A Dirty Deal: Social Dirt and the Adjunct Predicament

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Although I've taught at the same university continuously since 2007, I'm still considered "temporary" faculty: a kind of intellectual migrant, shifting every year to a different office left open by whichever tenure-track faculty member is on leave that year. I keep two photographs and a small stack of books at the university, shifting camp each August. I've learned to keep it lean, not settle into any given office space. Each year I sign a contract granting one year of teaching employment. Each contract specifies that no matter how many consecutive years I teach for this same university I am guaranteed no further employment by said university. In other words, I am not recognized as part of the university community but instead am allocated a sojourner's space.

None of this information, though, is available to the many undergraduates I teach. The university where I have taught since 2007 prides itself on combining teaching excellence with scholarly research. Students expect that their professors represent exemplary positions in the fields they teach. And I have, during my eleven years of teaching as an adjunct for this university, published five scholarly books, and four books of poetry. A student could be

forgiven for thinking that I bring scholarly accomplishment to my role as “professor.”

But I am not a professor. Not in the sense of the word that most associate with the liberal project of sustaining a national (and international) scholarly community: professor as scholar and teacher supported financially and socially through some version of collegiality by the university where she teaches. Instead, I inhabit a kind of shadow world, in which as in a tilted holograph I appear at times to be a professor—give lectures, teach classes, assign grades to students, mentor and write letters of recommendation—and at other times do not appear to be a professor, in that I lack a stable contract with the university.

As is by now well known, the majority of American faculty in this second decade of the twenty-first century are non-tenure track. What does it mean to not have claim to inhabit that social space in which one labors; to be hired to teach but not allowed to have voice? Orlando Patterson’s theory of social death, Mary Douglas’s theory of dirt, and Arnold van Gennep’s theory of liminality, shed light on the shadowland that is adjunct employment. For adjunct labor is coded as *social dirt*: labor that is not connected with embodied dirtiness, but instead carries the stigma of social impurity, entirely through symbol. The reasons academia does not implement fair resolutions to the adjunct predicament, I suggest, have to do with this quality of *social dirt*, the unspoken premise that adjuncts are outside the bounds of the university’s proper circumference, symbolically unclean, and therefore not ultimately a group whose difficulties need to be resolved.

This kind of social dirt is not related to bodily performance or bodily style. Instead, it is adjuncts’ position within the university system that eludes social properness.[1] Within the university, the adjunct’s expertise is curiously believed to exist only in the classroom, not outside of it. As Eric Fure-Slocum points out, many adjuncts survive by cobbling together a large array of courses taught at different universities.[2] The force of the adjunct contract is clear: you are hired to teach this course, and only in this domain are you considered qualified. Hence, the adjunct in the social world of the university is an incomplete professor, with expertise that is considered by the university not to extend beyond the contained act of teaching a specific course for hire.

The adjunct’s social position abrades the definition of proper subject identity that tenure track faculty structure and occupy. In response to this abjection stems unvoiced but clear social pressure against rectifying injustices that face adjuncts. Instead, as the abject in the text of the university social world, the impetus is – just as Julia Kristeva states of all abject objects – to cast out the adjunct.[3] The act of casting out takes the form of creating a “caste,” a social group that is always already considered not to exist even as it clearly exists. Adjuncts are just such a group: on temporary contracts, vulnerable to being expelled

altogether from the university. Even when employment is retained this taint of what is improper to the professor hovers around the adjunct, creating a system wherein the fact of adjunct labor is kept behind doors of rhetoric, not included in university advertising and propaganda.

This sense of stain coexists with social invisibility. Orlando Patterson's lengthy *Slavery and Social Death* yields a succinct definition of "social death:" the *non né*, the never born.[4] Patterson, here, means he whose birth is not accorded social meaning as the birth of a socially generative person. While Patterson's analysis speaks to power imbalances far direr than those found in the modern university, his insights are applicable to adjuncts' challenges. To be clear: since adjuncts are not enslaved, an adjunct can leave her job. My point in discussing Patterson's theory of social death, however, is to show that *within that job* the adjunct's status is that of the socially dead person. Moreover, within the interlocking system of universities, leaving an adjunct job at one university is unlikely to lead to higher status at another potential university, as the adjunct is already marked by her previous job. Readers familiar with Patterson's work will recall that his far-ranging study of slavery includes data on many cultures and histories. I draw from his work, here, in that spirit of far-reaching theoretical import.

The socially dead person, then, is he who cannot publicly claim an inheritance from his parents and cannot publicly bequeath to his children; he cannot be situated, publicly, in a lineage, not as scion nor progenitor.[5] In the life-cycle of the university, mentorships of various kinds are parenting: adjunct faculty members are almost always those without publicly articulated university "parents." The support afforded junior tenure track faculty is notably missing for entering adjuncts: no one is responsible for their professional success, because it is assumed they are temporary faculty. And yet, adjunctcy has become a bankrupt form of permanency, with adjuncts accepting the precarious terms of their employment for years and even decades. During my early years of adjuncting, I was advised by a well-meaning administrator to find a "parent," to cozy up to my departmental chair, so as to be shifted to tenure track. The administrator stated that it didn't matter what I published; it mattered that this chair *like me*. I could go deeper here into the questionable integrity of a system that values cozying up over and above scholarship—as it happened, I decided not to cozy up to the departmental chair, and hence the terms of my employment did not improve—but my point is the *unparented* status of the adjunct as one source of the social death experienced by adjuncts in the university system.

Just as the adjunct does not have parents in the university system—senior faculty members who implicitly allow the junior faculty member to draw from their collective departmental status as he builds his own work—the adjunct does not produce "children" in the scholarly

world. Given the supposed impermanence of each adjunct's contract, it is unusual for an adjunct to see a doctoral student through the process of earning her or his doctorate, as that student's dissertation advisor. This structural impediment to the adjunct producing scholarly heirs seals the deal: the adjunct is, using Patterson's definition, the socially dead person, in the context of the university community.

Social Dirt

To see the link between social death and social dirt, consider Mary Douglas's symbolic definition of pollution and purity. I extend Douglas's argument by defining as social dirt that which cannot make us physically sick, because it has no physical property whatsoever. *Social dirt* is all that we associate with powerlessness, the indigestible taint of non-being, the object that confuses social categories. Douglas, in *Purity and Danger*, shapes a cartography of the fear of contamination through social proximity.[6] Douglas discerns that what is considered socially dangerous is *not* correlated with what is biologically risky. Instead, the category of social danger emerges from the fear of non-being at the boundary of the human; dirt is the object that blurs categories, the living and the dead, the human and the inhuman. Argues Douglas, "All margins are dangerous. If they are pulled this way or that the shape of fundamental experience is altered. Any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins."[7] Margins are a realm of social anxiety and variable social proscriptions and taboos.[8] Douglas's theory of "purity" shows that the pure and the sullied are ontologically fungible, categories structured through social process.

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But how are adjuncts "dirty"— even in the highly-symbolic sense that Douglas intends in her exploration of pollution? The physical act of teaching while an adjunct is indistinguishable from the physical act of teaching while on tenure track. And yet, within the university, and here I mean not only where one teaches but also one's interface with all universities, through conferences, publications, job applications, the status of adjunct is a mark of social dirt. Adjunct teaching occupies the realm of social dirt in the university because it inhabits the margins of the university social body.[9]

Social dirt is marked as that which must be kept sequestered, at the boundary of social propriety."[10] Adjunct labor falls decidedly in this category of the boundary, at the pale, of social prestige, as universities rarely advertise their adjunct faculty. Students are not lured to the tier-one university where I teach with the promise of being educated by adjunct

faculty who are paid less than a living wage for their labor. No. The adjunctification of the professoriate is kept quiet, a sign of the shamefulness of the condition.

One might imagine that the shamefulness reflects the university's own shame for exploitative practices. But I don't believe that's the case. The shame instead devolves onto adjuncts. When, five years ago, I made a concerted effort to push against my situation, and spoke to an administrator in an informal complaint, I was told that adjuncts are exchangeable and that I could easily be exchanged for another adjunct. The condition for keeping my job, such as it was, was to accept my own exchangeable status. That condition could be exerted against my will because I was already positioned as exchangeable. This also is a marker of social dirt: that one's identity, in one's social world, is unbounded. Having no fixed identity—and this is the definition of being interchangeable with another—is a form of porous margins. The very premise of adjunct labor is this interchangeability.

I do not suggest that adjuncts are fakes in any deep ontological sense. Rather I mean that the sociality of the university world depicts the adjunct as the partial professor. While typically it is argued—and this designation holds at my university—that adjuncts and other non-tenure track faculty are "teaching faculty," and tenure track faculty called "research faculty," my own experience has been that even as I produce more scholarship than same-age "research faculty" in my department I continue to be called "teaching faculty" because I'm not tenure track. This use of euphemism signifies a terrain of social dirt: adjunct faculty should truthfully be called minimum-pay faculty.

Social dirt means hiding the nature of the work: Adjunct labor, though it occurs in the same physical realm as tenure track labor, is hidden by the language used to describe adjuncts, hidden by propaganda items that forward university goals without mentioning the often substantial role played by adjuncts in achieving those goals. The obscene (literally, off-scene) linguistic and symbolic positioning of adjunct labor signifies its status as social dirt. It haunts the margin of the social body of the university community, and as a source of anxiety at the margins of the body is handled with prohibition and taboo, as with all formations placed in the social realm of pollution, taboo.

The adjunct retains the place of the neophyte, the one in transition between completing a graduate degree and obtaining employment as a professor. Even as adjuncting has become the job situation for a majority of university faculty, it retains the taint of liminality: the one who has graduated from university, earned a doctorate, but has not yet secured the next level of status, tenure track appointment. Caught in a rite of passage that does not end, that has no ending in sight in the social world of the university, the adjunct persists as the initiate—a position that renders one outside the bounds of normal society, a permanently

liminal figure. Often teaching a heavier course-load than his tenure track colleagues, the adjunct is somehow *not there*, subject to abrupt dismissal, without recourse if employment is terminated, a figure on the margins.

Douglas clarifies that margins are experienced as socially dangerous, subject to elaborate control of pollution and taboo. Adjuncts are not dangerous in any real sense—but the presence of adjuncts threatens on many levels the social perception of the project of university research and education. The presence of adjuncts draws into question the social status of the professoriate by tainting it with precarious, ill-paid, chronically disrespected workers. The boundary distinguishing the value of the professor from the devalued adjunct is nebulous in terms of the content of the job and its performance. Hence, it must be rigorously maintained, through a kind of caste system, in the university's social world. Denied votes in departmental matters, the adjunct is there but not there, her speech constrained to the syllabus and the classroom. The social dirt that is adjunctcy is adroitly hidden by university propaganda: but only by attending to hierarchies of power and the way they enforce terms of social dirt in academia can we find remedies for the adjunct predicament.

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1. Julia Kristeva defines abjection as that which is socially determined to be outside the boundary of the proper self. See Julia Kristeva, l'Abjecte (1980) Translated into English as Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection, (Columbia University Press, 1982)

2. Eric Fure-Slocum, Precarious Academic Labor: Insecurity and Organization, Southern Labor Studies Association May 18, 2018

3. Kristeva, Powers of Horror, 6-8; see also, Rene Girard, The One By Whom Scandal Comes (Michigan State University, 2014).

4. Orlando Patterson, Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study (Harvard University Press, 1982)

5. Ibid, 26-40

6. Mary Douglas Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo (New York & London: Routledge, 2001), 123.

7. Mary Douglas Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo (New

York & London: Routledge, 2001), 124.

8. Ibid, 122

9. ibid, 53-78

10. ibid 92

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