The idea for this post originated on Twitter on January 19th, 2016 when @AdjunctNation asked: “So who went to the #MLA16? Give us your one word review of the conference from the #adjunct perspective.” I replied:

![Twitter post](https://twitter.com/AdjunctNation/status/692606472109617152)

Though most of my time at MLA 16 was spent in booth 522 at the book exhibit hall in the Austin Convention Center, sandwiched between Haymarket Books (“books for changing the world”) and University of Notre Dame Press, I did manage to sit in on one morning panel, session 458. Salaita, Academic Freedom, and the Question of Palestine: Where Do We Go From Here? and present in another, session 526. Contingent Faculty Members in Service, what I witnessed was indeed inclusive.

When I walked the halls of the JW Marriott, I saw professors flowing in and out of the various rooms, engaged with each other and ideas. This is my community, even though I’ve lived in the margins of academe since 2002 when I was assigned my very first Writing 121 course at Portland State University as a graduate assistant. Even though I am adjunct to the university and I follow contingency closely as an adjunct activist and in my new profession as an organizer with Faculty Forward Network, I am still a scholar of language and decadence in the Victorian fin de siècle and contingency will never strip me of that identity; rather, it’s enabled me to find new and creative uses of Oscar Wilde.

I never imagined sharing my personal correspondence with Merlin Holland in any venue, but I feel it is appropriate here:

Dear Tiffany,

Sorry not to have replied sooner. I was taking a two week break in Italy (the first for ten years and needed) and I have a pile of things to do this autumn and have hardly started on them – so this will necessarily be short.

Your question seems a fairly vast one and the brief answer is that Wilde scholarship will go where the majority of ‘scholars’ want to push it. At the moment that seems to be into the mire of obfuscation. Wilde is (or perhaps one should soon say ‘was’) a sexy subject. Everyone wanted to have a piece of the action. A book or an article with his name in the title, so long as it wasn’t total rubbish, would almost be bound to find a publisher. This
turn has led to a plethora of material which seems to have been written for a post-post-modern coterie audience and seems, to me at least, to serve very little purpose other than to keep the author in tenure.

The age of the audience that matters is 15 – 25 – though Oscar would have said that it was 18 – 80 – and anything which brings him alive to that audience and gets them to think about the depth behind the frivolity while still appreciating the lightness of its expression, is valuable. That is not an audience which most academics are writing for. It would discredit them to do so. Peer criticism is always in the background. I’ve been lucky enough not to have to be a part of that world and can express myself more or less how I will so long as it is credible. *Oscar Wilde and the Importance of Not Being Too Earnest* would be the book I should write, but I shan’t because *After Oscar* is the last one I shall do.

Anyway, good luck with your search and don’t follow the rest of the sheep down the path of pseudo-intellectual obfuscation.

Best wishes

Merlin

I first took Holland’s advice, and title, and created a Wilde inspired zine. And I have to say how liberating it is not to have to write to get on or stay in tenure. I quite like my hybrid status in academe, and it’s worth a helluva lot more than what most institutions pay their adjuncts on average, which is absurd and only serves the bosses.

Let’s come back to contingency: we all know that adjuncts are the faculty majority, but at professional conferences they are the minority for various reasons, financial means chief among them. For this reason, I would like to see more institutional faculty development funds trickle down to adjuncts so they can participate in conferences, which are essential venues for all faculty to convene and make original contributions to their discipline. I would also like to see the Modern Language Association generously fund the MLA Committee on Contingent Labor in the Profession because our voice and presence are critical to the Humanities.

Quality research should advance the profession, and I see in the *PMLA* program that several sessions were devoted to just that. Research and scholarship are essential to the academy, and it was impressive to see professors from all tiers, graduate students, and administrators coming together to discuss books, culture, technology, pedagogy, and issues. I realize that equal representation is problematic at this time given the state of higher education in our nation, but I tip my hat to MLA 16 for putting together a world-class conference.

A lot of thoughtful organization went into MLA 16, and I am still awestruck by one event in particular: Gun-Free UT’s March for Gun-Free Campuses on the Texas State Capitol where
professors and allies laid books on the steps of the capitol in a circle-of-safety to demonstrate the power of reason over violence. And leading the charge arm-in-arm with the organizers from Gun-Free UT were MLA’s leaders: Roland Greene, President, and Rosemary G. Feal, Executive Director of the Modern Language Association.

Another personal highlight was bumping into Michael and Jamie Bérubé. I told Michael that I hope the book he co-authored with Jennifer Ruth, *The Humanities, Higher Education, and Academic Freedom*, gains traction not, of course, to sell copy, but to disseminate the “Three Necessary Arguments.” I had the opportunity to witness Ruth’s leadership as Chair of the English Department at Portland State University while I adjuncted there, and I know first hand that she knows how to fix the intentionally broken system. This is why I question those in positions of power or authority who don’t argue for necessary change: “... the plight of the adjunct is the collective plight of the professoriate” (Bérubé and Ruth 82).

And one more memorable highlight was when Jesse Stommel came by my FFN booth in the book exhibit hall and sat behind the table with me for a good spell. Those who know Jesse will know that he fiercely defends and advances a compassionate pedagogy that includes direct advocacy for adjuncts. *Hybrid Pedagogy* was my first safe-place when coming out as an adjunct activist because they advocate for students and foster awareness of academic oppression. We need more Jesses and Sean Michael Morrises in key positions in our universities and digital communities.

Last but not least was Paula Krebs who live tweeted session 526. Contingent Faculty Members in Service and engaged in the discussion offering solutions to improve campus diversity and equity and suggested ways that adjuncts may actively participate on those service levels to drive awareness and change. Thank you, Paula.
It wasn’t all roses, though. I did experience one unforgettable lady who stopped by my booth and asked what Faculty Forward Network was about, and after I told her she candidly said: “This is not my problem; I am tenured faculty.” At the time, I just smiled and said, “Okay.” But I want her to know that contingency is everyone’s problem, and it is particularly problematic for the students when poor faculty working conditions impact the quality of education. I talk more about this here.

Let me set something straight, the federal government is the biggest financier of institutional profit and student debt in the form of Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). I will never forget what former U.S. Representative of Congress George Miller (D-CA) said at Adjunct Action’s town hall at Georgetown University: “There is plenty of money in higher education; it’s just not being directed at frontline teaching.” There has been a lot of talk about the true measure of a college president’s net value to the public or private institution, but I believe value should be based on how effectively presidents place mission over profit -- students before profit.

I sometimes wonder how veterans of academic labor activism remain patient with the silence and complicity endemic in the plight of the professoriate. When we stand together and fight together we will win back our profession together. Indeed, Joe Berry articulated this directly at the AAUP Contingent Faculty Conference at Northern Arizona University: “Faculty must move from plight to fight.” And because we are not all together on this issue, many adjuncts and students are doing the heavy lifting in the form of protests, teach-ins, occupies, campus rallies and marches, board of governors’ meeting disruptions, and civil disobedience.

Teaching has never been just a job, and it certainly is not a part-time job despite the seismic shift to contingent labor that’s deprofessionalized our domain. This is why I stand with faculty, students, and socially just community leaders who really are our liberators. Je suis contingency. Of course, my tenure is not on the line and even if I had that privilege, I believe I would have the courage of Jesse to “if necessary, fight to the death of my own tenure” to reclaim the ivory tower.

It’s not too ironic that I turn to bell hooks, who reminds us that “marginality [is] much more than a site of deprivation; in fact … it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance … It offers to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds” (Yearnings Race, Gender and Cultural Politics, 207). The new higher ed world I imagine is not just radical but just; it is closer to the romantic ideal that I thought existed back when I was an undergraduate, before I realized that the corporatization of higher education has fundamentally flawed the idea of the university. Thank you, MLA 16, for reaffirming the necessary and inclusive argument for the Humanities. The only real threat to the profession and Humanities is the people and politics in place that pander to the oppressors.