

Poetic Labor Project

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Honor Labor

For the sake of spurring further discussions, I will take off here from two slippery moments of impulse: one, my first hearing about PLP from Steven Farmer over nouveau Vietnamese food; and, two, from the “Jobs are jails” sentence quoted by one of the original contributors in a larger borrowing from a friend. These impulses were, I think, both toward the same end even though one was a positive misunderstanding and the other was a dialectical angle of indirect opposition. I’d like to think both may have been what I’d call “creative mis-takes” à la Philip Whalen’s funny pointed mis-hearings like “adipose muchachos, compañeros de mi vida.” I hope you will indulge me a bit as I adopt a voice that imagines itself speaking. In the long run, I will answer PLP’s six questions, maybe raising a few more along the way. I look forward to any form of Q&A. Dialogue is the natural dialectic.

Talking with Steve, I took the original question to basically be: “What does your job teach you about your work?” Once I saw some of the original talks and the response pieces, I thought I might have gotten that question wrong; still I asked myself: “What would this look like if I did it according to that question?” That was my positive possible misunderstanding.

My dialectical indirect bouncing off of another impulse came from reading one of those talks. In that talk, a poet offered an idea from a friend that “jobs are jails.” I made a leap glancing away from this interesting idea because it seems to me that maybe jobs are more like schools, not in the most positive sense but in the way we can learn from them. My own experience as a student and as a teacher tells me that schools teach mostly in ways obliquely angled off of what is “required” or called for in standard ways. It’s not in what our bosses require of us or the standards they apply, but the very fact of requirements and standards can teach us a lot for our writing. Our jobs can show us a lot about the structure of the world in which we do our work. A job of any kind puts you in relation to things and people and a system of values: this in itself is an education—that it exists, that is, this system in each job a little different but there. Jails are just a power racket cog in such a system, depersonalizing. Any job webs out wider than that, and you can make it show you stuff.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak from a position that gets lost too often between the university academics who get the podium fairly often through conferences and publications and the wide assortment of otherwise working poets who have presented so far at last year's conference and on this blog/site. I work as a contract instructor for a community college district. I have a contract that emphasizes a load of teaching units, a load of office hours, a set of "shared governance" obligations, and participation in a structural hierarchy administering a hierarchized structure of educational achievement. That is not just a casual list; it is my attempt at a concise full description of the factors that rule my job. That list is the beginning of my "what it would look like" answer.

What a job is about, mostly, is expectations, and a job is a good situation for learning about expectations. At my job, it is what is taken for granted as expectations that has enlightened me a little. We are expected to fulfill our contractual obligations regarding hours in the classroom and office, paperwork on paper and not, taking a position in the hierarchy, and taking part in the systems in place. But there are unstated expectations too. We are expected to help students learn. We are expected to have expectations of them. We are expected to act as though the whole thing can and does work. We are expected to act as though we believe that we have academic freedom and that it is being fulfilled in the systems in place. As with any job, a moment of stopping and looking can provide an outside perspective. As with any job, once you have taken this break, the whole game of expectations becomes a farce. A farce is not not worth playing out. That's where what I call the "gas" factor comes in.

"Gas" stands for "giving a shit." I see that we are prevented from fulfilling all those expectations by the structure of expectation itself. My own expectations have revealed to me what I have to call the "unteachability" of my students; this is their sense of certainty, of knowing already just like the bosses do. Instead of tossing up my hands or my lunch, I meet this with a dialectical complement of teaching "uncertainties." I have the good luck and the tough luck to get to work on writing itself with them. Their certainties about who they are and what they know provide a resistance that is both good and tough. I then get to act as if I care to help them overturn their over-determined individualisms. Held within the system, still I try to create assignments with requirements to see meaning as being built, in flux, momentarily determined, not hard wired, never forever. I play this inside the farce of the larger play I'm paid to be part of, and it gets me gassed.

The other thing that gives me energy and even ideas for my works is what my students teach me. They inspired me to succumb to Facebook and to find a way to let its form teach me what I could write there. I saw that Facebook would allow me to post a "status" statement or to "upload a photo" and add a comment on it. I saw that these choices were both strategies of illustration: I could tell how I am doing OR I could show something and tell you about it. Having been through a thirty-year history of toying with illustration

as the relation between words and photos (by doing slideshow poetry readings at D.G. Wills Books in La Jolla or printing poems on postcards or any number of other tricks), I saw an opportunity here. I started writing pieces where one rule for composition was that there had to be a photo that responded off from something in the lines, that it itself acted like a line does in the best Ted Berrigan poems—that it both “fit in” and go somewhere else, somewhere new.

I found some more guidance in thinking about putting these pieces on my wall as an inverse form of filling in the space where I was asked to “say something about this photo.” One rule for these poems now is that they be dependably readable for any one of my Facebook friends. Another two come from my students’ ways of thinking and reading, too. They have shown me that they are oddly numbed to image, probably from living in a world with so much of it that it has become what words already are for so many people, transparent. They are also transparently dependent on the concept of “person” as a crutch; so, these poems start with perception rather than person, though they let it in as a place to sit down now and then. From all this, I have composed a book called *Post Language*, all made out of posts from my Facebook wall. It will appear as a blog book one of these days, avoiding the paper page.

That idea came from a goofy play on a couple of truths from my students’ lives. Working with my students led me to see that one of the most important things for them is getting away from treating the world around them as Mom & Dad. Another big thing is that tests and textbooks suck wind. Looking for the humor in this, I decided that I could talk about tests in terms of the Documentable Achievement Deictic thingie (D.A.D.) and that the textbook fit in with this when I saw that poetry also held onto a security blanket that could be called the Marketable Object Manifestation thingie (M.O.M.). Perhaps, I thought, I could get away from M.O.M. and help them get away from D.A.D. too.

My job has shown me that people have forms they inhabit and that you can’t simply talk them out of those in most cases or maybe even never in any case. They must be e-duc-ated, led slowly out from where they are through what they already know to what they hadn’t yet thought of, to the new or at least to the looser. Both students and my colleagues command and subtly demand such a respect for what they think they already know, and sometimes, often times, they won’t budge unless it is along the bridge of what they think they recognize. “Illustrativity” is just one of those things. There is a whole world (rather strongly represented on FaceBook) that depends upon it, just as Cabrillo College depends on its structural hierarchies of administration and its structure of what it calls education. The poets’ answer is, “Look; it doesn’t have to look like that.” But to get to that work from the job is the proverbial trick. I suggest that we can do it by taking the energy that exists as something like an electrical resistance within the job and its forms; I have tried here to describe how that works for me with the needs and tensions in the charge I have been given.

That energy creates the space where I nervously await the shut down that inevitably comes, from an attitude, a need for a grade, a term termination, whatever. I think my answer to half dozen questions lies right there. The form of my work comes right from my job of meeting people in this space. The constraints of my job life are the *energeia* of my poetic life. The classes I confront (and I mean social classes, no joke about school classes here) are really just two: the sure individualists who corroborate their own positioning by the haute bourgeoisie and the aristo-owners, and the structural collaborist who sides beside labor by building. One has made the known; the other makes thinking. It gets shut down eventually, but we will have gotten to give a shit along the way. These two classes are the same among poetry readers & listeners. I work with that. I work at a college too. You would have to say that I am not “institutionally unaffiliated”; however, inside the institution I strive to be. Financial reality requires me to stay there. I dig the “wig,” and flip it. In the poem, I collaborate with what I can expect the readers to think they know; I work simply with that. I trick us both into stealing something from our own unsureness though. I let the poem close, and maybe they walk away thinking they know something, even something new. That’s OK. The moment, though, was there when they didn’t know for a moment while they had to think their way through a turn of phrase, a repeat of a word that shows it different from itself, an image that is not quite illustrative, for example. They labor.

DOLSY SMITH is a librarian in Washington, D.C. He writes regularly but doesn't publish much. At present, he is enjoying three months of research leave, working on a book about academic writing as lure and discipline.

As an academic librarian, I am blessed with one of those “day jobs” that all the time seem less and less plausible: a job with adequate salary and benefits, job security, professional standing, and a forty-hour week that neither swells with overtime demands (like much white-collar work) nor drains one's waking hours of their vitality (like manual labor or many service jobs). As a librarian, I enjoy the privilege of doing “knowledge work” not immediately recouped for capital – teaching, research, and writing – although the saturation of the university by the managerial unconscious continues apace.¹ But unlike my friends and colleagues on the faculty, who pour themselves through the sieve of those intellectual activities to find only the desperately small residue of institutional recognition and rewards (positive evaluations, publications, conference appearances, occasionally a raise or promotion), my “day job” is such that I manage to keep a good part of myself in reserve. Perhaps more important for my lucubrations than having time for them is being able to dedicate a mental space: a private space apart from the circuits of performance and reward. For the past several years, keeping my poetic work private has been the precondition of my doing it at all. I worry, of course, that past a certain point this approach proves self-defeating, but at the same time, I can't seem to make plans for the work itself – apart from planning to make time for it amid other obligations and solicitations.

I am happy with my choice of career, and I do enjoy my job, even though there is something about it residually unsatisfying. This dissatisfaction doesn't stem simply from its status as wage-labor, nor from its disciplinary character; after all, writing poetry is a discipline I can escape into at the end of the day. To put it a bit abstractly, the soul of work courts power and possibility – the very modalities of poeisis – but managed work pits those modalities against necessity and control. I have been thinking lately a lot about the concept of information, which we in the library profession use to talk about the work we do. It seems as though, from the librarian's point of view, all the products of intellectual and creative activity – all works, in other words – should be reducible to this one common and universal substance, amenable to algorithmic principles of organization and storage – amenable, in short, to the logic of control. In a fascinating essay, John Guillory points out how much of the writing of modernity falls under the heading of informational genres: genres whose intent is not to persuade, imagine, or reveal, but merely to document or report: to render transparent to those in authority the activities of labor, or conversely, to convey to labor the decisions of management and the designs of capital.² In other words, as JoAnne Yates argues, these genres of

writing make possible the extension and ramification of managerial control on which the modern organization depends.³ I think the distinct lack of pleasure (or lack of possibility for pleasure) that attends writing in modes like the annual report – apart from their blatantly ritualistic character – has to do with the fact that the intention of these modes is, as Guillory notes, profoundly anti-rhetorical. Although they do not, of course, succeed without rhetorical resources, one knows, composing in them, that their institutional function, their *raison d'être*, prescind from that dimension of language that gives language its rhetorical power: from its being as material, personal, intimate, affective work. And so these genres of writing mirror the situation of organizational labor writ large, which is performed under the compulsion to ignore the feelings that attend its performance. Managerial structures demand that we cloak affect in efficiency – a disembodied rhetoric that proclaims the perfect justice of the code.

Again, I feel fortunate in that I can muster a certain amount of passionate investment in my job. Professionalism permits a sense of autonomous responsibility (over against the expectations of management), and I do often find myself passionately engaged, when working with students, arguing with colleagues about pedagogy, etc. Nonetheless, the passionate and moral commitments that work serves and inspires are not the same feelings that abide in work and that, from moment to moment, condition its performance. For the most part, the passion that I can muster on behalf of my job feels different from the pleasure I take in writing poetry. At issue, perhaps, is the work of time itself. As passionate investment, work looks toward the future as means to ends. As enjoyment, work appears as an end in itself – if the word end lends itself to what vanishes upon its presupposition. It tends to fill time, “as a glass may be filled not just to the level of the rim but slightly above.”⁴

Of my own poetic work, I would say that it amounts to a long, slow struggle to let language overflow the presence of my self-control. It is useful, perhaps, to distinguish control from constraint: the latter is arbitrary, extrinsic because chosen, and generative; the former is necessary (because internalized), intimate as my own reasons for doing anything, and repressive. Control manifests itself in my writing as an appetite for meaning and as a drive for self-expression, where these terms suggest the representation of moral or aesthetic truth, but also as the tilt toward any larger set of purposes to which I might subscribe the work. It is manifest, in short, as an urge to justify the work, inhabiting effort and devouring it from within like the larvae of a wasp, that gnawing self-doubt that can chew on an incomplete sentence for hours inside its fragile paper dwelling.

To emancipate the affective character of work seems like an admirable undertaking in any domain, not only in art. If it starts there, well, maybe it's because art, as tradition and social practice, sustains traces of that character – of those characters, rather, flocking to efface themselves, in which is written down our inadequacy and our despair.

1 I borrow the phrase from Donna Strickland, "The Managerial Unconscious of Composition Studies," in *Tenured Bosses, Disposable Teachers: Writing Instruction in the Managed University*, ed. Marc Bousquet, Tony Scott, & Leo Parascondola (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2004).

2 John Guillory, "The Memo and Modernity," *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 1 (2004).

3 JoAnne Yates, *Control through Communication: The Rise of System in American Management* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1989).

4 Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1980).

MARY AUSTIN SPEAKER is a poet, curator, blogger, book designer, and teacher. She founded Triptych Readings poetry series in New York, blogs for the Bryant Park Word for Word series, and is currently an art director for HarperCollins Publishers. In August she will begin teaching composition and work as a freelance book designer.

A few weeks ago, I gave notice at a job where I have been paid more than I have ever been paid in my life. For the past twelve years, apart from three years off to complete my MFA in poetry, I have worked as a book designer at a major publishing house. On Monday of this week, my upcoming departure was finally made public, and two of my colleagues were laid off in addition to my own position being eliminated after my departure. When I informed the publisher for whom I work that I was leaving, he was disappointed to see me go, but encouraging and happy to see me pursuing my writing in earnest.

Everyone I work with has agreed that this is a good time to leave the business. Ebooks are beginning to eat away at print budgets. Corporate publishing might be imploding in their rush to make cheaper and cheaper books. "All books should be free!" said a friend recently. I flinched, and saw the book industry vanishing in the same digital act of disappearance as the music industry. Yet I'm inclined to agree, and take some solace in the fact that the book-as-object is gaining in value as quickly as the book-as-information is losing it. Letterpress shops are becoming increasingly common. Small presses abound. Quality seems like it's beginning to matter again. Artistry. I have made my living working on objects – inexpensively made printed books – that are becoming increasingly less valuable, but as this happens, my conception of value is beginning to change anyway.

When I was 23, I became active in my company's union, a local of the United Auto Workers Technical and Professional sector. The collective bargaining agreement covering about 350 employees was about to expire, so I joined the negotiating committee to renegotiate our contract. This was the same year that the MoMA workers (members of our local) struck and picketed. The economy was flush with tech-boom dollars, and our paltry wages had come to seem antiquated. When I argued that our labor was worth more than we were being paid for it, I was told that people work in publishing "for love." Love as a currency deliberately used by one of the largest media companies in the world was a disturbing notion. But to some extent he was right. We work in publishing because we like the air – there is a shared value system at work that recognizes the worth of writing. But we are ultimately making a product declining in value, we are made to be more and more productive with little compensatory rewards, and this gets more and more heartbreaking the more you're doing it "for love." I resisted the proclamation that love should be an adequate compensation for wages we felt we were owed. We received, in the end, significant raises. We felt triumphant, though we were still paid relatively little.

Years later I would find myself setting a line of type by John Ashbery, or designing Werner Herzog's film diary, or working late into the night with Patti Smith as she fretted over word choice, and I would think, "I can't believe I get paid to do this. I would do this for free." They were rare moments, but they cast long shadows. And I was paid well to do that work. In love and in money. Each are valid currencies. But I think it's appropriate to designate certain spheres for those currencies to be acceptable as payment. Poetry operates in an economy that is barely monetary. Its currency is much more abstract—an alloy of music, seduction, relevance, performance, artistry, hype, bravado. Some of it might be love. That is what has started many a press.

I am looking for an economy that understands value to have many iterations, money being only one among these. In a few months, I am moving from New York to Iowa, where things are much cheaper, and I have more room to be naïve, or at least experimental. I have never gone off the beaten path before— always I have been employed by a major corporation or living on fellowship at a university. In the fall, while my husband attends graduate school, I will enter a new economy, and I expect to be paid in love as much as in money. I am already grinning stupidly when I read about the course text for Argumentative Writing, the comp class I'm teaching in the fall at the local community college in Iowa City. To teach argument! To discuss corporate responsibility and the abstraction of family in class with full-grown adults!

When I was hired to do this, I received an apology regarding the pay. I know that full-time adjuncting is not a sustainable kind of employment for me, but a class here and there is enough to keep my enthusiasm up and my energy focused on a service that I think is necessary, helpful, important. This is part of the economy of labor that I would like to recognize more: What is necessary? What is helpful to create a world I would like to live in? What kind of labor can draw me closer to the kind of community that I want to be a part of? What kind of work can provide the most fertile ground for writing poems and making art? Working full time in the service of others has not, thus far, been terribly fertile ground for this— the poems arrive, but the sustained attention required to put together and publish a book is always cut short.

I expect my values will change over time. Already I feel a bit conflicted about teaching. Am I diluting the negotiating power of full-time staffers by offering my occasional services? Should I value that concern above my own need to do good, worthy work; or the education of full-grown, dedicated adults, who might become more responsible citizens as a result of my labor? Where, ultimately, is my labor most valuable? Who is responsible for the value of labor? These are questions I would love to see explored by others.

I will need to eat, of course. And have health insurance. For that I will lean on my husband as he has leaned on me. For other expenses: thrift, invention, freelance. I am young enough to afford to do this. I have no children and no debilitating medical conditions. I realize this luxury, and the luxury of mutually supportive partnership. And I feel beholden to exploit these things, these two years of no expectations, for the brief time it's available to me.

Composed by Andrew Kenower
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