

Poetic Labor Project

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\$10 an hour in The Salinas Valley, Greenfield, California

I remember that I used to think that \$10 an hour for labor was a lot. Maybe I still do. Just the other day a painter I know, just before leaving the large warehouse where we share studio space with many others, said, “I’m leaving now to go work for \$10 an hour.” I believe she meant it sarcastically, but a large part of me jumped at the thought that that was a healthy sum. I remember wondering if I’d ever make \$10 an hour. I worked in a restaurant directly out of high school, topping out at just under \$9 after five years. I often wondered if I’d ever surpass that mark. I didn’t expect to, and didn’t really have the cultural or educational capital to figure out quite how to do so. I thought that maybe college might have something to do with breaking past the \$10 an hour limit, but didn’t have the external resources available, nor was I avidly searching for them. Today, \$10 an hour still seems a rightly sum; it’s a handsome number, the zero giving it fullness.

After working the restaurant job, about the time I had decided to go back to community college, I was looking for work, hoping to find something for \$10 an hour. My dad had been working a non-union construction job in the Salinas Valley of California. His friend who was living in Gilroy, California doing job-site management had hooked him up. So my dad hooked me up, and I had a non-union construction job starting at \$10 an hour. This was in the summer of 1995 after a particularly bad El Nino season. That was the year that a lot of the Salinas Valley’s farmland flooded. The Salinas River had eaten away at banks, broke open levees, and even shut down US 101 for a brief spell. If you had driven that stretch of US 101 between King City and Salinas at that time you could see water covering all the crops of onions, garlic, celery, broccoli, cauliflower that you usually see stretching to the foothills on either side of the valley.

The job site was on a farmer’s land where the Salinas River had blown out a riverbank that abutted the farmer’s property. The river had washed sand, silt, mud, and grass all across his farmland, so it was our job to transport much of that in dump trucks and build up a new embankment. The operation was this: the skid steel loader loaded the dump trucks with the sand and debris, and then the dump trucks would transport their loads to designated areas. A bulldozer had pushed together sand and mud into a series of two sand bridges for the dump trucks to navigate into and out of the river bed.

We were told that we, along with three other guys my dad had been working with on another job, would each have a dump truck to drive. The job was simple: drive into the river bed, crossing the two sand bridges, set up next to the skid steel loader while it loads your truck, then get back out of the river and dump your load in the designated spot. I jumped into the truck, an A40 Volvo Articulated Dump Truck, six large wheels each the size of a vw bug. I had no experience driving the enormous truck, but neither had my dad, and he had explained some of the ins and outs of driving it to me; he had done that same job on another site. He had warned me the bouncing around in the cab was tough on internal organs, so I had brought a “kidney-belt” for my midriff from my motocross days. He told me to be sure to strap myself in real tight before setting out. I studied the owner’s manual for about 15 minutes. There were few words, just large pictures with directions, graphics reminiscent of crash landing directions on airplanes.



I started it up. It was like driving a large Uhaul in that it was bouncy, and the brakes worked quite well. The foreman, who I had been introduced to earlier, eyed me with a blank stare, giving me, to my mind, tacit understanding that I would be training on the job. I had been assured by a few of the guys there, including my dad, that I could pick it up. I started out on my first pass into the riverbed, heading toward the first sand bridge to cross over and down into the riverbed. Previous passes from from the other dump trucks had left deep grooves in the sand bridge, as well as loosened the overall structure.

As I drove across, reaching about halfway, the sand bridge gave way to the right, tipping the dump truck and causing it to slide sideways down the side of the collapsing bridge. I pushed on the brake pedal, pumping it maniacally. I was in a harness, so when the dump truck came to rest on its side, I was left hanging in the harness. It all happened in a few seconds, and I don't remember hearing anything except a roaring engine, then a kind of silence as it slumped sideways into the sand, silt and mud.

I climbed out of the dump truck, circled around its sunken edge and found everyone standing around its underbelly in silence, staring at what looked like an exploded ordnance, which I quickly realized was the enormous drive train that had exploded into shards of tangled metal. After about ten seconds, which felt like thirty minutes, the foreman, Tony, asked the job site mechanic, "How much you think that part is?" The mechanic, taking his hat off and wiping his brow, said, "ten thousand about." After about another ten seconds of silence, the foreman asked the job site mechanic, "Where we need to get the parts from?" The mechanic thought for beat, put his hat back on, and said, "Sweden." Another ten seconds of silence. There was a short discussion about the sand bridge, how to shore it up, and a warning to others about crossing the sand bridges. The foreman told everyone to get back in their trucks and keep going, explaining the job was probably set back another three weeks, probably costing about \$250,000.

It was true that the sand bridge had been weakened, and that if I had had a few passes at trucking out mud with success, I probably would have been fine. But the humiliation of exploding the drive train of a million dollar dump truck was the push I needed to tell myself that that kind of work wasn't for me, wasn't my calling, and that even though it was \$10 an hour, it wasn't worth nearly killing myself or someone else.

My dad's friend, Larry, who had hooked us up with the work, told me later that that stuff happened all the time, and that the week earlier someone had driven a scoop loader into one of the tires on one of the dump trucks, exploding the tire. It cost \$3000 just to replace. That made me feel a little better. But I never really wanted to go back and try driving heavy equipment again.

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Last week I was talking with the new Dean of Language Arts at the community college where I am a full-time English Instructor. I was explaining to her the image that I have of what it means to teach English Composition at a community college in California, especially in an urban area (San Jose in this case). I explained to her that after teaching composition in the Bay Area for seven years, the most apt metaphor I have is that it feels like crashing an airplane in slow motion that lasts sixteen weeks. After about teaching three years I gave up the fact that the plane would ever take off, learning that taking off

is not really the point. The point is to learn how to crash the plane well. Or better, to learn how to comport oneself while it crashes, to be vulnerable, to open oneself to the students so when the plane is going down – it goes down every single time – some of them will say to themselves, “I’m following that guy out of this mess.” In short, as I learn to trust myself more, some of the students trust me more, and there begins teaching. I haven’t really moved on much from that experience of crashing the dump truck, except that now I do it in slow motion in front a bunch of strangers. And I get paid more than \$10 an hour to do so.

ERICA LEWIS is a fine arts publicist in San Francisco. She has worked in public relations since college, in Chicago and the Bay Area. Books include collaborations with artist Mark Stephen Finein, *camera obscura* (BlazeVox Books) and *the precipice of jupiter* (Queue Books); a new solo chapbook project is forthcoming from Ypolita Press.

When I first received the invitation to contribute to the PLP, my initial reaction was “no.” In my “real world” job, this is one of the busiest times of the year, and if I chose to write something, it would not be my finest work. I just did not have the time to be witty or do research, or write what I really wanted to say the way that I wanted to say it. Because my work schedule was killing me. Which leads me to write about my old friend balance, or rather, the fluctuating balance between work life and writing life. What I give up on both ends of the spectrum to maintain a semblance of equilibrium between the two.

My writing and work life are endeavors that I try to keep very separate. Not mixing the two has been my way of maintaining a pseudo-balance between “day job” and “artist.” I am very guarded about that line, although a writer friend reminded me recently about a time when that line was severely blurred. She asked if I still wrote poems on a notebook in my lap while I drove to work, recalling years ago when my morning commute was really the only time that I had to myself and my thoughts. I had forgotten about that. That was – quite literally - a dangerous time. I mean, who tries to write while driving down 280?! My work life has changed quite a bit since then. It is still a constant struggle to maintain a balance, a true separation, between work and art. I still work a lot and have fairly little “free” time, but, happily, I am in a place where I can say no, I no longer have to write in my car.

I am a theater publicist. What, in the old days, would have been called a flack. I work for money publicizing theater companies, dance companies, circus troupes, and their various stage productions. I write press releases, art direct photo shoots, and work with the media – theater critics, radio hosts, tv reporters, bloggers, et al – to place stories and ensure reviews of my theater’s productions. I have had the opportunity to work with some amazing performers, directors, playwrights and journalists; I’ve also had my fair share of dealing with numerous “egos” and “crazies.” I’ve been doing this in the Bay Area for about 10 years. And I’m good at it. Really. Two years ago, *SF Weekly* voted me the best theater publicist in the Bay Area. But I am also well aware how all consuming my day job can be; technically, I am always on call. Staying on top of things, no matter what time it may be, is one of the things that I am known for. There is the occasional 5am text from a reporter. The sleep-rousing phone call on my day off from a publication

looking to fact check. The neurotic actress leaving voicemail after voicemail about info she let “slip” to a reporter. Or, helping a critic on deadline, in the middle of the night, who happened to leave their press materials in the restroom of the theater they are on deadline to review. I wake up in the middle of the night with anxiety about getting my theaters coverage in the ever-shrinking world of newspapers and arts reporting. I go to sleep thinking about the list of pitches I have to send the next morning, who I haven’t heard back from, and who I need to check in with. I am well aware that my workalcoholic tendencies intrude upon my artistic life. It’s hard to switch from one mode to another. I don’t get out nearly as much as I should. I am way behind on my reading. Sometimes I’m just too mentally and physically drained to even think about writing. I’m not complaining; these are just the facts. The fact is I have taken to sleeping with a stack of books beside my bed, poems of people whose writing I admire, those that I don’t stay in touch with nearly as much as I would like, and those whose work just makes me “feel better.” I am a big fan these days of writing that makes me “feel” better.

Whenever anyone at my day job asks about my life as a poet I am rather shocked. I am also loathe to really answer them about my life as a poet because in my mind it crosses the necessary divide between personal and private, what I want to share about myself as an artist with the people I have to work with on a daily basis. Conversely, few people in my immediate artistic community know what I actually do to make money. My poet friends just know that I am “always busy” or always “have a show.” I always feel that because I make my money in the fine arts world that it’s wrong to talk about it in detail with my art world friends. I have also found that it takes a fair amount of explaining to both groups about what I do in my professional life and what I do in my artistic life. For the people in my writing community, what they really need to know about me is more or less on the page. For the people that I work with, what they need to know about me is pretty much what they see everyday – someone who is reliable, and organized, and who will take your call at 5 in the morning. Sometimes the two worlds unexpectedly collide, like on the day I found out that a poet who was reading at an event I was hosting the following weekend was also the print broker for the theater I was working at; he literally stood in my office, right in front of me, for a good 10 minutes without recognizing who I was; I could tell from the look on his face that it just didn’t compute that I existed outside of the poetry bubble, and frankly, I was just as surprised to see him standing by my desk. I don’t know how I would react if someone from my day job randomly showed up one of my poetry readings.

Three years ago I quit my stable and fairly well-paid position at an agency to strike out on my own. I had a solid part time job as an in-house publicist for one theater company and a few freelance clients lined up. The idea was to work fewer hours, thereby

freeing up more time for writing and other artistic endeavors. Cut to the present and I find myself working almost as many hours, if not more, than before I quit my job, with fewer benefits and less time to write! While I do have flexibility with my hours and what some would say a luxury in working mostly from home, and more freelance clients than I originally anticipated, there is way more stress and responsibility attached to my daily work life now that it's my name on the letterhead, so to speak. I sometimes question why I'm still doing this or whether or not I still love what I do as a publicist in the arts – this was my dream job and it glittered, and now, after 10 years, some of that glitter has worn off, to be quite honest. After all this time, it's only natural to feel a little bit jaded. But, this job is also what allows me to continue to write the way that I write and to grow in my writing practice – to buy the books and music and magazines from which I pull influences; the opportunity to experience (for better or worse) the innermost thoughts and behind the scenes practices of some of today's up and coming and established writers, journalists, and theater artists. In a way, I feel as if my writing has become more focused and spontaneous, perhaps more emotional, because of all of the changes and challenges of my day job. So, when I think about it, and I often do, I tell myself that I should never regret the decision I made to leave my agency job, to have taken that leap of faith. It's been difficult emotionally, financially, and artistically, but it has also been rewarding.

STEFANI BARBER moved from the West coast where she was born, raised, & cultivated, to New York in 2006 to pursue a career in journalism. She now works in broadcast news as an associate producer, researching, booking, wrangling, writing, shooting, and editing. Her work has appeared most recently in Aufgabe #9. A chapbook, *non eligible respondent*, was published by TAXT press in 2006. Her work also appears in the Bay Poetics anthology (Faux Press, 2006), The Capilano Review, and *Step Into a World: A Global Anthology of the New Black Literature* (Wiley, John & Sons, 2000), among other publications.

Coincidence of something primal— the primal scene witness then fear— new York city

demands— an empty vessel / overflowing with oneself

& this was lost in the transition— from the one coast to the other— the one idea of oneself— to the other—

or was it a burial— this thing that I hoped would someday break the surface— the work in the meantime stamping—

A flight again, & the people there— I tell myself, this is the poetry of *experience*— believing all of this to be *written* somewhere—

(the dirty blue notebook almost forgotten & with half a mind to leave unremarked— its hiding place under the airplane seat—

because what I do— the harder I work at it— begins to take on that function— bridging— confounding— the foreign landscapes— & people's ways of being— forces a different self— to surface—

(is still a choice that has drained me— the best hours spent in pursuit of my material survival— & not the other kind— where I work for “free”—

invest in something— whose return is mostly intangible—

impossible to shake off— to reposition my stance— look inside at space—

Take those quiet hours— own them—

without fear—

(I create a special morning — but that time of day — is not mine

We are people— we are like birds—

& the little books of verse on the train— in that, no different than the religious
at first it was strange to read this way— I believed the act requiring solitude— some
control

over one's circumstances— *but that's not how it's done here—*

so in the din— among the religious— little books of verse carve out—

songs from branch to branch, beside the highway— breasts of crimson & olive—

this is a beginning, a way inside, which becomes a way out, & to connect—
because being unmoored— exacts such a cost— one that somehow, seems easier to
pay—

but when the little creatures land—

at the kitchen sink— long foreign drives—

banishing morbidity—

seated with my candles burning—

I know you can. I love you.

Is the time to be free.

Before the continuous pouring process changed everything, ROBERT MITTENTHAL spent a summer in a steel mill working a number of jobs with impressive titles, including: assistant nozzleman, slagger, hooker and head hooker. He also worked as a janitor, dishwasher, library clerk and bookstore clerk prior to beginning a long career in the legal industry as a paralegal and litigation support person. His new book, *Wax World*, is just out from Chax. He blogs from Seattle at <http://rmutts.blogspot.com>

Day and Night – Night and Day

*Day and night, night and day, why is it so
That this longing for you follows wherever I go
In the roaring traffics boom
In the silence of my lonely room
I think of you*

*Day and night, night and day
Under the hide of me
There's an oh such a hungry yearning burning inside of me
And this torment wont be through
Until you let me spend my life making love to you*

OK – I'm not really here to talk about how Sinatra powerfully translates Cole Porter into swoonsong, but about how [Jacques Ranciere's *Nights of Labor*](#) might help articulate the problem of labor in a way that forces us to think, that induces us to take a risk.

I've been reading Ranciere's *La Nuit Des Proletaires*, a history of "nights snatched" or reclaimed "from the normal round of work and repose." The workers' frustration was with the time sunk maintaining "indefinitely the forces [of their own] servitude... the humiliating absurdity of having to go out begging, day after day, for their labor in which one's life was lost."

Ranciere's archival project details the dreams and busy nights of French workers in the 1830s, who were "dreaming and living the impossible: the suspension of the ancestral hierarchy subordinating those dedicated to manual labor to those who have been given the privilege of thinking."

The grievances of these workers were not just about working conditions and pay. They were looking for a different kind of emancipation. They were "doubly and irremediably excluded for living as workers did and speaking as bourgeois people did."

Ranciere does something difficult; he questions the purity of proletarian concerns, which he argues often seeks out a wicked third party to expel, just as Plato expels the sophist as undignified, as “undestined for [philosophizing] by nature...” But there is no need to equate occupational and mental capacity. The emancipation to be pursued should conquer the useless – to take time to go where we’re told we shouldn’t go.

In *Nights of Labor*, Ranciere restricts himself to thinking *with* the workers via their archival texts/traces. He doesn’t presume to think for them, that is, he tries to keep his own intelligence out of the picture; he resists the urge to compare, to explain, to critique. This is [consistent with his subsequent and more widely known book, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*](#), in which he argues for a presumption of equality, and against explication in education, rejecting the master-student dyad.

Back to the contemporary problem of Day and Night, i.e., how to productively “struggle to ‘do two jobs,’ that is, how to make artworks and earn a wage to support ourselves”?

To cope with my Day job (as a “litigation support” person in the legal industry), I have tried to partition or protect my Nights, in effect I’ve attempted to lead a bifurcated life. I rarely talk about my nightlife during the day, and vice versa – though both lives are seasoned or infiltrated by their other.

This social bifurcation is perhaps a failed attempt to create ala the Saint-Simonians: “a different space for [our] lives as workers... restoring ... the dignity of [our] nature which is sunk in the twofold servitude of work and the quest for it...”

The process of specialization, which divides jobs to make the worker more fungible, and/or eliminates jobs altogether, has led us toward the realm of so-called affective labor. We find ourselves in a situation where Day always has some purchase on the Night.

Nightlife isn’t all it’s cut out to be. The danger is no longer that you will merely take the job home, it’s that the job has already taken you home. You know you’re in trouble when you solve a work problem in your sleep, or while laying sleepless in bed.

To [quote Steve Shaviro](#):

“Hardt and Negri are ... right to assert that the extraction of a surplus – which is to say, ultimately, of profit – has now extended well beyond the factory, to encompass all areas of social life, and that this means an increasing appropriation, not only of surplus labor-power, but also of what Marx called “general intellect,” or the accumulated knowledges and capacities of human

life as a whole – including things like habits, everyday practices, forms of know-how, and other potentialities of human (and not just human) “life” in general.”

We’ve become entrepreneurs of ourselves. Trapped between performance measures and ‘personal’ operating plans. There is a frightening new transparency in the culture of the Day. Affective laborers are asked not just to accept the law of the market but to internalize it, to think the same way as the owners extracting profit from our labor. We workers must increase productivity to maintain our employers profitability and competitiveness, else the entire business may fail. The dominance of “market” as an arbiter in all forms of economic and social life seems nearly complete; it’s accepted as a force of nature, a kind of gravity.

Worker-consumers now identify more efficaciously with lifestyle choices and preferences than via economic or social class. The individual is now “free” to commodify or repackage himself – via the very products the individual consumes or prefers. There is a sinister echo here with how we are forced to participate in a labor market; that is, we are likewise forced to participate in this social tagging or construction of a “self.”

The desires of worker-consumers have been very successful pandered to -- via both product and political marketing. Perhaps Jenny Holzer got it right with her aphoristic: “protect me from what I want.” But what alternatives are there to setting ourselves up to wait for ‘need’ to reemerge as dominant over ‘desire’?

Ranciere calls Platonic Marxism a discourse that has been co-opted by capitalism, imprisoned in its own circular system that has to stand-by – waiting, hoping that something will happen, that the conditions for the new will emerge. Ranciere says it “hides itself in the inverted image” and is built on the same presumption of incapacity and inequality. You can’t because you can’t. Ultimately you are left stultified, impotent to escape.

One interesting line of flight from this waiting is [to follow Isabelle Stengers’](#) suggestions in her brilliant article [Introductory Notes Toward An Ecology of Practices](#). How to construct or invoke social technology of belonging, to leverage that which attaches us and/or obligates us to think and act in new ways, i.e., as part of the practice of belonging to this social nexus or practice.

Or as Frederick Jameson suggests, we need “to think the break,” rather than a “picture of what things would be like after the break.”

“The formal flaw - how to articulate the Utopian break in such a way that it is transformed into a practical-political transition – now becomes a rhetorical

and political strength – in that it forces us precisely to concentrate on the break itself: a meditation on the impossible, on the unrealizable in its own right. This is very far from a liberal capitulation to the necessity of capitalism, however; it is quite the opposite, a rattling of the bars and an intense spiritual concentration and preparation for another stage which has not yet arrived.” (Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 232-3)

We can attempt to induce collective thought. Not tearing down but respecting others practices, presuming the equality of others – which doesn't mean we should expect manifestations of intelligence to be equal. Different intensities of attention will generate unequal results. We need to pursue the problems that force us to think. But to identify what activates us is no easy task.

To quote [Leninology](#): “Be unrealistic, demand the possible!”

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