



# “Skilled, Cheap, and Desperate”<sup>1</sup>: Non-tenure-track Faculty and the Delusion of Meritocracy

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## **Abstract**

Over the past 25 or so years, geographers have produced sophisticated critical tools to examine systems like patriarchy, racism, and heteronormativity. However, they have not used those critical tools to examine the problem of institutional hierarchy in the academy. There are many kinds of institutional hierarchy, but the paper focuses on one particular structure: the difference between tenure-track and non-tenure-track faculty. I call for much greater critical reflection on the existence and experience of non-tenure-track faculty in geography. I argue that it is essential to undermine the structures and assumed wisdom of the hierarchy, for the sake of non-tenure-track faculty, the discipline, and the academy as a whole. Destabilizing the structures requires multiple strategies. I argue that one key strategy is for non-tenure-track faculty to tell their stories, to offer their critical perspective from the lower rungs of the hierarchy. The last part of the paper is an autobiographical account designed to give a better idea of how one such story might look.

## **Introduction**

Limbo is a compelling idea. It refers to a temporary state of being in between more permanent states. In Catholic doctrine limbo can be happy or unhappy, but in everyday usage it almost always means an unhappy condition. More specifically, it means a condition of neglect or oblivion, where people are consigned when they are regarded, as the OED puts it, to be “outworn, useless, or absurd”. Moreover, people are *confined* to limbo; they are not able to end their state of oblivion, either to go back or to go forward. They can only leave if something happens. But that something is entirely outside their control. They don’t quite know what that something is, who controls it, or when it will happen.

Temps, adjuncts, lecturers, part-timers, non-tenure tracks: there is a growing majority of faculty in the American academy that isn’t quite real. They are not fully there. They are in limbo in every sense of the word. They are not graduate students; they are not *really* members of the faculty. They are in between. And they are waiting. For something to break, for the door to open, for their career to begin. Meanwhile, they move in the shadows, teaching the big introductory classes, providing

indispensable service to their department, and drawing little in return in terms of salary or office space. They begin their career—publishing, teaching, attending conferences—even as they choke back the fear that their career will never really begin. They try feverishly to earn a tenure-track job, but they cannot know, and they have no control over, whether their limbo will end happily or tragically.

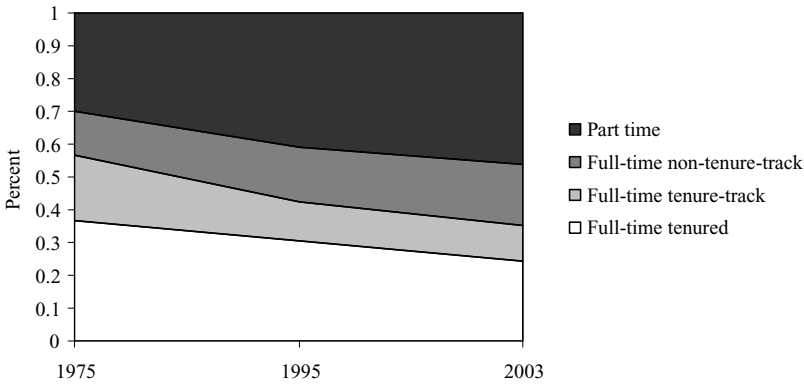
This paper is a plea for a sustained critical engagement in geography with what is commonly called the “problem” of non-tenure-track faculty (Leatherman 1997). It is a call to examine their pervasive exclusion, oppression, and devaluation. It is also an appeal to mobilize the sophisticated critical tools that geographers have developed to interrogate patriarchy, racism, heteronormativity, and ableism in the discipline (eg Jackson 1987; Rose 1993; Valentine 1994). We urgently need to turn these tools on ourselves, to critically question the structures of institutional hierarchy, status, and privilege in the academy. The paper is also an admonishment: academic geographers have so brilliantly exposed the debilitating effects of other marginalizations and oppressions, but they have failed in their duty to scrutinize the embedded and growing oppression that flows from the institutional hierarchies that structure their professional life. As Gill Valentine (1997) puts it “we often talk and write about the identities of ‘others’ and how power operates in their lives, as geographers we rarely stop to consider how these issues are played out in our own work environments”. The geography literature remains virtually silent on academic hierarchy. Institutional status remains something so naturalized, to paraphrase Kobayashi and Peake (1994:230), that it is not even viewed as problematic. As a discipline, we maintain this silence at our peril. The two-tiered system that divides faculty into “tenure-track” and “everyone else”, and the status and privilege that the tenure track enjoy, has a deep and corrosive effect, both on the well-being of non-tenure-track faculty and on the intellectual vibrancy of the discipline and the academy as a whole. This paper is also therefore a warning. If we continue to fail in our duty, not only will we be complicit in the marginalization of a growing class of professional geographers, we will stand by as the academy (and academic geography) increasingly becomes a ghastly, neoliberalized shell of its former self.

The paper proceeds in three main parts. First, I sketch the issue more fully and establish precisely which group of professional geographers the paper is concerned about. Then I make a case for why the current structure is badly broken. Last, in an attempt to begin to address these problems, I offer an autobiographical account of my four years in professional limbo. In order to expose and resist the debilitating effects of the current structure, I argue, non-tenure-track faculty must take the opportunity to tell their story, and tenure-track faculty must listen.

**Table 1:** Trends in faculty status at American universities, 1975–2003 (all institutions, national totals)

	1975		1995		2003	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Full-time tenured	227,381	36.5	284,870	30.6	282,429	24.1
Full-time tenure-track	126,300	20.3	110,311	11.8	128,602	11.0
Full-time non-tenure-track	80,883	13.0	155,641	16.7	219,388	18.7
Part time	188,000	30.2	380,884	40.9	543,137	46.3
Total	622,564		931,706		1,173,556	

Source: US Department of Education, IPEDS Fall Staff Survey. Adapted from Curtis (2005).



**Figure 1:** Graphic of trends in faculty status. Source: Curtis (2005)

**The “Problem”**

Not everyone has been silent on the question of non-tenure-track faculty. An increasing number of studies have tried to document and measure the phenomenon (eg Baldwin and Chronister 2002; Graduate Employees and Students Organization 1999). These studies find that non-tenure-track positions have become the clear majority over the last 30 years (see Table 1 and Figure 1). The *Chronicle of Higher Education* has printed many articles both by and about non-tenure tracks (Arden 1995; Bucak 2003; Leatherman 1999; Snowe 2004). And some academic writing outside of geography has critically examined the issue, primarily in anthropology and education (eg Aronowitz 2001; Berry 2005; Shumar 1997; Collins 1999). Writing about “the new internal colonialism” in anthropology, for example, Susan DiGiacomo (1999:263) writes that her discipline has offered “studied inattention to the emergence of a large

and growing underclass of underemployed professionals within its own ranks". Her argument applies equally well to geography. While geographers have recently begun to expose oppression within the academy associated with racism, patriarchy, and heteronormativity (eg Binnie 1997; Kobayashi and Peake 2000), they have not similarly critiqued institutional hierarchy. We need to shatter this "studied inattention". Before I say more about why, I want first to be specific about which faculty members constitute the focus of the paper.

## Who?

There is incredible diversity in the non-tenure-track teaching population. One can be a graduate student or post-graduate. One can aspire to a tenure-track job or not. One can be part time or full time. The list goes on. In this paper, I focus on one particular population: post-graduates with PhDs who are not on the tenure track but who aspire to a tenure-track position in US universities. The paper does not focus on two other major segments of the non-tenure-track population: graduate students and affiliate faculty who are non-academic professionals who teach as a sideline to their primary career. To be clear, we need to take all elements of the non-tenure-track population into account in order to adequately understand the current problem. However, because there are so many different kinds of non-tenure-track teachers, it would be beyond the scope of an article to adequately examine each of them. I focus on those who are qualified for and seeking tenure-track positions because that is the segment that I am most familiar with and that my autobiography can shed the most light on.

Even within this focus population, there is tremendous diversity. Non-tenure-track faculty can be hired through a search, or through another means, like spousal hire. They can have some security (like a year-long contract) or none (course to course). They can have high salaries (comparable to the lowest salary on the tenure track) or low salaries (as little as a quarter of what tenure-track faculty make for the same teaching). They can be full-time or not. They can have benefits or not. They can have burdensome teaching loads or not. They can have a sympathetic chair or a hostile one. They can be welcomed by the faculty, shunned, or ignored. On top of these institutional factors, one is always also positioned within other social categories, such as gender, race, class, ability, and sexuality. It is important to remember, for example, that non-tenure-track faculty tend to be disproportionately women (Leatherman 1999). With respect to these various criteria, my own experience was relatively favorable. But even for the relatively lucky ones like me, I argue, the marginalization and devaluation of non-tenure tracks runs deep and is an acute problem.

## Why?

There are two aspects of this problem: the first concerns the well being of non-tenure-track faculty, and the second has to do with the well being of the discipline and the academy more broadly.

### *For the Non-tenure tracks*

One problem concerns the very real material deprivations for non-tenure-track faculty when compared to those on the tenure track. The movement to unionize non-tenure-tracks has begun to examine the class-based material issues involved in the system of academic hierarchy (Berry 2005; Kirkpatrick and Robinson 2005). A primary consideration is job security. Non-tenure-track faculty don't just lack the extraordinary security of tenure, they usually lack even the most basic security. Many are employed on a term-by-term basis. Some are luckier: they get a one- or even three-year contract. But none have any true security. The real security in academia, the key to making a career out of the job, is entry into the tenure track. Non-tenure-track faculty can't know if they will ever "settle down" in academia. They live with the constant fear that they will soon be forced to give up their chosen career, the career they have trained for years to enter. For many, their specialized training does not give them extensive options outside the academy.

Added to that lack of security are more everyday material lacks. Non-tenure tracks are virtually always paid less than their tenure-track colleagues, and often they are paid only a small fraction. Benefits like health and dental care and retirement contributions vary widely. Some are covered, more are not. Their access to on-campus funding, and thus an important source of summer salary, is usually restricted. And there are less-direct material deficits. For example, it is difficult to buy a house and build the long-term wealth that comes with it (Oliver and Shapiro 1997) when you are unsure how long you will be in town. This reduced compensation is given in return for work that is sometimes less (especially if they are part-time), sometimes it is the same, and sometimes it is more than tenure-track faculty. Their job is centered mostly on teaching. However, for those trying to land a tenure-track position, research has to be an equal or even greater priority than for tenure-track faculty. But since that research is not considered part of the job, non-tenure-tracks must produce high-level research essentially in their spare time. Service loads are often less, but it would be a mistake to assume that is always so. For example, when he was non-tenure-track, Jonathan Church (1999) took an administrative job he equates to being the chair of a medium-sized department. He took on the added responsibilities and a cut in pay because the new job at least offered a more stable contract and health insurance.

While these material inequalities are important, they are only part of the problem. Also critical is the social and psychological toll

non-tenure-track status takes. This is an element of the experience that tends to be underemphasized by a unionization strategy. Here work in geography that takes seriously the importance of cultural exclusion and oppression is more useful. Laura Pulido (2002), for example, has written about the “enormous psychological and emotional energy” it takes to be one of the few people of color in a discipline that is predominantly white. In writing about ableism in the discipline, Chouinard and Grant (1995) examine “the little everyday practices of academic life” that serve as “a constant reminder that I am different, that I don’t ‘belong’ . . . the pain of being ‘the other’ was far deeper and more complete than I ever imagined”. Larry Knopp (1999) is one of the few in this literature to openly acknowledge the importance of institutional status. He writes that his decision to become more active and critical of the heterosexism in his university was made only after tenure cemented his institutional status. He even goes so far as to suggest that his decision “is probably best understood simply as the exercise of a new privilege, one which may very well still come at the expense of other people less powerful and privileged than myself” (Knopp 1999:119). Knopp makes explicit what few analysts of patriarchy, racism, and heteronormativity in the academy do not: institutional status is also a powerful force of privilege and oppression that works alongside other such forces. Its oppression is not more or less important than other forms; rather it is always interlaced with them in complex and variable ways.

Outside of geography, others have written eloquently about the trials of the non-tenure-track experience. Central to this experience, they reveal, is the very real *stigma* of one’s position. It is the stigma of assumed professional failure, and it is the result of a pernicious illusion: that of the academic meritocracy. Those who enjoy the privilege of the tenure track, this illusion presumes, have earned their place by their merit. They have been vetted and found worthy. Non-tenure-tracks, by contrast, have not been vetted; they are undeserving. Their presence in the department, according to this logic, is illegitimate, inappropriate, transgressive. But there they are, bodily, walking the halls, teaching the classes. The outcome of such a paradox is that non-tenure-tracks necessarily constitute a spectral, supernatural presence. They must carry, as Church (1999:252) puts it, “an apparitional identity”. Lucy Snowe, a full-time, non-tenure-track lecturer, writes “my tenured and tenure-track colleagues . . . continue to pass me in the halls with their customary distant gaze, and to peruse book catalogs with passionate intensity as I retrieve my stuff from the mailroom” (Snowe 2004:ch 4). The narrative of academic meritocracy imagines this kind of devaluation to be legitimate. It is not seen as a problem of structural injustice in the academy or discrimination and prejudice among tenure-track faculty. It is seen as the result of the inadequacies of the non-tenure-tracks (Domosh 2000). It is *their* professional failure that is causing them to be held in limbo.

Lying behind the “distant gaze” that Snowe endures—justifying it—is the sense that it is *her* fault such a gaze had to be invented in the first place. It is up to her to publish, to network, to just *get a job*, so everyone might be spared the discomfort of her unreal presence.

Tightly bound up with this devaluation is the sense that non-tenure tracks must be properly deferential and grateful for their position. They should understand that the department and the university are doing them a favor, employing them until they can get their act together. They are therefore in the position of being expected to feel lucky when they feel deeply unlucky. They understand, far better than most tenure-track faculty, how decidedly arbitrary hiring decisions are, how entry into the tenure stream is far more a matter of good fortune than good work. They know their limbo is the result of not yet having matched perfectly an available tenure-track job. Yet they get continual messages that their limbo is self-imposed, the result of their own failings, and so they should feel lucky and grateful for their non-tenure-track position. When Church finally landed a tenure-track job at the institution where he had been non-tenure-track for five years, he:

kept getting congratulated in the oddest way. Colleagues would come up to me and say, “Hey it’s great you got the job. You’re finally real”. I learned quickly that if I asked them, “You mean I haven’t been real these past five years?” they would look chagrined. I wasn’t being grateful, and then lesson that all subalterns learn is that when those in power finally open the door, no matter how earned, no matter how deserved, one must always be grateful. (Church 1999:252).

The situation of non-tenure-tracks inspires in them very legitimate feelings of frustration, rage, and bitterness. They must instead carefully express gratitude and collegial good cheer. If they let any part of those other feelings surface, even as mildly as Church’s ironic remark, they are very quickly labeled ungrateful, not collegial, a troublemaker. This dynamic parallels the situation of women of color in Pulido’s critique of her own experience in a “white discipline” (Pulido 2002:47). She clearly pulls her punches throughout her article in order to avoid being dismissed as a problem, as out of line, as ungrateful to the discipline that has, it believes, given her so much. Of course this hair-trigger threshold for being so labeled is also familiar to feminists, whose pioneering critique of geography’s patriarchy elicited a similar kind of repression (Foord and Gregson 1986; Monk and Hanson 1982; McDowell and Massey 1984). This threshold is clearly a kind of disciplining, a latent but unmistakable ethos designed to discourage subordinate populations from openly questioning the pervasive power structures that oppress them. And it works extremely well.

Taken together, these various forms of oppression, both material and cultural, have the effect of wearing away at non-tenure-track faculty.

Those that hold fast to the goal of making a career out of academia must wade through a bizarre limbo where a constant low-level feeling of anxiety and self-doubt is punctuated at times by fear, anger, and humiliation. One reason we must turn our attention to institutional privilege, then, is that the current system is unfair and belittling to a whole class of people. They deserve better.

### *For the Discipline and the Academy*

Perhaps the most obvious danger to the discipline as a whole is that limbo is chasing good people away. But the two-tier system also has more subtle corrosive effects. Much work in the feminist, anti-racist, and sexuality literatures has revealed how privileged groups are unable to “see” the social privilege from which they benefit. White people, for example, commonly think of themselves as raceless and are unable to see racist oppression unless it is overt and unmistakable (Jackson 1998). This erasure is made possible when both whiteness and white privilege are naturalized and taken for granted (Kobyashi and Peake 1994; McGuinness 2000). As a result, an all-white discipline like geography will be very unlikely to critically examine race privilege in anything like the depth it deserves. Thus a “collective myopia” develops whereby whiteness and white privilege are absent from the research agenda (Bonnett 1997). Conversely, those who are oppressed by a particular structure tend to be in a much better position to perceive and critique its workings. Thus Pulido argues that greater inclusion of people of color will enable both a “more robust and dynamic dialogue on race” and a “new disciplinary culture” in geography (Pulido 2002). Going perhaps a step further, Domosh suggests that listening to women’s voices opens up a critique of their oppression that simply does not emerge when we listen to only men’s voices (Domosh 1991).

Currently the most striking “collective myopia” in geography is the problem of tenure-track status and its associated privilege and oppression. The voices the discipline respects and listens to are those who have tenure-track status. It silences or ignores the voices of non-tenure-track faculty. But it is precisely the non-tenure-track faculty who are in the best position to see and critically analyze the problem. It is they who must launch and sustain the critique. But they cannot. They have no job security even when they toe the line. The discipline (and the academy) is therefore structurally unlikely either to see or to attack the problem of institutional status. I want to highlight just one of the critical analyses that are made possible when the perspectives of non-tenure-tracks are brought into the conversation: it destabilizes the legitimacy of the hierarchy. The recent critiques of patriarchy, racism, and heteronormativity have succeeded largely in delegitimizing them as bases for allocating privilege in the academy. The task is certainly far from complete, but



few would say, for example, that the dominant position of white people in geography is due to their superior ability and work ethic as a race. In other words, few would say their dominance is *legitimate*. However, the hierarchical system of institutional privilege in the academy, much more so than other forms of domination and privilege, is still considered legitimate. In the rare instances where institutional status is thought about consciously, it is legitimized by the meritocracy narrative discussed above.

The lived experience of many non-tenure-tracks destabilizes this narrative profoundly. They are frequently on the job market and experience a wide range of searches. They see first hand how capricious and arbitrary the selection process is. They understand that “merit” is a malleable thing, and is determined differently by different departments, and even by different people within a single department. Because of the overproduction of PhDs in many areas of geography, most hires attract many qualified candidates, any of whom is entirely worthy of a tenure-track position. Departments make their selection from among these worthy candidates based on the department’s particular needs and values, which are wholly variable and unpredictable. They want someone who studies Eastern (not Central) Europe because the hire is tied to the international studies program; someone who can teach the introductory quantitative methods class, because no one in the department will; someone who has published a book, because books are the true measure of scholarship; or someone who has *not* published a book, because books are not refereed as rigorously as journal articles; someone whose advisor has never had a run-in with a key member of the search committee; someone who uses feminist methods, studies East African development, and can teach GIS.

Despite these arbitrary criteria, the process gets narrated—in the halls, at conferences, in search committee meetings—as a measure of worth. X got the job, and Y did not. X must be worthy, and Y must have some lack, some shortcoming that caused Y to fail. But Y knows that s/he didn’t get the job because s/he studies *West* African development, or was more skilled in qualitative methods than quantitative, etc. These failings have absolutely nothing to do with Y’s worth as a scholar or potential tenure-track faculty member, but they are precisely the failings that kept Y out of the tenure track. And that analysis leaves out even more arbitrary, but nevertheless important, factors like marital status and spousal accommodation. The line between those that deserve a tenure-track job and those that don’t, therefore, is very different from the line between those inside and outside the tenure track. Many capable academics have earned a tenure-track job but don’t have one. The difference in status and privilege between those in the tenure track and those outside it is therefore largely illegitimate. It is, at the very least, not nearly so legitimate as those on the inside believe. Even as the tenure

tracks engage in sophisticated analyses of other forms of privilege and oppression, they suppress or wish away a critique of the illegitimate institutional hierarchy that permeates every corner of their professional life. This kind of self-delusion produces intellectual and institutional rot. It legitimizes hierarchy, privilege, and oppression in the academy, allowing them to be naturalized because they go unchallenged. As with other forms of oppression, these systems primarily harm subordinate populations, but they also diminish academic society as a whole. They diminish the quality of intellectual and institutional discourse because they privilege voices with status. Intellectual insight and innovation arising from the bottom of the hierarchy is more likely to be ignored because it is assumed to be of lower value.

Also central to this discussion is a more material institutional problem that threatens the academy. In many parts of the world, universities are currently undergoing a process of neoliberalization, by which employment security, living wages, and good benefits are being sacrificed on the altar of “flexibility”. The growing number of non-tenure-track jobs, and the shrinking number of tenure-track ones (see Table 1 and Figure 1), is part of this larger political-economic shift (Shumar 1999). Current tenure-track faculty benefit in tangible ways from the two-tiered system. It is easier to get a replacement for their course buyouts, they rarely have to teach the large lower-division classes, low adjunct salaries free up money in the departmental budget, etc. So they have structural incentives to ignore the problem. Although geographers have produced eloquent and sophisticated analyses of the ongoing neoliberalization of the global political economy, very few if any have in their work taken seriously the neoliberalization of the academy (outside geography, though, see, among others Bok 2003; Nelson 1997; Shumar 1997; Washburn 2005). Even when tenure-tracks acknowledge the issue, they have so far been able to little beyond blaming the victim. The problem is pervasively narrated as “the adjunct problem”: as more and more classes are being taught by non-tenure-track faculty, the quality of education is assumed to suffer. This narrative depends also on the meritocracy assumption. The teaching and scholarship of non-tenure-tracks is assumed to be inferior to that of tenure-track faculty.

This assumption is certainly unfounded, and it may even be the opposite of the truth. And it depends on the silencing of non-tenure-track voices. Listening to their perspective can help re-narrate the problem as a political-economic one. Organizers of a union for non-tenure-track faculty at the University of Michigan found the real problem was a lack of academic freedom and employment security.

During our organizing efforts, it was not uncommon for members to tell us that they did not push students as hard as they would like—either with challenging ideas or workload—when they knew that student

evaluation numbers were going to be the primary criterion used to determine whether their contracts would be renewed (Kirkpatrick and Robinson 2005).

High student evaluations are mostly a measure of student satisfaction with one's teaching. Such satisfaction can reflect good teaching, but it can just as well mean the instructor was unwilling to challenge students and instead provided a "feel-good" experience. Lack of security means non-tenure-track faculty cannot afford the risk of pushing students too hard. From this perspective, the victim is no longer to blame. Any deficiency in their teaching, if it exists, is not the result of their inherent failings; it is the result of their insecure professional status. Therefore, the union movement argues persuasively, "reclaiming the ivory tower" requires a class movement to challenge the flexibilization of academic labor (Berry 2005).

A sophisticated and trenchant critique of the "neoliberalization" of academic labor must almost certainly arise and be nurtured outside the tenure track. Tenure-track faculty are too oblivious and reap too many short-term benefits to be the primary locus of resistance. And the stakes are high: while it is possible tenure could be abolished in one fell swoop, it is far more likely it will be abolished by attrition. As we continue to hire more faculty off the tenure track, and fewer on it, what are we doing other than progressively eliminating the tenure track altogether? It is a classic neoliberal strategy: hiring new workers at significantly more meager terms than current workers enjoy. In this scenario no one currently on the tenure track would lose their tenure, but they would leave behind an academy staffed entirely by the non-tenure tracks they so assiduously ignored. If we want to resist a neoliberalized university without job security, academic freedom, living wages, or benefits, we must all begin to pay far more attention to the plight of faculty outside the tenure track. More than that, we must consciously carve, out of a system that actively prevents it, a way for them to narrate their experience and mobilize their resistance. Adjunct unions are one promising model, but we must creatively imagine other strategies as well.

## **Autobiography**

Because structures of privilege serve to silence the voices of marginalized populations, recent work in feminist, anti-racist, and queer theory has stressed the importance of biography and autobiography as a means of critique and resistance (Moss 2001). These methods are particularly good at apprehending and narrating the complex lives and everyday experiences of marginalized and oppressed people (Domosh 2000). Because they have a particular perspective on oppression and because that perspective tends to be unheard and devalued, these methods are one important way we can expose, critique, and resist oppression (Chouinard

and Grant 1995; Kobayashi 1994). In what follows, I adopt autobiography to further those same goals with respect to institutional status. In narrating my experience outside the tenure track, my goal is to help begin the project of critically examining institutional status and marginalization in academic geography.

In addition, it is critical for me to tell my story *now* because I recently crossed over into the tenure track, and, in fact, into tenure. I have entered the privileged class of academic laborers, and I have almost certainly begun to progressively forget what it was like on the outside. Church relates a similar amnesia he developed when he entered the tenure track, amnesia that encouraged him to adopt the meritocratic delusion that his status was a result of his inherent quality as a scholar.

Becoming “real” had begun to shift my daily perceptions and strategies of interactions so that now I hardly notice the other ghosts who haunt the institution. I am beginning to forget myself and believe that finally I have arrived because I deserved to, and I deserve this more than others (Church 1999:255).

Of course this amnesia debilitates the potential of autobiography I describe above. Any critique of the current system can only be made safely from inside the tenure track, and only with true security by someone who has tenure. Because of my unusual history, I received tenure soon after I entered the tenure track. So I am in the rare position of being secure enough to make a frank critique, but not so far removed from the outside that I have succumbed entirely to Church’s “amnesia”.

As is common with the autobiographical method, mine is not presented as representative of every non-tenure-track’s experience. Nevertheless, it is very much the story of a long-term non-tenure-track faculty member. As such it should be read as one among what I hope is a growing number of similar autobiographies. As a whole, these autobiographies can begin to articulate a complex portrait of the non-tenure-track experience. I think it is fair to say mine is the story of a particularly lucky non-tenure track. In terms of salary, security, and departmental climate, my situation was relatively good. But my “best case scenario” offers an important lesson: even in the best case, there are significant pathologies embedded in the system of institutional hierarchy and privilege, and these pathologies grind down the spirit, health, and energy of non-tenure-track faculty. So my story should absolutely not be read as an attack on the particular department and institution I worked in. On the contrary, it probably is relatively commendable in how it deals with non-tenure tracks. Nevertheless, even if it is better than others, it is very much embedded in a larger system that generates stigma, marginalization, and oppression. Many of the problems I encountered were borne of stumbling: tenure-track faculty were embedded in a system of oppression they didn’t grasp and didn’t know how to resist.

They were very much like the oblivious straight people that appear in studies of heteronormativity, asking a gay man about his wife. This paper's goal, and the solution to the problem more generally, is *not* to condemn the people who staff the structures of privilege. It is to expose and condemn the structures themselves. It is to help people become more aware of how they are complicit, and how they can resist.

### *A Spectral Presence*

I came to my current institution as a “trailing spouse”. When my wife and I got our PhDs she had many interviews and offers, so as part of her offer here I was offered three courses in the geography department for a relatively generous salary of around US\$20,000. I settled into my office, which doubled as the emeriti office and tripled as the coffee room. I assumed the weighty title of “Acting Assistant Professor, Temporary”. Initiating a pattern that would continue, the department made an effort to do the right thing but did it clumsily. In the first quarter I was invited to give a talk on my work, a gesture they certainly didn't have to make. However, at the talk a faculty member introduced me by saying, “He comes to us through his wife . . . and though his own abilities of course”. Of course my own abilities had been incidental to the arrangement. I really *had* come to them through my wife. In one stroke she had established my position in the hierarchy of status and loosed the powerful narrative of meritocracy—that some people haven't earned their place. I don't think she was intentionally trying to put me in my place; I think she bumbled because for her, as a very high-ranking, tenured faculty member, her sense of me was largely defined by my institutional status. In her attempt to introduce me she couldn't avoid narrating what was for her my primary identity: trailing spouse.

I had been efficiently marked as a less-than-full member of the faculty, as a temporary, interloping, and spectral presence. During my time in the department, the rest of the faculty reiterated this status, again mostly through clumsy or unaware acts. To varying degrees, I experienced the “distant gazes” that Snowe relates. Many on the faculty were clearly not sure how much interpersonal investment to make in me, since they assumed I would not be around forever. For example, one faculty member, whom I assumed I would connect with since we had very close mutual friends, didn't approach me until near the end of my first year in the department. She was not interested in meeting me, however, but in discovering if I would be available to teach the large introductory lecture course, a course she was scheduled to teach but did not want to.

From my perspective, it seemed the way to address this spectrality was to work hard, to do everything in my power to earn a tenure-track position. But I learned quickly not to engage in that project openly. A position would be granted by the institution if and when it was ready.

I was expected not to actively seek a position, to wait patiently and inconspicuously for a position that may or may not materialize. Any intimation on my part that I could *do* something (eg network with faculty and administrators, publish, teach well) to help that position materialize was seen as hubris, as overstepping my station (Domosh 2000). After my first year, the administration offered me a three-year lecturer position in the department, with the yearly salary of US\$45,000 paid by the administration, not the department. The geography department agreed readily, since they benefited tangibly: I would teach essentially five free courses, and my teaching evaluations had been quite favorable in the first year. When it became clear we would stay for at least three more years, my wife and I bought a house. That decision was met with surprise by one colleague; his reaction revealed clearly that he didn't expect me to be around long enough to make such an investment worthwhile. Another faculty member, when talking to me of the other faculty in the department, referred to them as "my colleagues", hesitated, and then renamed them "our colleagues". To be sure, his recognition and restatement is more consideration than most non-tenure-tracks get, but the initial slip shows that even the most aware and sympathetic of tenure tracks find it nearly impossible to think of a non-tenure-track faculty member as a full-fledged colleague.

Another harm runs along the same lines. I spent one year in the office of a faculty member who was on sabbatical and who generously offered to let me use her office while she was away. Not long after I had moved in, a member of the office staff came by and told me she had been instructed to place locked cables on all the filing cabinets in the office, which contained the resident faculty member's files. She didn't know why exactly, and the faculty member never contacted me to explain. In retrospect, I would guess that there were research data in the cabinets, and there was a nit-picky human-subjects requirement that the files be locked. But at the time I was at a loss to understand why the faculty member would go to such great and visible lengths to ensure I could not rifle through her files. The cables served as a daily reminder that these were not my filing cabinets, this was not my office, and I was not, in any sense, a full member of the faculty.

My spectrality reached its zenith at a faculty meeting. I had applied for a job in another department at the university, one closely allied with geography. I was naturally quite keen on the possibility, since it would mean a tenure-track job without changing universities or cities. I had not yet heard anything about interview invitations. One member of the search committee for the position was a geography faculty member, and he came to the meeting to encourage the department to support one candidate they were interviewing: a geographer I had gone to graduate school with and who is my good friend. As a member of the search committee, the faculty member knew I had applied, and he could have guessed I was

very interested in the job. He also knew I had not been informed of any invitations to interview. But it did not occur to him to warn me before the meeting what was going to happen. So I had to glean from the discussion that I had not been invited for an interview. Here again it was a blunder rather than malicious: my presence, in both the applicant pool and the faculty meeting, did not register sufficiently with the faculty member that he would think to inform me beforehand of the decision. Less innocuous was the subsequent comment by another faculty member. He had chaired the candidate's committee at his previous university, and he chimed in to say that the candidate was far and away the best graduate student he had ever worked with. Unfortunately, this faculty member had also served on my committee, a fact most of the faculty knew. It was a neat trick: it made me feel both utterly invisible and publicly humiliated. I sat there entirely flushed, hoping no one caught on but unable to imagine how they could miss it (though they probably did).

At the end of my time in limbo I accepted a tenure-track offer from the planning department at the university. My not-quite-full membership on the geography faculty came to a telling end the summer before I started in planning. The geography chair emailed me to say that the quarter had ended, I was no longer actively teaching, and so I needed to vacate my office. He needed to move someone else into it. I replied that my office in planning was not yet available, and I would appreciate a little more time until it was. He was unwilling to grant me a grace period, and insisted on the formal fact that I was no longer on the faculty because I was no longer teaching. I was surprised by his formality, but the event underlined the fact that I was never a full-fledged colleague, peer, or equal. For tenure tracks, faculty membership is not based on whether or not they are currently teaching a course. For me, I had to be actively teaching to earn the right, term-to-term and even day-to-day, to be present, to occupy space (Church 1999:254). The minute my teaching duties ended, my membership evaporated, as did my claim to space. My labor for the department over the past four years had earned me none of the professional consideration that would be granted to tenure-track faculty.

### *Pedagogy*

In many ways, the classroom is a refuge for non-tenure-tracks. There, you can "perform" for your students full membership on the faculty; they have little idea of the two-tier structure and accept you readily as a full faculty member (Butler 1997; Elder 1999; Valentine 1997). When you cross the threshold into the halls, however, into the gaze of the "real" faculty, your ability to pass in this way quickly evaporates. During my three-year contract, I taught the 600-student, 10-TA introductory lecture course three times a year, and a smaller, 45-student cultural geography

seminar twice a year. My colleagues were entirely uninterested in my pedagogy. On the one hand, this lack of interest was good. It gave me the freedom to pursue innovative and even experimental pedagogies, such as radically student-centered seminars with 45 undergraduates. My wife is in the College of Education, and I have several close relationships with other education faculty, so I had a rich store of pedagogical ideas and practices to draw from. Mostly because I listened to their wisdom, I won the departmental teaching award, received continuously high teaching evaluation scores, and eventually was nominated for the campus-wide teaching award.

On the other hand, the department's lack of interest in my teaching was stagnating. I was unable to contribute ideas, or learn from the ideas of others, because few were interested in talking to me about pedagogy. During my time there, the department received a big grant that allowed the faculty to set time aside to talk about pedagogy. But because I was not seen as part of the future of the department's teaching, the chair explicitly told me, in an extremely nice way, I was not invited to the discussions. By that time I had built up enough of a teaching record that the faculty could have noticed my success and sought out my contribution, but the sense that I was a temporary presence precluded such engagement. Near the end of my time there, one faculty member did seek me out. She said she had been told by quite a few students that I was doing great things in my seminar, and so she wanted to find out more. I had detailed handouts about the course and the assignments, so I gave them to her as a way to start the conversation. I heard nothing back from her until one day she stopped in to say she had looked at the handouts. Her only comment was that what I had called the "gay rights" debate is better termed the "gay and lesbian rights" debate. While she may well have had a point, I had hoped for a bit more engagement on pedagogy.

In my lecture course I developed a syllabus that examined the various thematic fields (economic, political, cultural, etc) through the lens of globalization. I wasn't being that innovative; the Knox and Marston textbook that so many people use makes globalization the central topic. But while I was teaching that syllabus, term after term, another faculty member developed another lower-division course that essentially covered the same themes. I was never quite sure why he wanted to produce a new lower-division course that so closely mirrored mine, or why, if he did, he didn't want to see the materials I had developed or even just chat about my experiences. Now, one could fairly suggest that I might have sought out other faculty members more actively to talk about pedagogy. But as I suggest above, non-tenure-tracks have to be very careful about being proactive in any way. Wanting to engage other faculty members seriously about pedagogical issues, especially when you are excited about radical new ideas you have had success with, is very easily read as an arrogant and unwelcome attempt to tell them how to do their job



(Church 1999:254). It's safer to be passive, let them come to you, and be very self-effacing when they do.

### *Disciplining*

James Collins (1999) talks generally about the need in a post-Fordist economy to “discipline labor”, especially in an era where more and more people are highly educated and are expecting more out of their career. The same applies to the academy and its rising population of non-tenure-track faculty. The PhD points toward a very particular career path, and implicitly promises that a place in the tenure track will be available (Church 1999:251). Yet for so many there is no place, since fewer and fewer tenure-track jobs are available in geography to absorb the PhDs we produce. So, people who are expecting a tenure-track position are forced into non-tenure-track jobs. The system needs to discipline their expectations, to get them to accept their subordinate position without asking critical questions. But such disciplining is perverse and highly unsustainable. It is an attempt to take people who have been thoroughly trained to think independently and retrain them to accept their utterly dependent and powerless position.

Disciplining can range from subtle and unconscious to overt and pitiless. An example of the former involved my teaching. While the department was uninterested in my pedagogy, they *were* selectively interested in what I was doing in the classroom. During my first quarter or two teaching the introductory lecture, I was giving grades a cut lower than what was normal in the department. Like anyone, I guess, I was grading the way we had graded at my previous university. But the grades were lower than students here expected. This got the undergraduate advisor (also a faculty member) interested, because she was getting complaining students in her office. She didn't talk with me, but instead went to the chair and to the department's academic advisor to discuss the problem. I stumbled onto their meeting because the water cooler is next to the chair's office. As I filled up my water bottle, the chair saw me and called me into the ongoing meeting, where they were discussing my aberrant grading. They asked me to justify my grading practices. To say the least, I was a bit uneasy. I tried to explain how I had graded and why, while at the same time trying not to sound defiant. Later the chair instructed me, again in a very nice way, to meet with the center for instructional development to discuss grading practices. In the end, the problem was simply one of two institutions having slightly different grading expectations: everyone was happy when the chair set an average for me and I simply inflated my averages to meet it. But the narrative of adjunct incompetence so colors the environment that the department felt it was necessary I go through some remedial instruction in how to grade. In addition, had I been a tenure-track faculty member, the undergraduate

advisor almost surely would have talked with me first, rather than calling a high-level meeting to discuss the “problem”.

Many other kinds of disciplining occur beyond teaching. In one case, two other faculty members and I were talking with graduate students about their possible future academic employment. During the course of the conversation, one of the other faculty members and I implied that in geography there is an elite tier of schools and a second, less-elite tier. This infuriated the third faculty member. She felt we should not reproduce those kinds of distinctions. After the meeting, she came to my office (with the locked file cabinets), closed the door, and vigorously chastised me for my comments. In making her case, she said explicitly that someone like me, who hadn't landed a tenure-track job yet, had no business distinguishing between elite and non-elite institutions. She explicitly and unsympathetically devalued me professionally in order to achieve her end. Whatever the virtue of her argument, the way she went about it left me stunned and, as she hoped, compliant. I suspect I would have been sympathetic had she made her case without demeaning me, but as it was her point was mostly lost in my dismay at her approach.

A similar but still harsher disciplining accompanied interactions with administrators around my various appointments. In offering me the three-year position in geography, the vice-provost saw it as a great beneficence on his part, as a generous gift to me. While I recognize that the appointment was much better than most non-tenure-tracks get, for someone enduring limbo a three-year position feels mostly like a long extension of the sentence. The vice-provost felt he had saved me from oblivion; I felt like I had been kept from leaving it. This feeling was magnified by the fact that the vice-provost insisted on language in the offer letter that prohibited me from going on the job market for the length of the contract. This made limbo feel more like indentured servitude. We asked to have the language removed, but the vice-provost refused. Luckily, we were able to draw on personal contacts my wife had made with powerful administrators to have the language removed from the letter, and everyone agreed not to inform the vice-provost. It was a reckless way to proceed, but the job market is the only hope for someone in limbo; it's just not something you can agree to forego.

In those negotiations I was clearly seen as a beggar, not a chooser, and so was expected to accept an offer in any form. My desire to alter the language was met with surprise. From their perspective a drowning person does not negotiate the shape of the life preserver. This perspective produced by far the ugliest event of my non-tenure-track experience. Near the end of my limbo, the vice-provost created a tenure-track line at the university and offered it to the planning department. He made a point to tell me clearly that his motive was not to retain my wife; it was to retain me because everyone had been impressed with my achievements.

The planning department voted unanimously to accept the line and hire me. I received an offer letter, and it seemed we were finally out of the woods. I had finally broken free of limbo. Between learning of the line and actually getting the offer there had been quite some time to adjust to the new reality, to feel like we had finally made it. When I got the offer letter, I did what everyone else I know has done, what I was trained in graduate school to do, I negotiated the terms of the contract. I asked for more money. I asked for a laptop. I did this professionally and respectfully. I came up with a salary figure by identifying other faculty at the university in various units whose accomplishments were similar to mine. I argued my compensation should be comparable to those with comparable achievements. My expectation was that they would either come up a bit or remain firm.

Instead the vice-provost wrote me an e-mail message saying, “We regret you found our offer of employment inadequate and we withdraw our offer”. I was in a panic. I tried to reach the vice-provost, who was “away from campus for the day”. After several tries, I finally reached the department chair, but she wasn’t in a position to resolve the situation, since the order to pull the offer had come from the vice-provost. At last I talked to the vice-provost late the next day (I think I actually managed to teach a class in the meantime). He laid out the process. I no longer had an offer of employment from the university. I was to meet with the vice-provost and the dean, and after those meetings they would perhaps discuss the matter further. There is no way to sugarcoat their perspective: I had been given a generous gift and I had avariciously asked for more. It might be over the top here to invoke *Oliver Twist*, but this experience was about as over the top as it gets. To them, my negotiating was “spitting in the face of the university”, as the vice-provost put it. My negotiating was so insulting that simply countering with the original offer was insufficient. I had to be disciplined in a thoroughgoing way. They revoked the offer. They returned me to limbo and left me to swim in my panic. On top of that primary punishment, the meetings with the vice-provost and dean were explicitly a rite of penance. In my meeting with the dean, he actually began by talking for a few minutes about Catholic theology, penance, and the idea of self-flagellation. Having spent years in limbo I was on familiar ground. I was to appear before them and clearly narrate how wrong I was, how sorry I was. And I did. I swallowed my outrage and performed the role of penitent, undeserving, and grateful supplicant. It required most of the performative skills I had developed over the years. They said they would talk. I went away to the AAG conference in New Orleans. While I was there, I got an e-mail reinstating the original offer. It came more than a week after they had pulled the offer. I had left limbo, then been returned there for 10 days. It was the most excruciating and mean-spirited disciplining I could ever have imagined. It turned me and my family upside down. I would like

to say it was a trial that strengthened me, but I think what it did was just empty me, evacuate any faith or hope or trust I had in the academy. While I may be in the process of restoring some of that, I feel like it will be a very long journey, if I ever get there at all.

## Conclusion

I have claimed that the system of institutional status and privilege in the academy is largely illegitimate. I realize this claim is subject to debate. But that is precisely the debate I want this paper to initiate. Currently in academia that legitimacy is taken for granted. Geography has paid very little attention to the question of institutional status. What little debate exists does not include non-tenure tracks in any kind of meaningful way. But the perspective of non-tenure tracks puts that legitimacy into critical question. It suggests provocatively that we should consider tenure-track status and rank equally as arbitrary as race, gender, or sexuality as a basis for assigning privilege. Again, I do not wish to *equate* the discrimination associated with institutional status with that flowing from racism or patriarchy or heteronormativity. Such a clear parsing and measuring misses the deep ways these social markers are unavoidably bound up together in each particular lived experience (Elder 1999). Rather I mean we should subject institutional privilege to the same destabilizing critical scrutiny that has begun to undermine patriarchy, racism and heteronormativity in the academy.

Because non-tenure-tracks must be present and primary in any such debate, it will be difficult to initiate. Perhaps the best model for how to overcome those impediments are the experiences of the pioneering critical geographers, especially feminists, lesbians, and gay men. Their “coming out” onto the (increasingly) center stage of academic geography, while incredibly difficult, has renewed the discipline’s intellectual energy (McNee 1984; Elder et al 2004). On the bright side, non-tenure-tracks have the advantage of a clear path blazed by these pioneers. Less hopefully, the pioneers faced informal oppression and discrimination, some of which was at least prohibited (if anemically and unevenly) by civil rights law. Non-tenure-tracks face *formal* exclusion and discrimination: the academy has explicit rules that exclude and marginalize them as a group, rules the academy cannot legally make to exclude racial or gender groups. Moreover, non-tenure-tracks cannot draw on the same social awareness the social movements in the 1960s and 1970s inspired with respect to gender and race. There is currently no sense in the larger society of non-tenure tracks as victims of institutional privilege.

As I have tried to argue, what is at stake is more than the well being of non-tenure-tracks, crucial though that is. Also at stake is the intellectual and institutional health of geography as a discipline and the relatively

humane political economy of the contemporary academy. If we continue to fail to critically analyze institutional status, we erode the intellectual and political foundation of the academic enterprise. While this paper has focused on non-tenure-track faculty, much of the argument can also be applied to the question of graduate students. Their contribution to both the intellectual and pedagogical product of the academy is massive. Their status and marginalization is an equally significant issue. As I indicated, unions are one promising and unfolding strategy of resistance, for both non-tenure-tracks and graduate students. However, this strategy primarily addresses the political-economic, redistributive elements of the system. Those are critical, but equally important are problems of recognition and respect: the devaluation of non-tenure-track faculty as less-than-full members of the academic community (Fraser 1995). Some solutions to these problems can be found in past struggles of others groups; other solutions will have to be forged anew in the developing debate about institutional status. But at this point talk of solutions is somewhat premature. We are currently at the point of just getting the issue on the agenda so we might begin to create a safe forum where a vibrant debate can occur. I hope this paper can be one initial impetus for taking, even if tentatively, those critical first steps.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Church (1999:252).

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