

“Haven’t we heard this all before?”: Contingent Faculty and the Unchanging Times

Veronica J. Austen
St Jerome’s University

IN EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCE OF CONTINGENT FACULTY amidst “changing models” of postsecondary education in Canada, I find my task fraught with a central contradiction. From the vantage point of contingent/part-time/contract/per course/sessional (insert your own label of choice) workers, are we really experiencing a change in postsecondary models? Any current description of sessional work, in fact, repeats what has been part of our common knowledge for decades, particularly since the publication of Judith M. Gappa and David W. Leslie’s groundbreaking *Invisible Faculty: Improving the Status of Part-Timers in Higher Education* (1993). Inadequate office space, classroom overhead projectors serving as classy coat racks, treacherous commutes, last minute hirings, contracts that do not compensate for pre-term preparation ... the list of difficulties is endless, and we have said and heard it all before.

If I am, thus, dealing with an aspect of the postsecondary education system that in changing times remains largely the same, then perhaps the more necessary task is to consider why these experiences remain unchanged and thereby begin to conceive of ways out of this perpetual cycle of poor working conditions. Why do we, particularly those in the humanities, who frequently claim to be making our students into more

VERONICA AUSTEN
teaches Canadian
Literature at St Jerome's
University. Her various
research interests include
visually experimental
poetry by Caribbean
and Canadian writers,
representations of
individual and cultural
trauma, and the portrayal
of the visual arts in
contemporary Canadian
literature. She is serving
as ACCUTE's Sessional
Representative.

socially conscious and responsible citizens, allow such an inequitable system to be the site for their learning? Yes, material changes—such as provincial or national unionization—could help improve basic working conditions. Nevertheless, in an economic and governmental environment likely not conducive to such seismic shifts, I am left thinking that maybe the most immediate attention should be paid to dismantling our attitudes and behaviours that serve only to entrench the place of sessional workers at the bottom of our institutional hierarchy.

Funny story: In my current appointment as a limited term faculty member, I have found myself negotiating a tricky space of liminality. From my second floor office window, I look down upon the portable I used to occupy as a sessional instructor and in which my sessional colleagues still have offices. One of my friends from that portable and I have joked that my current position literally offers me a position in the ivory tower! As an undergraduate, and even as a graduate student, I admit I was utterly naive of an academic Chain of Being, but every glance out my window confirms this fact.

To continue with this Darwinian metaphor, I have become curious in recent months about just how often the rhetoric of survival makes it into our discussions of our careers. For example, I have frequently been told by colleagues that getting a tenure-track job is “all about endurance,” that if I just “persevere” that elusive job will come (they don't then serenade me with “Somewhere Over the Rainbow,” but sometimes I imagine they do). Quality of work, of course, is foundational, but ultimately it seems that my career will come down to whether or not I have the mental and physical faculties to survive the process. Herein lies the problem: since the rhetoric of survival is innately involved in the construction of hierarchies—those who survive versus those who languish or perish—perhaps it is this depiction of our careers as the product of survival that we must necessarily upset.

We all likely have encountered the attitude that those who have permanent positions are somehow more fit as academics than their non-tenured faculty. I have heard stories of sessional faculty being called “failed academics” to their faces; I have heard of tenured faculty who have questioned whether or not sessionals are qualified to teach courses above the first year and those who have demanded for more “checking up on” the courses staffed by sessionals. This “survival of the fittest” mentality assumes that those who have achieved permanent work are innately (and abstractly) “better.” While the great majority of my tenure-track and tenured colleagues at various institutions do not overtly subscribe to the arrogance

suggested by this mentality, I do frequently encounter an attitude that is its by-product: “Pursuing a permanent position is hard; it’s *supposed* to be hard. We did it; you can do it too.” This attitude does not assume that those who are tenure-track/tenured are the fittest because their work is the best but, rather, suggests that those with permanent positions are the fittest precisely because they did manage to survive the trial-by-fire that is the academic job hunt. As such, even though these words have most often come in the form of commiseration and encouragement, the attitude they reflect does nothing to question a system that normalizes the exploitation of its contract workers as part of its regular business plan.

There is, of course, another side to this depiction of our careers in terms of survival: survivor’s guilt, a guilt that results from one’s awareness that so many qualified individuals are experiencing working conditions so much worse than one’s own. Survivor’s guilt, however, is not only an experience of our tenure-track/tenured colleagues, although I have heard many speak of it. Instead, from my experience, survivor’s guilt can manifest itself at any level of employment. If I will receive a living wage having been appointed for three courses in a term when a colleague has only been appointed for one, if my university offers me a larger stipend for fewer students than a colleague at another institution, or if I have a limited term position while my colleagues are working for stipends, then I, by comparison, become the survivor and, by comparison, find myself being grateful for what I do have, however imperfect my situation may be.

Being able to be grateful for what one does have, knowing that others have less, is a decent enough defence mechanism, but the problem remains that the guilt one feels as a survivor does not always manifest itself in the choice to advocate for one’s worse-off colleagues. Instead, the result is more often a tendency toward silence; even one’s ability to advocate for oneself is compromised. Hypothetically, if I know that others have it worse than I do, I end up feeling petty or afraid to speak up about the inequities I still face. For example, having office space in a portable may not be ideal, but at least it is office space. I, therefore, find myself feeling thankful to my employer for whatever small mercies I do receive, and I am thereby lulled into a complacency (or, eventually, a hopelessness) that allows the system and its inequalities to continue.

So, in changing times nothing really changes for sessional workers. As part of a system that propagates a hierarchical Chain of Being, we, as contingent faculty, will endure and persevere to become one of the system’s fittest, or we will not. We will be able to cast aside the inferiority complexes bred by our working conditions, or we will not. We will make it “over the

So, in changing
times nothing
really changes
for sessional
workers.

rainbow” and become advocates for our sessional colleagues, or we will not. I must, in fact, conclude this paper offering no real solutions. One’s survival instinct and capacity to endure should not be what determines one’s ability to pursue a chosen career. Our hallways should not be populated by guilty survivors or the walking wounded who are still hoping to survive. One’s initiation into an academic career should not leave scars. But, again, haven’t we already said and heard this before?