Perspective

Our Labor, Our Terms: Workers' Inquiry in Libraries

Anna W. Culbertson

ABSTRACT

The varied experiences of library workers during the COVID-19 pandemic have exposed a disconnect between how workers perceive the conditions, value, and results of their labor and the actual power they do or do not have over them. This paper proposes a workers' inquiry framework for gaining a more holistic understanding of the nature of library work by assembling the first-hand experiences of workers. This approach involves introducing the workers' inquiry proposed by Karl Marx as a political strategy and exploring Italian feminism adjacent to the workerist and autonomist movements in Italy during the 1970s. It then examines the distortion of the library's mission during the post-Fordist era and explores how arguments around "the home", "the family unit", and "caregiving" have evolved alongside the abolition of binary notions of gender roles and work. By situating workers' inquiry within its historical utility and connection to 20th century movements, it attempts to lay the groundwork for using this strategy to understand modern library work and workers and expose potential sites of struggle today.

Culbertson, Anna W. "Our Labor, Our Terms: Workers' Inquiry in Libraries," in "Assemblage, Inquiry, and Common Work in Library and Information Studies," eds. Melissa Adler and Andrew Lau. Special issue, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 4.

ISSN: 2572-1364

INTRODUCTION

The varied experiences of library workers during the COVID-19 pandemic brought into relief the disconnect between how we perceive the conditions and outcomes of our labor and the actual power we do or do not have over them. The disarray of our workplaces, the knee-jerk opening and closing of buildings and the confusion of rapid policy changes lead many of us to interrogate the very essence and value of our work, as well as where, how, why, and for whom it is performed. So many of us struggled through teleworking our waged positions for extended periods of time while caring for children and other family members when their schools and care facilities shut down. Many of us worked from morning until night with no transition or reprieve, wondering when work ended and non-work began (or whether it did at all). Like the policies and responses of our states, our institutions were all over the place, with most compelling onsite work, even for those at higher risk of serious complications or sharing households with someone who was. Under our nation's federalist mode of governance, pandemic management prioritized preserving the power of the states and the economy over blanket actions that might have curbed the impact of this global health crisis.

At the same time, leadership at every level, from national to institutional, had the best chance in a lifetime to enact real change to the unnecessary and wasteful working conditions of millions of Americans and they squandered it in the name of profit and power. The sad truth is that they never sought change to begin with—and the burden of understanding this is now on us. Why the push to return to "pre-pandemic" modes of workflows and services that were, in the minds of so many workers—in this case, library workers—already in serious need of re-examination? When we think of the millions of lives lost to the pandemic, some of them our own friends, family, and colleagues, we must ask ourselves, above all, whether work is worth dying for. What is it about our labor and services that is seemingly so essential that we must be put in harm's way? And if it turns out that our labor is truly that valuable to our employers, how can we leverage this to exert more control over our working conditions and our lives? Do we actually have leverage, potential, power—or are we just assets belonging to *other* people? Karl Marx understood this when he proposed his "workers' inquiry" method in *La Revue Socialiste* in 1880.[1] As I will discuss in more detail, Marx knew that the best way to reveal organizational exploitation and abuse is directly through workers' experiences, which employers downplay or invalidate on a continual basis. He knew that workers' inquiry would open eyes and ignite fires. What he did not anticipate, however, was how extensive an inquiry would need to be to politicize the working class in today's neoliberal order.

With this paper, I aim to develop the concept of workers' inquiry as an essential political strategy we can apply to library work and our research towards improving it. I

[1] Karl Marx, "Enquête Ouvrière," *La Revue Socialiste* no. 4 (April 1880): 194, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5817422b/f2.item.

will approach this by introducing workers' inquiry as developed by Marx and exploring the contiguous theories of workerism and autonomism, especially as articulated by women involved in these movements in Italy during the 1970s.[2] I'll explore how arguments around caregiving, domestic, and other forms of immaterial labor can help us gain a deeper understanding of the innumerable ways that neoliberalism has distorted library work (and all work). I hope to underline how a more holistic workers' inquiry that considers life outside of the workplace might expose unrealized sites of struggle, leading to new modes of examination and experimentation.

MARX PROPOSES AN INQUIRY

In 1880, *La Revue Socialiste* circulated a questionnaire among workers and trade union circles intended to analyze the working conditions in France. Written by Karl Marx, this "workers' inquiry" posed one hundred questions to be answered directly by workers, since only they could describe the conditions of their labor completely and accurately. The larger ideas at play were the circumvention of any marketed depictions of working conditions supplied by profit-driven employers and the exposure of any and all exploitation or abuse at their hands. Marx urged his fellow socialists to take responsibility for acquiring and organizing this direct knowledge of working-class conditions on behalf of the class "*à qui l'avenir appartient* (to whom the future belongs)."[3] The questionnaire itself represented a direct provocation of class consciousness, prompting workers to consider their working lives, their home lives, their activities and wages, and if applicable, their rights, benefits and access to resources. For most, these aspects of work were assumed inherent or immutable. Thus, worker's inquiry as an information-seeking process facilitates mobilization and organization around a collective ask or demand.

Today, many workers perform their duties under conditions substantially improved upon since the 19th century, owing to historical labor movements and undoubtedly, the demands organized by such collective inquiries. The workers' inquiry model has the potential to reveal how our own perceptions of our work differ from those of our employers and professional organizations, as well as from those of society at large, which maintains challenging perceptions of its own about libraries and library services (e.g., banning books, demanding neutrality, etc.). By investigating how workers' inquiry informed the evolution of class consciousness through its influences on 20th century Italian feminism, we may begin to situate its utility within our already self-reflective and data-driven profession.

---

[2] Autonomism evolved from the Italian *operaismo* (workerism) movement in the 1960s to encompass methods of self-organized resistance from within a more broadly defined working class (e.g., those responsible for unpaid labor such as parenting and caregiving in the home, the unemployed, students, and retirees).

[3] Marx, "Enquête Ouvrière," 194.

THE IMMERSIVE INQUIRY OF WORKERISM AND AUTONOMISM

In the late 1960s-1970s, Italian workerist groups like *Potere Operaio* (Workers' Power) and *Lotta Continua* (Continuous Struggle) organized around the idea that theory and praxis suffered from separation by social boundaries. That is to say, the theoretical discourse that took place in universities and armchairs was not accessible to its subjects: the workers. In *La Revue Socialiste*, Marx wrote that only the workers themselves "*peuvent décrire en toute connaissance de cause les maux qu'ils endurent"* ("can describe with full knowledge the suffering they endure'').[4] Drawing inspiration from the U.S.-based Johnson-Forest Tendency, who engaged in a form of inquiry by publishing the first-hand experiences of workers in the 1940s-50s, and their French counterpart, *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, Italian workerists took to the factories to organize directly around known sites of struggle. Most notably, workerist Romano Alquati assembled a report based on the experiences of workers at Fiat, which uncovered the same "deskilling" tactics we recognize in our own institutions today.[5]

Feminists associated with the autonomist movement, however, rejected the worksite as ground zero for social struggle, since production could not exist without the reproductive labor that happens in homes, schools and elsewhere. Mariarosa Dalla Costa, founding member of *Lotta Feminista* (Feminist Struggle) and the International Feminist Collective, challenged the view of her male contemporaries that the capitalist household "does not produce for capitalism, that it is not a factor in social production."[6] Dalla Costa instead describes that which, from the current vantage point, is immediately recognizable as *historical materialism* (i.e., how the development of modes of material production and their contradictions have shaped society throughout history)—how the gendered division of waged and unwaged labor arose not from innate abilities but from the transformation of society from feudal to capitalist.[7] In the former, Dalla Costa writes, "[...] the home and the family were central to agricultural and artisanal production," whereas in the latter, "Those who worked in the new productive center, the factory, received a wage. Those who were excluded did not."[8] Prior to capitalism, contributions to society were measured

---

[4] Marx, "Enquête Ouvrière," 193.

[5] Steve Wright, *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism* (London, UK and Sterling, Virginia: Pluto Press, 2002), 46-47.

[6] Mariarosa Dalla Costa, "Preface to the Italian Edition of Women and the Subversion of the Community," in *Women and the Subversion of the Community: A Mariarosa Dalla Costa Reader*, ed. Camille Barbagallo, 13-16 (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2017), 15.

[7] Marx and Friedrich Engels first began to lay out Marx's theory of historical materialism in a series of manuscripts that would eventually be published by the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow as *The German Ideology* (1932).

[8] Mariarosa Dalla Costa, "Women and the Subversion of the Community (March 1972)," in *Women and the Subversion of the Community: a Mariarosa Dalla Costa Reader*, ed. Camille Barbagallo (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2019), 20.

largely at the level of the family unit, which was maintained through the symbiotic roles of its members.

This is a useful point for situating waged and unwaged labor as, at one time, equally essential to functioning society; and that beginning with the onset of capitalism, aspects of the family unit were removed from the home and converted into specific, measurable forms of production. Not coincidentally, it was also at this point that the unwaged labor (birthing and raising future laborers, managing the home unit, caring for retired laborers) ceased to be acknowledged as labor, its conditions no longer considered working conditions but the "organically occurring" duties of the women left behind to run the households, now centers of consumption. Dalla Costa, Selma James, Silvia Federici and many others organized Wages for Housework campaigns around these ideas and collided with the patriarchal Left when it came to social reproduction. Specifically, as Dalla Costa writes, "the left's proposal for the social struggle was simply the mechanical extension and projection of the factory struggle: the male worker continued to be its central figure."[9] Autonomist contemporary Paolo Virno seems to confirm this in his essay "Dreamers of a Successful Life," in which he describes the "technical-scientific intellect, 'off-the-books' labor, the feminist movement, young proletarians, etc." [...] as "parts—not reducible to any whole—of a composite praxis in which production and emancipation are intertwined.[10] In their influential text *Multitude*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri identify new forms of exploitation to arise from the post-Fordist "hegemony of immaterial labor" with a brief nod to "women's work" as one example.[11] Of course, the international feminist movement of the 1970s laid the groundwork for the formulation of social reproduction theory, which fills significant gaps in Marx's incomplete analysis of capitalism. It also demanded compensation for the very same unwaged, immaterial labor that has infiltrated our neoliberalized workplaces and against which the *multitude* now struggles. More on this later.

Admittedly, the Wages for Housework movement struggled to remain relevant in a rapidly changing society. Silvia Federici and Alisa Del Re, two key feminists of the autonomist movement, would examine the transition of women who entered the workforce in droves in the 1970s, motivated perhaps by the futility of fighting to have immaterial labor recognized but certainly by the financial dependency, boredom, lack of stimulation and culminating existential crisis experienced by those whose lives center around domestic work and caregiving. Indeed, the work is essential to a thriving household and without end, while also being amongst the most unforgiving and thankless duties imaginable. In "Putting Feminism Back on its Feet," Federici describes feminism during this era as entering the labor market, with each step towards gender equality a

---

[9] Dalla Costa, "Preface to the Italian Edition," 16.

[10] Paolo Virno, "Dreamers of a Successful Life," in *Autonomia: Post-Political Politics*, eds. Sylvère Lotringer and Christian Marazzi (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2007), 112.

[11] Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri, *Multitude* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 110.

victory notched on the rungs of the corporate ladder. Leaving the household to pursue a career was perceived by the global feminist movement as, she writes, "a precondition for our liberation [...]"[12] This is, of course, where class struggle rears its ugly head to remind us that this unpaid work still has to be done and no one else is going to do it unless, ironically, we pay them. In "Women and Welfare: Where is Jocasta?," Alisa Del Re connects women directly to the State as the providers of reproductive labor, a relation whose "centrality with respect to production and the market" should be leveraged as a form of labor power.[13] She asserts that the State has a responsibility to welfare provisions, especially child care, as women's waged labor is increasingly commodified outside of the home.[14] Of course, not even liberal capitalists today support subsidized child care in any meaningful way. Inevitably, feminist liberation would come to be measured by financial success like in Sheryl Sandberg's "lean-in" corporate feminism model. The higher you climb, the more you earn, the more you liberate yourself from housework and caregiving—by being able to pay others to do it all.

INQUIRING OF THE "WHOLE WORKER"

By now, I hope to have provided a basic understanding of the usefulness of Marx's concept of workers' inquiry to 20th century working class movements and how they might prefigure a new wave of such activities. I also hope to have established a rationale for a more holistic approach to workers' inquiry based on the bold arguments of Italian feminists around caregiving, domestic labor and childrearing. Immaterial labor has, in fact, been normalized into many sectors of the workforce, including libraries. Lisa Sloniowski's article "Affective Labor, Resistance, and the Academic Librarian" tackles the omnipresence of affective, emotional, or "pink-collar" labor in libraries—a separate but relevant can of worms. Some examples of "pink-collar" labor might include assisting an emotional student at the reference desk, helping a new employee feel comfortable on the team or serving on a potluck committee—and workers' inquiry would certainly expose its extent to its deniers. The phenomenon of "pink-collar" labor bolsters Alisa Del Re's argument in the previous section that work done in the home is commodifiable and wageable—and worse, has infiltrated our waged spaces insidiously, without recognition or compensation. But Sloniowski also argues that the devaluation of librarians' labor is due, in part, to the larger issue of the neoliberalization of higher education: "While academic departments and the faculty within them are understood to be revenue-

[12] Silvia Federici, "Putting Feminism Back on its Feet (1984)," in *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012), 56.

[13] Alisa Del Re, "Women and Welfare: Where is Jocasta?" trans. Maurizia Boscagli, in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, eds. Michael Hardt and Paolo Virno, 99-113 (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 109.

[14] Del Re, "Women and Welfare," 101.

generating by producing surplus value in the form of attracting students to the university, libraries are often understood as expensive cost centers."[15] This calls to mind the remark a former campus administrator once (regretfully?) made in a public forum about our library being "a black hole of funding." I don't need to explain how demoralizing it is to know this sentiment is felt by anyone responsible for allocating funding on a campus. For years, the solution according to our profession's leaders has been to render our work more visible, which means marketing, reports, statistics, outreach, and service innovations (i.e., more work). Our administrative offices are constantly chasing us with urgent content requests. In academic librarianship, our tenure processes reinforce this burden of adequate articulation—we have done the work, but we must submit evidence of this to our peers or it never happened. Then, some of the work meets the requirements for tenure and promotion, the rest does not. So much of what we do every day is lost in the process.

While Sloniowski specifically addresses the academic library, I suggest that this theme is universally applicable across our profession and, for me, invokes the importance of coming to terms with how our perceptions of our own value contrast with those of our funders and constituents. If this doesn't ring true, consider the many conversations taking place around banned books in various states today. Parents and boards are increasingly deciding how we should be doing our jobs, even doing them for us, through the forced removal of books we've purchased. The sad fact is that outside of our profession and outside of our physical buildings, our credentials, experience, and differing roles are next to meaningless, which begs the question why we go to such great lengths to differentiate between ourselves and perpetuate the divisions that keep us powerless.

In his article "'The Power of Knowledge, Objectified': Immaterial Labor, Cognitive Capitalism, and Academic Librarianship," Sam Popowich argues in favor of discarding library-esque attempts to demystify how change occurs within our profession for a more critical approach which, informed by Italian autonomism, "places the library firmly within the changing processes of capitalist accumulation."[16] Indeed, the autonomists were deeply engaged with capitalism's reactivity to organized workers and how insidious it became as neoliberal reforms began to permeate workplace policies and culture. In their examination of the forms of immaterial labor that have emerged in libraries, Popowich notes that "by expanding the logic of labor-capital relations into the sphere of social, intellectual, and cultural reproduction, capitalism paradoxically opens up new spheres of resistance."[17] This observation is squarely at the core of an argument for reviving workers'

---

[15] Lisa Sloniowski, "Affective Labor, Resistance, and the Academic Librarian," *Library Trends* 64, no. 4 (2016): 649, DOI: 10.1353/lib.2016.0013.

[16] Sam Popowich, "'The Power of Knowledge, Objectified': Immaterial Labor, Cognitive Capitalism, and Academic Librarianship," *Library Trends* 68, no. 2 (2019): 154, DOI: 10.1353/lib.2019.0035.

[17] Popowich, "The Power of Knowledge," 154.

inquiry as a resistance strategy in libraries. But furthermore, we must uncover the hidden sources of labor in each worker's *life* that result in invisible power differentials—both within and outside of the waged realm and with consideration to all identity marker(s). The unwaged housework and caregiving performed simultaneously and interchangeably with one's own waged labor during the pandemic constituted an unsustainable and oftentimes desperate situation because *housekeeping and caregiving are work*. The neoliberal agenda bluntly acknowledged (and continues to acknowledge) this unsustainability by emptily advocating for self-care through "health and wellness" digests and webinars, but with no clear guidance as to how this additional task would fit into our lives. The result is guilt and shame over not "taking care of ourselves" when this lack of time and prioritization of self are not our fault in the first place and in fact, never existed as tangible options. I am reminded of the many articles published in the mainstream media describing women leaving the workforce during the pandemic in droves topping one million.[18] I ache for these people, as it couldn't have been an easy decision. I ache equally for those who don't have the luxury of choice.

Today we are shaped by a system that thrives on the individualization of ambitions, needs, and obstacles. We're groomed to see others' successes as our failures, others' needs as a strain on our own. By design, we're paranoid, competitive, attention-driven. We are exploited in ways we're completely unaware of and there's a reason for this. Popowich discusses how capital attempts "to escape its relationship with labor through various tactics, including deskilling, deprofessionalization, and automation."[19] The specters that established the qualities we've sought to attain through education and experience have vanished, leaving us over-credentialed, underpaid, and probably in debt. We are also trudging through an era of depoliticization—one where politicians promise ephemeral reforms to social and economic inequality through our very broken process of electoralism and misappropriate identity politics to prevent working class solidarity. Depoliticization is not a new technique but its ultimate goal, which is to condition ordinary people to be incapable of envisioning another way of life altogether, becomes all the more desperate in a period of decline.

---

[18] See: Megan Cassella, "The Pandemic Drove Women Out of the Workforce. Will They Come Back?" *Politico*, August 22, 2021, https://www.politico.com/news/2021/07/22/coronavirus-pandemic-women-workforce-500329; Emily Rauhala, Anu Narayanswamy, Youjin Shin, and Júlia Ledur, "How the Pandemic Set Back Women's Progress in the Global Workforce," *Washington Post*, August 28, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/2021/coronavirus-women-work/; Andrea Hsu, "Millions of Women Haven't Rejoined the Workforce—and May Not Anytime Soon," *NPR*, June 4, 2021, https://www.npr.org/2021/06/03/1002402802/there-are-complex-forces-keeping-women-from-coming-back-to-work; Katherine Riley and Stephanie Stamm, *Wall Street Journal*, April 27, 2021, https://www.wsj.com/articles/nearly-1-5-million-mothers-are-still-missing-from-the-workforce-11619472229.

[19] Popowich, "The Power of Knowledge," 155.

Arguably, we have arrived at this period, so now I arrive at my concluding proposition: the development of a framework for a modern inquiry of library work. This would look more or less like a list of suggested topics or questions to ask, but not without thinking critically about the intended usage of the resulting data. I strongly encourage looking first at Marx's original inquiry, which has been translated into English.[20] And then, we might start with a question or a problem, however existential, followed by an all-around examination of waged work: core duties, core values, how those fit into the bigger organizational picture and how those fulfill the organization's mission. This inquiry might also include the aspects of an individual's work that are out of the scope of the position they were hired for, require skills or knowledge not held by the individual, or are overlapping or otherwise counterproductive. Then, a breakdown of time and space: what are schedules like? Public service duties? Breaks? Does the individual have an office? A cubicle? A desk? Does the individual pay for lunches and commutes? We can examine time and space more abstractly, too: what percentage of the week is valued by the individual as their own productive work as opposed to pointless meetings or committees? What percentage of the week involves helping coworkers with their duties? Training? Advising? Does the work involve psychological or emotional labor? Then of course there is the wage itself: is there an economic disparity between the wage one earns and the cost of living, school/daycare access, transportation, etc.? Is the individual exempt or nonexempt, and if the former, is there a healthy balance between work and home life? If there is not, is it the individual's own fault or is it actually ingrained in the institutional culture? Do administrators and coworkers respect communication etiquette? By now, the respondent is likely clueing into how inextricably entangled their work and life really are.

Since we're inquiring of the "whole" worker, we must then ask questions that reveal unwaged and/or immaterial tasks and considerations factoring into the worker's labor. What are the worker's home circumstances? Do they rent or own, and how much is spent each month on housing? Utilities? Expenses for internet access for any work-related needs in the home? Property taxes? Did they relocate for this position, and if so, were moving expenses covered? As mentioned earlier, does the wage match the cost of living? This can be complex—a city's cost of living might seem reasonable when affordable areas on the periphery are factored into the data, but may also result in an hour of commute time. Is the commute paid for by the employer? Is the location safe and suitable to one's needs? What expenses relating to one's ability to perform labor are incurred if working remotely? *Does the housing ever constitute a space for rest and recovery*? How much of the worker's own financial resources go into all aspects of the housing location and travel required to work? What about childcare? Elder care? Other expenditures needed in order to perform the waged work, such as a separate wardrobe, an office, ergonomic considerations, what else? In particular, this allows us to start thinking about

[20] Karl Marx, "A Worker's Inquiry," *La Revue socialiste* (April 20, 1880), https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1880/04/20.htm.

our paychecks as a return on investment, and advocate for more pay if the ROI is negated or otherwise not worthwhile—just one example of a shared issue to organize around.

Thinking critically about the intended usage of the data we've collected means creating inquiries that will combat the skewed data already provided by administrators. This means that for the most part, we should seek information that pertains to the workers' perceptions—our perceptions—of our product (or service) and what goes into producing it. After all, Marx tells us in *Capital* that "Products are [...] not only results of labor, but also its essential conditions."[21] Workers' inquiry identifies the product or *use-value* through the self-perception and expertise of the workers who actually control the means of production once the layers of exploitation and propaganda are peeled away.[22] What can we do with this information that suits our own purposes? I guarantee that at the least, the activity will have ignited a flame amongst many of its respondents. It's up to us to keep it lit.

FINAL THOUGHTS

It feels both ironic and intimidating to inquire of our own working conditions and value within the context of today's economy. Our society is shaped by production and consumption but the socioeconomic hierarchy that sustains this relationship is far more complex than what Marx observed when he proposed a dictatorship of the proletariat. Part of our individualized and depoliticized condition means that many of us are "temporarily-embarrassed millionaires" who don't want to identify with those perceived as less educated, less strategic, less responsible…or less deserving. "Working class" is a pejorative term in this structure, and many social layers now exist between the true proletariat and the oligarchs. As we climb this ladder, we measure our success by participating in increasingly frivolous consumption. Today, anything can become a good or a service because value is determined by demand and demand is now distorted by companies like Amazon, Walmart, and Target that sell an overwhelming diversity of products that can arrive at your door in 24 hours. One can now pay a service to retrieve their possessions from their ex's house so they don't have to talk to them. Doggie daycare. Body sculpting. Spell casting. The luxury shave. Transcendental Meditation. Seemingly, people are no longer even valued for their skills or contributions to a society in need, but for their ability to either innovate or pay for innovations. We're frogs treading water

[21] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Classic, 1990), 287.

[22] In *Capital*, 1, ch. 1, Marx introduces the concept of *use-value* as the "usefulness" or "worth" of labor's tangible product. While his examination of the valorization process is much more complex than labor and output, the concept of *use-value* is helpful in the context of workers' inquiry because it allows us to begin thinking relationally about the material and abstract resources we expend in the labor process and its products.

in a pot on the stove, and corporations reinforce our behaviors and watch us boil ourselves alive in complicity while they destroy the planet and rake in more money than their top executives can collectively spend in one hundred lifetimes.

So much has also changed with regard to waged labor, unwaged labor, and who or what is performing each today. There is no longer a universally understood "location" for sites of struggle. It is true that 20th century feminist movements centered predominantly on increasingly outdated gender roles and social spheres. Today, much of what distinguishes waged labor from unwaged labor is determined by class, as has always been the case, but to a much higher degree than ever before since more of us can now afford to buy our way out of nearly all forms of unwaged labor. Of course, this won't hold because ours is a system that depends on social injustice to function properly. We must also recognize the potential limitations or obstacles to workers' inquiry, such as lack of consistency across institutions as to job duties, titles, and classifications, and collective bargaining protections or lack thereof. Likewise, in the workplace, there are peers who annoy us, offend us, whom we hope will retire. Yet, we must resist the urge to isolate them, to take up any struggles alone, or worse, side with management when others are struggling. Our collective voice is much more difficult to ignore.

What tools *do* we all have access to in order to organize? As we have observed the widespread rejection of many of our virtual "innovations" by library users during the pandemic—instead showing a preference for access to space, computers and resources without intervention—it has become increasingly difficult to understand our work. Some of us hold graduate degrees or professional certificates and remain deeply involved in professional organizations to keep our knowledge and assets relevant, sometimes without ever stopping to reflect on why. We are watching the death of information literacy in real time as Google wins out in our students' sabotaged attention spans over the techniques gained in our instruction sessions. People want to browse books and media. People want computer labs with free software. People want scans or copies of full documents. And all of this unmediated whenever possible. We no longer trust that our labor generates *use-value* that entitles us to demand anything of our employers or of society overall and instead feel lucky to have jobs. Yet at the same time, institutions continue to hire, employ, and assess library workers with an eye on forceful demonstrations of our *use-value*. Why is this? Are we saving jobs for administrators at the cost of our own? What is the product we are selling, and who controls the means of that production? Workers' inquiry allows us to seize this narrative. It's time for us to start answering those questions for ourselves while others idealize or propagandize our mission, our services and our obligations. It's easy to confirm via social media, especially #librarytwitter, that many, if not most of us feel this way. Coupled with the fact that we are already in the habit of collecting data and talking about our profession, it seems as though we already know our marching orders. I ask all of us to imagine what wholesale validation could occur, what solidarity could be built if we inquired of ourselves without the mediation of administrators and outmoded professional strategies. Workers' inquiry

may prove to become an essential tool in our struggle to organize ourselves around the many demands we share today.

POSTSCRIPT

I can't conclude this piece without acknowledging my dear friend and colleague Leanne Finnigan. We originally conceived and initiated a different version of this essay together, with an eye on a more comprehensive chronology of historic models of inquiry and much more outrage. Leanne had to drop out because of the same issues I've attempted to tackle here and while I can summon her voice from the many brainstorming sessions we've had, I feel her absence deeply in this final version. She works full time while raising a child as a single parent. I don't know how she does it. She shouldn't have to do it. No one should. A better way is out there for the taking.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Cassella, Megan. "The Pandemic Drove Women Out of the Workforce. Will They Come Back?" *Politico*, August 22, 2021, https://www.politico.com/news/2021/07/22/coronavirus-pandemic-women-workforce-500329.

Dalla Costa, Mariarosa. *Women and the Subversion of the Community: A Mariarosa Dalla Costa Reader*. Edited by Camille Barbagallo, 17-50. Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2017.

Del Re, Alisa. "Women and Welfare: Where is Jocasta?" In *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*. Edited by Michael Hardt and Paolo Virno. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

Federici, Silvia. "Putting Feminism Back on its Feet (1984)." In *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction and Feminist Struggle*. Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012.

Hardt, Michael & Antonio Negri. *Multitude*. New York: Penguin Books, 2005.

Hsu, Andrea. "Millions of Women Haven't Rejoined the Workforce—and May Not Anytime Soon," *NPR*, June 4, 2021, https://www.npr.org/2021/06/03/1002402802/there-are-complex-forces-keeping-women-from-coming-back-to-work.

Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Translated by Ben Fowkes. London, UK: Penguin Classics, 1990.

Marx, Karl. "Enquête Ouvrière." *La Revue Socialiste* no. 4 (April 1880): 193-199. Accessed January 22, 2024. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5817422b/f2.item.

Popowich, Sam. "The Power of Knowledge, Objectified": Immaterial Labor, Cognitive Capitalism, and Academic Librarianship." *Library Trends* 68, no. 2 (2019): 153-173. DOI: 10.1353/lib.2019.0035.

Rauhala, Emily, Anu Narayanswamy, Youjin Shin, and Júlia Ledur, "How the Pandemic Set Back Women's Progress in the Global Workforce," *Washington Post*, August 28, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/2021/coronavirus-women-work/.

Riley, Katherine and Stephanie Stamm, *Wall Street Journal*, April 27, 2021, https://www.wsj.com/articles/nearly-1-5-million-mothers-are-still-missing-from-the-workforce-11619472229.

Sloniowski, Lisa. "Affective Labor, Resistance, and the Academic Librarian." *Library Trends* 64, no. 4 (2016): 645-666. DOI: 10.1353/lib.2016.0013.

Virno, Paolo. “Dreamers of a Successful Life.” In *Autonomia: Post-Political Politics*. Edited by Sylvère Lotringer and Christian Marazzi, 112-117. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2007.

Wright, Steve. *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism*. London, UK and Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2002.