The Contingent Problem: A Counter-Narrative on Race and Class in the Field of Slavic Studies

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> If carpenters are needed it is well and good to train men as carpenters. But to train men as carpenters, and then set them to teaching is wasteful and criminal; and to train men as teachers and then refuse them living wages, unless they become carpenters, is rank nonsense.
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> –W. E. B. Dubois, "The Talented Tenth."[1]

In the summer of 2019, my family welcomed an unexpected guest.[2] A cousin of mine needed a place to stay in our area for the summer after his housing had fallen through. A Pre-Med major at a Historically Black College (HBCU) in the South, he had gotten an internship at the medical school of the flagship state university where I completed my PhD in Russian history and taught as a "Visiting Lecturer"—the grandiloquent title for my position as a contingent instructor on the margins of the academy. Stepping into my role as Senior Male Relative, I asked my cousin what he planned to do once he graduated. "Become a doctor and make a lot of money," he replied with frank sincerity. When my cousin's parents came to drive him home once his internship ended, I found myself describing to them in embarrassment how over a decade of education at America's elite institutions had endowed me with no health insurance and measly pay competitive with the lowest wages in America. "Where

1. W. E. Burghardt Dubois, "The Talented Tenth," in Booker T. Washington, *The Negro Problem: A Series of Articles by Representative American Negroes of Today* (Miami, 1969 [NYC, 1903]), 67–68.

2. In this essay, I draw on the Critical Race Theory (CRT) method of counter-story-telling, or counter-narrative, to use my own experience as a means of widening our definition of what it means to be a scholar in the field of Slavic studies. In one of the founding texts of this method, Richard Delgado explores how claims of objectivity in scholarly and legal writing conceal institutional power, arguing instead for a broader use of subjective narratives as a "powerful means for destroying mindset—the bundle of presuppositions, received wisdoms, and shared understandings against a background of which legal and political discourse take place," 2413. I likewise hope this essay will call into question the presuppositions embedded in the stories those with institutional power tell. These presuppositions include the meritocratic myth, which conceals the economic, cultural, and social capital central to success in the field; tokenism, which portrays the presence of a handful of underrepresented scholars as substantive change; and the juxtaposition of race and class as separate categories, which results in the treatment of adjunctification and diversity as segregated issues. Richard Delgado, "Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative," *Michigan Law Review* 87, no. 8 (August 1989): 2411–41.

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is all our tuition money going," his mother asked in sympathetic confusion, "if it isn't to the professors?"

My cousin's determination to get rich through education, while flying in the face of the lofty vision of W. E. B. Dubois that the Black community not "mistake the means of living for the object of life," reflects the deep imprint that the experience of poverty made on my family back through the generations.[3] It also echoes a belief central to my family's collective wisdom, which polling shows a large portion of Black parents share, that higher education has value because it offers an exit from the intergenerational poverty that has afflicted the Black population since slavery.[4] In light of this perception among Black people of education as a means of socioeconomic mobility, any discussion of race and bias in our profession must address the economic exploitation immiserating people of all races across academia. Without such a reckoning, especially in the context of a pandemic that has impoverished Black people while cratering the academic job market, inclusivity initiatives in Slavic studies will amount to little more than rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.[5]

My father's biography illustrates why so many in the Black community view education as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Born in the bowels of Jim Crow in Memphis, Tennessee, he moved as a small child with his family to Cleveland, Ohio, as part of the "Great Migration" of Black people in search of economic opportunity in the north.[6] Soon after his family settled into the city's public housing, his father had a stroke that left him paralyzed on one side of his body while his wife and six children had no income. As the eldest male at the ripe old age of six, my father had no choice but to begin work—shining shoes, delivering groceries, and hustling for "chump change" to support his family. In 1962, he became the first person in our family to attend college when Ohio University gave him a Track scholarship. He then entered the brand-new Psychology PhD program at Howard University, the so-called "Harvard for Blacks," subsequently embarking on a thirty-nine-year teaching career.

Solidly middle class in his adult life, my father still exhibits the ingrained behaviors of a child of poverty, picking pennies off the street and regaling me with stories of how his grandmother forced him to suck the marrow out

3. For this famous quote, see: Dubois, "The Talented Tenth," 34.

4. According to the Pew Research Center, 79% of Black parents in 2016 considered it "either extremely or very important that their children earn a college degree" compared to "about two-thirds (67%) of white parents." Similarly, 43% of Black parents viewed college as "a requirement to be a part of the middle class, compared with just 22% of whites." Renee Stepler, "Hispanic, Black Parents See College Degree as Key for Children's Success," *Pew Research Center*, at https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/02/24/hispanic-black-parents-see-college-degree-as-key-for-childrens-success/ (February 24, 2016), accessed June 14, 2021.

5. For an overview of the effects of COVID-19 on the Black community, see Mark Hugo Lopez, Lee Rainie, and Abby Budiman, "Financial and Health Impacts of COVID-19 Vary Widely By Race and Ethnicity," *Pew Research Center*, at https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/05/05/financial-and-health-impacts-of-covid-19-vary-widely-by-race-and-ethnicity/ (May 5, 2020), accessed June 14, 2021.

6. Economist Leah Boustan describes the hopes of Black people moving to the North in her study of the effects of the Great Migration, quoting Black memoirist Claude Brown as calling New York City "the promised land that Mammy had been singing about in the cotton fields." Leah Platt Boustan, *Competition in the Promised Land: Black Migrants in Northern Cities and Labor Markets* (Princeton, 2016), 6.

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of chicken bones. Meanwhile, the successes and failures of the rest of my relatives reflect the variegated experiences of the Black community. Many of them never made more than $30,000 and have battled drug addiction, spent time in prison, or dropped out of high school as early as age fourteen to deal with teenage pregnancies while relying on public assistance to get by. Others, like my visiting cousin, who is characteristic of broader trends among Black college graduates, have ascended into the middle class thanks to medical, government, military, and other professional careers made possible by educations at HBCUs.[7] As the conversation I had with my cousin's family indicated, however, I was a first in my family—a college graduate who at the age of thirty-one had never made more than $20,000 and avoided going to the doctor for lack of health insurance. What, my relatives puzzled faces seemed to ask, was the point of going to college if I ended up not much better off financially than those who never went in the first place?

In contrast to their bewilderment, however, I knew that I had it *good* compared to other adjuncts who, with heavy course loads and little familial support, taught at institutions with no stake in their professional futures. I also knew that no specific organization or group of people was to blame for my situation. A manifestation of *longue durée* economic processes eroding stable employment across the economy, adjunctification has diffuse causes and consequences, impoverishing acquaintances in my field from the Ivy League to the Big Ten Conference. In my graduate program, I had a supportive community of fellow Russianists and a mentor who went to bat for me at every turn, extending to me a contingent contract in a vote of support and confidence. Nevertheless, I had hoped that my academic career would inspire admiration from my younger relatives and extend to them a model of how hard work empowers Black people. Instead, I felt like a character out of a nineteenth-century Russian novel, an upstart *raznochinets* with too many books and not enough kopecks; or an impoverished member of the gentry funding his whimsical fascination with some foreign land by slowly parceling out his pathetic estate. I had begun to squander the modicum of intergenerational wealth my father had built, the lack of which in Black families, studies show, sustains racial economic inequality.[8] Even worse, I had done so to pursue a degree in Russian history—a subject so arcane and peripheral to my family's experience

7. Marc Parry, "Despite Obstacles, Black Colleges Are Pipelines to the Middle Class, Study Finds. Here's Its List of the Best," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, at https://www.chronicle.com/article/despite-obstacles-black-colleges-are-pipelines-to-the-middle-class-study-finds-heres-its-list-of-the-best/ (September 30, 2019), accessed June 14, 2021.

8. According to a recent survey of economic research by the Brookings Institution, economists studying racial economic inequality have found "that inheritances and other intergenerational transfers 'account for more of the racial wealth gap than any other demographic and socioeconomic indicators.'" This historical disparity derives from slavery as well as decades of discriminatory economic practices such as redlining. Sociologists have also found that Black people are far more likely than non-Hispanic whites to be "downwardly mobile," i.e. making less money than their parents did. Kriston McIntosh, Emily Moss, Ryan Nunn, and Shambaugh, "Examining the Black-White Wealth Gap," *Brookings Institution*, at https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/02/27/examining-the-black-white-wealth-gap/ (February 27, 2020, accessed June 14, 2021; and Fabian T. Pfeiffer and Alexandra Killewald, "Intergenerational Wealth Mobility and Racial Inequality," *Socius* 5 (March 2019): 1–2.

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that the same relatives who sighed in sympathy at my plight raised their eyebrows as they asked the question raised perennially at family get-togethers: "So why Russia?"

An overwhelmingly white field in which the mention of race is in my experience met with looks of confusion, Slavic studies seems to ask Black scholars the same question: why are you here? What is the value of diversifying a field focused on another region of the world by populating it with different kinds of Americans? Frequently invisible to and hence excluded from inclusion initiatives as a person with racially ambiguous features, I share some of this skepticism of the fad of diversity in academia and question its sincerity. But Slavicists of all stripes should want to add some color to our ranks not out of an appreciation of diversity for diversity's sake, but for the betterment and survival of the field. The diversification of our profession, by expanding the range of backgrounds and subjective positions brought to bear on the region, will carve out new avenues of inquiry. For example, the racial discrimination I and other Black scholars have experienced in Russia highlights the need for a deeper investigation of the xenophobia rampant in Russian society. Moreover, colleagues who want to promote a better knowledge of the Eurasian region among the American public have a direct interest in diversifying the field so that it speaks to the coming Black and Brown majority in American society. As countless reports have prophesized, the US will become a majority non-white nation by 2045.[9] This demographic revolution has already begun to change the composition of college student bodies and hence the pool from which to recruit intellectually curious undergraduates.[10] Students of mixed race will likewise form a significant presence in colleges, making it a necessity to stress the relevance of Slavic studies to American Pushkins like me.[11]

Yet in graduate school, I heard expressions of indignation from peers over violations, in the name of measures designed to promote such diversity, of the myth of meritocracy—a myth which many of them would find absurd in their own studies of structures of power but which becomes sacred when issues of inclusivity are broached. This belief in merit as fundamental to our field is belied by the cynical conversations about our profession taking place over coffee on university campuses or at bars during conferences. Indeed, only in graduate school did my faith in meritocracy, which my Black family instilled in me as the core value informing their veneration of education, shatter owing to what I call the "everybody knows" of our field, or the informal rules governing the profession that young scholars are left to their own devices to divine on the Tarot cards held by older scholars. K-12 education, as

9. William H. Frey, "The US Will Become 'Minority White' in 2045, Census Projects," *Brookings Institution*, at https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2018/03/14/the-us-will-become-minority-white-in-2045-census-projects/ (March 14, 2018), June 14, 2021.

10. Lorelle L. Espinosa, Jonathan M. Turk, Morgan Taylor, Hollie M. Chessman, "Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education: A Status Report," American Council on Education and The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation (Washington, D.C., 2019), xiii, available at https://1xfsu31b52d33idlp13twtos-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Race-and-Ethnicity-in-Higher-Education.pdf (accessed June 14, 2021).

11. Gretchen Livingston, "The Rise of Multiracial and Multiethnic Babies in the U.S.," *Pew Research Center*, at https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/06/06/the-rise-of-multiracial-and-multiethnic-babies-in-the-u-s/ (June 6, 2017), accessed June 14, 2021.

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a disciplinary institution, hammers into Black children that their failures in the classroom, and hence the root of their subjugation in the racial-class hierarchies of America, derive from having done something wrong—not studying for the test, chatting with a friend during class, or watching TV instead of doing homework. As a child, meritocracy made me interpret the times I failed a class or got into trouble as a pox on me as an individual and revelatory of the inferiority of my race, so that succeeding in school became a way to overcome my individual shortcomings, which in turn represented an overcoming of historical collective Black failure. Of course, isolated instances of discrimination occurred, but so long as such instances were eliminated, my thinking went, meritocracy would make hard work pay off.

In contrast, adjunctification dispels the illusion constructed by education that a fair game exists in which doing the right thing in an arena devoid of discrimination will lead to success. Rather, perfectionism and playing by the rules of the disciplinary regime of higher education will in all likelihood result in a contingent position. Furthermore, the informal rules of the profession *reward* the same cutting of corners for which Black students are *penalized* in K-12 education. Academic jobs, graduate students from a number of universities warned me, were not secured by doing the reading for classes, perfecting prose through just one more draft, or spending hours on teaching, but through doing just enough of the reading to hold forth during classes while minimizing work on the dissertation to get published. Thus, as a Black student with a disciplinary record and a vacillating history of academic performance, no sooner had I got my act together for graduate school than I faced mockery from my peers as a clueless workaholic for doing what my Black family taught me it took to be a good student. In addition to the social and cultural capital required to negotiate these unwritten rules, the amount of economic capital necessary to survive on pitiable stipends makes graduate school not so much a meritocracy but an uneven playing field in which those with familial financial support can afford to carve out time for research and writing while living in the expensive locales where most doctoral programs are located. As an African American in Slavic studies, I found it all the more difficult to rationalize seven years of eking out an existence to study a region with tangential relevance to the Black experience only to end up as a Visiting Lecturer—a position with the same salary as I had before my doctoral hooding but without the health insurance afforded to graduate students.

Once on the job market, I experienced our field as a cut-throat luck-of-the-draw competition shot through with a second economy of credentialism and personal connections (euphemized as "networking"), the exclusivity of which makes inclusivity in itself an antithetical goal. In a field with far more losers than winners on the job market, the inclusion of more Black people will result in the impoverishment of the majority of these new recruits and only a select few gaining access to vaunted tenure-track positions offering basic "benefits" like not going bankrupt over a trip to the hospital. Instead of eliminating racial hierarchy, the recruitment of Black students to the field of Slavic studies without addressing the problem of contingency risks creating a diverse but exploited majority whose cheap labor lightens the teaching loads of a shrinking tenured and tenure-track elite. The "lucky tenth" of

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Black students who make it into this elite would only give the appearance of equal opportunity to a highly stratified profession.Sociologists have demonstrated in other areas of higher education how the ascent of a handful of Black and Brown people to positions of power does not go beyond the performative "staging of difference," or the use of minorities as public-relations props to conceal the lack of diversity on college campuses.[12] In her study of diversity programs in American institutions, Ellen Berrey calls such tokenism "selective inclusion," or the strategic promotion of a small group of people of color for the purposes of furthering the "prestige, distinction, or profit-making" of an organization. While having the positive effect of empowering its beneficiaries, selective inclusion "is a mechanism of containing and coopting racial justice, as it largely leaves untouched persistent racial inequalities and the gulf between rich and poor," Berrey observes. She eloquently describes this placement of "culturally appealing" people of color at the top of professions as "*pushing against glass ceilings* while *ignoring dirty floors*."[13]

Given that only a quarter of all academic jobs are on the tenure track, how does inclusion and diversity in our field empower Black people if, for every Black person who obtains an assistant professorship, three find themselves faced with the choice of either leaving the profession (becoming "carpenters" in Dubois' words) or remaining adjunct faculty, most of whom make substantially less money than the median starting salary of a recent Black college graduate and a quarter of whom rely on some type of public assistance?[14]

If Black PhDs, out of frustration with these grim prospects, choose to leave the profession, they face an unforgiving rat race in which their hard-fought credentials become burdens. The recent emphasis on alternative careers ("alt-ac") paints a rosy picture of how those outside of academia regard our fancy degrees. The same summer my cousin stayed with us, I applied to hundreds of jobs in everything from federal civil service to secondary education. In the course of six months, I got one interview for a part-time job teaching upper-school language arts at a nearby private school. In other words, my attempt to quit contingent labor at the university level reduced me to excitement over the prospect of becoming contingent labor at the high-school level.

12. See James M. Thomas, *Diversity Regimes: Why Talk Is Not Enough to Fix Racial Inequality at Universities* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2020), 115–42.

13. Ellen Berrey, *The Enigma of Diversity: The Language of Race and the Limits of Racial Justice* (Chicago, 2015), 8–9; 14.

14. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) estimates that 73% of academic positions are off the tenure track. Colleen Flaherty, "A Non-Tenure-Track Profession?," *Inside Higher Ed*, at https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/10/12/about-three-quarters-all-faculty-positions-are-tenure-track-according-new-aaup (October 12, 2018), accessed June 14, 2021. US Department of Education statistics indicate that the median salary for Black graduates a year after college graduation is around $36,000. See "The Economic and Educational Status of African Americans a Year After Earning a Bachelor's Degree," *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, at https://www.jbhe.com/2019/07/the-economic-and-educational-status-of-african-americans-a-year-after-earning-a-bachelors-degree/ (July 15, 2019), June 14, 2021. According to the American Federation of Teachers, 25% of adjuncts rely on some type of public assistance while 40% "struggle to cover basic household expenses." Colleen Flaherty, "Barely Getting By," *Inside Higher Ed*, at https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/04/20/new-report-says-many-adjuncts-make-less-3500-course-and-25000-year (April 20, 2020), June 14, 2021.

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The look of befuddlement meeting me on the face of the principal when I showed up for the interview immediately dashed my hopes of getting the job. "You would be a much better fit with your credentials in a small-liberal-arts setting like Macalester," he explained to me in a fathering voice, as if my application had ended up in his lap by accident.

If, instead, Black PhDs choose to remain on contingent contracts waiting to strike gold year after year, they become the new objects of a long tradition of exploiting Black labor in America. In his study of the "adjunct underclass," Herb Childress and the adjuncts he interviews draw on the language of this tradition to explain the subjugation of contingent labor in the academy, characterizing it as "institutionalized slavery" in which the groveling laborer prays for "a place at the master's table someday."[15] Far from alarmist hyperbole, this language reflects the continued dehumanization of the least powerful among us. As Childress notes, "some professional accrediting bodies, and the federal IPEDS reporting system" reproduce in their assessments of faculty sizes the Three-Fifths Compromise (an agreement at America's constitutional convention reducing slaves to three-fifths a person), "with each contingent teacher counting as a third of a person."[16] The *de facto* class-based segregation of higher education also means that adjuncts are disproportionately represented at the community colleges and state universities catering to lower-class Black communities. "The least privileged students," Childress concludes, "are likely to have the least privileged teachers."[17] Little wonder my cousin, when asked, expressed no interest in getting a PhD.

My own story has a happy ending. Through the mixture of hard work, dumb luck, relative privilege, and irrational persistence some call "merit," I won a national award. As a result, I received a tenure-track offer from my current institution, which has a strong commitment to serving underprivileged communities. But I am the exception. I have seen some of the best minds among my acquaintances of all races, as well as the scholarship they began to cultivate, left to wilt on the vine. Thus, in my present job, I encourage students to study history and pursue careers requiring the historian's skill set, but give them some "real talk" when applying to doctoral programs comes up. I do so cognizant of the fact that we tenure-track and tenured faculty swell the ranks of this new intellectual proletariat at our own peril. As Dubois warned in his essay in support of Black education from a century ago, "if you do not lift them up, they will pull you down."[18]

15. Herb Childress, *The Adjunct Underclass: How America's Colleges Betrayed Their Faculty, Their Students, and Their Mission* (Chicago, 2019), 12–13.
16. Ibid., 24.
17. Ibid., 15.
18. Dubois, "The Talented Tenth," 74–75.

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