

CHAPTER 16

THE PROBLEM OF SPEAKING FOR ADJUNCTS

Seth Kahn

West Chester University

Thread: Organizing Within and Across Ranks

As a tenured professor who came to adjunct-equity activism a few years ago after training for many years as an activist, ethnographer, and action researcher, I wish I could say that my approach has been as thorough as the term *action research* evokes. Unlike most activists for adjunct equity, I've never been or supervised adjunct faculty. I have no direct experience of contingency (except as a graduate student, which for me was nowhere near as viscerally precarious as adjunct positions). I have just about every possible form of academic and cultural privilege on my side. Yet I'm still compelled to do work with and for adjunct faculty in pursuit of equity and labor justice, even though I'm the *other* from their community.¹

Linda Alcoff's "The Problem of Speaking for Others," the obvious source of my title, explicates the tension between *speaking for others* as an act of collectivity and as an act of colonial aggression. Privileged speakers always speak our own subject-positions and should do so self-reflexively, but can often subvert even the best motives if we aren't extremely cautious. Activists must be well aware of the dangers in appointing ourselves *spokespeople* for groups we don't represent.

She closes her analysis with a set of four "interrogatory practices" (24) designed to help those of us speaking from privilege to maximize our ethical engagement with communities whose interests we share and wish to advance:

1. The impetus to speak must be carefully analyzed and, in many cases (certainly for academics!), fought against. . . .
2. We must also interrogate the bearing of our location and context on what it is we are saying, and this should be an explicit part of every serious discursive practice we engage in.

. . .

1 I have become a member of the community to some extent, including election (in April 2015) to the Board of the New Faculty Majority Foundation. However, I'm well-known as "one of the tenured allies" and, as such, always marked in that way.

3. Speaking should always carry with it an accountability and responsibility for what one says. . . .

4. Here is my central point. In order to evaluate attempts to speak for others in particular instances, we need to analyze the probable or actual effects of the words on the discursive and material context. One cannot simply look at the location of the speaker or her credentials to speak, nor can one look merely at the propositional content of the speech; one must also look at where the speech goes and what it does there.

(24-26)

Loosely invoking Alcott's practices, in this chapter I present a series of recommendations, elaborated through a mix of textual and narrative evidence, along with a mix of my own experiences and the work of allies, for tenured faculty who feel the urge to advocate for (ideally *with*) contingent faculty. To be clear, I don't mean to offer my experience as models, and neither do any critiques I make of my own or other people's efforts aim to minimize the importance of their work. I should also say that very little of what I'm arguing for touches on the kind of program/department-level actions that most other chapters in this book are focused on. My interest is in larger-scale advocacy and organizing at what we might call a *movement* level.

DON'T OVER-IDENTIFY WITH THE COMMUNITY

If you're tenure-track, you don't face the same struggles; don't say that you do. Tenured faculty face struggles, yes, but "struggles" doesn't mean "the same struggles." Martin Kich, Professor of English Education at Wright State University and regular contributor to AAUP's *Academe* blog, put it well in early 2014 when he wrote about the tragic death of Margaret Mary Votjko of Duquesne University and coverage of it using the slogan/hashtag #IAmMargaretMary:

So it has struck me very pointedly and poignantly that I am not Margaret Mary Votjko, the adjunct professor who taught for decades and died in destitution. Indeed, whatever sympathy and outrage that I felt when I first became aware of her story has been much intensified by my now more immediate and visceral recognition of what it must be like to deal with a major medical crisis while worrying about how you will pay for your treatment and how you will possibly pay all of your other bills while trying to convalesce. (Kich)

Sympathy and empathy? Yes. Declarations of solidarity? Of course. But the truth is that Kich, like me and many of you, simply doesn't face the stress and fear of contingency and the dangers—physical, financial, social, emotional—that come with it. To an audience that has good reason to be suspicious of tenured faculty's motives for engaging contingent faculty, such declarations sound disingenuous.

A healthier move is for tenured faculty to acknowledge both the advantages we have—in terms of security and compensation—and to acknowledge the extent to which what we do as tenured faculty isn't necessarily or obviously worth all that extra money. Biologist Terry McGlynn, blogging at Small Pond Science, makes both points in “On Being a Tenure-Track Parasite of Adjunct Faculty”:

While I do have some additional responsibilities that are not expected of our adjuncts, this disparity between job expectations is tiny compared to the massive disparity between our relative pay, benefits and job security. . . . I also am conscious that many tenure-line faculty in my university do little to nothing more than some of the adjuncts. . . . I have particularly benefited from the contributions of adjunct labor. . . . I actually have never taught the full base teaching load, as I've always had some fraction of my time reassigned to additional research, administration, outreach or professional development activities. . . . The only way that I have been able to carve out time. . . is because others have stepped in to get the work done. (McGlynn)

Along similar lines, Amy Lynch-Binieck makes a very strong case that the very conditions tenured faculty often complain about (metonymized as “writers neck”) —arise directly from the very privilege of our status and, more important, from a system of labor exploitation on which that privilege rests:

On this “day off” that is really a day of catching up on work for so many U.S. academics, remember that, **if you're tenure-track or tenured, the work you do is made possible by a labor system that piles work onto contingent faculty** [emphasis in original]. You can research and attend conferences and write articles because the academic labor system exploits faculty in a system of cheap teaching that privileges a very, very few. (Lynch-Binieck)

Along with the importance of recognizing our privilege, we can articulate some advantages we have working with and for adjunct equity; not to say that

adjuncts can't win their own fights, but that our privilege can be helpful if we invoke it wisely. In November 2013, I was on a panel at the Coalition of Academic Labor conference hosted by SEIU in Washington, DC as part of their Adjunct Action campaign. Two adjunct activists—Lee Kottner, a former New Jersey/New York-area adjunct well-known in various parts of the network, and TL Mack, who left adjuncting to organize for Adjunct Action—invited me to do a session with them, my part of which was to talk about collaborating with tenured faculty.

From the beginning, I anticipated being seen—by at least some—as an interloper. I already knew from listservs and social networks about an often-expressed animus towards tenured faculty. We're sometimes seen as competitors if not opponents, and because I knew some people who thought so would be in the audience, I wrote with them in mind. The talk focused on tactical concerns—articulating common enemies faculty face across statuses, identifying venues for mutual organizing, and so on. An example of the complex stance I was trying to take:

But tenured faculty are still a set of allies to cultivate. As directly as I can say it, the group on campus that has the most ethos with other faculty and management are the senior tenured folks. I'm not arguing that the ethos is deserved, and more important I'm not arguing that tenured faculty should be making decisions about the movement for you. The grounds for common cause between tenure track and adjunct faculty are complicated to navigate for members of both groups, but there nonetheless. (Kahn, "Organizing")

Note not only the "But" that opens the passage, which is responding to a charge nobody actually made, but more substantively the quick move away from the heart of the argument—that administrations willing to treat contingent faculty poorly aren't likely to listen to contingent faculty arguments for equity. As Lee Artz argues in "Speaking Truth to Power: Observations from Experience," the powerful already know the truth; if they're not convinced yet, repeating it isn't going to change anything. Instead, Artz argues, the response to power is power; at this moment, the power (job security, cultural capital, ethos, access to administrators, and so on) is generally among the tenured. I had to make the point that I understand the risk of colonizing contingent faculty in the name of trying to support the effort, though, and I had to make it loud and clear.

A similar moment occurred later in the talk in a section about the *shared* part of *shared governance*:

To the extent that tenured faculty resist including adjuncts in shared governance, it's often because many of us feel like our governing power is already too defused—and diffused. More people fighting against neoliberal hegemony are likely to be more successful than fewer people, but that hasn't quite registered yet. But the riff that tenured faculty are over-privileged fat cats who willingly exploit adjunct faculty so we can be all elite just isn't right. The very large majority of tenured faculty understand well that we're threatened, but don't understand that responding to the threat requires allies, one group of whom we *already work with* and *who already understand the issues a lot better than we think they do*. (Kahn, "Organizing")

As an exercise in Burkean identification, the passage leaves something to be desired, but as an attempt to convince a skeptical audience that I understand we can and must acknowledge their academic and professional expertise, it works somewhat better.

What I didn't anticipate in advance was the odd sensation of being the only identified tenured faculty member in the room. It helped that I was vetted by TL and Lee, and that I already knew a few other people electronically. Still, there was a palpable sense of, not animus or anger, but not entirely friendly curiosity, about what I had to say. There was applause from the floor when I talked about some of the good things our union has done for adjunct faculty; there were nodding heads most of the time, which suggested I'd gotten the stance right.

Response to the content aside, two points are important. First, I was able to hear conversations, to participate, and to strike a conciliatory and collaborative tone that has helped me connect with more people doing more activism. Second is what I felt like I couldn't say, i.e., the limit-situation (to borrow Freire's phrase) of conciliatory rhetoric, or recognizing the moment at which I'd have been over-identifying. I rarely feel like I'm on eggshells in a group of academics, but I did that day. I wanted to channel friends who have often correctly bucked against mischaracterizations of the tenure track. I also wanted to make clear that I recognize how myopic some of the positions defending the tenured are. Since then, I've spent a lot of time on social networks, blog/news comment threads and listservs contending that overgeneralizations about both "tenured fat cats" (a riff that pops up on listservs and social networks now and again) and "the adjunct narrative" (as if there were such a thing), accomplish nothing except pissing off people with whom we actually agree substantively.

A healthy balance between conciliation and candor can be hard to find, but the important principle is to make sure that claims of solidarity are grounded in

actual issues on which solidarity is reasonable. Over-claiming solidarity risks the solidarity you're claiming, and as a result can undercut possibilities for meaningful work.

BE CLEAR ABOUT YOUR MOTIVES AND PURPOSE FOR THE WORK YOU DO

The first principle of Action Research is that your work benefits the community first, and you second—if ever.

There's a wide array of possible actions for tenured faculty to conduct with and for contingent faculty. Jennifer Ruth of Portland State University lays out a case for tenured faculty involvement in adjunct equity in a post called "When Tenure-Track Faculty Take on the Problem of Adjunctification" on the blog *Social Science Space*:

When we went on the market, getting a tenure-track job already meant you were the one person standing in the rubble-strewn city of your profession. There was no denying the corpses. At the very least, we understood that luck played a bigger role in our fate than merit had. We hadn't earned something so much as been spared something else—namely, the miserable life of the freeway flyer. And we drew the obvious conclusion from this, the survivor's-guilt conclusion: we would prove worthy of these tenure-track jobs only if we dedicated ourselves to creating more of them for others. We would fight the neoliberal adjunctification of the professoriate in the name of our no less talented but less fortunate friends. (Ruth)

I find the rationale she describes to be a little problematic—not because of what she and her colleagues did, much of which is perfectly sensible, but because of its motive ("survivor's-guilt") and purpose. When I first read the piece, it occurred to me that there wasn't any reference to what the contingent faculty in her department wanted. I eventually registered this:

For months, every other week, three of us would invite a new handful of people we considered influential on campus to have drinks—tenured faculty and chairs, people who were positioned to do something about the problem. It's not that we were excluding non-tenure-track faculty—far from being our untouchables, they were our friends with whom we had

coffees, lunches, dinners; with whose kids our kids shared playdates—but rather we took seriously what some of them were saying, which was You guys have the power, and thus the responsibility, to reverse this trend. We don't. (Ruth)

She may well be right that the contingent faculty in her department and across the university were prepared to hand off their own agency, or to acknowledge the absence of it. But the post, writ large, suggests a potential disjuncture between the motives of Ruth and her tenure-track colleagues, on the one hand, and their adjunct colleagues on the other. When Ruth says at the end that the group's motivations had shifted such that their fight was to protect a certain notion of academic culture against the incursion of corporatism, that seems to match the specifics of their actions quite closely, but it's unclear—at least within this post—that the adjunct faculty wanted them to “fight neoliberal adjunctification” by “creating more [tenure-track jobs] for others.” Possible? Of course; I wasn't there and wouldn't argue that she's colonized the adjunct faculty on her campus for her own purposes. Her declaration of “survivor's-guilt” raises that concern to some degree. At the same time, as long as the adjunct faculty she worked with understood what motivated the collaboration, that's all we can ask for.

When our individual motives are challenged explicitly, such challenges call for substantive answers. Many of us tenured faculty who identify as adjunct-equity activists are quick to say our work is obviously about social/labor justice, and that we can't imagine not being committed to it. Along with my commitment to labor justice, I would extend Terry McGlynn's point about recognizing the privileges of tenure to say that such recognition *requires active response*. *Mea culpas* aren't wrong, but they don't fix anything.

Twice I've made statements (letters on behalf of contingent faculty who were unjustly dismissed from their positions) that I shared among activist networks as templates—or provocations—for other supporters to use as they found helpful. In spring 2012, an adjunct criminology instructor named Sissy Bradford was let go from her position at Texas A&M-San Antonio after a battle with the university had become contentious and public, during which the university seemed not be taking seriously explicit threats on Bradford's life. When the story first broke in *Inside Higher Ed* (Jaschik, “Crosses”) in May, I wrote an open letter to the Texas A&M administration that I posted on Facebook, Google+, and various listservs.

When Josh Boldt from the Adjunct Project posted it on the Adjunct Project blog (Boldt) under the headline “A Tenured Professor Responds to Texas A&M,” the story was that a tenured faculty member was publicly speaking out for an adjunct—which was gratifying but distressing. While I already knew I wasn't

the only tenured faculty member who would (and did) speak out, I understand that it doesn't happen often. At the same time, I already felt awkward *speaking for* Bradford, although (obviously) not awkward enough not to do it. I didn't go out of my way to consult adjunct faculty before I wrote; I wrote *as an activist* and *as a labor advocate* calling on university management to reverse a reckless and deplorable decision. Although I announced my membership in and position working for my faculty union, I was clear about not representing the union or my university. The goal was to be an individual, ideally with some professional ethos, arguing for Texas A&M management to do the obvious right thing.

The letter didn't work (and for the record, the second on behalf of James Kilgore, dismissed from the University of Illinois in 2014, didn't either). The university didn't give Bradford her job back. I never got even a form letter in response from A&M. Somebody who seems to have been involved in harassing Bradford sent an anonymous letter to my department chair accusing me of consorting with terrorists (because Bradford had given an interview to Al Jazeera), which happened to show up while my promotion application to full professor was in progress—slightly nerve-racking, but otherwise harmless.

As it turns out, the Bradford letter did serve a purpose I couldn't have anticipated, earning me an entry into the community of adjunct activists that was forming around the New Faculty Majority and around the Adjunct Project, not necessarily connected to CCCC or even to English Studies. Since then, those networks have expanded and intertwined, and the national movement for adjunct equity has begun to coalesce and see some success, at least at finding space in mainstream media (as we note in the Introduction) and on social media. Because of my brief "fame" as Sissy Bradford's advocate, and because I've since been vetted by some outspoken movement leaders, I'm able to work with a certain degree of comfort with the community. So the letter didn't accomplish its explicit purpose, but it has been instrumental in helping me establish my motives: not to become another "Tenured Radical" who blogs and exhorts and does little else, but to be someone who at least tries to work on the ground with as many activists as possible in whatever roles I can play helpfully.

LISTEN

By "listen," I mean more than just nod, smile, and wring your hands in empathetic frustration when contingent faculty bring problems to your attention.

All too commonly I hear, "Thank you for listening to us. We feel like nobody is paying attention." I've heard it in response to major efforts and simple questions, e.g., a recent vote taken in my department about whether to move our offices to a new building. In the discussion, which ensued after a week-long

email conversation among tenured/tenure-track faculty (with adjunct faculty included but none having participated) on our department faculty email list, I wrote to all the adjuncts offlist and told them if they had a near-consensus opinion about the move, I'd vote with them. Among the respondents, only one didn't sound disproportionately happy about the offer (his reply, roughly paraphrased, was "Who cares, given the real problems we should be talking about?"). In the end, I didn't get a clear directive, but I got lots of thanks that felt much too avid. In many ways this vignette is symptomatic of what pro-adjunct faculty seem to think is sufficiently "activist."

Too often, tenured faculty—even those of us motivated to work for labor justice—seem to think we understand "the adjunct problem" without really hearing what adjunct faculty are telling us. And sometimes we react defensively when critiqued, as blogger Elizabeth Keenan points out (somewhat aggressively, but that's part of the point) in a post called "How Not to Be a Tenured Ally":

So, when we are critiquing "the tenured" for their lack of action and failure to support our efforts, we are critiquing the position of power that those with tenure have in relation to our own lack of power. We are critiquing a group with a voice that could well be used to assist in improving our situation, but that often fails to acknowledge that any of our problems exist. We are critiquing a group that has, over the past forty years, ignored the growing "adjunct problem" as long as their own jobs remained secure.**

We are not critiquing *you in particular*.

Though, you know, maybe we are. Reading critiques of "the tenured" as a personal slight makes you part of the problem. It means that you have, despite any protestations, absorbed the idea that you are meant to be in your position of power, via a route within the meritocracy. And it means that you are in denial of the very real stratification of the university that affects some people to a much greater extent than it affects you. (Keenan)

It's hard not to feel defensive every time I read this. The last line is the one that I need to amplify, that we all need to *hear*. The simple fact of the matter is that attacks on academic freedom (for example) simply don't affect the tenured the same as they affect the contingent. MOOCs don't threaten our jobs to the same extent they threaten contingent faculty positions. When I call on us to listen, I'm calling on us to get arguments like this through our heads, more

than well-intentioned but paternalistic exhortations to “treat our adjuncts like colleagues!”

Another way of putting this lesson, I realize, is to recognize that almost anything we say is likely an overgeneralization, or a misrepresentation of at least some of the contingent faculty population. Their reasons for taking and keeping contingent positions, their goals for workplace reform, their personal priorities—there’s nothing approaching a consensus, even a plurality, in survey after survey. As a result, to assert a position, even one that seems ostensibly to be just and equitable, without knowing that it has the support of your target population is exactly the kind of mistake Alcoff is cautioning against.

A worse mistake, of course, is to hear contingent faculty critiques of structures designed to maintain the status quo and simultaneously not hear them—to *not listen*. As “Post-Academic in NYC” puts it:

What is stoking the rage of adjuncts and graduate students is not the ability to lob 140 character rage bombs into the ether. Rather, it’s that people like Tenured Radical still get to frame the operative questions, even thought [sic] they don’t know much about the reality on the ground because they don’t have to know. (Post-Academic)

This post was in response to a flap between adjunct-activist-blogger-human-lightning-rod Rebecca Schumann and the blogger Tenured Radical regarding travel to MLA for job interviews. Karen Kelsky, blogger and director of *The Professor Is In*, picked up the thread in the post, “How the Tenured Are to the Job Market as White People Are to Racism,” in which she argues that even tenured faculty “believe their gains are the result of their own effort and merit, not systematic structural advantage.” It may be late in this chapter for me to be saying this, but if you still believe that, I’m probably not talking to you.

DON’T (EXPECT TO) BE A SAVIOR

One of the hardest lessons I’ve learned over years as an activist is not to lose hope and faith when efforts don’t pan out quickly, and I’ve had to relearn that lesson in my recent work for adjunct equity. In my own department (which Amy Lynch-Binieck and William B. Lalicker describe in Chapter 6), my vocal—sometimes evangelical—support for adjunct equity has alienated at least some of my colleagues, so much so that if I even say the word “adjunct,” some of them stop listening. At the same time, the department has made strides towards equity in the last three years: converting eight adjunct faculty members into tenure-lines (via the union contract provision Bill and Amy discuss in their chapter); inviting

adjunct faculty into department governance via committee service for people who want it. Notably, in November 2014, our department offered reassigned time for department service (supervising our student-produced literary magazine) to an adjunct faculty member for the first time in a non-emergency situation via a transparent process. *Something* has changed, and in the spirit of action research, it doesn't make a bit of difference to me how credit for that change is allocated; in the spirit of Linda Alcoff's argument, I must continue to reflect on how my argumentativeness, bordering on self-righteousness, about equity may have set back our efforts as much as helped them.

TRUST, EARNED AND GIVEN

As a tenured faculty member working with adjunct activists, understand that adjuncts are always vulnerable, often angry and frustrated, often suspicious of outsiders, and coalescing right now into a movement with real potential that could be threatened by careless but well-meaning tourists. We have to earn *trust* (maybe the most important concept in my entire argument, and so deeply embedded in my thinking that I didn't realize I needed to say it until now) from the members of communities in which we organize/advocate; it's not reasonable for us simply to expect it because we're tenured and interested. Part of that trust is, as I hope I've shown, a demonstrated willingness to be involved and public about equity issues. But trust takes more than that. We risk trust when we make arguments in public about what *we think* is best for *the adjuncts*, referring them as a class rather than actual people; when we over-generalize about what a huge and diverse group of people wants or needs. We have to trust that when they voice anger or make demands that it's not our place—from on high—to tell them they shouldn't sound that way (tone-policing) or shouldn't want those things (tenuresplainin'). That's not to say that we can never act without permission from or consensus among our adjunct activist comrades, but to say that we are neither free agents nor leaders in efforts for equity simply because we're interested and sympathetic. Alcoff is exactly right that we are responsible for what we say, to which I would add, we're responsible *to* adjunct faculty for what we say *about* them and *with* them, and given the contingency and vulnerability (material and otherwise) of their conditions, that responsibility comes first.

As simply as I can put it: if we find ourselves wondering whether something we're about to say/do will antagonize people we think we're helping, try asking instead of simply plunging ahead. If we feel impelled to join the chorus of people speaking out for adjunct equity but don't know what to say, just listen for a while. They'll let us know when they need us.

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