



*This is a transcript for an interview conducted by Harley Ferris, featuring Megan Fulwiler and Jennifer Marlow discussing their documentary, *Con Job: Stories of Adjunct and Contingent Labor*, published by Computers and Composition Digital Press and freely available at ccdigitalpress.org.*

[MUSIC]

HARLEY: Hello, and thanks for tuning into the first of a series of interviews with Computers and Composition Digital Press authors. I'm Harley Ferris, one of the co-editors of the CCDP blog, and on behalf of everyone at the press, I'm excited to share this conversation with you. Our most recent publication is a compelling documentary by Megan Fulwiler and Jennifer Marlow. The film is called *Con Job: Stories of Adjunct and Contingent Labor*, and it can be viewed in its entirety on our website, ccdigitalpress.org. Megan and Jenn premiered their film at the 2014 Conference on College Composition and Communication, and I sat down with them afterwards to talk about the conception and production of the film.

MEGAN: I'm Megan Fulwiler, an associate professor of English at the college of St. Rose in Albany, New York

JENNIFER: I'm Jenn Marlow, assistant professor of English at the college of St. Rose and currently Coordinator of First-Year Writing.

MEGAN: I think Jenn came to this far more politicized and far more eyes open than, certainly, than I was, and it was really in talking with her and working with the other adjuncts and literally, like, moving desks and creating a space in the third floor attic and getting computers and sort of dedicating a workspace with bookshelves, you know that "you can keep your stuff here," that I started to realize, wow, the situation is worse than I thought. And I think what sort of was troubling to me is that I as a writing program coordinator work closely with adjuncts, and most of my colleagues, in my department and I think in other places on the campus, didn't know about adjuncts at all. It never came up as a topic of conversation at all, except to, well, we can adjunct that course out. So I started to feel like this disconnect between the kind of invisible work I was doing with adjuncts, who were also invisible, and then the rest of the workings of the college and institution, parallel universes that didn't overlap or weren't in direct conversation in meaningful ways. That politicized me. That made me more—politically active, I guess? And also more curious. How did this come to be? What is the situation? How deep does it go? Who knows about it? What can we do? Can we do anything, and if so, what? I think Jenn and I had some conversations that were, she's like, radical, like, take over the university and sort of restructuring it, and I think we always try to sort of hit a spot in between.

JENNIFER: Yeah. But she knows institutional history, and she knows how to work with administrators, and stuff that I don't know—I'm only in my third, you know, going in my third year on the tenure track, so these are still things that, you know, every institution type has different issues that they face in trying to address contingency, and then within all those different institutions, there are different sorts of

categories of adjuncts, or different types of people who are adjuncting for different reasons, and so then that becomes part of the—how it gets very complicated. I mean, I sort of knew we weren't going to come out at the other end with a solution, but I think that's always the hope, right? Like we're going to do this and then come up with an answer. And there's just—there is no answer. There's no one single answer, there's no one-size-fits-all solution for this. But how to capture that and at least give a little bit of, you know, solutions that people can kind of latch onto or begin to enact in some way—

MEGAN: Like a range of options.

JENNIFER: —yeah—kind of became the goal.

MEGAN: The depths of invisibility is—is kind of shocking when you start to realize how pervasive that is.

HARLEY: Yeah.

MEGAN: How deep the invisibility, how deep the sort of desire to not talk about it, to not acknowledge it, and I think as she pointed out, so many administrators don't really know how many faculty actually are adjuncts. They know we have some, but no one really knows how many.

HARLEY: Well, so invisibility and visibility keep coming up, and that's probably a nice segue to talk about “why a film.” Certainly, it would have been a lot less work to have written an article, but it's a completely—

MEGAN: You can say that again!

HARLEY: It's a really different audience, too. And it does different rhetorical work, and all that. So maybe if you could talk a little bit about why you chose to do that, and if you can validate that choice.

MEGAN: I think we chose film as the natural sort of medium that we could use to put faces—faces and voices to those who are often unseen, unheard from. We saw it as the most direct way to tell the stories—rather, we didn't want to tell them for them, we wanted them to have a platform or medium where their stories would be heard and seen in a sort of unmediated way—as unmediated as possible. That's also why we chose not to use any voice over; that's also why we're not in the film, except for my one brief crossover—my Hitchcock moment. But the film is not about us, and we wanted to try to facilitate as generously as possible a way for these, for these teachers to tell their stories in their own voices. We thought that was so important. So we tried to do that, to create a kind of space and place for them to tell their stories.

JENNIFER: Yeah, and I would just say essentially what Megan said about, you know, giving voice to these people and, you know, bringing a face to the screen really gives the possibility of humanizing the issue. These are real people—these aren't the invisible, nameless, faceless people up in the attic or down in the basement or down the hall that you may or may not interact with. They're people who can't afford to buy milk at the end of the week, right? So I think that aspect of, you know, a day in the life of an adjunct, and following Jen Lee through her day to really sort of humanize it was certainly one goal in terms of choosing the medium. I think the other was this question of audience, which ended up being a huge struggle for us, because I think in part we chose film as a medium that wasn't strictly scholarly, right, that had the potential to reach a larger more general audience, a larger public, which we really wanted and felt was necessary and important... At the same time throughout the process, everyone was like, “Who's your audience? Who's your audience?” for this.

MEGAN: Right.

JENNIFER: You know, because at the same time, as I said today in the, um, before the showing, part of it is our field is so deeply implicated in what has happened. So part of our audience was certainly—OK, you all may be aware that this is happening, and again, going back to the Wyoming resolution, but what is actually being done, and do we—do you realize that we've sort of led the way in the casualization of labor across the disciplines. So that was again another thought about audience and medium—how do we, sort of, get that message out there. But how do we choose a medium that sort of has that sort of flexibility to move between this academic audience and a more general public audience, and we felt that film was hopefully the way to achieve that.

MEGAN: We started a Facebook page for our documentary project... three years ago? Two? Maybe two years ago, and it has become a kind of national stage and space for adjuncts around the country to ask questions about publications, to ask questions about networking, to ask questions about organizing, and they're sharing resources. Jenn and I are not active in this conversation in, really in any way. Sometimes we post links to relevant articles and the like, but... So I feel like film and going viral also just connects to this larger, the larger way that social media seems to be providing a way for collective action in a way that historically has not happened until I'd say fairly recently. Certainly with New Faculty Majority, um, Adjunct—I think Adjunct Justice or Adjunct Action—there's another, there's another Facebook group that links in with ours. So, it just seemed also to be a natural fit. As our intro makes clear, we really knew very little. We just knew that this, that this called to us. That this seemed to be the way to, to portray it. You know, I think also, in an academic piece—I mean, who reads that? And it's also, it's—it's just words. I think we were also thinking a lot about Cindy's work in multimodality, and really thinking about what does it mean to teach composition in the 21st century, how are we asking students to do things with different modes and semiotic channels, and then it's like, well, we talk the talk... Can we walk the walk? Can we do this? So I think it was also in some ways a kind of, I don't know, a kind of challenge, too. Like, let's—let's do this. Let's see if we can do this.

HARLEY: When you decided to take this on, you must have had some kind of clue that this was going to be, that you were going to have to learn—

MEGAN: Actually, Harley, no we didn't.

[CROSS-TALK]

JENNIFER: You give us far too much credit.

[LAUGHTER]

MEGAN: A friend came over and literally showed us how to turn on the digital camcorder that we had borrowed—it was from the '80s, I swear to god, we used tapes—how to connect it to the tripod, how to position people. He talked to us about, like, lighting and using the white page, and that was too confusing for us, so we just were like, whatever. And we literally just packed our bag and just went on the road. I mean, I think about it now, it was just naïve, but also brave. And really, how hard can this be?

[CHUCKLING]

MEGAN: Really, right?

HARLEY: And how hard was it?

[LAUGHTER]

MEGAN: And that is so classic me.

JENNIFER: Really freaking hard.

[LAUGHTER]

MEGAN: Let's just—yeah, let's just do this. I think when we first started... I don't think we had any idea how consuming it would be. Because really it was about four years ago that we really started talking about it, preparing, planning, contacting people, setting up interviews, thinking about the sort of scope of our project. And it just kept growing. And, as you know, anything with a video—it has a way of growing, and it has a way of sort of consuming your time, consuming your computer [LAUGHS], consuming your hard drive [LAUGHTER]. And, I think, for me, I felt like the more people we talked to, the more questions I had. I was like, "Oh, I thought it was X." And so we would talk to these people, and I was like, "Oh, it's X and Y, so let's talk to the people who can talk to us about Y." And I was like, "No, it's also B, F, and G." You know, and so it's like, wow, this thing is really vexed and complicated in ways that I hadn't anticipated.

JENNIFER: I think one of the things that I had in my head before starting this out—before starting out with this—was that there had to be... but it's a composition practice, it's composing, you know, creating film is composing.

So there has to be these sort of similarities between writing and working with film and editing. It's called editing in whatever medium you're working in. So, especially as someone who's interested in new media and the digital, I became very interested in, like, now I want to actually do this myself and start to see these overlaps, and how are they similar and how are they different, and what does that look like. So, I was really excited to discover that and really try that out. But I just... yeah. We were just really... [SIGHS] I feel like we really underestimated all of the other things that are involved in working with film, then thinking about, you know, editing and juxtaposition and how do images relate to one another, and all the things that as rhetoricians and as compositionists we already think about. Not like, how do you get iMovie or Final Cut to work properly on your computer.

MEGAN: This rhetorical stuff—we could talk about that all day: How are we creating this argument, which clip should go where. We loved cutting the clips, like this is a really good sound bite here, and we sort of put it up here and it segues next to this person. We debated every single edit, I think, in that movie. But what we were not prepared for was actually like the software, the hardware, the computer crashing, the Final Cut crashing eighteen times, we can't open this program.

JENNIFER: We don't know how to use this program.

MEGAN: And the programs kept changing. Right? So it was like a different platform. Our original work was on iMovie 9, or something. But then they... HD?

JENNIFER: HD.

MEGAN: ...Which then they eliminated, but all of our work was on it, and we had to like find some nine-year-old hacker on YouTube who showed us how to hack into it and basically keep working.

[MUFFLED LAUGHTER]

MEGAN: We must...

[CROSS-TALK]

JENNIFER: Literally. She called Apple and they were just like, Sorry, we can't help you...

MEGAN: ...we no longer make that program...

JENNIFER: We found this like You Tube video, with this like, yeah, ten-year-old kid who was basically like, here's how you do this. And it worked.

MEGAN. Yeah. But I think, Jen, you also did your own... I just feel like you would google a lot of stuff, and I'd say we spent almost half of our time troubleshooting, problem-solving the technology.

For me it was incredibly humbling, and I think it also put me in a much more sympathetic stance toward working with students. Like, this is not easy, and to just suggest to students, well, just hop on iMovie and do this thing... No. No, no, no, no. Right? I think it's a lot more complicated than we've often realized. And certainly making this film made me more aware of that, more aware of the sort of challenges, more aware of the implications. And also I realized my students spend a lot of time, then, on the technology, and I thought they were spending all this time on compositional choices and rhetorical positioning, but they are trying to upload this, or download that, and I think we have to take that into consideration when we're teaching.

HARLEY: You felt compelled to do this, you were drawn to it, or it called out to you. So there are those who would rather work in Word, but they know that they must work in something multimodal. Can you offer some advice?

MEGAN: This might sound counterintuitive to your question, but I really think you have to think about what your purpose is. I think a lot of great work and arguments can happen in text and need to happen just in text and in writing. I don't think everything needs to be multimodal, and certainly if it's just multimodal for the sake of multimodal, I don't think that accomplishes much. You know, when and where does seeing something add to, augment, or expand your argument, when might it detract.

JENNIFER: But I mean I think if you take, you decide, you go through that whole purpose / rhetorical situation / what is the best medium – you know, answer that question, with some sort of digital, multimedia project... I mean if you're embarking on something that you have never done before, like film or whatever it might be, I think for one thing you need to account for a timeline that is far longer and larger than you could ever imagine. Find colleagues, collaborate, figure out who around you has these skills, is doing this type of work. Google stuff. There's lynda.com. I mean, there's so many resources out there now for, you know, sort of DIY-ers. And just accessing those resources... But again, this goes along with the timeline, you have to really factor in a learning curve. We did not think that we were going to have such a steep learning curve; we were very naïve in that sense, so we did not factor that in.

MEGAN: And that technology has changed. That technology kept changing, and at some point, we can't keep up. And we have to finish this before the technology is obsolete. The last time I went to buy tapes

for our camcorder, there was one left in the Best Buy. And I said to the guy, “OK, so where?” And he was like, “Yeah, we’re not making those anymore.” Jenn, we have to finish this film!

JENNIFER: It’s not because they were so popular, they just sold out that day?

MEGAN: No, so I think, the technology, I think, really advanced while we were making this film. As did the topic itself, actually, became more prominent and visible while we were making it.

JENNIFER: Yeah.

MEGAN: I would just piggyback on something Jenn said about finding colleagues, and I think there’s no doubt in my mind I would not have done this project alone. I think it was definitely in collaboration with Jen. Both that I saw the significance and the importance of this topic and making it more visible, but also I think just being brave enough to tackle it. And I think we kept each other going. There was a lot of chocolate, true, but I think we kept each other going just in our ongoing discoveries and conversations about the topic, about the process, about what we were discovering about the topic but also how we were learning about making a film. And I think for me, it was, and I think for both of us, a truly collaborative, absolutely collaborative endeavor.

JENNIFER: These kinds of projects can be a really great moment for sort of interdisciplinary learning, reaching out to colleagues, like, who else on your campus or in your community is doing this kind of work.

MEGAN: We actually did have this idea, we never came through with it. We wanted be to making a film of us trying to make this film. Because the challenges, the horror stories, the psychotic breaks, meltdowns, I mean they were just legion. And I do think it would have been a very interesting, talk about process, if someone had actually kind of followed us in trying to learn how to make a movie.

JENNIFER: Yeah, I mean, talk about psychotic breaks. We once had this... iMovie had such a psychotic break on us that we lost like 90% of our editing work. So we finally come up with this idea that we’re gonna smuggle Megan’s institutional computer out of the building and bring it to the Apple store, and it’s like raining and we have it in a carriage...

[LAUGHTER AND CROSS-TALK]

MEGAN: We have two of us lugging this computer...

JENNIFER: This giant like, you know, 27-inch...

HARLEY: Under the cover of night, of course.

JENNIFER: Of course. So, you know, we go to the Apple store, and they couldn’t even help us. It had gotten so far...

MEGAN: ...we were beyond Apple’s help.

JENNIFER: They were sort of like, we don’t even know how to find these files. Like, they were just...

MEGAN: You know what? This would be something if I could... taking a little bit more time to figure out your infrastructure and how to organize a video file and video assets, is just... The infrastructure confounded us. We did the best we could, but every day it became, it was... going back to our original

infrastructure was weak. And it threatened the project, I think, every step of the way. And to this day, we still have all those copies of things, there's stuff that's just buried. I don't know. It's like the Bermuda Triangle in our hard drive. I'm scared. I'm glad it's just up and it's done.

[MUSIC]

HARLEY: Indeed. We at CCDP are glad it's published, too. Congratulations to Megan and Jen for contributing such an important work to the field. We're excited about the documentary's potential to motivate changes in adjunct and contingent labor practices. And we hope you found this interview enlightening. Once again, visit ccdigitalpress.org to watch *Con Job*. And while you're there, we encourage you to check out other titles by Computers and Composition Digital Press. If you have questions or thoughts about this text, or about submitting your work to CCDP, we want to hear from you. Again, visit us online at ccdigitalpress.org. Thanks again for listening.