

**Labour in Libraries 2019**  
**The Awe-ful Spectre of Precarity in Libraries**

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My name is Adena Brons and I'm currently a liaison librarian, on contract, at Simon Fraser University. SFU is located on the traditional, ongoing, and unceded territory of the Coast Salish, including the Musqueam, Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh peoples. I am here representing my research team of Ean Henninger, Chloe Riley, Crystal Yin and myself.

For the past almost two years, the four of us have been conducting research into the issue of precarious employment in libraries. Our research team and research project emerged out of a series of conversations that we realized we were having all the time with our newly graduated and early career librarian friends and colleagues. Where are you working now? How long is your contract? Where else are you working? How many days a week are you working? How many jobs are you working? Where are you applying next? We were and are all still precariously employed.

But to back up - let's start with definitions. According to the International Labour Organization, precarious employment is work that involves "uncertainty as to the duration of employment, multiple possible employers or a disguised or ambiguous employment relationship, a lack of access to social protection and benefits usually associated with employment, low pay, and substantial legal and practical obstacles to joining a trade union and bargaining collectively."

Our research has looked into how people experience and perceive precarious work through interviews with BC library workers. We have an article based on that research that is being published by the Partnership journal; it should be out any day now. Check our twitter! We are also collecting data from the Partnership Job Board to ascertain the prevalence of precarious job postings. These research projects have given us some of the qualitative and quantitative data that is needed to establish the extent of precarity in libraries and its effects.

In this talk, I'm going to expand on that to examine precarity through the lenses of vocational awe, introduced by Fobazi Ettarh in her 2018 paper, and ghostly labour, a metaphor coined by Leo Settoducato in their article in 2019. I will use these concepts to examine precarity as a systemic issue and the library-specific mechanisms that maintain it. *Both authors highlight the erasure of library workers and labour structures in favour of the library as an institution and librarianship as a profession.*

To start with vocational awe, many of you will already be familiar with this term, which Ettarh defined as "the set of ideas, values and assumptions librarians have about themselves, and the profession that result in beliefs that libraries as institutions are inherently good and sacred, and

therefore beyond critique” (Ettarh, 2018). Many of the effects that Ettarh identifies as relating to vocational awe are also implicated in precarity: burnout, low salary, subordinating the needs of the worker to the demands of the institution, and chilling effects around talking about these issues. These were all themes that emerged in our interviews, with participants reporting feelings of isolation in the workplace, vulnerability around speaking up about precarity, and the mental, physical, and financial stress of unstable employment. As Ettarh writes, “In the face of grand missions of literacy and freedom, advocating for your full lunch break feels petty.”

One significant thread of our interviews were examples from precarious workers who delayed personal life events, including travel, marriage, and having children, or made changes to their location or housing situation, because of being in precarious situations. Vocational awe has to work additionally hard here, to make the experience worthwhile.

Ettarh also identifies the key neoliberal operations of vocational awe: “Through its enforcement of awe through the promotion of dramatic and heroic narratives, the institution gains free, or reduced price, labor.” One of the most significant components of precarity is the financial burden that is passed on to the employee - working at a lower rate, or with no long term security, or with in *lieu* payments that don’t match employee benefits, or without pension payments being made or matched. That is, it is the *institution* that gains, literally, financially, from the continuation of precarity. Vocational awe is the narrative that disguises that gain.

Settoducato investigates the death of libraries discourse, unpacking the fear that libraries will die or disappear. They note that the death of libraries discourse “centers specifically on libraries as spaces and institutions” which “overlooks the reality of library *workers*, actual people whose material and emotional needs are denied or compromised in the service of neoliberal capitalism.” They call vocational awe “a foil to death of libraries discourse, vehemently asserting the permanence of libraries.” They go on to say, “such a mindset suggests that it is acceptable for administrators to make decisions that harm workers as long as those decisions will aid the presumed greater good of libraries and keep the institution ‘alive.’” Settoducato takes a different approach: If libraries are dead, they argue, then library workers are ghosts, freed from the demands of the neoliberal library and the limitations of linear time. Ghostly workers haunt the library, revealing the labour that neoliberalism has tried to hide.

The idea of ghostly library workers, invisible themselves but haunting the library and leaving traces of their labour, was a powerful metaphor for the precarious workers we interviewed. I’ve pulled a few key quotes here that speak to prominent themes in our data. If you move around to multiple branches in a system, or work in multiple library systems, you are less connected to the communities and regular patrons. This is disruptive both to the worker and to the institution. Participants felt that they could not provide as high a level of service as they wanted to when they were constantly shuffling between different libraries and different positions.

They also spoke of feeling isolated and devalued by their colleagues. Working heavily on weekends and evenings, they lacked opportunities to build strong relationships with regular colleagues and supervisors. They felt they lacked supervision and opportunities for professional development. Many spoke of feeling scared, stressed, and unsupported. One participant

described how precarious work limited their ability to follow up with a manager after being harassed during an evening shift. In another example, invitations to a staff retirement party were sent only to continuing staff members.

We also saw additional demands being made of the precarious workers that often require work outside of paid hours: to remain current in library trends, to build or maintain relationships, to manage schedules across branches or employers, to seek out professional development opportunities.

Likewise institutional documents such as collective agreements, shift schedules, and working practices can position precarious workers as 'outside' other employees and therefore less visible. For example, precarious workers may be ineligible to serve on working groups, hiring committees, or even to be part of a bargaining unit. In this way, precarious employee's labour becomes invisible to their supervisors and managers. This can negatively affect the relationship library workers have with their colleagues and impact their training, development, and recognition.

In addition, while unions can (and do!) advocate for precarious workers, not all precarious workers feel connected to or represented by their union. Auxiliary or part-time employees may not be present at staff meetings for union updates, or may not be able to attend information sessions, AGMs, or other union-organized events. They are often unable to serve (or may not want the added work) as a union representative. In this way, precarious workers can often be ghostly presences in the unions that represent them.

When looking at the confluence of vocational awe, invisible labour, and precarious work, it seems necessary to question whether conditions in libraries live up to the values they profess as institutions. Many libraries aspire to some form of equity, diversity, and inclusion, but it seems that these values are unevenly applied when it comes to working conditions.

Are we being equitable when perhaps more opportunities (for advancement, for burnout) are given to those who buy in to vocational awe? What happens to those who disengage or push back?

What does diversity mean when precarious workers are more likely to be women, Indigenous, LGBTQ\*, racialized, etc.? How about when the negative effects of precarious work selects for people with the resources to take it on, who may have privilege in other areas as well?

How are we being inclusive when precarious workers are excluded from various kinds of benefits or activities?

And, quite apart from the effects on workers alone, how do turnover, burnout, stress, and other features of precarious work in turn affect workers' ability to support and build relationships with colleagues and the communities they serve?

Some of the answers to these questions have been implied in our research, and they demand further action. The main question then becomes, what actions can we take within the systems we work in to better meet those values, to counter narratives that are built on our own awe or to use our ghostly powers? At CAPAL 2019, we asked **“If you were ten times bolder, what big idea would you suggest to counter the effects of precarious labour in your institution?”** I present some of the answers we received as suggestions for us here, along with some of our own thoughts:

#### Advocacy Actions

- Ask for clear answers from management about how precarious positions can be turned into permanent ones.
- Have open dialogue with senior admin about the negative impacts of precarious jobs for the institution and individual.
- 1) Advocate for others. Use my relative power as a continuing track employee, to speak up for my precarious employed colleagues. 2) Show up for and participate in conversations around precarity. 3) Tweet, cite, and promote data and analysis around precarity.
- Focus groups especially for/(by?) precarious workers.

#### Bargaining actions:

- As a manager the data around the effects of precarity on my employees should be brought into my budget negotiations.
- Bargain a full-time % threshold. i.e. full time staff component will not fall below x% of institutional workforce.
- Allowing term employees extra time at the end of the contract to find other work (and maybe resources). It is incredibly stressful to be applying for jobs as you are still in a position.
- CA language requiring positions longer than 12 months be converted to permanent.

#### Ideas for stably employed colleagues and managers:

- relationship-building/inclusion of precarious colleagues, including:
  - inviting them to participate on relevant task groups (even if they won't be able to serve a full term)
  - inviting them to regular team/unit/dept meetings
  - checking in regularly/taking them for coffee
  - asking them about their experiences & pressures as a precarious worker
  - NOT telling them "i had to do it too,"
  - publicly recognizing their work/contributions in meetings,
  - mentorship,
  - be open to flexibility in scheduling (where possible) in recognition that they may have a 2nd/3rd job

#### Ideas for precariously employed workers:

- Speak up (if you're able to). It's possible to enjoy your work and still critique the larger structures that shape it. Share your experiences, both with other precarious workers and with supervisors and colleagues
- Talk to your local union or faculty association rep if you have one - do they have plans to fight against precarity?
- Share our article! (Shameless self promotion). But if you're not comfortable talking directly about your own experiences, we've collected data from other library workers that you can use as a talking point
- Be more overt about the facts of precarious work--mention that you're on contract. put it in goal setting or annual reporting documents. make visible the invisible/overlooked/*ghostly*. put friction on the narrative that this is fine.

### Imagination Actions

- Be radical! Let's change the hierarchy of the profession not just institution for all library workers.
- I would like my securely employed colleagues to recognize that "the best person for the job" is a neoliberal construct, and that the right person may be the one who's been the job for years, rather than someone from outside the organization.
- I would create an open culture of discussion in my institution where precarious workers could speak freely about other job opportunities as they arise.

Settoducato invites us to "imagine and enact positive futurities," encouraging us to think beyond what is broken, what doesn't work and what we don't like. Along with some of the concrete ideas I've just offered, I'd like to offer a similar invitation for us to imagine more freely. What structures can we imagine beyond the standard employer relationship that are closer to people's wants and needs? What values could we bring into play that are currently stifled or sidelined?

And what's next for our anarcho-syndicalist commune? We are eagerly awaiting the publication of our article, "Perceptions and Experiences of Precarious Employment in Canadian Libraries: An Exploratory Study" (Any day now!)

We're committed to collecting job posting data until November of this year, which will mark 2 years of data collection. Over the winter, we'll look at ways to analyze and share out the findings from that project. And while we are planning to wind down the data collection portion of that project, we are open to passing on the project to another researcher. So if anyone else wants to do some longitudinal data collection and analysis, let me know!