

## [Navigating the Changing Landscape of Scholarly Book Publishing in Literary and Cultural Studies, Part 6](#)

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A post from [Feeding the Elephant: A Forum for Scholarly Communications](#).

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*This post was developed from a virtual panel conversation that took place at the Modern Language Association 2022 meeting in January, organized by the [MLA Publications Committee](#). Throughout the week, the Elephant has published one post per day from each of the six interlocutors on the themes of [Change](#), [Generations](#), [Experiments](#), [Open](#), [Fit](#), concluding with today's post on Labor. As always, readers are invited to continue the conversation in the comments. -Eds.*

### **Labor**

Rebecca Colesworthy, senior acquisitions editor, SUNY Press

I love conversations like this one at MLA because I genuinely think it's crucial to demystify not only the process of publishing for authors but also the conditions of university press publishing—especially in 2022 as we close out the second year of a global pandemic. While authors and publishers face unique challenges, some of our challenges are very much the same. To some degree, our working conditions are your working conditions.

Many of us are working remotely or, in the case of some of my colleagues at other presses, wishing we could work remotely. We have children at home—in quarantine, running rampant, homeschooling—while working full-time, which basically means working all the time to compensate. For the most part, we do not have job protections. [The pay](#) varies widely and can be scandalously low. As more and more tasks accrue to individual staff members, seemingly central job functions—like, say, reading proposals if one is an acquisitions editor—get relegated to nights and weekends. Other functions are routinely outsourced and constitute freelance markets around university presses. Some of those functions should be covered by the press (e.g., copyediting) but others typically fall to the author to subsidize (e.g., indexing, [developmental editing](#)). I have also seen listings for short-term acquisitions editor gigs that might seem like a great chance to get one's foot in the door but are really just a harbinger of yet further casualization of higher education workers.

It's significant and telling that we've seen organizing and unionizing at a handful of university presses this year just as other higher education workers have become, according to one *Chronicle of Higher Education* [headline](#), a “new force in American labor.” In her presentation, [Courtney](#) noted some of the factors that have contributed to ever-growing interest among authors in writing more experimental or hybrid works. I would add to these factors the collapse of the tenure-track job market. If authors are worried about more experimental or public-facing books “counting” the same

as a conventional monograph as they try to secure a tenure-track faculty position or tenure, they are also, in my experience, sometimes driven to write those kinds of books precisely because they don't know if they will be able to stay in academia. And, if those in relatively secure faculty positions want to reach beyond academia, it is at least sometimes because they are worried about the long-term survival of academic audiences. Amid casualization they are no longer sure who they are ultimately writing to and for. Moreover, I think the impression is often that this is exactly what UPs *want*—that is, for authors to write more public-facing books with so-called crossover appeal. While my own response to this impression would be a heavily footnoted “well, sort of,” authors' suspicions are not entirely off-base. [Parneshia](#) noted how Northwestern UP is pushing past thinking about scholarly versus trade books in rigid, distinct categories and, though our approaches may vary, we are for sure all thinking about our books' markets and issues of sustainability.

Of course, casualization has another effect that's relevant here. University press work is often identified as an “alternative” academic career path—and understandably so. In reflecting on the realities of UP working conditions, my goal isn't to dissuade people from pursuing UP work but rather to paint a fuller picture of what our work often looks like.

I routinely say—and have admittedly said before on [Feeding the Elephant](#)—that I work with people more than I work with texts. When I say this, I above all have in mind authors—and, indeed, *lots* of authors, at all different stages of the process. Editors often remain the de facto primary point person long after a book has gone into production and even been published. That's not a bad thing! We may hope to publish an author's *next* book or they may connect us to other authors, so maintaining those relationships is crucial.

It bears underscoring though that authors are far from the only people with whom we work. Indeed, one thing the pandemic has made clear is just how many people touch and shape a book on its way from proposal to print—editors, peer reviewers, series editors, editorial boards, production managers, copyeditors, typesetters, cover designers, printers, and more. The way all of these people tend to get discussed by both authors and publishers is in terms of delays and supply chain issues. We discuss them, in other words, as if they were *things*—e.g., “reader reports haven't come in” or “there's a paper shortage.” But what these complaints encode is just how many people are needed to create a book. It's common to quip that the monograph is dying if not already dead—not least because, as [Jennifer](#) and [Mahinder](#) noted, the sales to libraries of traditional monographs have long since plummeted to unsustainable levels. But a monograph is never a work of solitary genius. Acknowledgments and footnotes only tell half the story of just how social and collaborative its creation is.

So what does all of this mean for authors? I think it's crucial for authors to feel empowered to ask questions about anything and everything throughout the publishing process—about contracts, about the review process, you name it. I actually think this is an equity and inclusion issue. It's our job as editors to be open and transparent and not to assume foreknowledge about how processes work. At the same time, it's important for authors to know that editors and presses only have so much flexibility and control—due to our finances, due to our workloads and workflows, due to our timelines, and, yes, due to the fact that there are so many *people* involved in the publishing process, the vast majority of whom are, quite frankly, tired and struggling in various ways. What is “urgent” on our end may not always line up with what is “urgent” on authors' ends.

Despite all this, we continue making scores of smart, beautiful books each year and we remain invested in doing so! But I do think it's important to remember that we are in this together and trying to figure out this ever-changing landscape just like you are. We are nonprofit organizations, some with financial support from our parent institutions and some without, many understaffed, trying to figure out how to move forward in sustainable ways while continuing to shape, drive, and foster important scholarly conversations—conversations that we care about as much as authors do.

**Rebecca Colesworthy** is a senior acquisitions editor at SUNY Press. Her areas include literary and cultural studies, Latin American and Latinx studies, women's and gender studies, queer studies, and education. She is also the author of *Returning the Gift: Modernism and the Thought of Exchange* (Oxford UP, 2018) and currently serves on the Executive Council of the MLA.

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Have something to say on this topic? Reply to this post or [email the Elephant](#) about writing for us. We welcome submissions from stakeholders on all sides of scholarly publishing.