Kahn, Seth, William B. Lalicker, and Amy Lynch-Biniek. *Contingency, Exploitation, and Solidarity: Labor and Action in English Composition*. University Press of Colorado, 2017. 309 pages. ISBN: 9781607327653.

Reviewed by Erin Lehman

Contingency touches every faculty member and therefore every student in higher education today. It's often draped in varied terms, such as "lecturer, adjunct, temporary faculty, contingent faculty, and visiting professor" (7). One result of this inconsistency in naming is that few students, parents, and K-12 teachers realize that contingency is an ever-present, unspoken backbone of American higher education.

Over seventy-five percent of all faculty in American colleges and universities work in a contingent or non-tenure-track position, according to a widely-cited 2012 survey (Coalition on the Academic Workforce). Given the widespread reliance on non-tenure-track faculty, professional bodies such as CCCC and MLA publish and update statements outlining "reasonable workloads and protections against unnecessary changes" for those off the tenure-track (Conference on College Composition and Communication).

The "CCCC Statement of Working Conditions for Non-Tenure-Track Writing Faculty" recommends transparent hiring practices, appropriate space to meet with students (without violating FERPA or Title IX standards), access to health insurance, and a living wage—outlining what equitable treatment of non-tenure-track faculty *should* look like. Similarly, the MLA currently recommends an idealistic minimum compensation of $10,900 per 3-credit-hour course (Modern Language Association). Despite such recommendations, the reality for contingent faculty is much different. In the 2012 survey mentioned earlier, the average pay for a 3-credit-hour course was $2,700 (Coalition on the Academic Workforce). The voices in *Contingency, Exploitation, and Solidarity: Labor and Action in English Composition* take on the realities and possibilities of contingent faculty by outlining actions and describing attempts to challenge labor inequity in the composition field.

This collection captures the complex relationships and power structures that contingent teaching creates. Like many young women working in higher education, my first paid teaching position was working as an adjunct faculty member in the writing department of a local university. Later, I was hired by a community college for a full-time faculty position (there is no tenure at the institution where I currently teach). Then, I was promoted into the program chair role, where I hired and fired full-time and adjunct faculty in order to staff the English schedule of course offerings.

Now, a decade into my career, I am considered a non-tenure-track, full-time faculty member. Though I hold the titles of department chair and associate professor (after applying for and earning rank reclassification), I am issued a nine month contract each August. Throughout my career, and especially working at a community college, I have been involved in contingent labor first-hand. At times, the lack of equity between full-time and part-time teaching roles has made me uncomfortable. Other times, I am keenly aware that I have profited from the under-paid labor of my writing instructor colleagues. In many ways, we (students, faculty, administration, and community stakeholders) all do.

I suspect that many people working in higher education composition departments (myself included) both recognize the lack of equity on campus and realize they should do something about it. *Contingency, Exploitation, and Solidarity* intends to show the unsure reader a broader picture of labor in the composition field so that she might begin organizing on her campus. The collection of eighteen chapters is written by non-tenure-track, tenure track, and writing center faculty—eleven of the chapters are co-written—and reaches into a variety of campus contexts. The collection tells the stories of contemporary contingent activism—some successful and others less so—to highlight such stories and provide specific examples for organizing.

The Introduction opens with a discussion of the roots of this project spurred by the rise of public interest in contingent labor in higher education. Editors Seth Kahn, William B. Lalicker, and Amy Lynch-Biniek aim to set this collection apart from the typical

responses to contingent labor, which are described in the Introduction as horror, anger, and empty promises. Instead, Kahn writes that the book is "more about taking concrete steps to fight both exploitation of contingent faculty and the denigration of composition studies" (7). The effect of this matter-of-fact approach is that the collection comes across as professional, purposeful, and action-oriented.

The book was first published online and is available as a free PDF (the entire text and/or individual chapters may be downloaded) from https://wac.colostate.edu/books/perspectives/contingency. The free access to the entire text makes it clear that the editors and authors are committed to making the book a democratic project. The paperback is also available through online retailers for $36.95.

The book can be read cover to cover or used as a guide by following reading threads. The editors outline five threads in the Introduction:

1. Self-advocacy
2. Organizing within and across Ranks
3. Professionalizing and Developing in Complex Contexts
4. Local Changes to Workload, Pay, and Material Conditions
5. Protecting Gains, Telling Cautionary Tales

Editors Kahn, Lalicker, and Lynch-Biniek justify their use of reading threads rather than sections: "Because we expect many readers to be downloading individual chapters . . . we opted out of *sections* that inevitably tried and failed to categorize these multifaceted arguments, and decided instead to articulate *threads* that we believe connect arguments across chapters" (emphasis theirs, 10).

The reading threads allow for chapters to fall within multiple designated topics. Of the eighteen chapters in the book, fifteen are linked to two or more threads; none of the chapters is linked to all five threads. As the editors suggest, there is overlap among the identified threads. For example, three of the five threads (Self-advocacy; Organizing within and across Ranks; and Local Changes to Workload, Pay, and Material Conditions) emphasize practical

actions for organizing and enacting change. At the same time, the suggested threads shrug off traditional sections in favor of a more decentralized organization, allowing for multiple and conflicting themes and perspectives to emerge. This style of organization connects with the collection's larger intent to resist the current arrangement of the academy.

Thread 1: Self-advocacy includes chapters written largely by non-tenure track faculty about efforts to effect change. Grouping only four (4) chapters, this is by far the smallest reading thread. Even a book like *Contingency, Exploitation, and Solidarity* cannot avoid the reality that contingent and part-time faculty simply have less compensated time to research and write than tenured faculty. The only chapter to fall under Thread 1 alone is "Adjuncts Foster Change: Improving Adjunct Working Conditions by Forming an Associate Faculty Coalition (AFC)" by Tracy Donhardt and Sarah Layden.[1]

Donhardt and Layden's AFC first started with a request to include part-time writing faculty in the university's online faculty directory. Those unfamiliar with treatment of contingent faculty might be shocked to hear the administration's reasoning for declining the request: "there were 'too many of us' and so the task of maintaining the list from semester-to-semester for faculty who come and go would be too time intensive for any of the full-time staff members" (190). Donhardt and Layden offer to maintain the directory for part-time faculty and realize that the online system automatically generates a biography for all faculty at the institution. Adding a part-time faculty member's biography to the directory requires someone checking a box:

> Until our request, that box had simply remained unchecked for anyone with part-time status. And thus, the harsh reality of our plight was evident from the start: a faculty record was automatically created for us but intentionally shut off by the administration. We won the right to check that box. (190)

Donhardt and Layden capture how easily the administration renders part-time faculty invisible in the institution.

Donhardt and Layden go on to engage in a two-year process to gain visibility, gather their own data, and organize public events which bring local and national media coverage. Eventually, they make several important gains for part-time Liberal Arts faculty, including some funding for presentations, more office space, and small raises. Donhardt and Layden's chapter is both humbling and motivating; it left me wanting just a few more Thread 1 chapters authored by part-time faculty.

Thread 2: Organizing within and across Ranks includes eleven chapters and is the largest reading thread designated by the editors. The chapters in Thread 2 highlight the ways contingent faculty reach across the tenure line to change and improve existing policy. These chapters also capture the complexity of organizing, how powerful campus context can be, how loaded and political the process is—even how news travels from room to room on campus. In many ways, this reading thread gets to the heart of the book's topic; without this thread, the collection could not deliver on the book's title.

The chapter "Despair Is Not a Strategy," by Anna K. Nardo and Barbara Heifferon provides the activist reader ideas for how to remain persistent in the face of years of setbacks. Nardo and Heifferon recount double-digit instructor layoffs, high administration turnover (which leads to inconsistency and empty promises), and an ineffective attempt to unionize with a professional lobbyist. After a decade of poor morale stemming from budget-related instructor layoffs, the faculty group LSUnited leverages the open comment portion of a monthly board meeting to secure raises and job security. This chapter, along with several of the Thread 2 chapters, fulfills the activist reader's expectations for this collection because Nardo and Heifferon detail local organization attempts.

Among the eleven chapters included in Thread 2, "Building Our Own Bridges: A Case Study in Contingent Faculty Self-Advocacy" by Lacey Wootton and Glenn Moomau stands out. Wootton and Moomau describe how—with a little encouragement and a little

outrage—contingent faculty rewrite the description of their own role in the faculty manual. With subheadings like "Alliances" and "Realize that the Process is Fundamentally Political," this chapter explicitly advises the faculty-activist to accept the political nature of organizing: "Perhaps the most important lesson we can take from the decade of preparation and advocacy is the realization that change is a finely tuned political process" (210). Wootton and Moomau slyly remind the reader that a strong reputation can be leveraged as a political strategy. Many teachers reading this journal—presumably with positive reputations due to their classroom and campus efforts—might relate to Wootton and Moomau's insight and consider how their own reputations might be valuable, confidence-boosting assets for organizing.

Thread 3: Professionalizing and Developing in Complex Contexts captures the problematic nature of professional work and professional development for contingent faculty. If asked to do too much, professional opportunities walk the line of exploitation. If too few opportunities are presented, then the result may be exclusion and isolation for contingent faculty. In a recent CCC Symposium article about curriculum standardization, Chris Gallagher suggests that highlighting professional work might be a way to advocate for better working conditions: "Whenever possible, we should use assessment to make instructor working conditions, along with student learning conditions, visible and to agitate for improving those conditions" (497). Chapters in Thread 3 explore these professional work and professional development complications.

On one hand, Jacob Babb and Courtney Adams Wooten argue in "Traveling on the Assessment Loop: The Role of Contingent Labor in Curriculum Development" that contingent faculty should be included in professional work such as curriculum discussions. Some administrators recognize that contingent faculty are exploitable and, to shield them from additional work, administrators avoid engaging contingent faculty in professional opportunities. Babb and Wooten criticize this reasoning: "Such a stance strikes us as an infantilizing maneuver that deprives contingent faculty of the chance to engage in professional and curricular development" (170). Babb

and Wooten go on to describe their beneficial experiences as graduate teaching assistants engaging in portfolio review workshops. From these workshops, Babb and Wooten (both now WPAs themselves) were able to develop their own approaches to curriculum development; ultimately, the experience of being included in professional work despite their contingent role was valuable for the authors.

On the other hand, "Hitting the Wall: Identity and Engagement at a Two-Year College" by Desirée Holter, Amanda Martin, and Jeffrey Klausman traces issues with offering too many professional opportunities to contingent faculty. The work itself and resulting accolades can be misleading. Both Holter and Martin are accomplished composition faculty members; Holter assumed her performance and engagement in departmental assignments would protect her from structural and curricular changes adopted by her department, despite being an adjunct faculty member. Holter reflects upon her situation: "My aspirations for full-time employment, as well as my perceived job security and stability, have merely been a façade, inherent in the structure of the labor system at two-year colleges and elsewhere, which dangles incentives before adjuncts in order to keep them 'on the hook.'" (239). In some cases, contingent faculty are led to believe that developing and working within the department will better position them for a full-time role, which rarely materializes. Holter's story—one of two contingent faculty stories highlighted in "Hitting the Wall"—shows her growing disillusionment with the professional work and opportunities that she has taken on.

Thread 4: Local Changes to Workload, Pay, and Material Conditions highlights campus-level conditions and organization attempts. Thread 4 includes nine chapters and is one of the larger threads, but no chapters are listed singly as Thread 4 chapters. This thread functions well as a guide for faculty and administrators reading to learn strategies to bring to their own campuses.

One might expect this thread to dwell in the practical, and the thread does offer specific, actual examples. But the chapters in this thread also emphasize the theoretical grounding for equitable composition labor and the way such theory may be in service to

practice. For example, in "Head to Head with edX," Michael Murphy argues: "We have little chance of improving the material conditions of writing teachers unless we insist emphatically on the real, demonstrated complexity and urgency of their work" (73). Murphy suggests that composition instructors should know the history of the field to explain the value of the work they do in the classroom.

Again in "Contingency, Solidarity, and Community Building," Lalicker and Lynch-Biniek describe the process by which full-time, non-tenure-track faculty are converted to tenure-track faculty after five consecutive years of teaching. In order to validate and protect this clause, Lalicker and Lynch-Biniek share nine principles that assist in the contingent to tenure-track conversion process. Principle 9 is "Support contingent faculty for whom the tenure track means embracing composition as not just a teaching assignment but as a scholarly endeavor" (99). Similar to Murphy's reasoning, an academic approach to the composition discipline leads to improved outcomes for contingent faculty.

As the editors remark about the purpose of this entire collection, "departments that exploit contingent faculty the worst are almost always the ones that respect the intellectual value of composition the least" (7). The chapters in Thread 4 emphasize the value of seeing composition as a discipline and the problems that arise when campuses fail to do so.

Thread 5: Protecting Gains, Telling Cautionary Tales includes seven chapters that emphasize the effectiveness of storytelling. Arguably, storytelling seems to be an unnamed theme of the entire collection because each chapter is engaged in the work of storytelling. The act of taking care to tell these stories validates the identities, expertise, and actions of contingent faculty.

In "The Uncertain Future of Past Success: Memory, Narrative, and the Dynamics of Institutional Change," Rolf Norgaard emphasizes that documenting and discussing gains are important because institutional memory can be short; institutional memory can be distorted and distracted by retellings. "Competing narratives can arise . . . at moments of institutional crisis or doubt when commitments

and values can lend themselves to counter-narratives" (146). Norgaard explores how comfortable attitudes about gains for contingent faculty and a change in administration can expose the tenuousness of the current narrative.

As Norgaard analyzes the narrative of momentum (for contingent faculty) on campus, he seems to speak to the power and problems of contingent faculty and narrative: "It matters who tells the story. When just enough of them turn silent, and just enough new faculty enter the institution without being schooled themselves in this institutional narrative, the story can turn. Narrative requires, and is itself a product of agency" (147). It matters who speaks—and it's revealing who is given the opportunity to speak. After reading Norgaard's chapter, I thought about my own campus. What is the current narrative, who is writing it, and who is given speaking roles in it?

Contingency, Exploitation, and Solidarity invites readers to consider their own working conditions and the campus where they teach—and if not their own campus, then the college they attended, the university their daughter attends, or the institution their students plan to attend.

Like non-tenure-track positions, this collection of voices is varied and each chapter could be standalone. If the intended audience is contingent faculty, then it does make sense to emphasize multiple perspectives. As a reader, I found myself drawn to individual stories of contingency and using them as placeholders—either this is what my situation and campus is like, or perhaps mine is "better" or "worse." But I also sense that the intended audience is not contingent faculty because many of the chapters are written by faculty and administrators speaking from a position of authority about changes they've attempted or enacted.

I wish to conclude with a few critiques and ideas for future work on this topic:

- First, I would love to hear from students on the topic of contingency. After all, the institution's treatment of faculty often reflects its attitudes toward students. I suggest a

chapter that tackles the following question: How does contingent labor in the composition classroom affect first-year students?

- The organization of the entire collection, especially when read cover to cover, is unclear. Keeping in mind the intended audience of contingent faculty, I question whether the reading threads help readers locate and digest the content in a useful way. Assigning chapters to reading threads is an interesting idea, but in this case has resulted in broad categories that tend to obscure rather than specify placement.
- Finally, if there were to be future editions or other books on this topic, they could more carefully consider the implications of gender, race, sexuality and ability as they affect contingent teaching roles. Eileen Schell's Foreword seems to suggest a missing conversation on diversity when she questions: "How is contingency tied to the bodies of workers and students that are marked as non-normative and different" (xiv). *Contingency, Exploitation, and Solidarity* seems to overlook issues of gender, race, sexuality, and ability—issues that are critical when it comes to contingent faculty and the treatment of students.

Readers—both faculty and administrators—could use this collection to see a broader picture of the labor issues affecting contingent faculty nationally. Readers should download and read individual chapters that apply to their situation in order to analyze their working conditions and campus contexts—and possibly begin organizing locally. *Contingency, Exploitation, and Solidarity* does not seek to provide the final word: it's "less about envisioning a utopia toward which we strive—particularly because we don't all agree what that utopia looks like" (7). Instead, the collection will complicate the reader's understanding of the ways contingency affects the teaching of composition across institutions.

Note

[1]In full disclosure, I participated in Donhardt and Layden's AFC for about one year when I taught for IUPUI in 2009-2010. However, I did not participate in the writing of the chapter. I did not realize that anything had been written about the AFC until I began reading this collection. I'm including a discussion of Donhardt and Layden's chapter in this review because it's the collection's only chapter where the activism of part-time faculty is detailed by part-time faculty (though both authors have become full-time now), rather than across ranks.

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