ONE day last winter I turned the corner of my tree-lined suburban block and was actually disappointed to see that the trash had already been collected in my efficiently run midwestern neighborhood. I had returned to rescue the student portfolios I had thrown out. Trying to make room for the new by clearing out the old, as all good feng shui books recommend, I had discarded this proof of effective pedagogy in my last face-to-face brick-and-mortar teaching position. Having just come back from the Modern Language Association convention in Seattle, where, interacting with a full range of colleagues, I had been reminded of my extremely marginalized status and of my own much better, more privileged days, I did not want evidence around my home of a time when I had been allowed to offer courses I created myself.

_Ah, what is the use?_ I had uttered ruefully and wandered back into the house. I was as distraught about my underutilized skills and abilities as I was about the low pay. Yet at the same time I found myself realizing that perhaps Cary Nelson had been correct in prophesying in _Manifesto of a Tenured Radical_ that different kinds of classroom structures are relevant for different historical conditions. Perhaps I needed to adjust to this change in my workplace and pedagogical orientation. Although I was not tenured for enough time to have his long-view perspective, I had to admit that a moment he had written about had actually come, one necessitating a change in the mode of production of education. This recognition led me to reconstruct my identity as a professor, to turn to teaching online. Perhaps we are like the expropriated peasants working in factories, longing for their homes in the country, looking back to what they lost instead of figuring out how to improve where they are. Perhaps we need to evolve a conceptual scheme to see new ways to organize, not necessarily to get back the material plots we have lost. The period of relative stability for professors has come to an end even if our intellectual understanding about our situation lags behind.¹ As Vladimir Biti has argued, often there is a discrepancy between contemporary theories and the actual practices of history.

Remarks at a panel I attended at the 2011 annual conference of the National Women’s Studies Association made me realize how rapidly online distance education has grown (Dolhinow, Freehling-Burton, Jolna, and Malhotra). When I started working in online instruction, the ability to teach remotely seemed like a lifesaver. On some days, the opportunity still is. I overcome my isolation and offer my support, wisdom, and knowledge, and the students seem to appreciate me. Yet at times my frustrations mount, because I am not allowed to alter courses to keep students active enough to complete a term. I do not understand why I cannot bring to bear all my years of experience to do the most I can to teach them, since they will only have to pay to take the course again. To this an adviser wisely points out that the
institutions are run not for the sake of students’ learning but to operate at a profit. If students fail a required course, they, or the government agencies paying for their education, will have to pay for it again.

By the end of my time as a tenure-track assistant professor, I was earning $51,000 for teaching five courses a year, including summer teaching assignments. Now I piece together courses and assignments from three different institutions, work year round, and constantly seek more work. My total salary from online teaching—with a peak year, in which I taught eleven courses—was only in the neighborhood of $20,000, before taxes and deduction of expenses. I do not yet define myself as a career adjunct, instead holding out hope for another tenure-track position, and I operate a few small businesses on the side. In answer to the persistent questioning of why I continue this online adjunct work, clearly the most contingent of the contingent, I begin with the details of the positive before I suggest reasons to condemn practices that cripple those of us still willing to toil in the cracks of higher education.

After struggling through the unpaid training period, I thought that teaching only online suited me quite well. As long as the personal credit line behind my house held out, I had the freedom to travel. I often work and carry out research in Uruguay, Argentina, Mexico, and India and do so more cheaply than I would stateside. I write about my research in class blogs as I travel not only abroad but in the United States, engaging students in news about alternative lifestyles. Sometimes I inform them about women artists I am interviewing while they themselves are interviewing women for a course; at other times, in a course called Myth and Modern Life, I explain how mythic enactments occur at musical festivals where I vend. Because I live a life of passionate engagement, I model the life of someone pursuing higher knowledge and creating live, ongoing academic research. I hold office hours at home by Skype, send original documents from the women’s movement from my attic, and mentor a student moving from India to Finland. I use Skype from a rooftop restaurant in India at three in the morning with a student doing an independent study in Los Angeles. I work with students in the military and invite them to women’s studies meetings once they get to the United States.

I get to draw on my capabilities as an interdisciplinary scholar when I teach online. I can teach outside the box, since people are willing to hire me in fields in which I excel rather than only in institutional departments in the field in which I earned my doctorate. Administrators actually seem to review what I do, looking at my current activities, and offer me a range of courses. I have found that some new institutions use flexible criteria as the basis for hiring decisions that extend beyond the traditional narrow criterion of pedigree. Thus as a member of an arts, humanities, and writing faculty group, rather than as a member of an English department, and as a member of an arts and sciences program in a for-profit institution, I can teach three courses in women’s studies in the same semester, which I see as a definite advantage. In this climate, special hires allowing one to teach only women’s studies courses are very rare. And as I have learned from applying for around one thousand jobs either in women’s studies or English, only to have very few interviews, these positions are more likely to get filled by new PhDs, who are younger and cheaper to employ, than by someone entering an assistant professor slot with over fifteen years of solid college teaching
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experience (Weinbaum, “Consciousness-Raising,” “Creating,” “Exploring,” “Keeping,” “Teaching Feminist Approaches”). Whereas for-profit institutions of higher education seeking accreditation and legitimacy might hire me because of the extent, width, and breadth of my qualifications, including publications, it is likely I have been eliminated as an overqualified candidate for positions in traditional institutions, where remuneration is tied to experience and achievement. It is counterintuitive to academic hierarchy to bring in a candidate who has published as extensively as I have.

Online teaching has allowed me to develop a career in art. I exhibit in a number of galleries, which I would not have been able to do if I were still employed in one institution full-time. Like many artists struggling to survive, I started a small wearable-arts business, featuring designs from my travels to Indonesia. I had this business running by the time of my first online job interview. I was hired for a course that included teaching about women’s art in clothing and fabric design, traditional women’s work for the last twenty thousand years (Barber). Now that my work appears in galleries and I am having shows, my art has appeared on the cover of an issue of Lesbian Connection (34.4 [2012]). My art sells, not only in galleries but also in festival booths and online, yet not enough to support me. For that, I rely on my day job, which is flexible and does not tie me down other than having to lay out money for laptops, roving service, and computer repairs and to get to an Internet connection at all costs and at all hours—a search that has necessitated coming down a mountain from an ashram in India in the middle of a nine-day goddess festival, working in dining rooms of Indian hotels with workers sleeping on the floors around me, teaching on the porch of a hostel in Uruguay in the midst of crowds appearing to catch a channeling of the Divine Mother, driving from music festivals in the early morning to McDonald’s and cafés for Wi-Fi, and imposing on strangers and friends. All this has been challenging, but doable.

As a single mother, I can combine some aspects of parenting and still maintain some semblance of an academic career. The flexibility offered by teaching online has allowed me to take my daughter to weeklong homeschooling and circus camps in Vermont and to Virginia for weeklong teen meditation retreats. During one of those weeks I was able to complete a book; in all those trips, I was able to take my online teaching with me while I enjoyed the woods.

Out of the nearly one and a half million part-time faculty members in higher education in America, one million are women (“Employees”). Perhaps this information can help us conceptualize the adjunctification of the university as a way of coping with the unruly specter of feminization. Rather than let women invade the workplace, erecting elaborate glass ceilings and carrying out gross gender discrimination to drive them away, it might be simpler and less expensive to create a way to employ them cheaply in their own homes, as a sort of cottage industry in which they can combine teaching and mommy work. If the pay for adjunct work and full-time in-person teaching were the same, institutions might be able to successfully accommodate working mothers this way. Other benefits include funds for intermittent travel to conferences and other opportunities to socialize with colleagues. I even receive health-care and retirement contributions from one institution.

Yet, despite the numerous advantages of teaching online, there are big creative drawbacks to it. Generally the instructor is not in control of the course and the
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learning experience of the student. The hired-on pieceworker professor is like an auto mechanic, tooling the car driving through the pit for a quick fix. One rarely gets to design and offer an original course, choosing the books, articles, or films one wants to teach or implementing chosen methods of instruction. One can barely tinker the design of someone else’s product and must be careful not to leave too much of one’s imprint on the student experience. Even when hired as a subject-matter expert at a for-profit institution, I was given a structure to follow and could not organize forums as I liked since the college wanted its courses to be uniformly standard.

The implications for higher education of this major disadvantage are quite serious. As Barbara McKenna explains, institutions are failing to support their instructional staff members. Much like the many part-time faculty members paid by the course, I get paid in the neighborhood of $2,500 per fully enrolled distance-education class (sometimes $2,200, sometimes $2,600, sometimes $1,200, depending on enrollment; in another institution, I was paid $1,800 per course, no matter what the class size, which varied from five to twenty-five students). In one institution I get to teach eight such courses, if lucky, in a good year, but the slot is still referred to as part-time, even though I carry more there than I did as a full-time assistant professor elsewhere. When I brought up the inaccuracy of this wording to a union leader, he told me that, in his twelve years of working in that state institution, discussion of changing this language was not something administrators wished to hear. The part-time misnomer excludes me from quite a few grants and other professional development opportunities; it also means that the university is only paying me $2,500 to teach a class. The MLA recommends paying around $7,000 for each three-credit adjunct course, and I usually teach four-credit courses. At another university, I got paid $25 an hour for mentoring, but I was only paid for two hours and am still in touch with the student, who continues to turn to me for mentoring, as I do to my adviser, as is only natural once one connects solidly with someone who can open doors and have an influence on you. The difference is my adviser is retired after earning a full professor’s salary, and I am still working, trying to piece together an underpaid living. At another institution, I am paid $1,800 per course before taxes and $1,000 for course design and development. True, each university has its own costs, such as paying license fees for use of software programming, yet over this period, fitting with the picture of undersupport of adjunct professionals that McKenna discusses as the general trend nationally (4), none of these universities has provided me with computers, office space, paper, supplies, overhead, or electricity or compensated me for any other out-of-pocket costs of operations, such as a cell phone. Compensation for course development is another area of concern. The hourly rate for developing a course rapidly reduces to about $2 or $3 an hour, which I suspect to be less than the pay rate of the unionized janitors. The product remains owned by the institution, and it is the institution, not the creator, that continues to earn profit over the years.

Some administrators have become sensitive to adjunct issues and are spotting ways to work on our behalf from the inside, yet structurally they are positioned to create conditions of alienation as well as exploitation. For example, at any point in time, administrators can pop in to the course I am teaching, and they have the right to tell me to remove postings at their discretion. To those schooled in old-
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school face-to-face teaching, including me, this intervention can be rather jarring. The first time it occurred felt like a violation of academic freedom, as if Big Brother were watching, especially since I was not forewarned of the administrator’s intent to observe the class. Or, for instance, an online instructor may be questioned about providing students with scholarship in fields corollary to the one being taught, for background context discussion and possible further student research, although providing such information would be a matter of course in face-to-face classrooms.

The people who are in administrative positions may be more recently minted PhDs with less teaching experience on the college level and fewer publications in the area of expertise in the field of hire than the online instructors they are overseeing or they might have a different pedagogical perspective. They may also lack doctorates and operate according to a business model that includes statements in contracts specifying instructors will not be paid until after grades are delivered and evidence of effective teaching has been provided.

Although we can presume that full-time administrators have the advantage of considerable advanced planning, they frequently expect adjuncts to jump in and teach a course at the drop of a hat. One possible explanation for this short-term notice is that if adjuncts are offered contracts and then a course is canceled, we are eligible for unemployment benefits, which add to university costs. This placing of economic concerns ahead of pedagogical ones means we may not receive the syllabus and the materials ahead of time and cannot prepare for a course with the learning goals for each module in mind, if we can prepare for it at all. For example, I once agreed to teach a course without even having seen the books. Such hasty arrangements are further indicators of the lack of respect for adjuncts that McKenna describes (5). We are often slapped in at the last minute to teach books we have not read, to meet learning objectives that someone else has thought up, using a syllabus we cannot stand behind. Students evaluate us in our ability to lead them through materials that do not engage us. This kind of underpay, alienation, and exploitation of the labor crop toiling to produce the pay of the supervisory structure can create resentment that may even, for some, encroach on the ability to perform well as teachers. I admit that, given the number of papers I have to read, when teaching a course for which I am paid the same amount whether there are five or twenty students, I actually have caught myself uncharacteristically feeling happy that some students have dropped off. The collective literally overrides the individual professional identity.

The mistreatment of adjunct or contingent faculty members can make a negative impression on students. Before I began my online teaching career, I held a one-quarter adjunct job in California. My graduate students there were disappointed to hear that I was answering advertisements to deliver newspapers as the period for which I was under contract ran out. They were spending upward of $100,000 on their doctorates, and yet one of their most loved professors—I was accessible to them and helping them get their needs met—was living in a one-room studio with her teenage daughter, talking about the trauma of getting fingerprinted for food stamps, and seeking supplemental income. After I left, I was still mentoring students, helping them publish, present at conferences, and even procure professional jobs, but the institution was not paying me for these ongoing services. It is only so long before operating out
of the goodness of one’s heart stops. When students pay money to an institution, they do not necessarily differentiate the specific reason a professor is there or understand the limitations of a position. As long as some of us are undersupported the students remain underserved, a fact that has propelled the filmmaker Chris LaBree of 2255 Films to team up with the adjunct instructor Debra Leigh Scott and make a documentary film interviewing those working in the adjunct positions. The filmmakers’ goal is primarily to educate the parents of students whose college education has become vastly different from what the parents experienced many years ago. That the institutions are crumbling and cannot offer the teachers a solid basis of support can undermine students’ learning and hence desire to reenroll and pay; the strategy seems counterintuitive across the board, not only as it applies to online adjunct work.

When I was working in a face-to-face job in a southern university, I spent the first semester fighting to get my own office. I also spent much time fighting for the opportunity to teach graduate and literature courses. Eventually I developed an excellent proficiency at teaching composition, with students reaching out to me on Blackboard to get into my classes and clamoring for the creation of more sections to which they were recruiting their friends. I still can recall fond moments in that teaching office, but teaching composition was not the reason I had relocated. I remember going around to various administrators in that southern university with the MLA suggestions for appropriate pay (“MLA Recommendation”), but to no avail.

Those two years I continued to publish research and to present at scholarly conferences. Yet in my work review, the space on scholarship was simply left blank. It was as if I never did anything, as if my scholarship had become unimportant since it had also not helped me fight the battle against my nonrenewal at a previous university. Such an insult makes for embitterment in what is becoming an increasingly divided and hypocritical profession. I was teaching research and writing, in English 1100 and 1200, yet my own writing remained invisible to the institution. I was passed over for an assistant professor opening and saw there was no room for advancement. In my eyes, tenure-track and tenured faculty members were treated like a privileged class. In a budget crunch, for example, they were able to take over literature courses that had been promised to the contingent faculty members. How does this build coalitions within an institution and a department? My second year, I only went to one departmental meeting. When I first arrived I had been set on going to all of them, even sending items to go on the agenda, expecting to participate equally in the discussion. I couldn’t understand how the department meetings were all scheduled during my teaching hours. I didn’t understand that it didn’t matter to the department whether I attended the meetings.

My first employment offer from the institution—given at the last minute—was for a one-year appointment, and I was saddled with keeping up the expenses of my house in Cleveland Heights and getting an apartment near the school on such short notice. At the end of the year, I packed everything up and left it in people’s garages and in the office I had finally gotten and went to Vermont over the summer. In the middle of that summer I got an offer for one semester further.

I took the position at the encouragement of the banker that has the home equity line behind my house—since the crash in 2008 people had been leaving the
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Cleveland area left and right. I went back for one semester and made the commitment to live there with my daughter for only one more semester. One-semester, and even one-year, last-minute offers that require relocation almost always have the added expense of a second house, and I was not the only suddenly transplanted contingent faculty member, either fall semester, who owned a home elsewhere. And because the offers were given at the last minute, we did not have time to clear out our houses and rent them to subsidize our temporary moves. How could we rent anyway, for four months, knowing we might need to come back?

Then halfway through that semester I was offered a second semester. My daughter got very depressed; struggling with all this uncertainty was not a sufficient container for growing into young adulthood, and the impact on families of these administrative policies is relevant to note. I became overwhelmed with the idea of moving and trying to pack up at the end of that first semester. I tried to stick it out, even though this broke my commitment of staying only one semester, for the benefit of my daughter’s security. I stayed a second semester. Then in the last few weeks of the first semester I became ill, but, on a one-semester contract, I had no right to sick leave and had to keep going in to work in what I felt was a physically unhealthy environment. Not surprisingly, given my objections to the adjunct working conditions, mine was one of the first heads to roll when budget cuts swept through the system. Maybe it was then that I figured that teaching online in distance-learning programs suited me better than moving around for short-term gigs.

The bottom line for anyone who considers teaching a calling, and not just something one does for money, is, What kind of education can be offered like this? I once popped my head into a departmental meeting where the faculty members were discussing how to retain students. It seemed so obvious to me. If an institution wants to retain students to get a bigger piece of the state budget, as this one did, then why not make the jobs of the freshman composition contingent faculty members more secure? We have the most contact time with the first-year students and are the most helpful to and supportive of them. Yet we are the most disgruntled and underpaid. Not knowing if we will even be there semester by semester, how can we concentrate on students and what works in a classroom for them? The threat to my own family’s stability continually distracted me. Undercutting people in these underpaid, insecure slots creates discouragement, despair, and despondency, keeping alienated educators from delivering what students deserve.

There are only so many times those with professional training can perform well while being treated in such an abominable fashion. What is at risk is not only institutional life but the life of the country as well. As Debra Leigh Scott argues, this impoverishment of faculty members might be an intentional part of the design of stifling revolt. In other countries, Scott maintains, the ruling powers would throw dissenters into prison. Yet in the United States, “instead of doing anything so obvious as throwing them into prison, here those same people are thrown into dire poverty. The outcome is the same. Desperate poverty controls and ultimately breaks people as effectively as prison . . . and some research says that it works even MORE powerfully.” Then Scott presents a recipe for killing universities. After World War II, with the passage of the GI bill and the general affordability of the university, there
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was an upsurge of college students nationally. Scott points out that this made universities often become “the very heart of intense public discourse, passionate learning, and vocal citizen involvement in the issues of the times.” She continues, “It was during this time, too, when colleges had a thriving professoriate, and when students were given access to a variety of subject areas, and the possibility of broad learning.” With liberal arts at the center of a college education, students were exposed to philosophy, anthropology, literature, history, sociology, world religions, foreign languages, and cultures, Scott says. And she reminds us that then something else began to happen: “the uprisings and growing numbers of citizens taking part in popular dissent—against the Vietnam War, against racism, against destruction of the environment in a growing corporatized culture, against misogyny, against homophobia.”

Since much of that revolt incubated on college campuses, Scott argues that warmongers, corporations, and “those in our society who would keep us divided based on our race, our gender, our sexual orientation” would most likely have liked nothing more than to shut down the universities and destroy them outright. But a country claiming to have democratic values can’t just shut down universities, so the debate that used to be fostered has been easily clamped down by defunding the public universities, deprofessionalizing and impoverishing the faculty, corporatizing the culture, and giving increased funds to managers who are not educators themselves. Such practices result in taking away the power from what used to be a self-governing faculty and in undermining collegiate culture.

More than anything Scott’s metanarrative makes sense to me. It helps me understand and place my personal story in a large social and national picture. I hope my story and what I have reported here from Scott’s analysis have done that for further readers as well. When Scott came to interview me and other adjuncts for her film, I was on the verge of writing a letter to the dean of the institution where I had just been recognized for five years of service. I was going to say, now that you know I am reliable and competent, why can’t you give me $50,000 a year and job security to continue to teach your eight courses a year? I felt that this was a negotiable offer, in that I was ready to settle for less just to have security. Now I realize that thinking my proposal was reasonable and that the dean might agree was a fantasy. Unlike Scott, I had not begun to fantasize about how to change everyone’s situation equally. Perhaps if we stop thinking like peasants wanting to get back to our land (offices, classrooms), we could imagine new ways to go forward as a group, having accepted the changes in higher education. Having worked with Occupy and attended their educators’ forums, my thoughts go back to the 1960s and campus protests against the Vietnam War. Then, students burned draft cards and engaged in other acts of civil disobedience. Is it so hard to imagine the kinds of disruption a campus protest movement might create today? Sit-ins, teach-ins, and building occupations might find their networked equivalents. Then, protesters occupied the offices of campus administrators; today, one imagines, protest might well look to occupy online institutions’ servers.

In books such as Rebooting the Academy, tech innovators are advocating ways to integrate technological change into the management of colleges. Perhaps we need to write books about how to transform the proliferation of technology so that it benefits academic laborers. That is, while the Chronicle of Higher Education’s Wired
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Campus e-report includes articles such as “Harnessing the Power of Digital Learning in Higher Education,” by Jeff Borden, still missing are the articles recommending job stability and a living wage to the online professors or suggesting how such an evolution might come about. Borden recommends maximizing an institution’s online teaching and learning investments but not maximizing the job security of the professors who design and teach the courses. He offers ways to improve student engagement and retention, but these ways include course redesign and customized digital learning tools, not improving the working conditions of the professors.

Could we form an online adjunct teaching union of our own not subject to agreements made by unions representing tenured and tenure-track faculty members, organizing all online instructors, internationally and nationwide? If so, how? And what risks would we be taking? It is time for the expropriated academic laborers to prepare for the demands of the digital learning environments in higher education. Only in this way could we truly make way for the new.

Notes

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1. According to Maclean, such a mechanism is arguably visible.

2. Unpaid training in online work is par for the course and functions as a screening process (see Babb and Mirabella). Paying for training is an aspect of corporate business culture that has not yet penetrated our realm.

3. My work is so interdisciplinary that I have been hired in both psychology and English departments, have been questioned as to why I was teaching anthropology in an English course when I started a multicultural literature of the United States survey with Yaqui deer song, and was hired as subject-matter expert to design and teach a course called Comparative Cultures and then was given a course in remedial composition.

4. For accounts of gender discrimination in the academy and its impact on education, see Clark, Garner, Higonnet, and Kattrak; Is Academic Feminism; McCoy and DiGeorge-Lutz; Martin; Nerad; Coiner and George; Ferber and Loeb.

5. For further enumeration, see Weinbaum, “Teaching Feminism”; Kramarae.

6. See McKenna for statistics on the proportion of the overall professoriat off the tenure track and for discussion of the similar pay structures in face-to-face instruction. According to recent surveys, the median pay for a three-credit face-to-face course is $2,700, and per-course pay ranges from a low of $2,235 at two-year institutions to a high of $3,400 at four-year colleges or research universities (5). See also Portrait (2).

7. See Scott’s The Homeless Adjunct (http://junctrebellion.wordpress.com/), a blog that follows the making of the documentary film Junct: The Trashing of Higher Education in America.

8. In the process of leaving my first tenure-track job in an English department, I sat through sixteen days of arbitration hearings during which I was not allowed to speak unless under examination by a lawyer. Always looking for predecessors, which I found originally in accounts of the McCarthy Era, I recently discovered another one in Emma Goldman, who, as described in Living My Life, also went through persecutory hearings in which she was required to remain silent. On my experience, see Weinbaum, This Could Happen, “Memoir,” and “How Work Reviews.”

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