

## **Academic Librarianship in Canada: Post-COVID Perspectives in a Neoliberal Era, edited by Jessica E. Shiers, Harriet M. Sonne de Torrens, Joanna Szurmak, and Meaghan Valant**

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The state of academic librarianship in Canada seems to lurch from crisis to crisis. If there ever was a time of abundance, it no longer lives in the memories of librarians currently working in the universities of this country. Instead, we have a foreboding feeling, and we can collocate this feeling with a straightforward explanation: we are attempting to operate in a world dominated by neoliberal ideology. *Academic Librarianship in Canada: Post-COVID Perspectives in a Neoliberal Era* seeks to provide evidence that the effect of this ideology is detrimental to the goals and function of the modern Canadian academic library.

Anyone who has spent enough time in post-secondary education will have heard of the spectre of neoliberalism. Some would have even read the foundational treatise on the topic by David Harvey (2005). Harvey's definition of neoliberalism is expressed in many different ways, but perhaps the most relevant for our consideration is as follows:

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong property rights, free markets, and free trade. (Harvey 2005, 2)

In other words, neoliberalism is a specific turn away from spending on the public good for the sake of the public. Only market-based solutions need be considered. Undoubtedly, much has changed in the twenty years since Harvey's original publication. The question is worth asking: Is it truly the case that the dominant

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ideological narrative still pushes an absolute necessity for free-market solutions and reduced public investment? Any librarians working in the trenches will be nodding in agreement, unequivocally.

How, then, do we express and understand the side-effects that this causes in our library environments? This collection of essays edited by Shiers, Sonne de Torrens, Szurmak, and Valant is a valuable contribution to the published record that seeks to investigate this very question. What's more, early-career librarians still developing their research agenda will benefit from the methodological plurality utilized in the chapters of this book.

This book's subtitle includes the phrase "Post-COVID," but this is certainly not a theme that stands out. Most of the pieces are not situated as a response to the COVID pandemic, but rather happened to be written in a post-COVID era. Admittedly, this is a small quibble; more importantly, all of the pieces adhere very closely to the use of neoliberalism as a framing mechanism, though their topics are wide-ranging. Standout topics include an examination of library reorganizations and Marxist descriptions of neoliberal action within the library. Also discussed are the impact of neoliberal modes of thinking on collection development, changes to job descriptions, and the commodification of information literacy instruction. This is a very diverse spectrum of topics. The lesson to be taken away from this is that the tendrils of neoliberalism snake their way through all aspects of our lived experience as academic librarians.

Of these pieces, one that is particularly successful is the computation analysis by Lomas et al. (2025, 67-96) of the text of librarian job descriptions from the University of Toronto covering a period of over thirty years. The authors present several arguments using this data, showing that these job descriptions demonstrate increasing use of feminized language for the most precarious positions advertised. More of this type of empirical research needs to be undertaken within LIS scholarship; quantitative methods can produce strong evidence that allows for compelling inferences, as this chapter shows.

Perhaps the most poignant and heartbreaking of all of the pieces in the book, though, is the concluding chapter: "Restructuring an Academic Library without Due Process at the Ontario College of Art and Design University" (Forrester and OCADU Colleagues 2025, 169-194). It feels as if the previous pages were a preamble to its point. It is a piece that provides a post-mortem of the library reorganization activity that happened at OCAD U. The authors, Forrester and "OCAD U colleagues," present a gut-wrenching history of the institution and all of the events leading up to and following the dismissal of four librarians after a botched library reorganization activity. The fact that some of the authors of this piece wish to remain anonymous is a clear

indication of how radioactive the situation remains; it is not yet inert. I remember paying attention to this situation as it was unfolding, with many confounding factors at play: librarians at OCAD U were considered staff, not academics; they were unionized, but that did not protect them; the administration of the school inexplicably claimed the reorganization “aligns with the decolonization approach” (Forrester and OCADU Colleagues 2025,186). The OCAD U story will unfortunately be the library reorganization case study that is etched into the minds of academic librarians within this country. It is equal parts disheartening and reassuring that, finally, it has been captured and added to the literature.

*Academic Librarianship in Canada: Post-COVID Perspectives in a Neoliberal Era* is an important title that chronicles a snapshot of the academic library labour landscape within Canada, and it joins a shockingly small amount of literature on the topic. At the end of the day, every description of librarian work life is ultimately a description of our working conditions and our labour struggles. As a mid-career librarian, the presence of this book gives me hope that the new generation of librarians entering the profession will be reminded of what is at stake if we do not actively pay attention to the ideologies we are steeped in. This title is a necessity for the collection of every academic library in Canada, particularly for librarians who are interested in professional development and progression in their career. What is vital is that we share stories of the bigger picture so that we can learn the lessons of the past when we inevitably encounter the next crisis.

#### REFERENCE

Harvey, David. 2005. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199283262.001.0001>.