

“Make Some Noise”: Precarity, Dialogue, and Professional Development Introduction

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Volume 43, Number 1, 2018

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1050822ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1050822ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Terry, A. & Wark, J. (2018). “Make Some Noise”: Precarity, Dialogue, and Professional Development: Introduction. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 43(1), 81–84. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1050822ar>

Article abstract

Cette section Polémiques répond à la situation et aux expériences professionnelles du personnel académique contractuel (PAC) dans le milieu universitaire. Outre deux introductions écrites par les rédactrices invitées Andrea Terry et Jayne Wark, elle comprend cinq textes qui présentent diverses perspectives sur la question.

“Make Some Noise”: Precarity, Dialogue, and Professional Development

Guest-Edited by Andrea Terry and Jayne Wark

Many, if not most of us, now just run into our departments to grab our mail or to attend a meeting and then leave as quickly as we can. Increased use of technology makes it possible for us to do so. Academic rituals that were conceived of as community building are on the decline. ... [W]orkplace loneliness affects our well-being, interferes with professional development, and makes us more vulnerable to burnout. A supportive environment, on the other hand, can actually reduce our perceptions of the stresses caused even by the most recalcitrant corporate context.

—Maggie Berg and Barbara Seeber, *The Slow Professor*, 2016

ANDREA TERRY Issues affecting Contract Academic Staff (CAS) have garnered much media and public attention recently. Strikes protesting the working conditions for CAS have happened at York University (1997, 2008–2009, 2015, and 2018; the latter strike began on March 5 and remains ongoing at press time), Mount Allison University (2014), the University of New Brunswick (2014), Nipissing University (2015), the University of Toronto (2015), and at twenty-four Ontario colleges represented by the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (2017). And this momentum must continue. “*Make Some Noise*”: *Precarity, Dialogue, and Professional Development* brings together polemical works that focus on CAS issues from our contributors’ various points of view: a letter written to the Universities Art Association of Canada (UAAC) Board by Anthea Black, Nicole Burisch, and others; a response to the letter by UAAC President Anne Whitelaw; Erin Wunker’s proposals for how we can support CAS; Ery Contogouris’ insights into editing and translation contract work in Quebec; and T.L. Cowan’s reflections on how her background in cabaret gave her a survival strategy for precarious work in the academy. My co-editor, Jayne

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Wark, makes the case for the importance of union activism for CAS. Several of these contributions have been published elsewhere and are slightly revised here, both to augment pre-existing discussions and to bring them to the awareness of all RACAR readers. Collectively, they signal the need for ongoing dialogue amongst CAS, permanently employed faculty, graduate students, and the wider public. Prospective and current undergraduate students, as well as parents, guardians, caretakers, and partners, also need to be involved. All participants in post-secondary education must collectively commit to better working conditions for everyone.

With universities’ and colleges’ ever-increasing exploitation of contract/short-term labour in the classroom,¹ as well as our continued reliance on communicative technologies, CAS individuals often find themselves isolated. A fellow CAS worker drove this point home for me when, at a CAS faculty union meeting held early one winter term, she professed that the gathering was her first opportunity to have an actual, in-person conversation that year.

In the case of UAAC, I was elected in 2016 as the Board’s CAS representative. It’s a daunting position to occupy, given that I’m representing a constituency that experiences significant obstacles (financial, logistical, temporal, etc.) in coming together. While UAAC now offers reduced membership and conference registration rates for CAS members, as well as a growing travel fund to subsidize travel expenses, the fact that the conference is hosted by different institutions every year still makes regular CAS participation difficult.

Speaking for myself, as a person living and working in Thunder Bay, ON, my ability to connect with CAS people in other departments or schools is hindered by geographic, administrative, and departmental obstacles. And there remains a significant dearth of research exploring the “impacts of casualization.” In September 2017, the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) launched

its first ever, national survey—led by Dr. Karen Foster of Dalhousie University—on CAS experiences at universities, colleges, and polytechnics over the course of the 2016–2017 academic year. In the press release for the survey, CAUT Director of Research and Political Action, Pam Foster, states, “Ever-growing numbers of teachers at Canada’s colleges and universities are trapped in precarious contract and part-time work, creating serious implications not just for CAS, but for regular academic staff and students.”²

Gathering together, coming together, working together, and raising our collective voices in the academic conference context, or in publications such as this one, has gained traction. Dialogue is key. Institutional exploitation of CAS labour affects both part- and full-time academic staff alike. The replacement of recently vacated, full-time positions with part-time ones places incredible strains on full-time staff in terms of time, energy, and resources. Many are stretched so thin, be it financially, mentally, emotionally, or even physically, that we cannot remain silent anymore—none of us. We need to talk to each other, listen to each other, and learn from each other. We can no longer afford to draw boundaries between full-time and part-time workers. To do so is to succumb to the tactics of “divide and conquer.”

My experience working as a member of CAS at different universities across Canada for the past seven years has led me to firmly believe that maintaining one’s silence has the potential to do great damage. Remaining silent might lead to isolation, loneliness, depression, anxiety, and limited understandings of larger systemic problems. To combat these states, some of which I’ve experienced myself, we need to reach out, come together to talk, and respect and honour each other’s experiences; make contacts and maintain those connections; and look for and listen to sources of support. If opportunities present themselves, CAS individuals should not be afraid to let family, friends, and members of their networks know how precarious

1. Erika Shaker and Robin Shaban, *No Temporary Solution: Ontario’s Shifting College and University Workforce* (Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2018), www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2018/02/No%20Temporary%20Solution_CCPA%20report.pdf (accessed May 9, 2018).

2. Canadian Association of University Teachers, “CAUT launches national survey of contract academic staff,” press release, September 22, 2017, www.caut.ca/latest/2017/09/caut-launches-national-survey-contract-academic-staff (accessed May 9, 2018).

their work situation is. Over the years, I have found myself amazed at how many assume that, because I have a PhD and teach at a post-secondary institution, I must receive benefits and a regular, liveable salary. I most assuredly do not. We need to work on dispelling these illusions. Weigh your options; consider that, if you choose to take on unpaid service work, you might be contributing to the continued exploitation of CAS workers. Talk to your colleagues—maybe your chair has some discretionary funds in the departmental budget that could go to supplement your conference travel expenses. Maybe department chairs could offer this support, rather than waiting for CAS people to come asking. To those who have offered support—and they have been there for me—thank you! Maybe full-time faculty could look to collaborate with part-time faculty on research grant applications. Maybe we could all take some time, listen more intently, and then make more noise. ¶

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JAYNE WARK The voice I bring to this polemics section is different from the others, because I am a tenured, full-time professor at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD). I have never been part of the academic precariat, but I add my voice to this debate for two main reasons. First, I want to show solidarity with our Contract Academic Staff (CAS) colleagues, because the conditions they face are our problem, too. We full-time faculty need to understand what our precarious colleagues are up against, and to recognize that our secure salaries and benefits are subsidized by the discounted cost of their teaching contributions, which are paid for through the human cost of the job insecurity that comes with universities' demands for "flexibility." We need to be part of the solution by helping our precarious colleagues to get fair treatment. Second, I want to draw on my long history with union work to make the point that, although collective bargaining is not a panacea that will solve all the problems faced by CAS, it is the only viable path forward in these neoliberal times.

I stress the importance of collective bargaining, because it is a legal process that results in a Collective Agreement (CA) between the employees and the employer. CAs set out the terms and conditions of employment in transparent language in articles that can be grieved if violated, and they provide representational security, including—most importantly—the right to strike. Nobody ever wants it to come to a strike, but this is our only real leverage against the employer's pernicious and instrumental policies and actions, which threaten the rights, dignity, and fair treatment of employees.

Some of the contributors to this polemics section suggest other ways our part-time colleagues can be treated with dignity and fairness. Indeed, we should all be doing everything we can to make this so, but unless the terms and conditions of CAS employment are covered by CAs, precarious faculty members will be subject to the capri-

sciousness of administrators. An unsympathetic dean may replace a sympathetic one. A favour done for one CAS may be denied to another. Without a CA, there is no safeguard against such unpredictability, leaving CAS in a constant state of anxiety and insecurity.

I urge my part-time colleagues to recognize that you can only address your precariousness by means of union activism. I know this from my long experience with union work and collective bargaining at NSCAD. Our union is unusual, but not unique, because it represents both full- and part-time faculty. This means that, although I have not personally experienced precarity, I am well aware of the injustices experienced by CAS and have fought hard for their rights for many years. At NSCAD, we’ve been able to secure some good things for our CAS, including pegging their per-course compensation to the equivalent teaching portion of the full-time faculty’s total salaries. This model has made CAS wages at NSCAD the second highest among universities in Nova Scotia, even though salaries for full-time faculty at NSCAD are the lowest. We hope to make many more aspirational moves for our CAS in the next round of bargaining.

To make such moves collectively we need more concrete information about the situation of CAS as a whole. This information is beginning to be comprehensively compiled. In 2016, the Association of Nova Scotia University Teachers (ANSUT) commissioned Karen Foster, Canada Research Chair in the Department of Sociology at Dalhousie University, to write a report on the results of a survey she conducted focused on CAS at seven Nova Scotia universities in 2015. Her report, *Precarious U: Contract Faculty in Nova Scotia Universities*, is a revealing snapshot of the hidden human costs of precarious labour.¹ Cynthia C. Field and Glen A. Jones published the results of a similar survey of CAS at twelve Ontario universities in April 2016.² All three researchers also presented their findings at the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations

(OCUFA) conference “Confronting Precarious Academic Work” in February 2016.³ While these studies have focused on individual provinces, the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) launched a national survey of CAS in October 2017; the results are pending.⁴

While I agree with Foster’s recommendation in the final “What Now?” section of her report that “full-time faculty and their unions can take some steps to help contract faculty,” I do not agree that “it is ultimately up to university administrators to mitigate most of the structural challenges facing contract instructors” (27). Although she is right in principle, it is never going to happen, except perhaps at Utopia U. The goal of administrators is to give you more of what you don’t like, and take away anything you do. That’s why they always show up on the first day of bargaining with copious graphs and pie charts that aim to demonstrate that faculty salaries are the university’s biggest expense (duh), followed by dire claims that they have to be reduced in order to keep the university sustainable. Their sustainability model relies on exploiting precarious CAS in order to ensure so-called flexibility. The idea that these administrators are willingly going to do anything to improve the lives of CAS is unfounded. Only the solidarity of unions and the right to strike will get them and their universities’ boards of governors to pay attention to the concerns of CAS. ¶

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1. Karen Foster, *Precarious U: Contract Faculty in Nova Scotia Universities* (Halifax: Association of Nova Scotia University Teachers, 2016), <http://ansut.caut.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/ANSUT-Precarious-U-Final-Report.pdf>, (accessed February 21, 2018).

2. Cynthia C. Field and Glen A. Jones, *A Study of Sessional Faculty in Ontario Publicly-Funded Universities* (Toronto: Centre for the Study of Canadian and International Higher Education, OISE-University of Toronto, 2016), www.oise.utoronto.ca/hec/UserFiles/File/Sessional_Faculty_-_OH-CRIF_Final_Report_-_July_2016.pdf, (accessed February 21, 2018).

3. “Confronting Precarious Academic Work,” Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA), conference, Toronto, February 11–12, 2016, <https://ocufa.on.ca/conferences/confronting-precarious-academic-work> (accessed February 21, 2018).

4. Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT), “News: National Survey of Contract Academic Staff Launched,” press release, October 2017, www.caut.ca/bulletin/2017/10/news-national-survey-contract-academic-staff-launched. The initial deadline of November 1 was extended to December 15, 2017. Karen Foster is the lead researcher for this study.