I recently had lunch with a writing colleague. She was lamenting her need to fight for administrative funds and a course release while other colleagues were given release time and money without formal requests. All of those colleagues were male. So I asked, “Do you think it’s a gender thing?” I strongly suspected it was, but felt the issue needed to be said aloud. My lunch partner met my eyes, hesitated, and said with affection, “You are so adorable.” Rather than provide an answer, she simply indicated that she felt my question was naïve.

And I am.

It’s not that I do not know there is injustice for women in the academy. It’s not that I believe my university and my colleagues who espouse diversity, teach inclusivity, and champion the underrepresented are above workplace politics and deeply entrenched institutional norms. I also am aware that rhetoric and writing, my own discipline, has not been fully accepted as a viable area of research and scholarship aligned on par with other fields within the humanities.

It’s that I don’t want to believe it all. Because as a non-tenure-track faculty member, I am part of the problem.

Often people describe being on the tenure track as a long engagement, and the sixth year is when you either get married or the engagement is called off. So if tenure is marriage, then non-tenure track is a civil union, equal on some legal
documents, but culturally unequal. Just as many of those within civil unions are not part of the institution of marriage, non-tenure-track faculty are not fully included in the institution of academia. The legal documents, the culture, and the names we use mean something.

At each session in every professional conference I attend, I feel a mix of pride and at times deep shame for my permanent junior status among my peers. I am proud of the work that I have done as a doctoral student and as a professor, and proud of having won out over other applicants during a national search by a prestigious institution. I enjoy my work immensely. Nevertheless, as an non-tenure-track assistant professor, I feel a lack of kinship with those around me. It is a feeling that ignites a sense of inferiority.

I felt this poignantly at the July 2013 Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA) Conference in Savannah, Georgia. The conference theme was “Queering the Writing Program,” and its organizers invited proposals that would spark “conversations that unsettle what we think we know” (Council of Writing Program Administrators). The invitation brought to mind those of us who share space with tenure-track colleagues, filling positions as contingent labor and non-tenure-track faculty. What we do know about these positions is best illuminated by what we don’t know. We don’t know what to name these essential members of the academy, and we don’t know how to ameliorate the growing problem of tenure versus non-tenure. The work that my colleagues and I do operates, in some ways, in the shadows of traditional tenured and tenure-track faculty; we are defined by what we are not. Our contours mimic theirs, but our shape lacks mass.

Several sections of the CWPA conference addressed the source of my unease head-on. One institute, led by Seth Kahn and Michelle LaFrance, examined “The ‘Pro-Labor’ Writing Program Administrator: Conditions, Relations, Practices.” Two sessions, “Challenging the Marginalization of Fixed-Term Faculty” and “Managing Contingent Labor: Exploiters or Advocates?” also implicated important aspects of labor in my field. Sessions that addressed other topics, however, could not escape discussion of tenure versus contingent labor. Sadly, the discourse often took a dispiriting turn. I heard during the conference that some in the academy use terms for non-tenure-track faculty such as the “minor league,” and that we occupy the lowest part of the academic caste system.

Indeed, the realities of labor, staffing, tenure, and non-tenure seemed to be a subtext of every session that I attended at the Savannah conference. I may have been keen to spot references to these topics, given my status, but the conference theme seemed to have brought the issue to the fore. Or perhaps the changing nature of academia simply makes the issues of staffing unavoidable, especially for administrators. In any case, the tension involved in maintaining distinctions between tenured and non-tenured faculty percolated throughout the conference.
And the tension is permeating beyond the academy. Within the public sphere, the murmurs are getting louder as the value of college and advanced degrees has come into question. Even as I am drafting my contribution to this symposium, my local newspaper has reprinted an op-ed, “Can’t Get tenure? Then Profs Should Get Real Jobs,” by Megan McArdle, a Bloomberg View columnist. Her column was prompted by the growing Internet chatter regarding the job market for academics. Between the apparent fake jobs of tenured professors and the exploitation of adjuncts are those, like me, who occupy the middle. Certainly, we consider our jobs real, and perhaps the connotation of abuse through exploitation is too harsh, but we can identify with the miserable job market and the necessity in which we embrace any sort of academic employment.

Some contend that writing scholars who have PhDs, yet take positions off the tenure track, contribute to the marginalization of identities. I agree. And given that I fit this profile, I concede that I add to this sidelining. Though these realities predated my arrival in the academy, I can’t help but feel implicated in the problem beyond my role. My own behavior, I fear, may add to my culpability. My own sense of happiness and satisfaction from my work seems to enhance my guilt.

Like so many institutions and businesses, universities are struggling. Increasing enrollment and decreasing dollars are causing tremendous labor and staffing problems. But this division of faculty into the haves and have-nots runs on an archaic machine of tenure. And the machine is fueled by omnipresent hypocrisy in which all levels of scholars are complicit. In other words, this predicament is especially germane to the academy. Surely, these kinds of divisions happen as well in the fields of medicine and law; but those fields aren’t in an institution that systematically violates the values of inclusiveness and equality we routinely espouse. Although Raymond Tumbleson in “A Confluence of Crises” ties the tenure issue to publishing, I think the correlation is appropriate here too. He writes, “Senior colleagues of a more humane bent, seeing their juniors having to be madly productive in an increasingly hostile environment, […] understandably feel regretful about the sweatshop atmosphere and perhaps guilty about their own good fortune in having come along earlier” (60).

And yet, even if those more sensitive colleagues are in the majority, the promotion and tenure system at most universities hasn’t paralleled that humanity. We stand in our classrooms reading historical texts of cultural change. We encourage our students to be civically active. We tentatively welcome and use new technologies in our classrooms. But we still live in the early first half of the twentieth century and its construction of academic tenure. The coveted Research I tenure-track jobs are still “the elect among the elect, or the luckiest of the lucky, in the perennially depressed field that is the humanities today (and yesterday, and probably tomorrow) and […] the already tenured feel entitled or even obligated to impose drastic demands on
those who seek to join them in the paradise of academics” (Tumbleson 59), and I add here, grouse about those off the tenure-track who are ruining it for all of them.

For most of us, the tenure pressure began in graduate school. When I went on the job market, I took an on-campus interview for a non-tenure-track position for the sole purpose of honing my interview skills. As I considered the job offer, a well-meaning professor advised me to avoid revealing my inferior academic status. “If you take the job, you don’t really even need to tell anyone that you are non-tenure track since your title is ‘assistant professor,’” he said. I was persuaded to take the job because my university offers continuing non-tenure track (CNTT) faculty the same benefits, salary, sabbatical opportunities, travel funds, voting rights, promotion possibilities, and other amenities that the tenured and tenure-track faculty enjoy. Yet, in spite of these generous perquisites, I know that in accepting the position I was doing a disservice to my field, and to college teachers. I am not innocent in the hypocrisy. And I am continually confronted by the implications of my decision.

For those of us in English departments, and especially in rhetoric and composition, the labor issue presents many difficulties: writing studies’ continued struggle to be(come) a discipline, writing’s reputation as no more than university service classes, first-year writing’s public reputation, establishing teaching as a scholarly endeavor, the entrenched fears of tenured professors, the institutional fogginess of non-tenured positions, and the struggle of the humanities to make itself relevant. All these difficulties are too much to tackle here, but all of them orbit me like satellites; they push and pull each other to maintain their gravity. Either we accept the multitiered system or we work to change it. By engaging in a seemingly endless, action-free period of discussion, we make a de facto selection of the former. I see the same issues reprised from the 1980s to 1990s to last year to last month. Whether the theme is “tenure in jeopardy,” “contingent labor in writing classes,” or “teaching as scholarship,” the same themes surface again and again. There is no movement afoot. There are no Maxine Hairston’s “Winds of Change,” paradigm shifts, or revolutions in the near future. We are still reading and responding to 1986’s Wyoming Resolution. That document, crafted by CWPA and passed unanimously by CCCC’s executive committee, called for standards and grievance procedures for postsecondary teachers of writing (Trimbur and Cambridge). Almost thirty years later, professors have been hired, spent their entire careers under this resolution, and since retired, yet these issues remain.

How do we move forward within this torpor? I heard ideas repeated throughout the CWPA conference: We have to encourage professionalization. We need to get faculty involved in the discipline; Non-tenure-track faculty need to enter the conversation. Professionalizing writing teachers isn’t easily defined. Beyond local or departmental workshops or conversations, reading current scholarship, participating in listservs, and attending conferences, professionalization in the most philosophical
sense is acknowledging that we are all part of a wider discipline, and that what we do each day in the classroom matters. To be clear, I’m not discounting the reward and importance of being active in the profession; in fact, if they have the time, more non-tenure-track faculty should be making their positions and voices known and heard. But I do think that it’s not a panacea to this complicated issue. As a faculty member who is already professionalized and part of the conversation, the more I know about this ubiquitous issue, the more I understand that we are reinforcing the problem. In other words, when non-tenure-track faculty enter the conversation, we realize that our jobs, our positions, our status in the university are all part of what is fostering these difficulties. Providing the trappings of professionalization alone will not solve this problem.

The institutional structures just aren’t in place (another trope of the CWPA conference) for the large-scale change needed to modify the deeply held beliefs of who should make up the professoriate. Writing program administrators—and I heard from many of them during the Savannah gathering—want to make changes, but are met, at every level of the institution, with barriers or laughter. We all want to believe that our vision of labor equality will prevail in the academy and beyond, but the ranks of faculty are entrenched. And those in the higher echelons want, understandably, to keep their positions secure, even as many side with our concerns.

I think, “When will teachers (like me) start saying no to these sorts of jobs that continue to relegate us to the margins?” Within this economy and its glut of English PhDs, the answer to this question is “Probably never.” Although some scholars, such as Eileen Schell, consider all non-tenured positions to be contingent, clearly I am in a unique position at my university. Calling non-tenure-track faculty “professor” is debated too frequently in our university’s faculty senate. Still, even in my full awareness of the hypocrisy, I enact my own by putting myself outside of other contingent labor. I am comforted by my title of assistant professor and grateful for my renewable contract, a security that is rare among those without tenure. I know that I am privileged among the unprivileged. I hesitate to think I’m superior to instructors or lecturers. Better than people with “only” master’s degrees. Unfortunately, we create our own tiers: tenured, tenured without PhD, tenure track, and non-tenure track with PhD. And then there are the sub tiers: those called lecturers, instructors, I, II, III, non-tenure track without PhDs—that’s not to mention the realm of clinical non-tenure track, or the relatively new hiring area of “preceptors” who are more than postdocs but not really instructors. Yet, we don’t want to complain too loudly because many of us know people who are teaching five courses per semester and are on the tenure track, expected to teach hundreds of students each year, produce scholarship, and do service.

And still, others claim that those who are teaching writing with only master’s degrees are contingent because they have “chosen” these circumstances and “chosen”
not to get the terminal academic degree. But sometimes there isn’t a choice. Certainly some academics only want to teach a few classes or do not want their PhDs, but often geographic, economic, or family issues get in the way; and today’s labor market frequently offers them little choice. But it’s not just a matter of degrees anymore. PhDs like me are taking these positions because we want to.

Are we asking too much? Doug Hesse’s vignette in September 2013’s CCC narrates his lunch with two PhDs who are instructors in the University of Denver’s writing program. He writes, “[T]he question floats just over the table, urgently unspoken: ‘Is this all there is?’” (16). Hesse knows that “budget crises in higher education and public critiques of professors in general have accelerated anxieties, no doubt, but our profession has pushed them too” (17). Certainly, the conditions are intensified within university writing programs where the need for professors who teach outpaces those willing to do it. Hesse writes, “[M]y definition then for a ‘good’ career makes little sense to my colleagues today,” and he suggests that our problem is our expectation that “people with PhDs in rhetoric and composition studies should do more than teach undergraduate writing” (17). Hesse holds the academy culpable because it has “jacked up expectations for individual agency, success and status, in ways difficult for all aspirants to achieve or the profession to sustain” (18). But the academy is us. The academy is made up of teachers, researchers, scholars, and administrators, as well as the institution of tenure that is causing the schism and inequities that make us ask, “Is this all there is?” Don’t we all want to work with professionals who desire more, who want to be better teachers, better scholars, better colleagues? To want more is not unreasonable; it’s healthy.

We can all agree with Mary Webb and Kathleen Boardman, in their article “The Last True Optimists,” that tenure “carries several distinct implications: security, academic freedom, [. . .] status” (39)—and I’d add the ability to speak truth to power. Webb and Boardman go on to say that at the University of Nevada–Reno, despite what is often seen as an exemplar of how a non-tenure structure can work, we are “not viewed as fellow professionals” (42). They argue that what we all really want is a good work life: reasonable teaching loads, a variety of classes, and input on curriculum. Everyone wants to feel valued, competent, and challenged; we all want options and opportunities, and we want to feel safe in our careers, something that we know tenure offers.

Non-tenure, on the other hand, has to be explained. People within and outside of the academy don’t understand it especially when the question arises at university recruiting events, “Will tenured professors be teaching our kids?” Because not only does the public want value for the exorbitant investment they make, but they hear “the decline of full-time tenured positions goes hand in hand with a decline in the quality of education,” as Cary Nelson writes in “Parents: Your Children Need Professors with Tenure.” “Remember,” he writes, “poor teaching conditions produce
poor learning conditions. Your children pay the price.” Lesser-quality teaching with non-tenured instructors is highly arguable, but that perception is pervasive and supported by many of the college ranking systems, and thus by the general public.

At my institution, we are trying to educate the educators. We have formed a non-tenure-track caucus. Here we are called “continuing non-tenure track.” We are continuing, but not necessarily permanent. The caucus is composed of instructors and assistant, associate and full professors—we are all non-tenure track. We have it good, but we are not equal and we are not always included. We are trying to define our positions by separating ourselves—the very thing we ask others not to do to us. CNTT faculty are a large part of my university; in 2010 there were 845 tenured or tenure-track faculty and 322 full-time non-tenure-track faculty. We want to synthesize our work, scholarship, awards, promotions, and service in order to make our contributions to teaching, service, and scholarship more visible. Our hopes are to get out publically what non-tenure track does, codify why we are essential to the university’s success, and create a very clear institutional understanding of promotion, development, and work criteria, all the while advancing the means to make people feel valued, challenged, and heard.

Defining what we do and who we are as non-tenure-track faculty is not easily agreed on. John Boe says, “Don’t call me a professor—I work for a living,” (34) in a 2011 article. He examines all the language and titles that surround and define non-tenure, such as adjunct, affiliated, instructor, and lecturer, and argues that titles and the language we use with our colleagues matters, even if we want to ignore that fact. Even referring to faculty as “staffing” and “labor” makes me cringe. Let’s face it: many in academia feel removed and above the outside world. Hierarchy is inevitable in other work institutions as well as ours. If we were all tenured or tenure track, the tiers would be created through other criteria such as time on the faculty, or chairmanships, or number of books published; there would be hierarchies in determining class schedules, teaching times, office assignments. But this sort of hierarchy is still preferable to a bifurcated one of tenure and contingent, because with comprehensive job security faculty would feel safe, they would have voting rights, and they would have access to all the incentives of being a valued member of a group of employees (sabbaticals, travel funds, eligibility for named professorships, emeritus status).

Boe’s essay responds to David Bartholomae’s “Teaching on and off the Tenure Track,” where the data cited galvanizes the distinction of tenured and non-tenured. It’s as if all the figures that Bartholomae provides should be prefaced with “Can you believe . . .”? For example, “Can you believe” that non-tenure-track faculty are teaching between 20 and 40 percent of upper-division classes at baccalaureate, master’s, and doctorate institutions (Bartholomae 16–17)? Is this phenomenon an affront to the professoriate? Or is it astonishing that contingent labor makes up so much of the teaching, and yet we still haven’t figured out how to include these colleagues in the
culture of the academy? But then Bartholomae fleshes the numbers out even more, saying that most of the full-time non-tenure-track faculty hold MAs or MFAs, and if that is the preference, then it “seriously compromise[s] the value of the doctoral degree” (21).

My university legitimately claims equality between non-tenure-track faculty and tenure-track faculty. Non-tenure-track work in total is essentially the same as that of the tenured faculty; we teach, do research, write scholarship, serve on committees, and hold administrative positions. Moreover, we argue that the instructional work we do allows tenured and tenure-track faculty to do the more research-intensive work they do. Even if the system seems balanced by this work distribution, the culture isn’t. As Boe so powerfully shows, most non-tenure-track faculty are treated as outsiders; many of us are not part of university governance, and if we are, we are seen as token representatives, and are still hesitant to speak out because of our contingent status. Boe admits that in the early 1980s, his department even had a separate photocopy machine for tenured and tenure-track faculty that he was forbidden to use (41). Everyone uses the same copy machine now, but the rest of Boe’s article shows that there are still clear distinctions (that he doesn’t mind), but that neither immutable equality nor full inclusion are part of his description.

I left a ten-year career in publishing to join the academy. And I clearly could not write this article about any other career except academia. People are marginalized, overlooked, ostracized in all employment sectors, but the problem is magnified here. We are hypocrites; we betray all the concepts that we teach: open-mindedness, tolerance, inclusivity, diversity, free speech. Robin Wilson says this about New York University’s 2013 vote to pull voting rights from non-tenure-track faculty, noting that many of those who teach and believe in Marxist theory and espouse inclusivity are also those who don’t practice it within their own profession.

And yet our professional organizations remain fully aware of the problem, whether it was in 1986 through CWPA and CCCC, or more recently through the Modern Language Association. In 2011 MLA issued its “Professional Employment Practices for Non-Tenure-Track Faculty Members.” Suggesting that the report builds on its 2003 statement, MLA helps programs “identify areas of policy and practice” such as “hiring and assessment,” “compensation and professional advancement,” “professional rights and responsibilities,” and “professional development and recognition.” The area of policy and practice that is listed last—but is undoubtedly the foundation on which the rest of the list lies—is “Integration into the life of the department and institution.” The bulleted questions under this area end with, “Do non-tenure-track faculty members perceive themselves as members of the department?” (Committee of Contingent Labor in the Profession 1–4). Much like the argument some make about the equality of marriage and civil unions, this final question is faulty because it hinges on perception rather than reality, and assumes that “membership” entails a
binary. Certainly perception often defines what is real, but would tenured professors ever be asked if they perceive their own departmental inclusion?

Clearly, there are no easy answers. My perception of my non-tenure-track status may have a deliberate veneer of naïveté, but if we continue to keep silent, stay “adorable,” and not continue to call out faculty on the hypocrisy within their own teaching and institutions, the same conversations will continue to surface, and resurface. And sometime, a few years from now, yet another faculty member, writing scholar, or teacher—perhaps non-tenured, optimistic, and adorable—will reference this symposium, and it will become just another in the long history of tenure versus the non-tenure track.

Unclear, But Not Unclean: Resisting Familiar Binaries in Faculty Labor

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For much of the public, if not those working in academe, the face of non-tenure-track faculty is Margaret Mary Vojko, a contingent faculty member who taught at Duquesne University and who, in September 2013, tragically died of a heart attack, “nearly penniless and without health benefits,” according to Maria Maisto, Joseph McCartin, and Jacob Swenson. Her story has since been distributed widely via social media, rightfully calling attention beyond higher education to the plight of faculty who are paid by the course and provided few, if any, benefits or even resources to do their jobs. Among the new faculty majority, though, are increasing numbers of permanent, full-time, non-tenure-track faculty positions, like mine, that offer pay and benefits equal to tenure-stream faculty members. However, in the popular imagination, particularly among those in higher education, these positions are notably absent. For example, recently there was an interesting discussion on the WPA-L listserv in which non-tenure-track jobs were initially defined as, quite simply, ones that have no job security. In contrast, when I was hired from a national search for my position, the hiring committee made it explicitly clear that the department intended to keep the person they hired.

As these examples suggest, we tend to look at faculty labor in binaries, and radically unequal binaries at that: one is either tenure stream or adjunct, one of the elect...
or the preterite. The reality is, of course, far more complex, but such complexity is not reflected in the discourse of higher education, much less English studies or rhetoric and composition. In this essay, then, I argue that if we are to move forward in our discussion about labor in writing programs, we will have to disrupt those binaries and conceive ways of working that account for the vast space between the two points we have established as the only options for academic labor. Taking inspiration from Keith Hjortshoj’s work in “The Marginality of the Left-Handed Castes,” I first turn to the work of anthropologists, specifically Victor Turner’s concept of liminality and the Native North American berdache tradition, to show how we, as an academic culture, can learn to think of our work and our workers in more complex and realistic ways. I also use the work of Joseph Janangelo to demonstrate that rhetoric and composition is closer to this goal than we might think.

My purpose in using concepts from anthropology, and in particular features of many Native American cultures, is not to equate Native American cultures with non-tenure-track labor, but rather to show how cultural norms influence our thinking about people who challenge our ideas of what is normal or typical. My experience reading ethnographic studies of the berdache role, for example, radically changed how I identified as a gay man. Once I read that there were cultural worldviews that not only tolerated those who did not conform to traditional sexual or gender roles, but in fact celebrated them, I was forced to reevaluate my place in my culture; in other words, I realized that perhaps I might not be deemed just acceptable as a gay man, but that some entire cultures viewed me as special and offering something no one else could. My hope is that a similar change can occur in rhetoric and composition once we see how our conceptions of faculty labor are socially situated, unstable, and revisable in the face of the changing material conditions of writing instruction.

We should also address issues of naming. As Christine has already noted, one of the frustrations that has emerged with the establishment of these positions is the problem of what to call them. At my university, as I have mentioned, these positions are called continuing non-tenure track, or CNTT. It is unfortunate that these faculty positions have names so cumbersome and prone to acronyms. More unfortunate is that they are defined by what they are not, rather than what they are. Many at my institution would rather rename these jobs teaching-track professors; however, some CNTT faculty are actually far more research or service intensive. Some universities have called these positions professors of the practice. Although in this essay, I use the term non-tenure track, I am most interested in those faculty who are—through equal pay, benefits, and voting rights—woven into the cultural fabric of the department.

Because the commonly conceived dichotomies of academic labor present such an inherently unequal spectrum of privilege versus exploitation, I suggest that we think in terms of constellations or maps, more three-dimensional and complex ways of looking at the professional relationships that non-tenure-track positions alter
in useful ways. Therefore, I find Turner’s ideas of liminality, or the state of being between or outside established social roles or statuses, useful to demonstrate how such positions might be conceived in the academic workforce. Turner develops his ideas about liminality from anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep’s discussion of *rites de passage*. “The attributes of liminality and liminal personae,” Turner writes,

are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there, they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed in a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. (*Ritual Process* 94)

This betwixt-and-between position of liminality expresses the unknown and indefinable presence of non-tenure-track faculty in an English department, and this ability to “elude or slip through the network of classifications” can be a useful one. Taking off from Jacob Boehme and Georg Hegel, Turner argues that liminality “may perhaps be regarded as the Nay to all positive structural assertions,” and “as a realm of pure possibility, whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise” (*Forest* 97).

My position as a teaching-track professor, with voting rights and eligibility to serve on most departmental committees, gives me innumerable options to help guide the course of the department, particularly where teaching in general, and writing instruction in particular, are concerned. Currently non-tenure-track professors, as liminals, are “undifferentiated raw material” (*Forest* 98) with limitless possibilities. For Turner, the liminal period is “accompanied by processes of growth, transformation, and the reformulation of old elements in new patterns” (*Forest* 99). In a profession faced with new, ever-more complex challenges, teaching-track professors offer the flexibility and possibility of new solutions to administrative challenges.

Another benefit that liminal personae offer is a way to shuttle between different models of structural interrelationships. Turner labels these two models as juxtaposed and alternating. The juxtaposed model refers to a society that is “structured, differentiated, and often hierarchical, [. . .] separating men in terms of more or less.” The other model, which Turner suggests emerges in the presence of liminal personae, is the alternating model, and describes a society that is an “unstructured or rudimentarily structured, undifferentiated [. . .] community, or even communion of equal individuals” (*Ritual Process* 96). Because liminal persons have no previously established position in their given culture, they disrupt conventional hierarchies by forcing those in established positions to see their positions as unstable as those of the liminal. Further, because of the unstable nature of the liminal personae, they are often seen as tabula rasa, with limitless possibilities. In my own position as a teaching-track professor, such a novel position offers intriguing options for reconceiving the work we do in the department.
When looking at Turner’s early work as a whole, choosing his ideas of liminality might seem counter to the goals of non-tenure-track faculty. For example, because these faculty defy previously established academic classifications, they become a problematically undefined and unclear phenomenon, and as Turner—and Mary Douglas before him—has put it, “the unclear is the unclean” (*Forest* 97). Indeed, liminal people can be so dangerous that the rest of a culture must be protected from them: “Liminal personae nearly always and everywhere are regarded as being polluting to those who have never been, so to speak, ‘inoculated’ against them” (97). My advisors expressed profound distrust when I spoke to them about my job when I applied for it, and such distrust speaks to the unclear and unclean perceptions that current faculty in established job titles have of the teaching track.

The academy’s current discomfort with non-tenure-track faculty reflects the structural invisibility experienced by liminals. Turner explains, “As members of a society, most of us see only what we expect to see, and what we expect to see is what we are conditioned to see when we have learned the definitions and classifications of our culture” (*Forest* 95). Because our current academic culture sees only two options—tenure track or adjunct, permanent or temporary, stable or unstable—and because non-tenure-track professors fit into neither category, they risk invisibility that is unwarranted and inaccurate. Many of my colleagues, for example, did not know I was non-tenure track when I first stepped on campus. After all, I went to departmental meetings and voted therein; therefore, I must be a tenure-track assistant professor. Though such confusion is minor, I am more concerned that many faculty in my department have little idea of the work we do and the benefit we offer the university and department. Our achievements are much harder to quantify than those on the research track. One knows the research-track professors are doing their jobs by the list of publications on their CVs, but the excellence of non-tenure-track faculty is a bit more ephemeral, left behind when we close the classroom door at the end of the day.

In his later work, however, Turner broadens his notions of liminality to include more than those undergoing ritual transitions. He turns liminality into an umbrella term to include not only those true liminals, but also those he terms “outsiders” and “marginals.” Outsiders are those who “set themselves apart from the behavior of status-occupying, role-playing members of [a] system [. . .] such as shamans, diviners, mediums, priests, those in monastic seclusion, hippies, hobos, and gypsies.” Marginals, on the other hand, are “simultaneously members (by ascription, optation, self-definition, or achievement) of two or more groups whose social definitions and cultural norms are distinct from, and often even opposed to, each other,” such as “migrant workers, second generation Americans, persons of mixed ethnic origin [. . .] migrants from country to city, and women in a changed, non-traditional role” (*Dramas* 233). Sometimes marginals become, as Turner suggests, “radical critics of
structure.” These alternative definitions of liminality strike a slightly more familiar chord with the experience of the non-tenure-track professor. However, non-tenure-track professors do not necessarily “set themselves apart” from the rest of the academic system; some are, indeed, integrally woven into it.

The idea of marginals being “simultaneously members of two or more groups” rings truer to the non-tenure-track position, but Turner also points out that marginals often “look to their group of origin, the so-called inferior group, for communitas, and to the more prestigious in which they mainly live and in which they aspire to higher status as their structural reference group” (Dramas 233). Non-tenure-track teaching-intensive professors, particularly those trained in writing studies, do not necessarily fit the aspirations that Turner describes. I do not, for example, aspire to be a research-track professor. I see myself as not inferior, but different, and in many ways more fortunate than, my fellow junior faculty. I can pursue much more varied research interests without the ticking of the tenure clock in the back of my mind.

Even with all the promise and problems that Turner’s definitions of liminality offer, metaphors from anthropology can still be helpful, I would argue, when conceptualizing the non-tenure-track professor in the academy. In particular, the idea of the berdache, or two-spirit, as described by Walter Williams in his book The Spirit and the Flesh, provides a better, though related, model for Turner’s liminality when thinking of the role that non-tenure-track professors play in a department. Williams’s book explores in detail the roles that aboriginal American cultures have constructed for those who do not meet what Western culture labels male or female. In fact, in many cultures there are not two genders, but three or more (81–84). Cultures create the berdache role “as a way to recognize and assimilate some atypical individuals without imposing a change on them or stigmatizing them as deviant. This cultural institution confirms their legitimacy for what they are” (3). In Native North America, berdaches, such as Lakota winktepi and Navajo nadlé, act as intercessors not only between men and women in matters of relationships, but between the physical world and the spiritual world. Winktepi, for example, are the only men who can perform the inipi sweat lodge ceremony for women. Moreover, accounts from explorers such as Cabeza de Vaca indicate that berdaches did all kinds of work, that is, they did the work attributed traditionally to both women and men (Williams 68).

I find the implications for this model for non-tenure-track professors, particularly those trained in writing studies, promising. As professionals trained in composition, they are not only good teachers, but writing studies scholars in their own right. In addition, they can relate to adjuncts and research-track professors in ways no other academic professional can. The point I wish to make with this discussion, though, is that berdaches have a name, a role, and a status in their cultures. Williams devotes his entire book to elaborating the familial, spiritual, and social roles of those who are permanently “betwixt and between.” If the creation of non-tenure-track faculty
positions continues to increase, universities and departments will need to follow suit and embrace the productive liminality of the work that these faculty do.

Although the notions of non-tenure-track faculty work that I have described so far are from anthropology, it is worth noting that rhetoric and composition scholars also offer intriguing possibilities. For example, Janangelo’s application of Jacques Derrida’s notion of supplementarity to writing program administration rings true for new labor models as well. “Supplements,” Janangelo explains, “exist because things are not complete in themselves” (12). In terms of writing programs, Janangelo notes that “when we acknowledge the multiple inherent ‘lacks’ in the academy—in terms of literacy instruction […] we can see the need and justification for the supplement” (12). I suggest that Janangelo’s ideas of the value of the supplement can be extended to the role professionalized non-tenure-track professors can play in an English department, in that the current models of tenure stream and adjunct do not satisfy the pedagogical needs of large-scale literacy programs in many universities.

Janangelo also argues that writing programs are sites of “pedagogical surplus within the academy,” and provide a “versatility and breadth of knowledge not available to other disciplines.” As such, they function as “unifying agents […] by providing pedagogical perspectives on the complexity of composing, perspectives that imbue all the disciplines” (13). Just as writing programs act as unification agents within an institution, non-tenure-track professors bridge the gaps between research-track “content” professors and the adjuncts who do large amounts of teaching, particularly when these professors have voices and votes. As with the berdache roles described by Williams, non-tenure-track professors are particularly well placed to act as go-betweens connecting the research-track faculty and those whose responsibility lies primarily in teaching.

In a turn reminiscent of Turner’s liminals, Janangelo also notes that writing programs act as sources of subversion and social critique. For example, they provide “empathy and socially transformative strategies to groups whose difference […] makes them feel less than welcome in the academy” (13). Through mentorship and advocacy, Janangelo suggests, writing programs “may play potentially important roles in changing educational expectations and performance in the twenty-first century” (13). Teaching-track professors are well positioned to raise questions about inequality and institutional praxis when curricular and programmatic decisions are made. As the potential “[n]ay to all positive structural assertions,” non-tenure-track professors, like Turner’s marginals, act as a radically critical answer to the question of how we are going to go about the work of writing instruction in a rapidly changing postsecondary climate.

I feel a caveat is in order. My position as it is configured is a rare one, a product of a particular institutional context. For example, without an active branch of AAUP with sympathetic and conscientious leadership, my non-tenure-track job might not
offer the exciting professional possibilities that it does. Therefore, as a field, rhetoric and composition has two dishearteningly large tasks to undertake as we seek solutions to our academic labor problem. The first is, of course, to ameliorate the conditions of teachers like Vojko. The second is to help our institutions reconceive the ways we think of academic work. In the tradition of Turner's liminals, though, these two Herculean labors are “accompanied by processes of growth, transformation, and the reformulation of old elements in new patterns” (Forest 99). Those transformations are long overdue.

Places at the Table

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Lunch tables often seem to figure in the stories we tell one another about our work lives. Christine, for instance, begins her essay here with a lunch conversation, as does Doug Hesse in “Sustainable Expectations?,” a piece Christine discusses. I suspect this has something to do with how lunch is at once an ordinary part of our workday and a break from it. We all have to eat. We’re not in someone’s office, or classroom, or conference room, but in a neutral, public space. For a moment, we feel like equals. We can lower our guard a little, let our talk grow a bit more casual and candid. And yet we are still at work. We’re likely to be talking about work. And we still know who’s a teacher or a student, a professor or an adjunct or a member of the office staff.

I’d like to bring another lunch table into our conversation. Most summers my wife and daughters and I vacation in south-central Pennsylvania. We often spend an afternoon or two browsing for antiques, and on those days, we’ve grown fond of stopping to eat at Hinkle’s, an old-fashioned pharmacy with an old-style luncheonette, in Columbia, a fading industrial town set on the banks of the Susquehanna River. Last summer, the pharmacy printed up a set of paper placemats to celebrate its 120th year of business. At the center of the placemat is an exterior photo of Hinkle’s standing proudly on its corner. Surrounding that image are six rows of headshots of its employees, about sixty in all, one after the other grinning yearbook style at the camera.

Each photo has a caption with precisely two bits of information—first name and years worked. In the very top left corner, there’s Paul, forty-six years of service, who by the white collar of his lab coat looks to be a pharmacist. Next to him is Edie,
forty-one years, whose green top suggests she works in the kitchen, and then there’s Cathy W., thirty-six years, whose blue polo shirt hints at a counter job. The series of portraits continues on, left to right, top to bottom, old and young, male and female, collars and open shirts, ties and baseball caps, until at the very end, we come upon a row of teenagers—Larissa, Ashley, Matt, Jordan, and Todd—hired in just the last year. The afternoon we were there, the placemats were the talk of the luncheonette, with customers finding the photo of their server or busser or cashier, and joking with them about their years on the job.

Now of course I don’t know what it’s like to actually work in the pharmacy. Maybe the stockroom workers and managers get along, maybe they don’t. Nonetheless, I was taken by the placemat as a representation of a workplace. Even though everyone was photographed in work clothes, no one is identified by rank or title or even last name. We are simply shown everyone who works at the store, in one photo after the next, together on the same page.

It’s hard to imagine something more unlike how we represent our own workplaces in the academy. The People tab on the webpage for every English department I’ve worked in is arranged in a clear hierarchy of ranks and titles, beginning with something like Primary Faculty or Administration and gradually working its way down to Staff and Students. Alongside our photos, and after our names, the first bit of information listed for every member of the department is a title—named professors, full professors, associates, assistants, visitors, professors of the practice, lecturers, instructors, graduate students, adjunct faculty, supplemental faculty, secondary faculty, part-time faculty, business managers, support coordinators, administrative assistants, secretaries, and on and on. No one escapes being assigned their place.

And that is precisely what Christine and Michael write about so eloquently here—the sense of place they have been offered in the academy. They write as members of a growing group of academics who are specifically defined as not being something—not tenure track, not research faculty, not regular rank, not . . . whatever. Christine speaks to the frustrations of occupying this sort of not-status, and Michael to the possibilities of using such not-positions to disrupt the hierarchies of our programs and departments.

Both raise issues that are less economic than cultural. They are concerned, that is, less with the terms of contract offered them by their employer than with how their work is valued by their colleagues on the faculty. Of course, one reason they can focus on such cultural problems is that, in economic terms, their positions are good ones: secure, fairly compensated, with opportunities for advancement. We can’t forget that, and we need to continue to argue for fair terms of employment for teachers at all ranks.

But we can’t define good jobs in contractual terms alone. That is the key lesson I take from their essays. I’ve been involved with running university writing programs for more than twenty years. In that time I’ve met my share of heroes and martyrs, of
instructors who—no matter how underpaid or overburdened or isolated—still manage to teach well. But eventually most of us just get worn down by such conditions. We need support, both material and intellectual. We want to feel connected to a larger project, to colleagues who share our ambitions and interests. When I first started working with writing programs, I thought that if we could just improve salaries and teaching loads, then all that other stuff would sort itself out. It doesn’t. You need to work at creating a sense of intellectual community.

There is an irony here. We love to complain about what we can’t fix and ignore what we can. Most of us—even deans, chairs, and directors—have little real say over things like salaries for non-tenured instructors, course rates for part timers, or stipends for graduate students. But we do have real voices in a more symbolic economy, one in which we assign value to different kinds of intellectual work. Here you might think we could afford to be generous, but we are more often frugal, privileging work at certain sites over others: research over teaching, graduate over undergraduate, the major over general education, lit over comp, honors comp over ESL or basic writing. No matter how secure or well paid your position may be, if you spend most of your time teaching first-year comp, you won’t have quite the same place at the table as the person teaching all those grad seminars and advanced courses in the major, much less the person so busy with research that he or she hardly has any time to teach at all.

Let me be clear. Arguing that we need to reform the intellectual culture of English does not obviate the need to press for fair working conditions. But neither does pressing for better working conditions obviate the need to reform our intellectual culture. And, as Michael concludes his essay here by noting, that leaves us facing not one but two daunting tasks.

In confronting both those tasks, we will need to learn how to value—to appreciate, assess, reward, remunerate—the intellectual work of teaching in much the same ways we now value research. This is not an argument for leveling distinctions, but for judging the quality of intellectual work instead of its type. I’d rather see an imaginative course in writing than a mediocre journal article. But, as a field, we have barely formed the vaguest sense of what it might mean to teach an imaginative rather than rote course in writing, while we have developed meticulous protocols for vetting our scholarship.

Much of this problem stems from a tendency to view the work of introductory courses, which most non-tenure-track faculty spend most of their time teaching, as, by definition, standardized and routine. So, for instance, if your goal for your first-year writing course is something like having every student in every section at work on the same day with the same text and the same assignment, then you have reduced your faculty to a set of technicians, cogs in an intellectual-bureaucratic machine. Who really cares how well somebody teaches one of 50 or 100 or 200 nearly identical sections of the same staff course? To revalue the work of non-tenure-track faculty, then, we need to rethink our approach to introductory courses in writing.
and literature, to imagine them as spaces of not repetition but possibility. We need to ask faculty not if they can teach a course we have designed for them, but if they can design a course that speaks to goals we share. We need, that is, to value in the work of teachers what we claim to value in the writing of students: independence, creativity, responsiveness, surprise.

I agree with Michael that non-tenure-track faculty can prod us to rethink our courses and programs in these ambitious ways. But I also agree with Christine that we are currently doing a poor job of respecting the work of our colleagues off the tenure track. What I like so much about the Hinkle’s placemat is how it seems simply to say, these are the people who work here, without immediately sorting and ranking the kinds of work they do. What gets depicted, at least for a moment, is a collective project. I’d like us to begin to imagine our own workplaces in similarly capacious terms.

Works Cited


