

Editorial

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Special Focus on Labour in Canadian Academic Libraries

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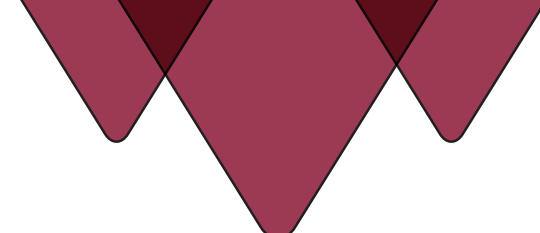
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Editorial

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THE term “academic library” often calls to mind the image of a building—but a building is merely an empty space. So what makes a library what it is?

We—library workers—make libraries. Human beings and their labour are behind everything a library is and everything that it does. Yet we suffer from a tendency to dissociate “the library” as a construct from the library work which animates it and gives it life. In light of the significant professional and societal challenges facing library work—and the new opportunities which spring from them—a renewed emphasis on the individual and collective dimensions of library labour is gathering pace.

This reorientation is as timely as it is necessary, reflecting the rapidly changing—and often difficult—sociocultural and socioeconomic contexts which give shape to our work. Budget cuts, service constraints, and ongoing library reorganizations have become a fixture of many library workers’ professional lives. Our work is further conditioned by de-skilling, deprofessionalization, and corporatization—but also by



renewed emphasis on social justice, an increasing appreciation of librarians' role in teaching and learning, and greater concern for student well-being. Against this backdrop of upheaval and evolution, the COVID-19 pandemic has added further layers of complexity, ushering in an era where remote work and flexible hours are the norm for many—but where existing inequities may also be amplified.

In this special issue of *The Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship*, we are pleased to share seven perspectives from across Canada which emphasize the experiences of academic library workers, the conditions in which they work, the forces that are changing those working conditions, and ways in which they can continue to strive for improved work environments.

In this issue's first article, "Just The Way We've Always Done It': Who Shapes The New Normal for Academic Libraries?" Amy McLay Paterson discusses the findings of a qualitative study about academic librarians' work during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on their thoughts about going "back to normal." Most participants, she found, were resistant to returning to the "old normal" without myriad changes inspired by the adaptations necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, the author highlights the need for refocusing on building library collegial governance structures that include all library workers.

The second article focuses on the particular experiences of academic librarians who have held temporary contracts in Canada. In their article "Contract Academic Librarians in Canada: Stories From a Nation-Wide Survey," Lindsay McNiff and Nicole Carter found that contract positions provided some librarians with opportunities to learn new skills, build and develop their professional networks, and gain confidence. At the same time, these temporary positions also resulted in stress and feeling excluded, undervalued, and "stuck" (e.g., unable to make life decisions while in these temporary positions). The authors conclude that many contract academic librarians are caught in a difficult set of competing structural and emotional experiences and provide recommendations for libraries hiring temporary contract librarians.

The next three articles highlight the various ways in which academic librarians are recognized and represented in their organizations. "A Seat at the Table: Academic Librarian Participation on Canadian University Faculty Association Executives and Collective Bargaining Teams" by Anthony Pash and Erin Patterson is a study that surveyed librarians' participation on faculty association executives and bargaining teams. The authors examined the governing documents of 46 faculty associations and conducted interviews with association representatives to reveal encouraging results. Despite being a minority within their associations, librarians have an outsized presence on association executives and bargaining teams.

Daniela Zavala-Mora, Gaston Quirion, Stéfano Biondo, and Joë Bouchard, in their article “Le statut universitaire pour les bibliothécaires de l’Université Laval: Une question d’équité entre les bibliothécaires universitaires canadiens,” chart librarians’ significant struggle for professional and academic recognition at Université Laval, where—as at many universities in Québec—librarians have generally not enjoyed many of the privileges common to Anglophone academic library environments. This includes a detailed analysis of the structural efforts that librarians at Laval have undertaken in pursuit of academic recognition. Moreover, in situating Laval librarians’ struggles within the historical and cultural contexts which have informed them, they undertake a broader comparative investigation of librarians’ status across Canada.

In “The Cheese Stands Alone: Situating the University of Waterloo within the Canadian Academic Library Landscape,” Danielle Robichaud and Lauren Byl survey the unique, and in many ways idiosyncratic, labour environment for librarians and archivists at the University of Waterloo. They explore the history of the Librarians’ and Archivists’ Association of the University of Waterloo, the labour context in which it was established, and the ways its governance and operations have evolved over time—with a particular focus on its efforts to achieve recognition and its relationship to other campus entities. Throughout, the authors posit that “academic status” is a fraught concept more easily articulated in theory than practice.

The sixth article in this special issue describes the leadership roles and active engagement of three academic librarians during the University of Manitoba 2021 strike. Orvie Dingwall, Lyle Ford, and Ruby Warren, in their article “Ready For a Fair Deal: Librarian and Archivist Leadership During a Canadian Faculty Association Strike,” describe historic levels of faculty participation that were significantly bolstered by librarians assuming key leadership roles including as members of the executive council, picket captain, and president of the faculty association. The narrative highlights the skills and competencies germane to librarianship as relevant, even necessary, to union organizing.

And finally, in “No Justice, Only Struggle: Academic Restructuring and Library Labour in Authoritarian Capitalism,” Lydia Zvyagintseva and Tim Ribaric argue that library rationalization processes and the downward social mobility of librarian labour are an aspect of authoritarian capitalism. Among other characterizations, features of authoritative capitalism include a persistent crisis narrative and a seeming absence of anyone being in charge. Against this backdrop, the authors review library restructuring at four universities through the politically theorized approach of Mezzadra and Neilson.

In presenting this special issue, the editors wish to acknowledge the labour that

underpins academic discourse and the enterprise of scholarly publishing. Authors, reviewers, editors, copyeditors, and production teams are all essential to this great effort, but all too often these contributions—almost always voluntary and unpaid—go unacknowledged. In this especially challenging year, which has required so many of us to balance a seemingly overwhelming number of commitments, we wish to extend our particular gratitude to everyone who has worked to make this special issue happen.