Editorial

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The ultimate, hidden truth of the world is that it is something that we make, and could just as easily make differently.

— David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy*

S o much of our current experience of academic libraries and librarianship is presented as the application of common-sense tactics in response to unchangeable, inexorable realities. This special issue of the *Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship* (CJAL) considers whether the seemingly logical pursuit of innovation, accountability, and efficiency in the face of this so-called reality puts academic libraries at risk of becoming irrational or even absurd—that is, marked by contradiction and incoherence, ultimately alienating library workers and their publics.

Academic libraries are bureaucratic and technocratic institutions: highly structured, rule-bound, and rationalized (Lynch 1978). Weber (1968) argues that bureaucratic organizations are optimized, or rationalized, through "precision, speed, unambiguity, knowledge of the files, continuity, discretion, unity, strict subordination, reduction of friction and of material and personal costs" (Allen 2004, 114). In the current climate of austerity in higher education, which asks academic libraries to demonstrate their value to their host institutions by doing more with less, rationalization is a process that would appear to serve academic libraries

well. Yet Weber also contends that rationalization, when carried to an extreme, can become a form of *irrationality*, rendering bureaucracies inefficient, maladaptive, and dehumanizing. Irrationality, evident in managerialism, McDonaldization, the cult of busyness, and discourses of the future and innovation in academic libraries, creates a growing chasm between our stated values and practices, ultimately alienating library workers and their publics (Buschman 2017; Coysh, Denton, and Sloniowski 2018; Glassman 2017; Mirza and Seale 2017; Nicholson 2015; Quinn 2000; Schmidt 2018).

Building on Weber's ideas, David Graeber (2015) goes so far as to claim that bureaucracy is a form of existential violence that infringes upon human imagination and creativity. Graeber observes:

> In reality, bureaucracies are rarely neutral; they are almost always dominated by or favor certain privileged groups . . . they invariably end up giving administrators enormous individual personal power by producing rules so complex and contradictory that they cannot possibly be followed as they stand. Yet in the real world, all these departures from bureaucratic principle are experienced as abuses. (Graeber 2015, 186)

To illustrate his point, Graeber uses as an example a graduate student who goes to the library to read up on coercion yet fails to see the library itself as a space of control and surveillance where anyone may be required to produce an ID card on demand to prove they "belong"—or risk expulsion from the premises. When Juán-Pabló González, a black MLIS student at the Catholic University of America, tried to enter the law library to study on October 10, 2019, displaying his student ID card, a white library worker called campus police, providing yet another example of the very real ways that abuse, power, and "the rules" intersect with race and identity in libraries. In less overtly violent or racist scenarios, circuitous and obtuse bureaucratic processes may still be experienced as forms or abuse or exploitation, particularly by vulnerable populations. In his 2006 *Malinowski Memorial Lecture*, Graeber names a general theory of "interpretive labour"—the labour that goes into interpreting the rules of order created by those with power, generally by subordinates who will bear the consequences of misinterpretation. "Bureaucratic procedure invariably means ignoring all the subtleties of real social existence and reducing everything to preconceived mechanical or statistical formulae," creating "dead zones of the imagination" (Graeber 2012). Graeber implores us to hold these dead zones up to the light—as dreadfully boring as they may be—to avoid becoming complicit in the structures that create them. Indeed, the idea for this special issue grew out of our own feelings of alienation, frustration, and even awe at the often contradictory and frequently incoherent bureaucratic practices and processes within our workplaces— truly dead zones of the imagination—and a shared desire to expose their absurdity in order to push back against them. After all, libraries and librarians (at least in

their most idealized forms) are meant to be hospitable to the imagination. We sought articles and creative works that would help us to see the irrational in the seemingly rational, to recognize the absurd in the commonsensical, and refocus our labour on those practices which might more meaningfully support our constituents and communities. We were excited and heartened by the quality and quantity of proposals we received. Maybe we weren't imagining things after all. We certainly weren't alone.

Unmasking the Irrational

The authors represented here tell a particular story of 21st century academic librarianship, one characterized by institutional processes of rationalization and the games of artifice, compliance, and resistance that library workers offer in return. We see in these articles an emphasis on certain fetishes—the fetishization of commodified value, intellectual and academic freedom, technology, efficiency. We also see the idea of pretense and sham repeated thematically. We see how these fetishizations and pretenses too often accompany library processes and decisions, and the confusion and malaise library workers experience in response. Faking it, poking fun, and working to bring about change though acts of mutual care, critique, and performance are tactics librarians use to both game the system and subvert it.

Donna Lanclos extends her previous work on ethnographic research in libraries, specifically the reluctance of library researchers to ask questions for which they don't already have predetermined answers, to argue that open-ended research rooted in curiosity has the potential to create relationships based in understanding the needs of students and faculty. By rejecting the use of rational measures and examining the ways that our existing structures and processes reinforce normative practices, we open the door to *strategic agency* that might help to dismantle structures of inequality.

Drawing on literature from organizational design and management, Kris Joseph uncovers a peculiar quirk of academic library organizational structures, namely the existence of job titles and departments that isolate digital functions and workflows, a phenomenon Joseph refers to as The Digital Disease. Four interrelated themes frame the symptoms of this recently uncovered disease: organizational design theory and the arrangement of work in academic libraries, the reliance on strategic alignment through buzzwords as a means of coping with uncertainty, the tendency of academic library structures to resemble one another, and challenges associated with knowledge sharing and professional development in hierarchical organizations. While Joseph uses the digital disease as a lens through which to analyze contemporary academic library organizational structures and processes, he notes that its existence highlights pre-existing structural issues within academic libraries.

Lisa Levesque explores technology fetishism in academic libraries as an irrational form of worship. Drawing on contemporary fetishism theory and the work of Bruno Latour in particular, Levesque traces technology's entanglements with social relations and power to demonstrate that academic libraries participate in networks of prestige through their investments in technology and its fetishistic rhetoric. Using fetishism as a lens affords insights into the less visible ways that discovery layers shape research, embedding whiteness and sexism into library practices; it further enables academic libraries to imagine more human-centered approaches to technology.

Lalitha Nataraj, Holly Hampton, Talitha R. Matlin, and Yvonne Nalani Meulemans take on the absurdities of library bureaucracy using critical race theory. An over-reliance on group work and meetings leads to the alienation of workers— particularly BIPOC library workers—who feel disconnected from officious busy work. The bureaucratic nature of academic libraries leads to a *culture of conformance* that is antithetical to the aims of diversity and social justice. Nataraj et al. reveal that the banality of everyday workplace routine harms and alienates the very people that libraries claim to protect.

Sam Popowich makes an important contribution to the raging conversation in libraries about academic freedom, claiming that liberal understandings of academic freedom are based on an irrational conception of reason and individuality as somehow divorced from power. Using examples of recent trans rights debates in both public and academic libraries, Popowich illustrates how libraries take up and concretize the philosophical irrationality of liberalism, lending support to transphobia and thereby repudiating the interests of the counter-publics they purport to serve. Drawing on the work of Antonio Negri, Popowich concludes that in order to better support the rights of marginalized groups, libraries must align their efforts with constituent power.

In harmony with Popowich, Maura Seale and Rafia Mirza take the idea of "value," a concept that is core to rhetorical and discursive strategies of 21st century libraries and liberal democracy, and dig deep into its philosophical underpinnings in order to expose its contradictions. They argue that academic libraries' efforts to demonstrate their worth empirically and rationally is a Sisyphean task premised on a concept of capitalist value that is in itself irrational and thus an impossibility. Seale and Mirza suggest that academic library value must be claimed politically—through an ethics of care, solidarity, and mutual aid to individuals and communities within and around the academic library and amongst different groups of workers within our institutions.

Danya Leebaw encourages us to explore critical performativity in order to challenge the irrational that we encounter in our daily work. She contends that through an ethic of care and an ethos of curiosity even disempowered middle managers can create discursive interventions that subvert and undermine mainstream approaches, creating spaces for "micro-emancipations." Ultimately, Leebaw sees the potential for the development of a critical library management praxis, expanding our understanding of the ways that we might disrupt the status quo. Leebaw speaks to those who participate in management but feel disaffected and disillusioned by their inability to effect authentic change.

Speaking of change agents, Nora Almeida offers a provocative, smart, and fun take on how we might endure the prolonged toll of austerity through performance as a mode of political resistance. She examines the "emotional impact of bottomless and invisible labour and the ways institutions use emotional coercion to promote self-surveillance, meta-work, and hyper-productivity" while also silencing dissent. Using narrative and autoethnographic methods, Almeida offers creative, personal, and absurd forms of protest to critique and perhaps even transform our affective experiences as knowledge workers in the neoliberal academy. In her exploration of soft power and the use of absurdity as a mechanism for cultural disruption, she attempts to circumvent the logical avenues in which criticism normally takes place—from scholarly journals to street protests—and in so doing, demonstrates how "absurd performances confound and disrupt systems in which power is encoded, enacted, and consolidated."

Finally, in keeping with our belief that creative works offer different paths to discovery, have an important place in LIS scholarship, and are particularly well suited to illuminate the veiled and involute irrationality of library bureaucratic practices and efficiency measures, we include three such works here. In the fantastical vein of stories by Borges, Murakami, and Kafka (and with a nod to Charlie Kaufman's 1999 film *Being John Malkovich*), Alan Harnum's flash fiction walks us through the fulfillment of a closed stacks retrieval request made to a special collections librarian. As we don't want to give too much away, suffice to say that consciousness is indeed a curse in the 21st century library. Next, through a series of photographs, Alec Mullender and Marnie James document the large-scale removal of books from Western University's D.B Weldon Library as part of a space "revitalization" project undertaken in 2019. Their photo essay chronicles the impact this "mass culling" of books had on their own research agenda and raises broad questions about the functions and uses of libraries in our current neoliberal era, in particular, the prioritization of study spaces and communal areas at the expense of a well-respected physical collection. Finally, comprising five artists' books and book objects housed

in a handmade box, Andrea Kohashi's *The Efficiency Toolkit*, presented here with a statement followed by a series of videos, explores the human desire to be more productive. Kohashi considers how "outmoded" technologies from letterpress printing to hand book-binding, themselves once progenitors of change in the name of efficiency and innovation, continue to play a role in her work as a book artist and a librarian in special collections and archives. Providing meaningful access to rare and unique items frequently requires laborious processing or original cataloguing and, much like producing artists' books, these inefficient methods are integral to the access and understanding of these collection materials. Presented in the guise of a pedagogical tool, *The Efficiency Toolkit* is a provocation to investigate the absurd and potentially detrimental and dehumanizing aspects of striving for efficiency.

Engaging with the Irrational during a Global Crisis

We cannot leave without acknowledging the extraordinary context in which this issue was produced. The global pandemic hit hard in March 2020 and most of the authors writing for this issue, as well as colleagues reviewing for it, and the editorial team at CJAL, were all displaced from their libraries, labouring from home, working long hours online to meet the at times frantic needs of users while balancing their own personal and family responsibilities, all under considerable duress.

For a short time, it felt like the world was on hold. Our campuses shut down—some faster than others—but eventually, we were all following work from home orders and the directive to "pivot" to online only services. We pressed pause and braced ourselves for the worst. The unknown. We three editors held a conference call where we uneasily asked each other, Should we go on? Is it fair to go on? Can we go on? In the end, we opted for a middle path, acknowledging that along with those for whom writing was unfathomable, there were others who found it helpful. Taking our cue from the editorial team at the *Feminist Review* who advocated in early March 2020 for slowing things down and taking good care in this moment of crisis, we relaxed our deadlines. We softened our language in email communication to both authors and potential reviewers, reminding everyone that their health came first and that publishing deadlines could wait. At one point we agreed to go with a rolling submission process and take what we could, when it was available. A few authors bowed out in the name of self-preservation and some wise peer reviewers too. We wished them well, and we still hope to see their work make it to press one day.

Around mid-summer, things began to shift. Subtly. We started hearing about "a new normal." Our neighbours to the south began preparing to reopen their campuses, pandemic be damned. Football, after all, must go on. In Canada, our university libraries started feeling the pressure to respond to faculty demands for access to

print and archival collections, and eventually, one by one, curbside pick-up, home delivery, and document delivery services began. Those among us who continued to work from home became accustomed to online research consultations and classes. Teaching in the online environment was not only necessary, but desirable in the face of the terrible option of calling students back to campus and putting everyone at great risk. We figured out how to carry on with the work of institutional governance and its accompanying bureaucracy through Zoom. Tweaks to home work spaces were made as we settled in for the long haul. What had been previously thought impossible was now our daily routine. And this special issue continued to come together, somewhat miraculously, without significant setbacks. Also framing our authors' explorations of the contradictions of bureaucracy was the distracting and seemingly endless (and endlessly bizarre) electoral process in the United States. As multiple narratives proliferated and frivolous lawsuits metastasized, it became hard to focus on anything else. And yet the use of arcane rules and strained legal interpretations also underlined the irrationality, the illogic of the American empire and its leading oligarch—the very same irrationality that we wanted to illuminate on the micro-level in this issue.

In the midst of this endless upheaval, we, along with the rest of the world, were shocked and saddened to learn of David Graeber's untimely death at age 59. Graeber was not a victim of COVID-19; the cause of his death is as yet undisclosed. He was just one of the millions of people who have died during the pandemic. We write of him here because his work has had a profound impact on our collective thinking about the irrationality of the academy and the economy. His influence is evident throughout this volume, from his insights into the ways that bureaucracy runs, ruins, and regulates our lives to his astute observations into the ways that we spend our time doing everything but that which makes us happy in service to our employers and the myriad bullshit tasks they conjure. Graeber's writing was uniquely accessible, but never trite. He was able to name and call out bullshit that many of us experience but cannot articulate. To mark his passing, an Intergalactic Memorial Carnival (carnival4David) was held across the globe. From a Protest Against the Death of David Graeber in Montreal to public readings of his work in Beijing, Graeber's friends, fans, and followers gathered publicly to pay homage to him in a spirit of joviality and performance. Meeting sadness with merriment serves as a tribute to Graeber's refusal to capitulate to the expectations of authority and "norms." He is missed. We would like to dedicate this special issue of CJAL to him in recognition of his influence on our thinking.

Looking back over the strange period that marked the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic and the production of this issue, we realize we have all accomplished so much. We have worked harder than ever before, hunched over

laptops, some with cats trying to sit on the keyboard demanding attention, others with kids needing assistance navigating the world of emergency online learning—a whole new definition of interpretive labour presented itself as we learned new platforms and re-learned algebra and how to write book reports. The universities where we work will never be the same as a result. The more fortunate among us have not seen our salaries and benefits interrupted. But the less fortunate, particularly racialized and precarious workers, and those much farther down the pay scale, have had to return to the library, their labour suddenly deemed essential when it was previously largely invisible. Someone has to go to the stacks to retrieve the books that need to be scanned for reserves. Someone has to coordinate the laptop loan programs so students have access to the technology they need. At the same time, many positions, particularly staff positions, have been lost. How many? We can't say, since it's not the sort of number that goes out in the weekly wellness newsletter from the administration.

An additional problem is that information that would usually be transmitted via random or casual hallway encounters has been lost, a major blow to organizing efforts and solidarity between bargaining units. "Whether we call it storytelling, rumor, or telling tales, gossip is an old strategy and can be a profoundly political act. . . . a way to subvert established norms, procedures, and assumptions," particularly for those in marginalized or disenfranchised groups (Yousefi 2017, 98). We struggle to regain or redevelop new strategies for staying connected with colleagues and sharing our stories, while some administrations make increasingly centralized, unilateral decisions. At the same time, we also acknowledge that other managers and administrators have engaged, and continue to engage, in often invisible acts of compassion and humane-ness, leveraging their positions to protect us when they can, while working unimaginably long hours.

And still. What will the "new-new normal" look like post-pandemic? Will we see these lost colleagues hired back? Will we ever go back to a model of mainly face-to-face classes? What sort of rationalizations will be made by university administrators to maintain what started as emergency measures? What opportunities will be "leveraged" from the crisis? What will be kept in the name of innovation and resilience? Just because we can run the university this way doesn't mean we should. While there have undoubtedly been some success stories with the pivot to online, we must be aware of moves to capitalize on changes that have negatively impacted the lives of faculty and students (OCUFA 2020) in the name of "organizational agility" or "the future of work."

Consequently, as we neared the conclusion of this project we began to see that this CJAL issue on the irrational in libraries was not simply a coping mechanism for those

of us needing a distraction during this long, lonely, dreary, and grief-filled period, nor was it a trivial pursuit. What became clear in the universities' and academic libraries' sometimes brutal response to the pandemic was how we have become driven by fear: fear of being closed down, fear of irrelevance, fear of cuts, fear of being bold, fear of being sued, fear of criticism, and fear of doing what's right over what's valued in corporate university settings. That fear manifests itself in the repetition compulsion of our bureaucratic fetishes and performances as documented by the authors in this issue—and thus we believe this issue is a necessary and timely intervention in our professional and scholarly conversations.

While the next CJAL issue will address crisis as a trope in our profession more directly, in this issue we lay a foundation for what will follow. In this issue we see humorous and sometimes scathing critiques of librarianship's fetishes— for efficiency, for unreflective technological solutions and digital everything, for uncritical embraces of "core democratic values," for unfettered bureaucracy, and for procedures designed to make one feel seen while being trampled, coerced, and invisibilized. These fetishes emerge from and are produced by the anxiety of living life under neoliberalism, and they are compulsively repeated, encoded, enacted and consolidated in the discourse of crisis. And indeed we are a profession that is marginal on campus and in capitalism—within neoliberal logics, libraries are, after all, just expensive cost centres that do not contribute to the university's profit margin directly, and therefore always liable to cuts, closures, and disruption. The fear is real. The system seeks to break us until we conform to its terrible, deadening (ir)rationality

But in our panic to avoid a dire fate, in our capitulation to neoliberal rhetoric and practices which we describe as "strategic alignment" rather than what it is— complicity—we irrationally abandon the alliances and solidarities that might carry us through austerity and into the future. What if we oriented our work around making things better in the world instead? As our authors insist, such a goal can only be achieved through alignment with the power of the grassroots and not with the power of our boards of governors and political leaders. And we must move beyond survival as the only horizon.

Far from empty critique or toothless satire, the authors featured here take a revolutionary stance, and while shining light on the hollow stageyness of our futile bureaucratic gestures, they also offer counter-narratives for how we might critically perform a visible resistance to such deceptions. Can we use pretense to stop pretending? In faking it can we unmake it? The rational resistance to neoliberal irrationality in academic libraries begins with solidarity, care, showing up, checking in, and, please—more creative, funny interruptions that make us look at things aslant. Because the only way out—if there is an out—is through, together.

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