

# ***This Is Contract Faculty Time***

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**ABSTRACT** *This article argues that Maurizio Lazzarato's (2014) book Signs and Machines: Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity is useful for apprehending the employment of contract faculty. After setting the scene of the university, I examine the mixed semiotics of the York University budget. I then look inside CUPE Local 3903's history and politics, and focus on the video This Is Contract Faculty Time: York Faculty in Support of Contract Faculty. In the next section I describe how mixed semiotics operates at the bargaining table. Finally, I review the outcome of collective bargaining with respect to job security, political action, and truth-telling. This case of academic labour struggle shows that semiotization and subjectivation need to be better understood. I conclude with some remarks on challenges, academic freedom, and ways of reforming the faculty employment system.*

**KEYWORDS** *Precarious academic labour; Critical theory; Subjectivity; Semiotics; Unions; Higher education reform*

**RÉSUMÉ** *Cet article soutient que Signs and Machines: Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity (« Signes et machines : le capitalisme et la production de la subjectivité », 2014) de Maurizio Lazzarato est utile pour comprendre le travail des enseignants intérimaires. Après avoir décrit la situation actuelle à l'université, je considère la sémiotique mixte du budget de York University. J'examine ensuite l'histoire et la politique du Syndicat canadien de la fonction publique, section locale 3903, ainsi que le vidéo This Is Contract Faculty Time: York Faculty in Support of Contract Faculty (« C'est le moment de parler des enseignants intérimaires : le corps professoral de York à leur appui »). Dans la section suivante, je montre comment la sémiotique mixte peut aider à mieux comprendre la table de négociation. Enfin, j'évalue les résultats de la négociation collective par rapport à la sécurité d'emploi, l'action politique et l'honnêteté. Cette lutte pour le travail académique montre qu'on a besoin de mieux comprendre la sémiotisation et la subjectivation. Je conclus par quelques remarques sur les défis, la liberté académique et quelques façons de réformer le système d'emploi pour le corps professoral.*

**MOTS CLÉS** *Travail académique précaire; Théorie critique; Subjectivité; Sémiotique; Syndicats; Réforme des études supérieures*

## **Introduction**

One major trend in the Canadian public university has been the dramatic growth in precarious faculty. The challenges to reforming a stratified faculty employment system are enormous when hypermanagerialism rules over faculty governance, software and con-

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sultants are employed by administrators, university media relations shape the representation of the “university;” academic labour inequality has been normalized, and contract faculty are contractually bound in ways that limit their participation in unions and the scholarly community. After the 2008 global financial crisis, the austerity agenda was implemented by university administrators and academic capitalism entered a new phase.

In response to these developments, there has been renewed discussion of academic labour politics and a rising stream of stories about precarious academic labour. In 2011, for example, a Canadian journalist asked “Whatever happened to tenure?” (Findlay, 2011). In 2014, Ira Basen produced “Class Struggle,” a CBC radio documentary about university working conditions. At Western University, the erosion of collegial self-governance sparked “100 Days @ Western: The Alternative Listening Tour” on Facebook and Tumblr to speak the truth to President Amit Chakma. In October 2015, the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) joined a coalition of unions and activists to oppose the casualization of academic work. In December 2015, CBC’s “The Current” covered the situation in Canada where only one in five PhDs are in tenure-track positions. As one recent PhD observed, students are encouraged to pursue their doctorate to obtain a tenure-track job while the university has decreased the rate at which retiring professors are replaced. As she sees it, the problem is not the so-called gap between PhD holders’ “expectations” and the “reality” of the labour market but a systemic problem of reduced funding for permanent faculty.

This article is concerned with the problem of precarious academic labour at the intersection of capitalist economy, subjectivity, and politics. Drawing on the critical theory of Maurizio Lazzarato (2014), I follow the flow of money, labour, and signs in the network university (Hanke, 2016). I contend Lazzarato’s work on capitalism, the production of subjectivity, employment discourse, and the struggles of intermittent cultural workers is useful for apprehending the employment of contract faculty. To begin, I set the scene of the university after the neoliberal revolution. The second part looks at the mixed semiotics of the York University budget. The third part looks inside the history and politics of CUPE Local 3903, the union representing contract faculty at York. Turning to the 2014–2015 collective bargaining cycle, I then focus on the video “This Is Contract Faculty Time” (CUPE 3903, 2015a). The fifth part describes how mixed semiotics operates at the bargaining table to limit the union’s bargaining power. Finally, I review the outcome of collective bargaining with respect to job security and the conclusions Lazzarato (2014) comes to regarding political action and truth-telling. This case of academic labour struggle shows that the role of semiotization and subjectivation needs to be better understood. I also suggest that the scope of academic freedom must be extended from the discursive to the existential dimension of academic lives to articulate the relation between these two levels.

### **After the neoliberal revolution**

The incursion of neoliberal economism into higher education has not gone unnoticed by scholars in communication and cultural studies (e.g., Brownlee 2015; 2016; Dyer-Witthford, 2005; Hanke & Hearn, 2012; Sterne, 2011). However, where there is neoliberalism, there is resistance, as was seen in the Québec student strike against the Liberal provincial government in 2012 (Massumi, Barney, & Sorochan, 2012). Likewise, in the

spring and fall of 2015, a common front of public service employees including teachers engaged in series of rotating strikes against the Québec Liberal government's austerity agenda. The managed university has also been confronted through protests and occupations at the University of Amsterdam and other European cities (Van Reekum, 2015).

And yet there is more complacency than action. Rosalind Gill (2010) argues that at an affective, embodied level of experience, toxic individualism structures the secrecy and silence around precarious lives. We have also seen how the rise of hypermanagerialism has centralized decision-making about a university's administration, finances, and academic mission. In her research on how the growth of university administration is affecting the daily practice of academics, Claire Polster (2012) argues that "academics are responding to what new administrative practices appear to be, rather than what they do; as such, academics are helping to entrench and advance these practice's harmful effects" (p. 116). Alison Hearn (2013) observes that scholars and students in communication and cultural studies seem to be less, rather than more, inclined to engage in a critique of the university. Speaking of the professoriate, Jonathan Sterne (2011) likewise says that there is "great and systematic impetus for doing little of consequence ... As paid intellectuals, we have the luxury of situated transcendence, one that depends on a division of labour" (p. 1856).

In this context, academic-activists must critique centralized administrative rule, the symbolism of university finance, the economic rationality that shapes the enterprise, and the reduction of professional autonomy and academic culture to market discourses of demand and competition. From the perspective of presidents and boards of governors, twentieth-century academic culture must yield to a twenty-first-century planning culture, where IT and management software tools are used to streamline operations. As Stephanie Ross and Larry Savage (2014) argue, "Insofar as faculty and their commitments to particular research and teaching priorities constitute barriers to the internal transformation of universities through prioritization and differentiation, their containment or marginalization in decision-making processes becomes an important goal for university administrators leading restructuring efforts" (p. 10). With the assistance of executive search consultants such as Janet Wright & Associates, the ranks of executives and managers have grown while the influence of professors has waned. At York University, for instance, there was a 58 percent increase in senior executives and middle managers between 2000–2001 and 2014–2015, a 20 percent increase in tenure-stream faculty, and a 182 percent increase in contract faculty (Heron, 2015). Obviously, the standard academic employment relation has been made more flexible. At the same time, full-time faculty are being forced to accept a restricted definition of "research" to compete for research release time. Nothing less is at stake than reversing these trends.

Faculty associations thus need to focus collective attention on precariousness, mobilize members to exercise the right to problematize academic labour, and resist employment policies and managerial practices that de-professionalize academics and exploit precarious academic labour. In unionized university environments, there may be varying degrees of mobilization during collective bargaining for a "fair deal" on issues of workload, salaries, benefits, equity, and faculty complement. But employers

such as York University have refused the faculty association's proposals to increase faculty complement. Some faculty members with lower teaching loads are unwilling to go on strike to support colleagues who have higher teaching loads. The erosion of solidarity at the micro-political level makes it more likely that a managerial stratagem for "good faith" collective bargaining will prevail, so any new collective agreement will be continuous with macro-political trends in labour-management partnerships, management techniques, and "academic leadership" discourse (Bousquet, 2008).

Labour unions maintain the right to problematize employment in the public university system. But reforming the stratified faculty employment system depends upon more faculty, students, and administrators recognizing the long-term social harm that precarious academic labour does to the academic profession and to the public university system. Nearly 20 years ago, the York University Faculty Association (YUFA) went on strike for "equity now" and Diana Cooper-Clark (1997) noted that the issue of overload teaching by YUFA members is "directly related to the destruction and decimation of contract faculty" (p. 5). However, as Nick Dyer-Witheford (2005) has commented,

Faculty bargaining may be no more, or not less, radical than the unionization of various other sectors of the public service. ... Faced with a restive mass of immaterial labour, university administrator's best strategy — backed by centuries of academic hierarchy — is to ensure that the regular and contingent faculty remain divided. (p. 78)

While non-unionized contract faculty are now the exception in English Canada and unionized contract faculty have benefited from unionization, the U.S. Wagner Act model of labour law still promotes a fractured bargaining environment that produces the wage disparity between full time and contract faculty (Hughes & Bell, 2015).

The fall of tenured faculty and the rise of precarious professors might concern unions more if it were not for another split in the workplace where the truth of precarity transpires—between those are affected by "truth tensions" and those who prefer to avoid cognitive stress (Sloterdijk, 2016, p. 401). In response to the stress and burden of precarity, Mariya Ivancheva (2015) sees a growing ethos of academic activism in Europe. However:

In a life of accelerated mobility and inflated demands of work and activist involvement, they create a fake dilemma between political commitment and thorough academic work. It creates a dichotomy between those in permanent position, who can afford time to research, think, and write, but who are critiqued as becoming a part of the establishment, and the precarious academics who have none of these privilege, and whose political work is often seen as a lost cause for their academic advancement. (p. 44)

To widen the conversation about academic labour and equality, to make the truth of precarity come out in situ, faculty need to avoid this dilemma. But while competition for scarce resources has made academics more aware of the inequality engendered by academic capitalism, Ivancheva (2015) also finds that greater awareness does not translate into a greater capacity to mobilize. As long as precariousness characterizes the existence of being a contract faculty member, we can expect there will be strained

relations between those professors who accept material and symbolic privileges without a sense of political interests (*vis-à-vis* the employer's managerial stratagem), or ethics (*vis-à-vis* the community of scholars), and those who struggle to earn a precarious living. Nonetheless, we need to recognize that the invisibility of "part-time" contract faculty and the marginalization of "full-time" faculty parallel each other.

As Pierre Bourdieu (1998) noted, neoliberal discourse is strong and hard to fight. He summarized neoclassical economics as a politics that destroys collectives, "recognizes only individuals, whether it is dealing with companies, trade unions or families" (p. 96). According to Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval (2013), neoliberalism manufactures the "neo-subject"—"enterprising subjects who in turn will reproduce, expand and reinforce the competitive relations between themselves" (p. 262). More recently, Lazzarato (2014) has linked political economy and subjective economy to argue that "neoliberalism has destroyed previous social relations and their forms of subjectivation (worker, communist, or social-democrat subjectivation or national subjectivity, bourgeois subjectivity, etc.)" (p. 8–9). Lazzarato's work, premised upon the inseparability of capitalist economics, politics, and subjectivity, suggests that we need to connect money, labour, signs, and subjectivation within the university. Historically, the division of labour has been a paradigm of subjectivity. In addition to reinforcing the academic division of labour, administrations have weakened faculty governance that would stand in the way of imposing "strategic" priorities and initiatives aligned with neoliberal discourse. Administrators' cost-cutting measures and overreliance on cheap labour have turned good academic jobs into "dead end" jobs. Faculty work to produce and reproduce knowledge, but in response to the division of labour, social subjection divides the faculty body into those that are permanently employed and those who are intermittently employed and unemployed.

Progressive academic labour politics means moving from capitulationism to administrative policy and practices toward organized, constructive, collective action. Ideally, the political interests of progressive faculty converge with contract faculty. But as long as their interests remain divergent and an "us/them" mode of subjectivation shapes micro-power relations, highly—paid administrators can exercise their solidarity to "divide and rule" and externalize the costs of management and its failures onto the academic precariat. If faculty associations are the primary means of protecting our profession, then faculty associations and contract faculty should be in solidarity based on the principle of equal pay for equal work (Pimlott, 2014). But it remains to be seen how many associations representing permanent faculty will "take the lead in modelling ways and means for supporting (not leading) contract faculty in fighting to improve their pay and working conditions" (Pimlott 2014, p. 19) when it comes time to negotiate their own collective agreements.

### **Follow the money**

For Lazzarato (2014), who draws on Félix Guattari's asignifying semiotics, corporate accounting, national budgets and computer languages are abstract modes of semiotization that belong to asignifying semiotics beyond subject/object, sign/thing, and production/representation. "Power signs," for example, act on material flows. University budgets and those that present them are beholden to signification, and complete fi-

nancial disclosure is a prerequisite for bargaining in “good faith.” But the semiotics of “power signs,” such as money, bypass representation and act directly on material flows. Such “power signs” engage real flows to “constitute the semiotics of an economy of possibles” (Lazzarato, 2014, p. 85).

Similar to other public universities, York University has two major sources of income for its operating budget. The first source is Ontario government grants and contracts. The second is student fees. Based on the available data, since 2006, tuition has increased 42 percent for domestic students; for international students, it has risen by more than 50 percent. According to York’s 2014–2017 budget plan, the university’s total revenue in 2014–2015 was \$761.39 million and total expenses were \$770.17 million—with a deficit of \$8.78 million (Brewer, 2014a). Expenses include \$18.3 million allocated to a “strategic investments and contingency fund” created from savings from higher employee pension contributions, investment performance, and government solvency relief. This small deficit is the result of decisions made to transfer funds in and out of other funds, including internally restricted funds. For example, since 2011–2012, the “Campaign for York University” has raised \$113.7 million from alumni, friends, corporations, and foundations, which was not included in the revenues. In the vice-president finance and administration’s October 23, 2014, extended budget plan, a cumulative surplus of \$6.59 million dollars was projected for 2016–2017, \$16.18 million dollars for 2017–2018, and \$7.77 million dollars for 2018–2019 (Brewer, 2014b). While past budgets have projected operating deficits for a decade, annual surpluses are projected for 2015–2018. In addition to projecting surpluses, between June and October 2014, the above-mentioned \$18.3 million, committed to managing institutional risks, disappeared from this extended budget plan.

These projected budgets do not, however, represent York’s actual financial condition. According to YUFA’s analysis of audited financial statements, the university has a cumulative operating surplus of \$176 million (YUFA, 2014a; YUFA 2014b; YUFA, 2015). The university’s accounting procedures for projected budgets obscure the institution’s actual financial history. YUFA’s analysis shows how accounting leeway is used by senior administrators to construct internal “deficits” and “surpluses.” Resources, expenditures, and net worth have all increased, which has enabled senior administrators to reallocate resources toward academic plans and priorities without collegial input. For example, in 2009–2014, management transferred \$241 million from the deficit fund to the internally restricted funds. The “deficit” is also due to managerial decisions about how much money to move in and out of internally restricted funds. From the perspective of the semiology of signification, money is a mediation between equivalents that represents purchasing power. This mode of semiotization calls for a proper reading of accounting, which is what YUFA has done.

We can take this analysis further by looking at the asignifying semiotics of the budget in relation to York’s other union, CUPE 3903. As noted above, operating budgets provide resources to fulfill academic plans. These plans give form to objectives handed down from the president, who serves the board of governors, and “budget constraints” are “transformed into asignifying organizational elements: ‘budgets,’ HR policies, ‘investment plans’” (Lazzarato, 2014, p. 114). If total university expenditure on CUPE 3903

contract faculty is about 3.7 percent, what does this budget figure signify? From the perspective of asignifying semiotics, this figure can be understood as a “power sign” that expresses “money as capital”; it “represents nothing ... except the future exploitation of the labour force” (Lazzarato, 2014, p. 85). The work of senior executives is to transform abstract demands into organizational requirements. Within a university “machine,” budgets go beyond language to transmit orders. “Words and propositions are the ‘input’ and ‘output’ of the machinic enslavement specific to service relations” (Lazzarato, 2014, p. 115).

From the perspective of money as a means of payment, all faculty ought to ask administrators, “Where is all the revenue going? Is it being allocated for academic or non-academic spending? Is it going into the classroom or to administrative salaries, outside consultants and agencies, new campuses or buildings, and advertising campaigns?” As we have seen, projected budgets may not tell faculty what they, as knowing subjects, need to know. From the perspective of asignifying semiology, the university “budget” bypasses signifying semiologies to act on the real by pre-producing a reality that does not yet exist. The “budget” thus functions as a “power sign” that acts on production flows within a public institution that can be considered a machine “because they assemble (machine) multiplicities (people, procedures, semiotics, techniques, rules, etc.)” (Lazzarato, 2014, p. 82). In the social machine of the university, contract faculty, via machinic enslavement, are cogs in the machine.

### **Inside CUPE Local 3903**

The academic labour situation at different universities varies depending on the unions that represent faculty as their collective bargaining agent. YUFA was formed in 1962 but faculty and full-time librarians organized a drive to form a trade union that was certified in 1977. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) mobilized “regular academics” to unionize but it did not lead affiliates to include contract faculty (Hughes & Bell, 2015). As a result, “contract faculty” were not part of YUFA. In 1975, an organizing drive brought together teaching assistants and contract faculty into the Canadian Union of Educational Workers (CUEW). In 1994, CUEW Local 3 amalgamated with the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). Despite the late 1990s vision of merging CUPE contract faculty with YUFA, YUFA’s current collective agreement still allows for “part-time employees” with “instructional responsibilities” outside its bargaining unit.

Today, CUPE 3903 represents 1,578 teaching assistants, 72 graduate assistants, 789 contract faculty, and 21 part-time librarians. General membership meetings, the site of “member-driven democracy,” tend to be composed of a higher number of graduate student activists than non-activist, rank-and-file members. This union could be characterized as a dispersed, loosely knit, network with low participation rates until collective bargaining begins. As an organization with a “social movement” image, political action and arguments are typically based on identity politics and single issues. Activist agendas with multiple interests make it difficult to generate a consensus about what is to be done about job security, or to make political arguments that start from an analysis of how the university works. This means that ending academic precarity may not be collectively sensed and acted upon as an overarching organizational goal.

Within this Local, contract faculty autonomy is also constrained by the executive committee structure. In 2009–2010, in the wake of a financial debacle that put the Local under administration by CUPE National, a working group to restructure the Local into a composite model that would give contract faculty more autonomy was supported by a large majority of contract faculty only to be ruled out of order by the executive committee. Contract faculty are also disconnected from other employees by departmental practices of segregation and the lack of coordinated bargaining across the province. Precariousness is thus an obstacle to participating in unions that represent contract faculty's economic and professional interests.

The word “precarious” means “aleatory, uncertain, unstable, and it refers not only to the uncertainty of the labour relation, but to the fragmentation of time and the unceasing deterritorialization of the factors of social production” (Berardi, 2012, p. 117). Contract faculty are similar to other flexible cognitive workers who do “just in time” knowledge work in network enterprises. At York University, they apply for their jobs every year and departments issue notices of “recommended appointments” in order in order to hire a “fragment of available time, a fractal, compatible with the protocols of interfunctionality, and recombinable with other fragments of time” (Berardi, 2012, p. 118). The four or eight-month, per-course, contract represents the bare minimum of labour time that contract faculty are expected to be available to work. Per-course contracts exclude the labour carried out between contracts to be prepared to teach. Like other info-workers, contract faculty are paid for subjection, but they are also prone to the work method of “academic mobbing”—the use of negative communication to sideline or eliminate an employee (Seguin, 2016).

In 2008–2009, this political-economic context gave impetus to the longest strike in English-Canadian university history (McCreary, 2009; Newstadt, 2008; Shipley, 2009a). Echoing the Situationists during the unrest of May 1968, CUPE 3903's slogan was “Be Realistic: Demand the Impossible” (Shipley, 2009b). Within the political subjectification process of the Local, debates under the aegis of “radical democracy” expressed divisions among general members and “moderate” or “radical” factions (Harman, 2011). In Jason Harman's retrospective view from the bargaining team, the ideal concept of “radical democracy” was potent among activists but lacking in the union's real dynamics. In other words, the means of conducting the strike was democratic in theory but hedged by contradictions in practice.

After the 85-day strike, which included picket lines, a sit-in outside the president's office, and a march from the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities to Queen's Park, York University President Mamdouh Shoukri asserted to the board of governors that he “doesn't do labour relations” (quoted in Nelson, 2009). However, in 2010, he directed the vice-president academic and vice-president finance and administration to conduct a budget resources review. With the hired help of PricewaterhouseCoopers, this led to PRASE (Process Re-Engineering and Service Enhancement) to increase operational efficiencies through a “strong internal audit function” (Education Matters, 2013). PRASE is framed as a “partnership between administrative and academic staff — that works in collaboration to improve processes and services,” but we can read this as a local development in the global university's

“audit land” where “[a]udit technics/cultures use a flexible series of control procedures to differentially declare what is (un)acceptable” (Murphie, 2014, p. 1). While labour relations are left to the Department of Faculty Relations, other senior executives work with outside experts and the PRASE team to evaluate processes. As Lazzarato (2014) further explains:

CEOs and experts “represent themselves and are considered as specialists, not in ‘labour,’ but in ‘processes,’ ‘techniques,’ and ‘tools’. The central role played by process also emerges in monitoring procedures.” What first of all must be monitored and evaluated are the humans-machines systems, the mixed semiotics (signifying, asignifying, symbolic) which together make up ‘processes’ (p. 119)

In 2012, as a part of PRASE, contract faculty allocation and teaching assignments were incorporated into an “Academic Resource Management System” (ARMS). This Web-based application, integrated with Oracle PeopleSoft HCM, reduces redundant data entry in the “hire to pay” process. Thenceforth, contract faculty labour could be managed by department chairs as one part of the academic resource planning process with little or no discussion of “work.”

The strike was ended by the university’s “war of attrition” model of bargaining followed by provincial back-to-work legislation. Addressing faculty senate after the 2008–2009 strike, the president blamed the strike for “costing us many millions of dollars in direct costs” and a 10 percent drop in applications. Responding to news media stories about the labour dispute, he told the assembly that “stories that demonstrate our excellence in teaching, research and student life” are the “types of stories that people should think about when they think of York University” (Shoukri, 2009). To promote its reputation and brand as well as counteract negative publicity, York University has a “Communications and Public Affairs Division.” Its media relations unit employs symbolic semiotics to represent the “university” to the university community, journalists, and the public. Additionally, in the category of “contract faculty,” the president also gives out teaching awards that “demonstrates the value York University attaches to teaching.” York University’s traditional motto is *Tentanda Via*—the way must be tried. After investing in a rebranding exercises, the advertising slogan became “Redefine the Possible,” signifying interdisciplinary ways of seeing. It was later replaced by “This Is My Time”—reportedly at a cost of about \$3 million—which interpellates current and prospective students as future holders of middle-class occupations and professions. Lazzarato (2014) suggests how university advertising and marketing culture can be considered part of management techniques that act on students as customers and faculty as employees. If students believe the promise made by “This Is My Time,” then faculty must fulfill them; “In this interplay, the ideal promised to the consumer becomes the norm of what must be produced” (p. 118).

As “hidden academics” (Rajagopal, 2002), contract faculty have a particularly strong interest in increased visibility because visibility means presence. A mixed-media communication campaign to raise awareness and put public pressure on the administration is a necessary complement to collective bargaining and going on strike. On the one hand, as Lazzarato (2014) explains,

Signifying semiologies (language, stories, discourse) ... are used and exploited as techniques for control and management of the deterritorialization undermining established communities, social relations, politics, and their former mode of subjectivation. (p. 42)

On the other hand, the signifying semiotics of labour media can be used to overcome invisibility and suspend dominant significations.

### **This is contract faculty time**

At the April 2014 CUPE 3903 annual general meeting, I made two motions that were approved. The first was a motion to increase the Local's communication budget from \$7,000 to \$15,000. The second was a motion to reallocate \$57,500 in unspent funds to hire a videographer and a graphics designer to assist the communications committee in producing a mixed-media communications campaign in support of collective bargaining. In September 2014, I was elected to the communications committee.

In developing the Local's communication campaign strategy, the slogan "A Better York is Possible" was created as a linguistic remix of "Redefine the Possible" and the World Social Forum slogan "Another World is Possible." In addition to stretching the field of reference of "Redefine the Possible" to how the university works, the slogan expressed the union's collective aspiration to make the university a better place not only for graduate students and contract faculty but also for undergraduate education. Winning the sympathy and support of students was deemed to be very important. The Canadian Association of Labour Media award-winning website for "A Better York is Possible," (<http://betteryork.ca/>), designed by graphic designer Chad Mohr, was addressed to students and explained in ordinary language why the union was having a strike, how a fair deal could avoid a strike, and how students could help end a strike by sending a message to the president (CUPE 3903, 2015b).

The mixed-media campaign also included the production of a six-part video series (CUPE 3903, 2015c). Here I focus on the production of "This Is Contract Faculty Time" (2015). As the contract faculty member of the communications committee, I took the lead on this video project. The model was Support for Contract Academic Staff (2014), produced by a coalition of professors and students at Western University. Rather than representing contract faculty, it features professors, librarians, and graduate students talking about contract faculty to the administration. The York-based communications committee hired Alex Lisman, a member of the Canadian Freelance Union, a community chapter within Unifor that represents precarious media workers. With degrees in sociology and film production, he had 14 years' experience as a videographer and producer on many student and labour union projects, including the CUPE Ontario 50th anniversary history video. Nine tenured faculty responded to a call for participation. Shooting took place on January 20, 22, and 23, 2015, in their offices. The video was edited on a very tight production schedule, closed captioned, and released on February 15, 2015, before the first bargaining meeting with the conciliator to present job security proposals. The total budget was \$3,719.42 for preproduction, filming, editing, outputting, and uploading to YouTube. At the time of this writing, this video has had 5,941 views.

The interviews were based on five questions: 1) What obligation do members of a scholarly community have to raise the issue of contract faculty and make visible the

problem of academic precarity? 2) What is the problem with the growth of precarious academic employment at York? 3) How have contract faculty contributed to teaching and research in the York scholarly community? 4) How does precarious academic employment undermine the quality of higher education at York? 5) What can the administration do about academic job insecurity to create more sustainable academic livelihoods at York?

The title of this video, “This Is Contract Faculty Time,” was chosen to insert contract faculty employees into the York advertising campaign “This Is My Time.” The opening shot presents a key statistic: “At York University, contract faculty teach 43% of the undergraduate courses. 54% have taught on low paid, course-by-course contracts for five or more years. 30% for more than ten years. But they only represent 3.7% of the total operating budget.” One segment features Stephanie Ross, an expert on social unionism and labour activism. In the last segment, Leo Panitch, an expert in global capitalism, sums up how

we all have an obligation to be very active politically, whether it’s people in administrative positions, or full-time faculty, or indeed, obviously, the people who make up unit two in CUPE 3903 ... vis-a-vis the provincial and federal government to try to turn around the commercialization of the university, the corporatization of the university, and the appalling underfunding of the university.

The closing shot references a YUFA discussion paper (Short, Podur, & Rogers, 2009): “In 2009, a subcommittee of the York University Faculty Association released a discussion paper on the Casualization of Academic Labour at York. To date, the York University administration has yet to acknowledge the problem of precarious academic employment.”

I solicited feedback on this video from Indhu Rajagopal (2002), author of *Hidden Academics: Contract Faculty in Canadian Universities*, which is worth quoting at length:

One can easily see how York University’s commitment to its mission of ‘social justice and collegial governance’ rings hollow, and the top-heavy administration is inclined to pursue short-sighted policies. An instance in point is its continual rejection of the contract faculty’s legitimate claims and insistent denial of their hopes of becoming full-time academics, despite their being fully qualified and fully utilized at a marginal cost. The contract faculty have been carrying nearly half of the total teaching load in the university, all for inequitable remuneration and inelegant terms of employment. It is obvious that the administration cannot hope to fill the classes offered in the university, unless it is prepared to water down the quality of teaching, or replace human creative minds with robotic computers, which will indeed ensure certainty of discipline and control.

The university pursuing the ‘Matthew Effect’ (Merton, 1968) seems to thrive on accumulating advantages from the contract faculty’s precarity! Is it not York U’s time to redress the inequities the contract faculty have bravely suffered so long, and is it not ethical to fairly integrate them into academe?

For Rajagopal (2002), the university's commitment to social justice and collegial self-governance should be developed into an ethical faculty hiring policy. In the video, geography professor Steven Tufts calls upon permanent faculty to use what power they have through their unions or administrative roles to pressure administrations to hire more full-time professors.

In the manner of other short, documentary videos, "This Is Contract Faculty Time" was produced to create what Lazzarato (2014), following Mikhail Bakhtin, calls "dialogical understanding" (p. 190)—taking a position and making a judgement. Sidestepping the "us/them" distinction, it represents the problem of precarity as a common faculty concern and seeks to reconfigure political-ethical space so that "hidden academics" may be perceived as colleagues with the same rights. Addressed to all faculty, it interpellates viewers into a subject position that is political-ethical and affective. It invites reflection and reaction-response-action that expresses reciprocal obligation and inter-union solidarity.

### **Bargaining table talk**

From a labour union perspective, signifying semiology such as the language of collective agreements matters during negotiations. On November 25, 2014, the stage was set for political interlocution about "job security" for contract faculty. CUPE 3903 presented a package of proposals to Barry Miller, the executive director of the Department of Faculty Relations. Using speech, reason, and statistics, the bargaining team took a two-pronged approach to create greater job security and stabilization. First, they argued that the employer had not fulfilled its historical commitment to members of the Affirmative Action Conversion Pool, which enables eligible, qualified contract faculty to move from per-course contracts to tenure-track positions. In 1998, a report to the governance committee of the Faculty of Arts recommended that long-service contract faculty be "compensated for the damage to their career by being automatically converted if they obtained a Ph.D. and published a few articles in scholarly material (in journals or books)" (Young, 1998, p. 7). The CUPE proposal for "automatic conversions" postulated equality where equality does not exist, and demanded reparation for longer service contract faculty. In addition, in order to address the unhealthy faculty complement in York's largest faculty—the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Professional Studies—the bargaining team introduced the principle of internal hiring first for new tenure-track positions, 50 percent of contractually limited appointments, and all teaching stream appointments. Second, in regards to job stabilization, the bargaining team proposed continuing sessional status that would guarantee work to contract faculty who have taught at least one course over three years.

With this bargaining table talk in mind, let us return to mixed semiotics. Lazzarato (2014) maintains that asignifying semiology may matter more than the signifying semiology. He qualifies this by saying signifying and asignifying semiotics operate together "but the relative weight of one with respect to the other changes according to the hierarchical level in which they function" (p. 114). To exemplify this point, we can look at what happened at the bargaining table to the faculty at the bottom of the academic hierarchy. According to its own financial statements, York University had a surplus of \$4.4 million in 2014. At the December 2, 2014, bargaining meeting, Miller responded to

job security proposals by stating that their side of the bargaining table was “under no illusions.” From his perspective on economic “reality,” based on projected budgets that were not on the agenda, the university was in a “financial crisis.” On December 16, he invoked the budget plan to frame employer’s counter-proposals in terms of the need for a “restrained settlement.” In this exchange, we can see the operation of signifying and assignifying semiotics to produce and maintain the condition of contract faculty. At the level of signifying semiotics, there is the language of financial “crisis” and “restraint.” At the assignifying level of a business assemblage, Miller transmitted an order from above in order to limit the union’s bargaining power. In this way, contract faculty, similar to the unemployed, are forced to function as a “flexible and adaptable part of the ‘automatic’ functions of supply and demand” (Lazzarato, 2014, p. 47). From this perspective, it is not surprising that the CUPE 3903 bargaining team’s use of rhetoric to demonstrate the gap between faculty employment equity and administrative logic was not persuasive enough to reach an agreement. To make any modest gains against an intransigent employer, the union would vote to go on strike again.

### **Political challenges and policy prospects**

On its own, CUPE 3903 could not overcome the constraints of a faculty employment system that is based on a language that classifies “full-time faculty” and “contract faculty” and manifests unequal legal rights and obligations. Collective bargaining strategy was based on meliorism, and the possibility of improvements to the previous collective agreement, rather than reforming the faculty employment system. Management discretion in the interpretation of the language of concluded collective agreements extends all the way to arbitration hearings where management can take a reserved rather than broad view of employer’s rights and only a limited duty of reasonableness has developed in case law. This makes the Ontario Confederation of Faculty Association initiative to reform Ontario labour law and policies around precarious academic work extremely important. The Special Advisors to Ontario’s Changing Workplaces Review have released an interim report that marks the next stage of consultation on working conditions and workplace fairness in the province (Mitchell & Murray, 2016).

During the 2014–2015 bargaining year, CUPE 3903 members managed to mobilize for a strong strike vote and negotiate collective agreements that remain at the forefront of the public university sector. A two-pronged approach to job security proposals mitigated somewhat against employer counter-proposals that pit senior contract faculty against junior contract faculty. The introduction of “continuing sessional status” was a first, small step toward job stability. For qualified, long-term contract faculty, however, there was no substantial progress. Indeed, the progressive demand to end precarity was not strong enough. Proposals for the “automatic” conversion of long-term, qualified contract faculty to a probationary tenure-track appointment were initially accepted as worth going out on strike over, but were later dropped, thus betraying the Local’s own ideals for faculty employment equity. In a June, 2016, town hall meeting, the vice-president of finance and administration disclosed that “CUPE conversion” was a \$0.27 million budget line item in the Academic Investment Contingency Fund (Brewer, 2016). In 2015–2016, by comparison, \$10 million was allocated to the SHARP budget model implementation, and \$1.15 million to the schools of business and engineering. These

“cost pressures,” he noted, did not change the overall institutional budget plan. There was no increase in the number of conversions to the “professorial” stream, and the only modest gain was in the number of conversions to the “alternate” stream, which was aligned with the vice-president academic and provost’s goal of expanding teaching stream faculty. The neoliberal principle of competition and the freedom to “pick and choose” was reinforced and any real change in job security was infinitesimal.

For contract faculty, the challenge remains the same: how to build tacit solidarity among faculty and students that is strong enough to fight a regressive academic hiring policy that divides academic labour and produces income disparity in lifelong earnings. This struggle for more equitable academic labour relations, however, should be a research-informed struggle. This special issue of the *Canadian Journal of Communication* (CJC) and the special section of the *International Journal of Communication* (IJOC) on “Communication Activism Research: Engaged Communication Scholarship for Social Justice” map out myriad opportunities for further research (Carragee & Frey, 2016). Academics with expertise in the precarious labour market could take stock of the precarious employment of faculty, staff, and students inside the university. Media scholars in particular could engage in participant-activist research on university media relations and union communications. On the union side, media scholars may find that there is a tendency to devalue professional standards of media work and minimize aesthetic considerations, which undermines meaningful public intervention. Some activists, for instance, criticized the union’s “corporate” or “slick” communications campaign and privileged activist media-making or guerrilla communication. These terms echo dualistic thinking about “mainstream” versus “alternative” media; politically-mediated action (such as elections, negotiation, and arbitration) versus nonviolent direct action or job actions (such as refusal to perform tasks such as turning in grades). The communication strategy of a university-based union should remain open to a multiplicity of semiotics, creativity, music, and noise.

As I have argued above, subprofessional academic labour and substandard faculty employment raises the crucial question of political subjectivation. Lazzarato (2014) insists that the production of subjectivity cannot be separated from economics or politics. He concludes that resistance to capitalism’s production of subjectivity entails “militant” subjectivation that works not only on what we say but on the subject that speaks. Synthesizing subjectivity at the intersection of the discursive and the existential, Lazzarato (2014) argues that: “Subjective mutation is not primarily discursive; it does not primarily have to do with knowledge, information or culture.” Rather it is an “existential affirmation and apprehension of the self, others, and the world” (p. 16).

Following Lazzarato’s (2014) lead, we could do better in Canada studying academic capitalism, employment discourse, and the meanings of categories of employment in public university space. Moreover, to take care of the faculty self would mean concerning oneself with the “ways of doing and saying necessary to occupy the place allocated to us within the social division of labour” (Lazzarato, 2014, p. 246). Lazzarato (2014) emphasizes Foucault’s lectures on *parrēhsia*—the truth telling of someone speaking in assemblies that does not depend on citizenship or socio-legal status. What *parrhe*-siastic utterance comes down to is *dunasteia*—a force of ethical differentiation that

means “taking a position in relation to the self, to others, and to the world” (p. 230). There is a difference here between the professor who possesses “knowledge of *techne*” (p. 235) and risks nothing, and the parrhesiast who runs the risk of provoking conflict and dividing equals.

Galvanizing more professors into political-ethical action is a daunting challenge. As Latour (2013) notes, we can complain about political issues “and yet not even start to make the political enunciation move in such a way as to generate a *Body Politic*” (p. 37). Based on our common lot, a faculty-centred provincial policy and socially responsible vision of institutional sustainability would encompass sustainable academic livelihoods. According to Cynthia Field and Glen Jones (2016), 15 percent of contract faculty have been working for more than 15 years and only 13.1 percent believe they will find a full-time position in the next two years. Only continuous employment can fully protect the full scope of academic freedom, as a pillar of the university. Moreover, defending freedom of expression in teaching and research is as important as defending it in journalism, publishing, policy, and law (Turk, 2014). Wary of negative student feedback, 42 percent of contract faculty indicate they have adjusted their course content (Field & Jones, 2016). Without the protection of tenure, contract faculty may limit their expression of political views. But there is also an existential dimension to precarious academic lives that directly affects the conditions of knowledge production and reproduction. Labour studies show that precarious employment affects household well-being and limits participation in the community (Lewchuck, Laflech, Dyson, Goldring, Mesiner, Procyk, Rosen, Shields, Viducis, & Vrankulj, 2013). What precarious academic workers and indebted students have in common and usually suffer in private is anxiety and stress. This is the less accessible truth that must be spoken to power.

While faculty are unionized, confronting precarious academic work will require more involvement, collaboration, inter-union cooperation, and province-wide coordination in between rounds of collective bargaining. In addition to communication campaigns, there is a time for carefully considered job actions such as a slow-down, work-to-rule, or strike to suspend or stop ordinary work time. Over a decade ago, the CAUT council approved the “pro rata” model, which defines and compensates contract faculty work as a percentage of a regular appointment (CAUT, 2005). Beyond incrementalism in collective bargaining, greater advocacy, anti-precarity task forces, and dynamic resistance on varying scales are needed to intervene in hiring, tenure, and promotion policies. Following the American Association of University Professor’s (AAUP) subcommittee on Contingency and the Profession, the definition of “probationary” could be extended to contract faculty appointments to create tenure lines for qualified, contingent faculty (AAUP, 2010). As well, universities could incorporate the principle of internal hiring first. At the second Fighting Against Casualization Conference at University College London, UK, the two key demands were: “An end to 9-month and other contracts that don’t pay us outside of term time” and “A cap on the percentage of teaching done by casualised staff at every institution” (Goddard, 2015). In the quest for better academic jobs and the production of subjectivity based on rights for all, any or all of the above ways must be tried.

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