like so many others, he uses hyperbolic language and has a tendency to overgeneralize and represent issues in a stark black-and-white manner. We see this unnuanced stance in the next passage, in which he continues to represent the situation of contingent faculty in the most negative and extreme ways as he discusses diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in higher education:

These initiatives of contemporary higher ed work both for and against students, because it’s almost certain that the enormous contingent faculty won’t be welcome to participate in any of them. Adjuncts won’t be invited to the professional development workshops about community-engaged learning, won’t be invited to include their students as research partners in their (unfunded and often nonexistent) scholarly endeavors. They won’t be paid to attend safe-space training for LGBTQ+ support, or to attend workshops about support for autistic students. They won’t even know the array of resources available to students on their campuses. (95-96)

What Childress does not acknowledge is, as in the case of the UC system, some

9. I explore these perceptions of undergraduate education in Samuels, *The Politics of Writing Studies*.

institutions do fund NTT faculty for professional development and institutional service (Kezar and Lester). Of course, not enough is being done in these areas, but when one ignores positive examples, one takes away hope and makes exploitation appear natural and inevitable. It is important to stress I do not want to let my knowledge of some better labor practices make it seem that the problems Childress is addressing do not exist; instead, my goal is to present a more balanced and truthful account that can let people know alternatives are possible.

What is most upsetting about Childress' work is that he dismisses and ignores the labor contingent faculty have been doing for decades. As a result of advocacy by contingent faculty and their allies, not only are some NTT faculty evaluated based on their level of engagement in research and their publishing of scholarly texts, but also some are evaluated for teaching, service, and professional development by their peers, yet Childress makes it seem that all contingent faculty are assessed only by student evaluations and their chair. He states, "For adjuncts, there's even less support for or interest in their research lives, so the only thing that gets reviewed are end-of-semester course evaluations, and those only by the department chair" (106). Once again, this representation denies the reality of the labor of many contingent faculty and feeds into the exploitative logic that NTT faculty only teach and that they have no part in evaluating their colleagues.

To be honest, I do not know whether Childress is simply ignorant of the facts or if his hyperbolic language forces him to reiterate destructive generalizations and prejudices. I would argue that a problem with a certain form of political activism is that it feels that the world has to be represented in stark, extreme terms in order to maximize the emotional appeal to create an argument. The problem with this rhetorical strategy is that it often distorts the truth and can be highly manipulative. Furthermore, while focusing only on the most negative situations can foster a bond through a sense of shared victimization, one might lose any sense of reality or hope that situations can be improved.

Although it is clear that Childress wants to enhance the working conditions of contingent faculty, his mindset blocks him from recognizing all of the different kinds of labor that many of these faculty members are doing on a daily basis. For example, in the following passage, he makes claims not only about NTT faculty but also about TT faculty that are simply too definitive and universal, while the reality is much more complicated and diverse:

Contingent workers aren't paid to come to meetings, and don't have much time for them anyway, so even those rare schools or departments that open larger discussions to their adjuncts don't get a lot of participation. (Which, of course, can be seen by the TTs as further evidence of adjuncts' lack of interest.) But the larger fact is that even the TT faculty are largely invisible to one another in the details of their daily work. In part because everyone's busy, and in part because of the culture of academic freedom, it's extraordinarily uncommon to have one faculty member sitting in on another's classroom; when it does happen, it's usually a chair or a dean

exercising oversight, rather than a colleague exercising curiosity about what's going on in those other classes. Teaching is an isolative culture, one that reveres but rarely explores exactly what happens in the sealed box of a classroom. (106)

This passage is filled with overgeneralizations and misrepresentations hiding the labor that many faculty do on a daily basis. Contingent faculty members and TT faculty members have spent countless hours going to meetings and visiting each other's classrooms, and to neglect this reality is to belittle the labor of the people Childress is trying to support. Furthermore, it is strange that he blames academic freedom for contributing to the problems he is discussing. If anything, academic freedom protections often work to make precarious academic labor more sustainable even though many contingent faculty are not protected by this core system of rights and privileges.

Not only does Childress repeat the destructive stereotype that NTT faculty only teach, but he also fails to see the many ways that contingent faculty play a key role in working closely with students. He states,

if half of the courses are led by impermanent teachers, even the students who fall in love with an adjunct's thinking can never have a second date, can never see a relationship bloom into a new path through the intellectual garden. They might not even be able to see that teacher between classes, as she rushes off to another class session at another school. The possibilities of mentorship are lost when we reduce faculty life to mere instruction. (p. 116)

In his effort to bemoan the way so many contingent faculty are treated, he fails to see that for many undergraduate students, the faculty member they know the best is the one without the possibility for tenure. If this was not true, then many of my colleagues would not be writing so many letters of recommendation. The truth is that most students do not know the employment status of their teachers, so they do not hesitate forming extended relationships with their NTT mentors.

Childress' underlying pessimism and defeatism is made clear in his predictions about the future. He proclaims,

I think we have likewise passed the point of peak faculty. A combination of consumer thinking, market fluidity, loss of professional status, technological innovation, and demographic shifts has led us to a point where the faculty will never again be a primarily full-time, primarily tenure-track institutional or cultural commitment. There will always be teachers, sure. But the idea of "the faculty" is as dead as the idea of coal; it'll carry on for a while because of sunk costs and the gasping demands of those still left in the industry—but really, it's gone. (135)

The type of rhetoric presented in this passage robs the people he is trying to help of any hope, and much of his pessimism relies on how he is defining the

term “faculty.” By saying that the faculty are dead, he is indicating that a certain narrow idea of what faculty should be is dying out. On one level, he is correct to point to the reduction of new TT positions, but by overgeneralizing the term “faculty,” he dismisses all of the other types of academic labor. Moreover, why should one fight for improvement, if things can only get worse?

Perhaps the most dispiriting aspect of Childress’ work comes in his rejection of the ways that unions and other collective actions can improve the plight of contingent faculty. In his opinion,

We will not eliminate contingency through battles, through unions and collective bargaining, because we can make a school pay people better without respecting them any more fully. We will not eliminate contingency through increased state or federal funding, because we’ve already demonstrated that there are any number of things to spend money on that are more appealing than a permanent faculty. We will not eliminate contingency through the oversight of accreditors, because we’ve experienced their willingness to award continued operation to schools that starve the majority of their teachers. (154)

While it is highly likely that contingency might never be completely eliminated, it is wrong to dismiss the way that unions and states have helped to improve the working conditions of many NTT faculty. Furthermore, there are some situations in which contingent positions are desired and necessary. By conflating all faculty into a single definition, Childress simply dismisses the reality of higher education and the value of having different types of faculty positions.

Instead of endorsing collective action and what has worked in the past, Childress’ solution revolves around an abstract call to change our values and culture. He exhorts, “We will only eliminate contingency through changing our definitions and our values. We will only eliminate it through cultivating respect, through the decision to reward demonstrated capability and good will rather than roles in an organizational chart” (154-55). This vague idealism pretends to provide a solution, but in fact nothing is really offered; rather, the reality of the material conditions of many precarious workers is denied.