The Culture of Poverty in the Ivory Tower

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Macmillan).

W e, the authors of this piece, are both contingent faculty who primarily teach first-
year writing. Alex is an adjunct at a two-year college, and Bethany is a PhD student
at a nearby public R1 university.

Allow us to present you with two documents that outline the labor conditions of contingent
workers in our field: the Writing Program Administration Graduate Organization (WPA-GO)
statement on graduate student workers and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) report
on quality of life for adjuncts. Both documents, released in 2019 and 2020, respectively,
present data gathered from surveying contingent faculty. The WPA-GO statement surveyed
344 graduate students in writing programs across the United States and found their self-
reported working conditions to be bleak. Among the upsetting statistics were the following:
62.8% of them worked more hours than contracted each week, their median pay ranged from
$11,000 for MA/MS students to $16,800 for PhD students, 71.8% said their pay was
insufficient to cover their living costs, and 36% said their health insurance coverage was
insufficient ("Report on Graduate Student Instructor Labor Conditions" 1-3). The AFT report
gathered responses from 3,076 adjuncts from two- and four-year institutions, and their findings
were arguably worse. Below is a list of disturbing findings directly from the executive
summary of the report. I encourage you to read them closely and sit with the implications these
facts have on the lives of those who reported them.

- One-third of respondents earn less than $25,000 annually, placing them below the
  federal poverty guideline for a family of four.
- Only 15% report being able to comfortably cover basic monthly expenses.

- Fewer than half of the survey respondents have access to employer-provided health insurance; nearly 20% rely on Medicaid.

- About 45% of faculty members surveyed have put off getting needed healthcare, including mental healthcare; 65% forgo dental care.

- 41% struggle with job security, reporting that they don't know if they will have a teaching job until one month before the beginning of the academic year.

- For 3 out of 4 contingent faculty, employment is only guaranteed from term to term.

- A plan for a secure retirement is out of reach for most faculty, with 37% reporting they don't see a path ("An Army of Temps" 1).

To speak more specifically to adjunct conditions in our field of writing studies, we'll add a third report: the White Papers put out by the Two-Year College English Association (TYCA) in 2021, which gathered data from 1062 faculty respondents from two-year colleges across the country. This study had a mixture of tenure- and non-tenure-track respondents, but White Paper #9 addressed contingent labor in the two-year college specifically, and the results were predictably discouraging. The TYCA survey reports that adjuncts at two-year colleges in our field struggle with "job insecurity, differential treatment from chairs and deans, limited autonomy, lack of respect for their expertise from administrators or full-time faculty, employment at multiple institutions, a lack of resources required for doing their jobs, and a lack of opportunity or time to pursue professional development and research in the field" (Giordano et al. 4). In addition to these structural and cultural issues, they are also poorly compensated.

Regardless of institution type or local context, higher education is built on the exploitation and suffering of contingent workers. In this article, we respond to these conditions not through large-scale surveying and data collection, as the authors of the reports cited above have done, but through autoethnography—what Rebecca L. Jackson and Jackie Grutsch McKinney describe as "a subjective, emotional, and embodied view from the ground" (4). The truth is that neither of us can attempt to occupy the distant, pseudo-objective voice of the researcher when writing on academic labor. In our precarious positions within our institutions, we are too close to the action to describe academic labor systems without also speaking to our own local conditions, our own experiences, and our own feelings. The institutions we work within constrain our methods—to attempt a massive research study like those cited earlier in the introduction requires a kind of sustained institutional support that neither of us can access in our current positions. What is left to us, then, is the qualitative, self-focused, and context-conscious form of autoethnography (Jackson and Grutsch McKinney 7).

Though autoethnography is a form adopted in part due to our own contingency, it is also a form with close ties to the ongoing scholarly conversations around poverty and labor conditions in the academy. While Michael Dubson does not introduce any of the essays in his 2001 edited collection *Ghosts in the Classroom: Stories of College Adjunct Faculty—and the Price We All Pay* as autoethnography, many of the authors included seem to borrow from this form, narrating personal experiences of precarious teaching to suggest broader conclusions about the nature of adjunct work—and the academic systems that rely on it. More recently, in *Materiality and Writing Studies: Aligning Labor, Scholarship, and Teaching*, Holly Hassel and

Cassandra Phillips weave short sections of personal narrative into their evidence-based arguments about the state of the discipline, suggesting that just as field-wide surveys and reports can reveal something essential about the nature of our work, so, too, can personal stories.

Alongside our interest in autoethnography, we also draw on institutional ethnography (IE), a methodology about which Michelle LaFrance writes,

> [Institutional ethnography] holds that individual experience, ideals of practice, local materialities, and institutional discourse are mutually constitutive; what individuals do is always rule-governed and textually mediated. Using IE to study the "work" that people carry out allows writing studies researchers to reveal the deep and often hidden investments and experiences of those people, making visible the values, practices, beliefs, and belongings that circulate below more visible or dominant discourses. The researcher might then uncover opportunities for recognition, conversation, or intervention. (5)

As early career scholars, we are learning the field at the same time as we learn our respective institutions, and this process of enculturation reveals that poverty in academia functions not simply as a personal or institutional material reality but also as a cultural idea, sustained both by the institution and by those working within it. As LaFrance writes, this institutional framework "shifts the ethnographer's eye away from reified or static understandings of the people, events, or sites studied. The methodology asks us instead to investigate how the individuals within a location co-create the dynamics and processes under investigation" (5). It is this cocreation of a *culture of poverty* that we are most interested in— the ways that individuals within institutions of higher education sustain beliefs and practices that cement poverty as central to individual and institutional identity within the academy, limiting our collective imagination for more just and equitable systems and interventions.

The idea of a culture of poverty in academia builds on Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, which he defines as the "'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group" (Gramsci 12). However, even though he constructs the idea of cultural hegemony as the masses unconscious adaptation of the ways of thinking of those in power, Gramsci understands that "the outlook of subordinate groups is always divided and ambiguous," not entirely enticed by hegemony, but not entirely liberated from it either (Lears 570). This "contradictory consciousness" means the disempowered may at times protest systems that oppress them while simultaneously reinforcing them in other ways (Lears 570). bell hooks' *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* explores this phenomenon by analyzing the role women have in upholding patriarchy:

> Patriarchal thinking shapes the values of our culture. We are socialized into this system, females as well as males. Most of us learned patriarchal attitudes in our family of origin, and they were usually taught to us by our mothers. These attitudes were reinforced in schools and religious institutions. . . . We need to highlight the role women play in perpetuating and sustaining patriarchal culture so that we will recognize patriarchy as a system women and men support equally, even if men receive more rewards from that system. (41-42)

Those with more power in a given system are disincentivized from critiquing it, but even those with less power are enculturated to see its structure as normative, even if they

simultaneously recognize it as problematic. Once we understand hegemonic thinking, it's easy to see how it functions in higher education. We, the authors, have observed how the hegemonic culture of poverty is created and reinforced by administrators, full-time faculty, and contingent faculty alike. We see it in the way our departments talk about contingent workers, in the structures of support (or lack thereof) for them, and in the ways contingent faculty conceptualize their labor and limit their imaginations about what types of change are reasonable or possible.

The following sections, alternating between each of our perspectives, offer a braided narrative of our institutional encounters as contingent instructors, showcasing how institutional mechanisms incorporate new members into the culture of poverty in the academy. This dialogic format has a long history in pedagogical writing, stretching back at least as far as the Socratic dialogues in ancient Greece and connecting with Paulo Freire's "talking books" with Myles Horton and Ira Shor in the 1980s. Our version of this form is a written (rather than a spoken) dialogue and draws inspiration from Karen Powers-Stubbs and Jeff Sommers' "'Where We Are Is Who We Are': Location, Professional Identity, and the Two-Year College," an essay that similarly considers personal experience, institutional context, and identity in written dialogue. Following Powers-Stubbs and Sommers' example, we begin with brief descriptions of our institutional contexts which are followed by four alternating sections and a co-written conclusion.

Bethany

I am a PhD student at a large, public R1 in the Midwest. It's the second largest university in our state, with a student population of roughly 50,000. I teach and take classes on our main campus, but there are two branch campuses in the suburbs surrounding our city center. The university's student population is not representative of the neighborhood it inhabits–rather, most students come from across the region or surrounding states.

Alex

I currently teach at a public, urban, open-access two-year college in the Midwest. Founded in a former high school building in 1969, the institution started as a technical college before introducing community college programs in the 1990s. The college now offers 130 degree and certificate programs and enrolls more than 10,000 students annually. Like most two-year colleges, its students mostly come from the immediate geographic area, and the school enrolls high numbers of nontraditional students and Pell Grant recipients.

Bethany

Last semester, I received an email from the Graduate Program Director in my department titled "Goods and Groceries Available in the Lounge-Please come and grab some things!" She sent the email to a listserv of all the graduate students in our department. The rest of the email read:

Hi All,

There are groceries in the faculty lounge (dry goods on the table, meat in the freezer, eggs and garlic bread, lettuce, and some other produce in the fridge) that are up for grabs. There are also some personal products (soap, laundry detergent, toothpaste).

I have forms in the office that people can complete- if four forms are completed, we can regularly have this delivery of food to the department for graduate students.

Everything in the fridge that is available is labeled. Everything in the freezer is up for grabs.

Please take what you need!

I've been thinking about this email for weeks. It bothered me when I read it, but not because I think the person who sent it did anything wrong–in fact, I believe the opposite. They facilitated the donation of food and toiletries to a group that often struggles with food insecurity. That's a valuable effort. However, when that email popped up on my phone, I was horrified. It felt dystopian that my department, instead of paying us more, started a food kitchen for us in the faculty lounge.

Throughout the rest of the semester, I received more emails about this effort as different faculty and staff members sourced new donations. Every time I walked into the English department faculty lounge to fill up my water bottle, I would see the pile of groceries sitting on the table, with more waiting in the fridge. One day, there was a pile of fliers about how to apply for SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) benefits. I took groceries from these supplies on multiple occasions, but my deep discomfort with the situation remained. I have struggled with how to articulate this discomfort because I know the people facilitating the distribution of the food, and I know them to be kind and understanding of graduate students' situations. I appreciate the resource and have made use of it. But the reality is that I'm being taken advantage of by the university, and I feel like the people who see it happening and sympathize with graduate students' struggles are creating systems around our poverty rather than railing at the powers that be who are exploiting us. The problem is that graduate students in my department aren't paid enough, and instead of fixing the dam of that injustice, sympathetic faculty are plugging the holes with their fingers.

I'm uncomfortable with my feelings of resentment. I know that the people running the food pantry don't have real power to change our pay, and they are also some of the people working most directly with graduate students, who see the problem and want to do anything they can to help. I feel deeply guilty about criticizing their efforts, especially because I benefit from them and they come from a good place. The box of off-brand Cheerios is sitting in my pantry right now, and I'm using them to help feed my two-year-old son. Regardless, the fact remains that academic culture has understood, accepted, and reinforced the poverty of graduate students, so much so that no one bats an eye at our department creating a food bank for us across the hall from their offices. So I'm left with this feeling of, *this is weird, right? Can everyone else see this is weird, or is it just me?* If graduate student poverty is so bad that we need food assistance and SNAP benefits, then shouldn't everyone in the department be protesting? Striking? Throwing a fit? Instead, I hear a lot of "it's a damn shame," and "here's a can of green beans."

Alex

Poverty came up almost immediately in my job interview for an adjunct position at a local two-year college. I had just finished an MA in Creative Writing and was desperate to find work as a writing teacher so I could stop picking up shifts at a local coffee shop to supplement my meager income from adjunct teaching at my alma mater. When this college advertised for a part-time instructor in their English Composition program, I applied immediately. In the interview, the department chair told me that the pay—40% less per credit hour than I was paid at the nearby university—was non-negotiable, but that the work itself was rewarding and the experience would be valuable for finding a full-time job. She also told me that the students at the open-access college were essentially the same as students I had taught at a large public R1, and that my teaching experience—at that point, just a handful of first-year writing courses—would be sufficient preparation for the job at hand. I left the interview with three sections of first-year writing for the coming term, Spring 2020.

In the four years since that interview, I've often wondered about the department chair's motivation for stressing that there was no difference between students at the community college and students at the university. My best guess is that it was a response to an unvoiced stereotype of community college students as inherently less smart, capable, or driven than university students—a perspective that the chair would understandably want to discourage, having spent her career working with brilliant and hard-working two-year college students. At the time, however, oblivious as I was to institutional differences, I took it at face value and planned a curriculum that closely mirrored my university courses, a decision that I soon came to regret as my students struggled to engage with the class in the ways I'd come to expect.

It was not, as the negative stereotypes might suggest, that my new students were incapable, unintelligent, or unmotivated. On the contrary, many of these students were more ambitious and driven than my traditional university students. They were starting small businesses, making career changes, setting examples for young children, and they wanted—desperately—to succeed. The differences came down to resources. Most of my community college students were poor. They could not afford laptops or home internet connections, so they relied on campus computer labs or public libraries to complete their work. They often worked full-time, sometimes multiple jobs, along with taking classes, so their time to complete readings and homework was severely limited. Some of them experienced housing or food instability during our semester together, and they were forced to make difficult choices about where to apply their too-little time and too-few resources, knowing that a choice to attend my class often meant turning down a shift, needing to find childcare, and other challenges.

My students' individual poverty, however, was compounded by institutional factors. Many came from under-resourced schools compared to my university students, and they described uneven past experiences with English courses, some claiming that they had never been asked to write an essay or had never received any detailed feedback from a teacher on a writing assignment. The community college itself was similarly under-resourced, a point emphasized by the outdated classrooms, broken furniture, and perennially understaffed academic departments and student- or instructor-support offices. When the COVID-19 pandemic forced all instruction online later in the term, each of these factors contributed to the difficulty of the transition as the institution, its instructors, and its students were all unprepared to navigate that

change. Stripped of these institutional and economic realities, my students might indeed be "no different than university students" (though demographic reporting would still suggest a distinct difference), but within the context of institutions—both the college and the students' previous educational institutions—the difference became stark.

In the job interview, I was also told unequivocally that little opportunity existed at the college to move beyond a part-time role—that the English department had not been allowed a new full-time hire in more than a decade—and that this situation was unlikely to change. While the college's billboards suggest that anyone might find their future there, this disclosure from my department chair, echoed in subsequent years by various other stakeholders at the college, seemed to suggest that there was no long-term future for me at the college. The issues of pay, advancement, and support have come up at various junctures during my time at the college, and every time, the veterans of the college—tenure-track or tenured faculty, administrators, and staff—are quick to point out their opposition to the conditions on the ground for adjuncts, but they often seem eager to move past the topic, to focus on the positive and skirt the discomfort. That our pay is embarrassingly low, that our departments are terminally understaffed, and that these conditions are the result of choices (not inevitabilities) made and tacitly supported by various stakeholders at the college—these are realities that are so obvious and unchangeable as to be not worth voicing. Department chairs and deans sigh and shake their heads as they describe the college's role as "training up adjuncts so they can leave and teach other places," meanwhile adjuncts hope, fervently, against the odds, that their ongoing exploitation might somehow lead to a full-time job at the college.

For many academics, these are not unfamiliar conditions. While there are isolated examples of new full-timers being plucked from the adjunct pool, these are often the exceptions that prove the rule: contingent workers are most likely to stay contingent. That some chairs at my college share this so plainly in the interview is probably better than some alternatives—one could easily imagine a college stringing adjuncts along with the promise of full-time jobs that are always *just* out of reach—but I also cannot help but wonder about the work involved in maintaining this institutional commonsense. What if every department chair, rather than patiently and repeatedly explaining to each adjunct the slim chances of attaining full-time status, instead used that time or energy to express to the upper administration the need for full-time faculty lines? What all of the hand-wringing, head-shaking, and empathy was instead directed toward advocacy through the Faculty Senate, the full-time faculty union, or other avenues?

None of this is to suggest that full-time faculty, department chairs, or even deans have the individual power to undo the insidious austerity of the neoliberal university—in most cases they do not. But they do play an important role in maintaining and sustaining the discourse that makes such conditions seem entrenched and inevitable, even when our institution's history tells us that overreliance on adjuncts and overwork for full-timers were not always the reality. By defining the institution to newcomers through these limitations, experienced actors in the community constrain our communal thinking not only about what our work currently looks like but also about how it could work in future. That adjuncts at my college end up dreaming of jobs elsewhere and, ultimately, leaving is not inevitable–it is a reality created in part by these constant reminders that they have no future within the college. That the resultant culture

of the college is a small cadre of full-time faculty, clinging to the protections of tenure and a union contract, and a much, much larger pool of transient adjuncts who leave as soon as a better option is presented is not an accident, then, but the logical result of an institutional culture designed both materially and ideologically to sustain precisely those conditions.

Bethany

I've been the president of the English Graduate Student Association (EGSA), our department's student government chapter, for two years now. At the end of last semester, I decided to run for president of Graduate Student Government (GSG), which is the central student government body that oversees each departmental chapter. Simultaneous to my student government involvement, I founded and am the president of an organized group of students from various departments and graduate programs working together to unionize graduate students at the university.

Because of these organizing efforts, the current executive board (the president, vice president, treasurer, and community outreach organizer) of GSG was noticeably antsy about me running for GSG president. The week before the election, the current president asked to meet with me, and when I logged into the Zoom meeting, he was there along with the VP and the election committee (the group of grad students in charge of facilitating the election). I wasn't sure what the meeting was about–I foolishly assumed that they were meeting with every candidate to explain how the election worked. That was not the case. They were meeting with me specifically to, in their words, discuss the "conflict of interest" between my labor organizing and my candidacy. The current president repeatedly assured me that they weren't asking me to drop out of the race (a strange thing to say, as I hadn't been considering it), but that he wanted to prepare me to answer the questions that the voting body would have for me on election day, when I was to give a speech and do a Q&A. The group questioned me on many fronts, warning me that I needed to decide where my loyalties lay: student government or union organizing. This baffled me because I thought the two were aligned in their values of improving the lives of graduate students on campus.

The president told me that administrators wouldn't be happy if I were elected, and that I could ruin the relationships he had built with them over his tenure as president. He warned that they might ignore my emails, impeach me from committees the GSG president was supposed to sit on, or even remove funding from GSG, which is the main source of conference travel funding for graduate students at our school. He told me he wished I would wait another year to run because there was an administrator working on a stipend increase initiative, and he worried that if I were elected the university would shut down that effort in retaliation. I started to get paranoid and angry at the administrators based on his warnings. How is it that my candidacy could be so controversial that the current president and the entire election committee needed to meet with me to warn me about this? It infuriated and energized me, and rather than scaring me away from running, it made me want to win more.

After the meeting, I immediately typed messages to the Discord and email list with fellow student-organizers, urging them to come to the election and support me and another student from our group who was running. I told them about the potential controversies the election

committee and current president warned me about and said that although they couldn't vote, they could lend their voices to the discussion before voting happened.

On the day of the election, it all went to hell. The executive board of GSG kicked out all non-voting members and held a 45-minute meeting where they put up a vote to disqualify me and the other candidate who was involved in labor organizing. They projected messages I and others had sent on the Discord and email list onto the screen in front of the voting body, saying that our calls to come out and show support were "election tampering." Essentially, we were accused of trying to mobilize an outside force to unduly sway the election. Most disturbingly, someone on GSG called campus police, and had an officer standing outside the meeting room and one standing at the back of the room while these events unfolded. In the end, we were not disqualified outright, but the meeting scared the voting body. I've been told that the GSG president reiterated in that private meeting some of the things he had told me: if we were elected, administrators would come for our funding, and it would start a huge fight. After I and the other labor-involved student gave our speeches, there was a vote of no confidence for both me and him, and we were removed from the pool of candidates before the final vote to elect a president.

I found out weeks later, through talking to various trusted administrators and other contacts, that none of the GSG president's warnings were based on real threats from university administrators. In fact, I have been told by many faculty and various folks in power that the deans and administrators at my university, on the whole, are open to conversations about pay and benefits for graduate students, and they are (at least anecdotally) more afraid of the legal complications of retaliating against union organizing than they are afraid of our movement. Essentially, the GSG president and election committee, a group of my fellow graduate students, were so consumed with fear of administrative backlash over labor organizing that they sabotaged our campaigns and called the cops on us. The fear over what *might* happen if administrators got mad had spread among the graduate student government body and poisoned the well against me and my fellow labor-conscious candidate.

Despite previous nominal support for my organizing efforts, the GSG executive board essentially communicated to me and my fellow candidate that there is a right and a wrong way to make change for graduate students within the official university structure. I realized, especially in talking to the GSG president, that they believed the function of GSG was to work within the system, not rock the boat, and try to make incremental improvements to stipends, healthcare, protections, or other graduate student concerns and conditions. When I, an organizer known among fellow graduate students for advocating for a union, tried to step into the student government space, I met harsh backlash. The message was clear: we don't make waves over here, and you're a wavemaker. Stay away. This is the culture of academic poverty reinforcing itself among the graduate student population. It tells us to stay appropriate, to keep university administrators comfortable, and to not use scary words like "union" where anyone can hear you.

Alex

Three years into my employment at the community college, after having taught more than twenty-five courses across nine consecutive terms, I responded to an email soliciting a

volunteer to serve as the adjunct faculty representative on the college's Faculty Senate. I was, by this time, teaching at four institutions, pursuing my PhD, working on the editorial team of an academic journal, and pursuing an ambitious research agenda—in short, I decidedly did not have time for a two-hour weekly meeting and a weekly barrage of emails, all with no additional pay. However, I had been vocal about my frustration with the pay and lack of resources at the college, and this seemed like an opportunity to finally get a seat at the table and advocate for better conditions for adjuncts. I sent an email expressing interest and was promptly invited to attend the next meeting.

My introduction to the Faculty Senate was a strange one. While I had assumed the positive response to my message and the invitation to the meeting was an indication that I was the new adjunct representative, I discovered upon arrival that there was another hopeful adjunct, similarly confused, in attendance. The assembled senators asked us to make presentations to the group on our qualifications, our backgrounds, and our interests in serving before moving us into a Zoom breakout room so they could confer. In the breakout room, we commiserated with one another—neither one of us had realized we would be presenting to the group or even that this was a competitive position. As they discussed our respective merits behind closed doors, we shared our frustrations not just with this process but with the many opaque processes and systems at the college that left adjuncts—by far the teaching majority—feeling like outsiders, even when specifically invited.

In the end, the senators selected me, and so I became the sole voice within the college's shared governance structure for more than 700 employees. The imbalance in power between the other senators and me was drawn in sharp relief by the fact that they met on campus in person, but I joined via video call, a necessity as the college did not provide me with an office space from which to lead the synchronous online class that let out just before our meetings started. Delays and degradation in audio meant that I would occasionally miss portions of the day's discussion, and whenever I spoke, someone would speak over me. I soon learned that this power imbalance was not simply a quirk of technology but a reality written into the group's bylaws. The representatives for the full-time faculty were elected by their peers, had voting rights, and their service on the Senate was compensated as part of their salaried duties in the union contract. As the adjunct representative, I was appointed by the other senators (as described above), could not vote on any Senate business, and my participation was voluntary and unpaid.

After joining the Senate, I was put to work on an already developed project: an Adjunct Satisfaction Survey, the first of its kind in the college's history. The full-time faculty had already drafted questions, but when they asked for my input, I pointed out that there was no question about compensation on the survey and suggested adding one, noting that it was the primary issue brought up in any discussion with adjuncts. They accepted this in the end, but not without pushback—Faculty Senate already made a recommendation on adjunct pay, they were continuing to advocate for it, they didn't want to hear the inevitable complaints, and so on. In the end, the argument that won them over was that *not* including a question specifically on pay would cause respondents to shoehorn compensation concerns into their responses to other questions, potentially skewing the quantitative data.

When it came time to code the data and share a report with the rest of the college and the Board of Trustees, the senators eschewed the industry standard practice for calculating a satisfaction score (C-SAT), instead aggregating together "Very Satisfied," "Satisfied," and "Neutral" to suggest that most adjunct faculty (>50% of respondents) were happy with their experience at the college across almost every category on the survey. When I pointed this out during a meeting and, subsequently in emails, noting that the math being used didn't conform to any established practice and that there was, in fact, a widely accepted system for reporting and benchmarking this data, I was told that my suggestions were too skewed in the opposite direction. While a small portion of the full-time faculty on the Senate spoke up to support my suggestions, the majority did not, and little in the final report changed. When the president reported back after presenting the data to the Board of Trustees, she noted their excitement about the high overall scores but shared no other feedback, a sign to me that the many concerns voiced by adjuncts in the survey responses had gone unheard.

In the year I spent on the Senate, it was rare that I left our Wednesday afternoon meetings without a headache and a new set of frustrations to work through. In conversation, my fellow senators were quick to note their frustration about adjunct compensation and every other underfunded area of the college, from advising to classrooms to building maintenance. But in their reports and other communications with the rest of the college and the upper administration, their messaging seemed relentlessly positive, so much so that when a member of the Executive Committee attended one of our meetings, he expressed genuine surprise to learn that the college was not already meeting the Faculty Senate's recommendation for adjunct pay. The faculty on Senate (and the full-time faculty more generally) were genuinely sympathetic to the plight of adjuncts at the college, particularly as many of them began as adjuncts either at Cincinnati State or at other institutions. Still, as much as they might express frustration or regret in private conversation, their unwillingness to enter more public dialogue fostered a culture in which adjuncts believe that their exploitation is the only possible reality, even as the college invests heavily in other areas and reports strong enrollment. The material poverty experienced by adjuncts at the college is not directly linked to the college's financial circumstances, nor is it simply a sector-wide reality, as evidenced by the higher pay and better conditions offered by comparable institutions. Rather, it is a reflection of the culture of poverty at the college, in which the people within the institution have been convinced that no matter the material circumstances of the college, change is impossible.

Conclusion

As we move through our respective institutional contexts, we are constantly running up against cultural backlash that limits the possibilities for change in our institutions. GSG tells Bethany she can't advocate for a union and work in student government, the Faculty Senate tells Alex that it's pointless to ask adjuncts about their pay, and both institutions suggest that low pay for contingent instructors is the only way the system works. We're told that we have to redirect efforts to something more reasonable, like starting a food pantry for hungry graduate students or a social group for adjuncts. It's not ideal, nor is it a real solution, but it's attainable.

Both of us desire to be change-makers. We want to push for real, material improvements for contingent instructors, to point out the structures of oppression that surround us and work

against them. Placed into the culture of poverty that surrounds us, we instead end up facing friendly colleague after friendly colleague who, while ideologically supportive of our goals, tells us they just aren't possible, and that's just the way things are. As stakeholders within our institutions, these colleagues write these ideas into the culture of the institution itself through what LaFrance refers to as "boss texts"—"texts [that] carry ideas, language, and rhetorical frameworks between individuals (even those with little personal interaction) to impose notions of ideal practice and affiliations . . . not just sources of information but shapers of thinking and practice" (43). These boss texts–from syllabi to employment contracts to programmatic documents to bylaws—define the realities of our institutions. Those creating them are not, generally, acting out of ill-will, and their unwillingness to speak directly to pressing labor issues within each institution in these official texts often reflects their own limited power and fear of repercussions. Taken en masse, however, these half-hearted sympathies from well-meaning individuals result in a significant systemic challenge for labor activists to overcome when working to create real change.

This pervasive culture of poverty asks newcomers, particularly those in contingent roles like graduate students and adjuncts, to limit expectations, prepare for disappointment, and be grateful for what little they have—in short, it limits the institutional imagination. While this messaging is often mired in the logic of poverty, it does not necessarily correspond to an actual material poverty in the institution. It's not that our colleges can't afford to pay us more or to support us better; it's that their respective administrations refuse to do so. This distinction is important—to conjure up money that doesn't exist is an impossible task, but to shift money from one column in the college's budget to another is an exponentially smaller intervention. We recognize, of course, that our two institutions are not necessarily reflective of every institutional context—there are many colleges experiencing actual financial stress, plummeting enrollments, and other factors that do materially constraint the kinds of change possible—but we worry that, like the corporations reporting record profits during a global pandemic, many solvent institutions are seizing onto these austerity logics regardless of local material conditions because doing so benefits their bottom line.

While faculty are often powerless to change decisions made by upper administrators and trustees, it is their responsibility (and the responsibility of faculty senates, graduate student governments, unions and other such bodies) to advocate against logics that suggest that poor labor conditions (and thus, poor learning conditions) are an inevitability that all educational institutions must accept. By drawing attention to these logics in these small, localized ways, we hope to encourage others to reflect on their own institutional cultures and their roles in reifying or resisting them. This work might be as simple as pushing back when colleagues suggest that it is impossible for an institution to survive without the exploitation of adjuncts and graduate student instructors, or it may look more like sustained advocacy and organizing to safeguard and expand protections for the most vulnerable workers in the institution.

We also hope readers will adapt the methodology employed here to turn their critical study toward their own institutions and the systems that sustain academic poverty within them. Particularly when combined with the localized advocacy work described above, research can help change culture. We are academics, after all, and we value data and qualitative study. If we understand the problem and disseminate information about how academic poverty is

sustained, the increased awareness may help change the culture of poverty in our field, or at least underscore the fact that it is a system purposely maintained, not an inevitability. We encourage other scholars to research this subject, whether through autoethnographic work, institutional ethnography, or more quantitative or large-scale inquiries into the culture of poverty in university work, and we look forward to the day when academic culture values its workers and prioritizes their safety, dignity, and comfort.

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