

The Labour of Austerity Absurdity, Performative Resistance, and Cultural Transformation

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The Labour of Austerity: Absurdity, Performative Resistance, and Cultural Transformation

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the social-psychic toll of prolonged austerity on academic librarians and the range of strategies that have (or could) serve as tools of resistance. Using a combination of theoretical analysis and autoethnography, I examine the emotional impact of bottomless and invisible labour imposed by austerity and the ways institutions use emotional coercion to promote self-surveillance, meta-work, and hyper-productivity. Following this analysis, I discuss the ways that oppressive institutional cultures silence dissent and absorb common resistance tactics advocated by educators. Finally, I introduce several examples of performance-based resistance projects and explore how creative, personal, and absurd forms of protest might be used to critique and transform the culture of work and our affective experience as knowledge workers in the neoliberal academy.

Keywords: *academic libraries · affect · performance · protest*

RÉSUMÉ

Cet essai explore les conséquences sociopsychiques d'une austérité prolongée sur les bibliothécaires universitaires et la gamme de stratégies qui ont pu (ou pourraient) servir d'outils de résistance. En combinant l'analyse théorique et l'auto-ethnographie, j'examine l'impact émotionnel du travail sans fond et invisible imposé par l'austérité et les façons dont les établissements utilisent la coercition émotionnelle pour promouvoir l'autosurveillance, le métatrabail et l'hyperproductivité. Après cette analyse, je discute des façons dont les cultures institutionnelles oppressives font taire la dissidence et absorbent les tactiques de résistance communes prônées par les pédagogues. Enfin, je présente plusieurs exemples de projets de résistance basés sur le rendement et j'explore comment des formes de protestation créatives, personnelles et absurdes peuvent être utilisées pour critiquer et transformer la culture du travail et notre expérience affective en tant que travailleuses et travailleurs du savoir dans le monde universitaire néolibéral.

Mots-clés : *affect · bibliothèques universitaires · protestation · rendement*

The absurd is his extreme tension, which he maintains constantly by solitary effort, for he knows that in that consciousness and in that day-to-day revolt he gives proof of his only truth, which is defiance.
— Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*

Performing Resistance: A Prologue

August 22, 2019. I wake up early and walk to the Prospect Park YMCA in Brooklyn before work. Most days I go to the Y to swim, but a few times a month, I exercise in the cardio room while delivering messages that I screenprint on the back of t-shirts to Bill DeBlasio, the Mayor of New York City, who exercises at this particular YMCA every morning. Today's t-shirt says:

Public Education Matters

#FUNDCUNY

#MessagesForTheMayor

When I arrive in the cardio room, I scan the room for the mayor. If he's already on a stationary bike, I work out on the stairmaster in front of him. If he's still getting ready, I run on a treadmill near the entrance and wait for his arrival. Once the mayor begins his calisthenics routine, which involves hamstring stretches, hip circles, forearm planks, and staring into the abyss of his phone, I switch machines and run on the treadmill directly in front of him.

The mayor's gym routine is a fascinating performance; for 90 minutes every day around 9am, the mayor of America's largest city pretends to be an everyman from south Brooklyn who is deeply connected to the regular goings-on of urban life, who likes cycling, who is far from his cloistered Manhattan mansion, who is authentic and approachable and surrounded by ordinary, working people. The artifice of the mayor's performance is underscored by the two armed NYPD officers stationed at the YMCA entrance and the three bodyguards in suits who form a loose parameter around the mayor and prevent people like me from speaking to him about civic concerns.

I did try to speak to the mayor about civic concerns last month. Or more specifically, I asked him about public higher education funding during the end of the city budget cycle when I found myself stretching beside him on a mat in the corner of the cardio room. He declined to comment and his security detail started moving in. After this failed encounter, I started the #MessagesForTheMayor project, which I characterize as a passive-aggressive, cardio, performance-art, direct-action campaign. I can't tell whose performance, mine or the mayor's, is more effective.

The #MessagesForTheMayor project, which I began in February 2019, is an absurd performance that also functions as a public critique of the mayor's own—"made real" by his status as mayor and the systems of socio-political and economic power his position represents (Bruner 2005, 153). By drawing attention to the mayor's physical proximity and his unapproachableness (not metaphorically—he's literally

surrounded by armed guards), my performance acknowledges the incongruity between his simultaneous desire for public approval and rejection of public input. My performance serves as a critique of the “progressive” mayor of New York City who takes two unmarked sedans with a police escort (funded by taxpayers) twelve miles every day in order to ride a stationary bicycle and perform the role of approachable everyman. The messages I deliver, which highlight gaps between DeBlasio’s campaign promises and enacted policies, further suggest that the mayor’s performance might extend beyond his gym routine.

Even though my performance is hyper-local in that the primary audience is the mayor alone, the presence of his surveillance detail and other YMCA cardio room regulars allows for a more expansive reading of my performance as commentary on: the illusion of the accessible politician; the relationship between optics and political power; and the implicit threat of state violence works as a means to repress political critique in public spaces. The #MessagesForTheMayor project, which I also document on social media, functions as an embodied version of the kinds of political exchanges with public officials that many of us regularly have online. These mostly unreciprocated virtual encounters, in which we follow but are rarely followed back, in which we express dissent but are rarely acknowledged, are marked by a power differential that almost guarantees we’ll be ignored. However, at the YMCA, the mayor can’t ignore me because I’m physically in front of him and must be assessed as a potential threat (I’m extra surveilled at the YMCA, followed to the bathroom, whispered about on earpiece surveillance technology, etc.). At the same time, the mayor and his security detail also can’t silence me; after all, I’m just a small-white-lady-librarian wearing a homemade t-shirt, climbing the stairmaster. It is this facet of the #MessagesForTheMayor project and the way that performative absurdity confounds systems that are built to repress dissent that are most liberating and interesting to me.

Confronting the mayor of NYC for the past year at the YMCA has taught me a lot about performance as a mode of political resistance, which is the subject of this essay. As someone who has long been fascinated by and involved in performative social activism, I think questions about aesthetics, embodiment, and rhetoric have everything to do with creating new forms of critical resistance. The contexts in which political performances have historically been used vary widely: labour unions dating back to the industrial revolution have used theatrical reenactments to garner public support for strikes; absurd performance has been an important medium for public critique in repressive regimes like the Soviet Union where political dissidents might be jailed or assassinated; and many contemporary activists—like the organizers of the 1999 World Trade Organization protests in Seattle or members of the Extinction

Rebellion's Red Rebel Brigade—incorporate theatrics and elements of performance into street demonstrations as a strategy to encourage broader participation and garner media attention. Performance can open up avenues for critique that might otherwise not exist and provide opportunities for political engagement that involves humor and joy. As a vehicle to “to scrutinize public meanings” (Dolan 2005, 6) through embodiment and enable the reestablishment of eroded “social bond[s] through a collective elaboration of meaning” (Bishop 2006, 12), the political efficacy of a performance might be difficult to pinpoint; although this slippery, affective dimension of performance is part of its power.

In the text that follows, I use analysis combined with autoethnographic and narrative examples to explore absurd forms of performative resistance (and expression). The absurd is significant here because of its relationship to institutional power; most academic workers will recognize absurdity as a hallmark of bureaucracy and institutional culture and communication norms within higher education environments that depend upon on strict and often illogical hierarchies, processes, and rules. I examine absurd performance as a method for institutional critique that has the potential to transform the culture of work and specifically, our affective experience as knowledge workers in higher education. In response to the “politics of didactic authenticity”—the normative rhetorical mode through which the neoliberal institution is (re)produced and understood—absurdity offers a subtle, playful mechanism for cultural disruption and introduces new ways of expressing what our work means and how we see ourselves in relation to it (Shepard 2003, para. 2).

Labour and Austerity or During the Power Outage

October 18, 2019. It is almost midterms and in the New York City College of Technology (City Tech) library, you can feel it. By mid-morning, students are lined up waiting for textbooks and a large cluster of them surround the most centrally located printer, which is overtaxed and overheated, printing slowly. The stapler needs refilling on the hour and upstairs, once all of the study carrels are occupied, students sit on the floor, blocking access to parts of the stacks and one of the emergency exits. When I see them on the floor, I ask them if I can take their picture to share with my department chair so we can advocate for more space, more seats. Usually they say yes. The reference desk drawer is full of lost USB drives and abandoned IDs. A line snakes through the computer lab. Students come up and ask if there is another lab, more computers. We are always crowded but this week especially so because the multimedia lab at the other end of the library is closed due to a power outage. We tried to keep the desk in the lab open for a few days in order to lend laptops. College assistants worked with a rigged-up clamp-light but the outage continued and my chair determined there wasn't enough light for us to “operate safely.” During the power outage I wrote a new “Question of the Week” on a big post-it-pad and stuck it up on the wall outside of the

sole open computer lab in the library, currently serving our 17,000 students: “If the library received a huge donation, what should we spend the money on?”

The library has not received a huge donation. In fact, the City University of New York (CUNY) system where I work, like many public institutions, has weathered the steady erosion of public investment over the past decade (Mitchell et al. 2018; Newfield 2016). The university has responded to “systemic underfunding” with massive enrollment increases and tuition hikes without adequately investing in facilities, increasing staffing levels, or expanding student services (Williams 2019, 2). In New York, an austerity crisis is manufactured by legislators and administrators and used “to legitimate bad policies of diminished public support; increased tuition; growing use of part-time faculty paid impoverished wages; and decaying physical facilities” (Fabricant and Brier 2016, 4).

Academic libraries at both public and private institutions are often at the front lines of budget cuts and many librarians rightly feel they’re in the midst of a crisis of an entirely different sort, one that is “existential and institutional” as well as material (Sloniowski 2016, 660). Academic librarians in austerity climates who believed their jobs were protected by tenure status or union protections watched in alarm as Long Island University Brooklyn and Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières management locked-out faculty in the midst of union contract negotiations in 2017 and 2018, and as St. Cloud State University administration reacted to declines in enrollment by laying off tenured faculty including several librarians in 2019, *after* the library collection and operations budget had already been cut by forty-five percent (Ross, Savage, and Watson 2019; Drabinski 2017; Flaherty, 2019). And here at CUNY we don’t bat an eye at labour exploitation, “cuts to academic support services and course sections,” power outages, and other signs of crumbling infrastructure like “exposed wiring, persistent flooding, swarms of pests, and moldy ceiling tiles” (Williams 2019, 3). Instead, the austerity narrative prevails as though “levels and kinds of public investment [are not]...the consequences of human and political choices” (Fabricant and Brier 2016, 4-5).

Student responses to Question of the Week: If the library received a huge donation, what should we spend the money on?

Bathrooms [our library has no bathrooms, plumbing, or fire sprinklers]

Better lighting [our lighting was last upgraded more than 35 years ago]

More computers

Wifi [we have Wi-Fi but it is difficult to log on and it is often slow and spotty]

Nap rooms

More outlets

Get more computers! (→ I second this)

Lounge areas: Students need to have a place to study and read comfortably

More study rooms [we currently have 5 small group study rooms for our 17,000 students]

Comfortable chairs and couches

Upgrade that Mac lab please

Clean the rat problem [our library has a mouse problem so this is only mild hyperbole]

WIFI!

Make it look nicer, it looks so sad and old (→ I agree)

More printing

Free textbooks

More tables

Desks with outlets please

Better wifi

Audit Labour: The Manager's Revenge

Underlying austerity and accompanying calls for efficiency and accountability is the well documented, Reagan-era “neoliberal shift” or “utilitarian turn” in higher education that has since been spun by legislators, university administrators, and professional organizations as “a shift towards a culture of ‘excellence,’ focused on competition and results” (Bränström Öhman 2012, 28; See also: Attoh, Mitchell, and Staeheli 2017; Askins and Blazek 2017; Beilin 2016; Giroux 2002; Gregory and Higgins 2018; Harvey 2005; Lilburn, 2017; Nicholson 2015; Nicholson, Pagowsky, and Seale 2019; Quinn 2000; Ross, Savage, and Watson 2019; Seale 2013; Shahjahan 2015; Strathern 2003). The ideology of neoliberalism both perpetuates austerity and defines normative responses to austerity, which involve the embrace and continuous (re)production of “the new cultural epoch of managerialism” (Shore and Wright 2003, 58). Managerial responses to austerity and the demand for accountability and resilience in the face of budget cuts “transfer blame” (Berg, Galvan, and Tewell 2018, 1) from institutions to workers, creating a condition whereby the most precarious employees take on the most work and are disproportionately impacted by the “toxic” emotional consequences of the expansion and intensification of work (do Mar Pereira 2016, 104). In spite of the ways managerialism perpetuates systemic inequity and contributes to overwork, it is easy to accept this new culture, which relies on

“hierarchical relationships and coercive practices” (Shore and Wright 2003, 62) that valorize “individuals capacities to juggle multiple projects and commitments at once” (Gregg 2010, 187).

The internalization of audit culture by libraries and librarians—characterized by self-directed, iterative bureaucratic and technological “procedures for assessment”—is evidenced by a professional preoccupation with change, value, and the specter of obsolescence (Strathern 2003, 2). A professional emphasis on “rational efficiency” (Graeber 2015, 39) has changed the nature of work, the pace of work, and even “the way people perceive themselves in relation to their work, to one another and to themselves” (Shore and Wright 2003, 62). The reframing of libraries in relation to managerialism, and the characterization of continual audit as inevitable or even empowering—a path towards “self-realization”—in professional discourse is pervasive (Graeber 2015, 39).¹ Advocates for “counter narratives” are, as former ACRL Executive Director Mary Ellen K. Davis and former Association of College and Research Libraries President Lisa Janicke Hinchliffe characterize them, “impractical” given the ubiquitous “sense of urgency” around issues of value and accountability (Oakleaf 2010, 7-8).

According to a 2010 report commissioned by the ACRL and authored by Megan Oakleaf on the value of academic libraries, the only “rational” response to the manufactured crisis of austerity is thus framed as a kind of adventure: librarians are invited “take part in the quest to document the existing value of libraries and maximize their value in future years” (2010, 24). Audit culture, which has already colonized so much of our work and time, neatly reflects a rational ideal of higher education and “advances values that academics generally hold dear, such as responsibility, openness about outcomes and widening of access” (Strathern 2003, 3). For all of its “urgency” and mathematical reductions of library value (“library value = perceived benefits / perceived costs”), Oakleaf’s 200-page report never once uses the term “austerity,” addresses the problem of public divestment, or directly invokes what might happen if the above formula yields a negative number (2010, 20).

Most academic librarians are likely familiar with labour-intensive assessment processes conducted in “accelerated and compressed timescape[s]” and the quantification of “things that are inherently not quantifiable” (like perception) (Nicholson, Pagowsky, and Seale 2019, 4; Seeber 2019; See also: do Mar Pereira 2016, 104). And many of us, those outside of the growing ranks of assessment librarians at least, likely regard this labour as “superfluous to ... [our] real work” (Shore and Wright 2003, 72). However, meta-work (work about work) might take on new importance

1 David James Hudson's critique of what he calls “our professional imperative to practicality” offers an in-depth analysis of how the valorization of the “rational” works as a mechanism for coercion and repression. The “practicality imperative” is a “foundational reliance on existing ways of knowing, on received languages, on common senses;” it works to uphold institutional hierarchies and precludes any “challenges to domination” in ways that perpetuate inequality (2017, 212).

and become increasingly “real” in austerity contexts in which the specter of a “library-less future” hangs in the balance (Nicholson, Pagowsky, and Seale 2019, 4). Austerity, because of its entanglements with inequity and oppression, can elevate “superfluous” meta-work and function as a mechanism for coercion. Paradoxically, the more effectively we perform meta-work to combat austerity, the more it creates the impression that we’re already doing our “real” work quite well. The absurdity of managerialism is that it produces a workload that is bottomless and Sisyphean. If our workload feels impossible, that’s because it is.

Feminized Labour in the Rational University

October 24, 2019. This week I made a pact with myself to stop thinking about austerity and just focus on doing my job. I’m on the reference desk at noon and a student comes up to ask for help with a research assignment for his English composition class. He asked his professor for help, he tells me, but she told him because she’s an adjunct, she’s not paid for office hours and directed him to come here. We start to talk about contingency labour and how it impacts institutions and students’ experiences but then I remember the pact I made with myself and say, “why don’t you tell me what your research paper is about?” The student sits down. We’re just getting started when another student comes over, clutching a stack of papers, and I see if she needs something quick.

“What’s up?” I say. “I need help with my paper,” she says.

“Research? I can help when I finish here”

“No,” she says, “I need someone to read it over. English isn’t my first language”

“Did you try the learning center?”

“The writing room is closed,” she says.

“During midterms?”

She shrugs, “It says ‘closed Fall 2019’ on the door.”

“That doesn’t seem right. One second,” I say to the other student and pick up the phone.

I call the number for the learning center and it rings and rings and no one answers. When it clicks over to voicemail an automated voice says, “Inbox full,” and I’m disconnected.

“I’m sorry,” I tell the student, “We don’t have writing help available here. We can help with research, citations, things like that”

She starts to back away. “You should complain,” I say and indicate the stack of comment forms on the desk.

“This is crazy,” I say to myself, to both students, my voice rising in pitch a little, “they keep raising tuition and don’t even offer basic services. You should write to the administration and complain too; do you want the email address for that?”

I can tell she doesn’t but she waits as I scrawl the Provost’s email address down.

“Thanks,” she says, looking down at the scrap of paper I’ve handed her, and walks away.

Later that afternoon, I think about my interaction with the student who I encouraged to complain and feel mildly nervous. I was angry. I am angry but I don’t know if being angry is the best way to help. For the rest of the afternoon, I worry about being angry, about encouraging complaint. I replay the interaction in my head on a loop. It prevents me from working. I carry it home. It prevents me from sleeping.

In her work on higher education and complaint, Sara Ahmed writes that complaint is a means to “transform what we do not cope with into a protest at what we are supposed to cope with” (2018). If we can’t cope, we risk being seen as weak and unprofessional or worse, “irrational and violent,” and this explains how I feel but not what to do about it (Adsit et al. 2015, 22). It’s hard to know what to do with feelings in the rational university where emotions that aren’t of the competitive, “aggressive go-getting” variety are silenced or met with retribution (Hey 2011, 214; See also: Gill 2016). Beyond our “real” work and meta-work is a third affective realm of work which, like an office you can never leave, there is no “delimited space and time ‘outside’” of (do Mar Pereira 2016, 105). This hidden work involves the management of emotion, the careful cultivation of “somatic and psychic strategies appropriate for positions and workloads that have no definitive beginning or end,” (Gregg 2010, 187) and the “interpretive labor” of “imagin[ing] the perspectives of those on top” (Graeber 2015, 81). Affective labour is the kind that seeps and spreads and it does no good to try to draw a line between this labour and the fear and anger that austerity creates since “there is no position of exteriority” from which we can analyze something that is fundamentally about our psycho-social experience (Weeks 2007, 246).

The pressure to remain emotionally neutral is absurd and compounded by the cultural association of feeling as feminine, and the gendered and affective dimensions of academic library labour (Emmelhainz, Pappas, and Seale 2017). Librarians are expected to “regulate their emotions” (Ettarh 2018) while they perform care and strategically use “affective investments” to “supplement [...] flows of pedagogical power and authority” (Eisenhower and Smith, 2010, 316) through the display of “patience, active listening, understanding, the willingness to help” (Emmelhainz, Pappas, and Seale 2017, 35). When elevated, affective labour, like “meta-work,” can obfuscate or “de-emphasize” librarians’ professional expertise as we help patrons “feel self-sufficient, comfortable, capable, powerful, and smart” (Emmelhainz, Pappas,

and Seale 2017, 40). Even as our care labour functions as a kind of “shadow labor” that serves to reproduce the academy (Shirazi, 2014), the tendency for any emotional expression to be problematically “feminized and naturalized” (Weeks 2007, 240) within academia, further accounts for the “devalu[ing]” of the profession “due to stereotypes of subservience and caring” (Pagowsky and Rigby 2014, 10). Academic librarians, like flight attendants, waitresses, and other feminized public service workers, are especially expected to fulfill “demand[s] for emotional labor” during times of crisis and in austerity environments when stress is high and care is in short supply (Hochschild 1983, 125).

The Labour of Care in the Good Library

March 19, 2020. Six days ago, the mayor of New York City declared a state of emergency in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Three days ago, the New York City public school system shut down and public libraries closed. Several campus libraries across the CUNY system remain open, mostly staffed by skeleton crews of (female and minority) precarious and paraprofessional library workers, even on campuses where workers and students have tested positive for the COVID-19 virus. Four days ago, the Governor mandated that only “essential” New York State employees should report to work, but years of austerity have left most CUNY colleges without adequate technological infrastructure to shift academic support services online and hundreds of workers have suddenly been reclassified by college administrators as “essential.” In spite of the public health risks, administrators have placed the burden of supporting students, many of whom don’t have access to textbooks, computers, or reliable Wi-Fi, on public service workers in campus libraries, computer labs, tutoring centres, and counseling offices.

In messages to the CUNY community in the past few days, the University Chancellor has expressed “heartfelt appreciation” for our “professionalism,” “composure,” and “commitment” to “preserve academic, research and business continuity.” The global pandemic has, according to the Chancellor, inspired “renewed purpose” among university employees who are using “resourcefulness and resilience” to fulfill CUNY’s mission. After receiving countless critical tweets, a petition with more than 500 signatures, and statements from the CUNY Council of Chief Librarians, the Library Association of CUNY, and the labour union advocating for total library closures on all campuses, the Chancellor reaffirmed today “school presidents and deans will determine which facilities on their campuses, such as libraries, research facilities and computer laboratories, are considered essential to our COVID-19 emergency response and will continue to offer services.” I have been working from home since the city-wide declaration of emergency and feel both relieved and guilty. As much of my emotional energy and labour has been expended corresponding with colleagues across the CUNY system and advocating for library closures at other campuses, I also feel guilty for not spending more time on “real work,” for not feeling inspired or newly innovative, as management expects me to, by the crisis at hand.

In times of social upheaval, librarians and library workers are often asked to do the work of “first responders, social workers, and other clinicians” and take on “increasingly dangerous emotional and physical labour without the tools and support provided to other professions traditionally tasked with these duties” (Ettarh 2018). Even as the work of supporting students during a public health crisis falls is framed by CUNY administration as “essential,” this labour certainly will never “count” or be formally institutionally recognized. Recent critical work on “vocational awe,” which relies on the assumption that libraries are “inherently good” and that librarians should be willing to sacrifice their own well-being in service to others (Ettarh 2018), illustrates how this framing reinforces the institutional status of the librarian as a “subservient” care worker and creates a paradox wherein the work of the librarian is simultaneously essential and expendable (McElroy et al. 2017). Librarians, embracing (and internalizing) institutional directives *or* seeking to subvert academic regimes that marginalize care, who bring their “whole self” (Ettarh 2018) to work experience burnout, “acute levels of stress” (do Mar Pereira 2016, 105), and potentially “shame” (McGregor and Yousefi, 2018) about “wasting time” (Sloniowski 2016, 646) on unquantifiable things like listening or helping patrons and colleagues.

Resistance Labour: Academia without Walls

Feminist theorist Rosalind Gill characterizes the neoliberal institution as “academia without walls”—referencing the way that work (and the affective consequences of work) seep into all aspects of life (2016). Interestingly, most forms of resistance advocated by academic librarians and critical educators have to do with the removal of walls between institutional and social systems to allow for the production of new spaces “of resistance” (Giroux 2002, 455), of the imagination, and “for dissent, civic engagement, nonneutrality, and even nonefficiency” (Sloniowski 2016, 664). Or rather, librarians who recognize how thoroughly academia is steeped in neoliberal logic question whether academic spaces ever had any walls in the first place. Using the concept of walls, we can broadly conceptualize most modes of resistance within academic libraries as strategies to bring something outside-in—like integrating critical theory into our scholarship and pedagogy—or strategies to bring something inside-out—like “writ[ing] and talk[ing] our way into legibility” (Sloniowski 2016, 663) through interdisciplinary scholarship and connecting “public education’s fate to other progressive campaigns for social justice” (Fabricant and Brier 2016, 5; See also: Giroux 2002, 456; Mutnick 2018).

Many librarians, following in the long tradition of the progressive library movement and seeking to center social justice in their work, integrate critical theory into their teaching, scholarship, outreach, and other professional practices (Garcia

2015). While certain modes of resistance “carry the risk of epistemic disqualification,” many institutions “embrace critical research” and even welcome activism as long as faculty remain productive since this additional labour functions to “enhance the social, political and media visibility” of the university (do Mar Pereria 2016, 103). Institutions have the capacity to both “recuperate” and display critical work as evidence of their tolerance, unflagging commitment to academic freedom, and faculty’s deep institutional investment (Webb 2018, 102). In this way, critical pedagogy and scholarship, like other forms of immaterial labour, “can be seen to serve the reproduction of a society governed according to neoliberal models” (Eisenhower and Smith 2010, 312). The tendency to frame the labour of resistance as noble or even essential to institutional survival reinforces cultural ideals about the “good librarian” whose work (and worth) are defined by “struggle, sacrifice, and obedience” (Ettrah 2018). The more resistance efforts present a risk to institutional productivity, the riskier this work becomes, especially for contingent employees and faculty of colour.

Some cite the labour union as a space where academic librarians can resist overwork and austerity conditions with little risk of retaliation. In a recent case study on labour organizing at Oregon State University in the wake of the *Janus* supreme court ruling, librarian and unionist Kelly McElroy sees libraries and unions as sites where “potentially radical social alternatives” and new communities can emerge (2019, 340). Others frame the labour union as the logical site where education funding can be linked to social causes like “health care, policing, subsistence wages, housing, and the environment” (Fabricant and Brier 2016, 5). While unions certainly play an important role in protecting the rights of workers and advancing coordinated campaigns against imposed austerity, engaging in this work requires additional extra-institutional labour and does come with some risk, particularly for precarious workers. Further, the subservient institutional position of librarians, disparities in the classification of librarians across different academic institutions, and historic “tensions between [library] professional organizations and unions” (Phillips, Eifler, and Page 2019, 350) raise questions about whether labour unions can truly advance “an alternative vision of the university,” foundationally disrupt institutional hierarchies, or address the affective dimensions of library work (Ross, Savage, and Watson 2019, 18).

Riskier forms of activism, which can emerge from union or grassroots led efforts, recenter “questions of power, politics, and history” and seek to transform labour conditions and the affective experience of workers (Nicholson, Pagowsky, and Seale 2019, 13). In the context of austerity, this might look like doing “less with less” to draw attention to the ways that budget cuts create unsustainable labour practices (Seeber 2019; Smale 2019). Beyond work stoppages, we might experiment with forms of slow

scholarship and “embodied” pedagogical practices that center relationships over productivity (Shahjahan 2015, 497), although it is important that we engage in this activism without compromising our own positions within neoliberal institutions and while “respect[ing] students’ aspirations for success” in a neoliberal society (Beilin 2016, 18). Advocates for slowness are careful to underscore that this work requires a “move from individualized experiences of neoliberal time to collective action” since we must “help buffer each other” by using our relative positions of power to reject managerial practices that create overwork and emotional stress (Mountz et al. 2015, 1248, 1254).

While recognizing the critical legitimacy of calls for slow scholarship and mutual support systems, for many academic librarians—who typically work twelve-month contracts and whose positions are tied to systems, consortial workflows, and services desks—slowness and mutual support might be at odds. At my campus, where six full-time librarians, supported by some adjunct labour, provide reference and instruction services for 17,000 students, mutual support often looks like volunteering to take on an extra information literacy session so a colleague can attend a conference or stepping up to cover a reference desk shift when a colleague is out sick. Perhaps slowness can help us rethink our approach to scholarship or reignite conversations about professional priorities, but from this vantage—as I make time to write this article in the hours before work and during a week of annual leave (while my colleagues work additional reference hours)—it doesn’t offer a way out of “academia without walls” (Gill, 2016).

Performing Resistance: Academia and the Fourth Wall

January 27, 2020. I spent several days over the winter break building an Empathy Against Austerity booth. The booth is free-standing and collapsible. It is made out of cardboard boxes, duct tape, and large sheets of plastic that I found in a neglected corner of our institutional archives. It resembles (not accidentally) a poorly constructed public service desk. A placard affixed to the booth defines austerity as “made-up fiscal crisis that our government creates by not taxing the rich” and contains a section entitled, “I’m Tired, Aren’t You?”

The Empathy Against Austerity booth is a performance art and political advocacy project. Its primary purpose is to allow for the anonymous circulation of feelings about austerity and managerial culture. The booth is a celebration of invisible labour and a protest against the normative institutional framing of higher education environments as rational, libraries as neutral, and the exhibition of emotion at work as taboo. The positioning of the booth in central, high-traffic spaces works to “unhide care labor” and dramatize the ways emotional performances and

authentic moments of relational solidarity become confused in institutional environments (Askins and Blazek 2017, 14; See also: Emmelhainz, Pappas, and Seale 2017).²

The Empathy Against Austerity booth is open irregularly—whenever I have time to take a lunch break (not that often) —and pops up on different parts of campus. Booth visitors are invited to “leave feelings and take feelings” that are recorded in response to the question, “how does austerity make you feel?” and stored in a “double-blind feeling box.” The booth attendant (me) photographs submitted feelings and uses social media to disseminate them to New York’s governor, state legislators, and a broad coalition of public education advocates. The booth also functions as a site to distribute artwork including protest posters and buttons with slogans including “Less Competition, More Compassion” and “Invisible Labor.” On special occasions, I showcase various “work for hire” inventions including an “automatic value demonstrator”—a device that parodies the time-intensive meta-work that librarians must perform to advocate for funding and achieve institutional advancement.

In their exploration of “The Library as ‘Stuck Place,’” Cathy Eisenhower and Dolsy Smith ask, How can modes of resistance more intentionally highlight absurdity and incorporate “what falls outside of the realm and the scope of reason, what refuses to be reasonably governed: i.e., emotion, feeling, affect?” (2010, 312). In their introduction to a new special issue of *Library Trends* on “Affect and the Library,” editors Lisa Sloniowski and Kate Adler similarly hope to uncover “the things just out of sight, the things that propel us in-between what is clearly visible” (2020, 369). I believe that absurd performative interventions offer just this possibility. Through performative modes of resistance like the Empathy Against Austerity and #MessagesForTheMayor projects we can reenact and exaggerate meta-work, denaturalize audit, and “upse[t] conventional expectations [for] appropriate behavior” in ways that “offer a radical visual, sonic and corporeal contrast” to oppressive, hierarchical systems (St. John 2008, 180). Performance potentially enables institutional and affective transformation because it offers “a methodological framework for rethinking the shape of our world” that is experiential rather than merely cognitive (Solga 2019, 255).

Through strategies like reenactment and exaggeration, performance allows for new ways of “engaging power, playing with power, rather than replicating oppression patterns” (Shepard, Bogad, and Duncombe 2008, 3). Absurd performance can “disarm opponents” (Shepard, Bogad, and Duncombe 2008, 3) and offer socio-political critiques that institutions and governments have a difficult time absorbing (Bruner 2005, 138). It’s true that the playful and irrational dimension of absurd performances

² This project recognizes, and to some extent, dramatizes, the artificiality of institutional care-labour and limits of empathy as a mechanism for cultural transformation. Educational technologist and decolonial scholar Jade E. Davis has importantly critiqued “radical empathy” as nostalgic, self-directed, and too reliant on imaginative projection in ways that can be othering. In particular, empathy can be paternalistic in that it considers but doesn’t generate a pathway “for those who exist outside of dominant power structures” to engage with or participate in changing those structures (Davis 2018).

makes it difficult to evaluate their efficacy—but conducting a rational political analysis of an absurd performance would entirely miss the point. Performance, like other forms of political art, engages and intersects with reality and has the capacity connect people and generate new relational dynamics and collective meanings. The difference (and tension) between a performative protest and a political performance is slippery and often about how the performance is read, who enact and engages with it, and where it takes place. Is my performance at the YMCA less real than Mayor DeBlasio's? Are the interactions that I have with colleagues at the Empathy Against Austerity booth more authentic than the conversations I have at the library's reference desk? Do these distinctions matter? While difficult to pinpoint political efficacy, the tendency for performance to be dismissed as “just art” makes it easier for people to engage with it and is also a strategy that performance can use to insert itself into oppressive spaces where other forms political dissent will either be absorbed or met with retribution.

What follows are select examples of performative projects (library-related and otherwise) that have aspired to: shift cultural attitudes about the world and about work; disrupt normative conceptions of feminism, neutrality, and equity; and shed a light on hypocrisy and absurdity embedded in institutions and political systems. I've selected these examples because they use different performance tactics ranging from satirical appropriation and embodiment to ecological field work and dance. These examples also relate to some of the issues that I've explored in this essay thus far and have importantly shaped my own conception of what performance as a political tool looks like. Not all of these performative projects are absurd but all of them critique, on some level, the absurdity of prevailing socio-political and institutional systems. Several of these projects—which take on issues as important and diverse as environmental degradation, electoral politics, gender inequality, staplers, service work, and capitalism—were not described as performances by their creators and by including them here, I hope to introduce a new way to read them and to read the socio-political contexts they exist within. Performance, as these examples illustrate, can be many things and sometimes, many things at once. Taken together, these examples demonstrate the “soft power” of performance, which offers not only new ways to conceive of socio-political reality, but also new methods to engage with it and with each other (Bruner 2005, 150).

Performing the Manager's Revenge

In 2017, a group of artists, academics, and environmentalists who were troubled by the downsizing of the federal Environmental Protection Agency and rollbacks of environmental laws, founded a new EPA—that's the Environmental Performance Agency—to advocate for the “agency of all living performers co-creating our

environment” (Environmental Performance Agency, n.d.). EPA agents wear coveralls with an EPA logo emblazoned on the back, perform field work with the public, collect new scientific data about urban weed species, encourage concerned citizens to submit comments to the (other) EPA on behalf of plant species through a portal they developed, and campaign for plant candidates like mugwort for elected public offices through their Department of Weedy Affairs project. The EPA disrupts normative conceptions of what “environment,” “performance,” and “agency” signify and much of their work, which is participatory and embodied, is about rethinking human-plant hierarchies and relationships between people and environments.

I’ve had the opportunity to work with EPA agents in the field and with my students. The work of the EPA, which agent Andrea Haeggni describes as embodied science, mixes elements of performance art, dance, mysticism, botany, environmental activism, political appropriation, and affective critique. Last semester, Haeggni facilitated a “smell walk” and public performance ritual for my students and me on the banks of a federally designated “superfund” industrial waterway in south Brooklyn. Just this week, during the COVID-19 pandemic shelter in place directive in NYC, I participated in a virtual Moss in Pandemic Times / Embodied Gathering with two EPA agents. During the workshop we meditated, did some movement and breath work, reflected on moss samples that we “met” in our own neighborhoods earlier in the day, and talked about our physical and emotional experience of the public health crisis as it connected to our observations of urban plants. Through this kind of work, the EPA offers a new model for environmental activism that is earnest, emotional, and satirical. Their approach also disrupts conventions of scientific fieldwork, which often doesn’t make space for affective experience or consider reciprocal relationships between humans and plants. By embodying government agents, the EPA also offers an alternative to the labour of “imagin[ing] the perspectives of those on top” (Graeber 2015, 81); their work implicitly questions the authority of the government (and of humans in general) to exert control over or engage in regulation of the environment.

Another example of the use of appropriation and embodiment as an absurd political tactic is the Billionaires for Bush (or Gore) campaign, which ran from 2000-2009. The campaign was created as a replicable, theatrical counter-protest that celebrated systemic inequality and promoted corporate political interests. On their website, the Billionaires—“a grassroots network of corporate lobbyists, decadent heiresses, [and] Halliburton CEOs”—promise to do “whatever it takes to ensure four more years of putting profit over people” (2004). The Billionaires’ appropriation and exaggeration of corporate cronyism and political nepotism (“we know a good president when we buy one”) and strategic staging of events like a croquet match in Central Park, from which anti-Bush protests had been banned, illustrate the ways the

absurd and “unpredictable intervention[s]” have the capacity to circumvent political repression (St. John 2008, 184).

During their campaign, the Billionaires engaged in tactics that “unmask[ed]” political double-speak and, by reworking progressive slogans (“Whose street? Wall Street”), exposed the absurdity of the capitalist-populist and satirized the ways that political appropriation has been wielded by those in power (Varon, Boyd, and Fairbanks 2013, 298). On their website, the Billionaires characterize the rhetorical effect of embodying and exaggerating the forces that perpetuate inequality as a kind of “unspin[ning]” (2004) an approach that has parallels with feminist campaigns directed at “unhiding” care labour (Askins and Blazek 2017, 14). Anthropologist Angelique Haugerud describes the potential of this kind of theatrical “culture jamming” to invite broader participation in political critique, expose hypocrisy embedded in systems designed to consolidate power, and disrupt how we think dissent looks in ways that work to destabilize both “dominant corporate and editorial frames” (2013, 8).

Performing Feminism

On May Day 2002, a group of women dressed in pink and accompanied by a portable stereo blaring “She Works Hard for the Money” gathered in front of City Hall in downtown Chicago, started dancing, and distributed magenta leaflets containing facts about the gender pay gap. When the police turned up, they engaged in “tactical flirting”—a de-escalation strategy using “sexist stereotypes about how women should look and act in public (dancing sexy, wearing pink, smiling a lot)—and were able continue their protest (Caidor and Greenwald n.d.). The group was called the Pink Bloque and this “coming out party” was the first of many dance-based direct actions (increasingly with carefully choreographed routines) that they organized over the next three years (Caidor and Greenwald 2005, “About”). Not all of Pink Bloque’s actions were focused on gender inequity, but their methods, which involved performing hyper-feminized tropes for political advantage, “insert[ed] a feminist analysis into social justice issues” by deploying stereotypes that served as an important contrast to the joyless militancy and “olive drab” redundancy of the male-dominated street protest (Caidor and Greenwald 2005, “The 7 Ps”).

The Pink Bloque’s subversive choreographed dances worked as a kind of “liberatory play” (Shepard, Bogad, and Duncombe 2008, 2). They cultivated broad participation and as they gained political traction and generated more press coverage, released videos with their dance routines in advance of political gatherings. They actively sought to “get away from the individualizing tendencies of capitalist media,” and developed a corporate press strategy in which they all used a shared alias—“Julie

Smith Tells the Truth the Pink Bloque Cannot” (Caidor and Greenwald n.d). The Pink Bloque’s performances, which integrated pop-culture tropes and harnessed “tactical frivolity” as a protest strategy, drew attention to gender oppression within activist communities and society at large. Their approach also allowed them entry, like the Billionaires for Bush, into public spaces, which they occupied without the militancy or violence often associated with political occupations (St. John 2008, 180). Pink Bloque’s appropriation of “visible and central” (Askins and Blazek 2017, 15) municipal spaces for the purpose of dancing and listening subverted cultural norms which “militate against such relations and practices” (Mountz et al. 2015, 1239). While performing as flirty femmes, members of the Pink Bloque also illustrated—in ways that are instructive for workers in feminized professions—what a feminist ethics of care looks like: they actively sought to make participants feel comfortable during street actions; they carefully created a successful de-escalation strategy to protect themselves and others from police violence or state-sanctioned repression; and they emphasized the role of partnerships (it’s one of the 7 P’s of Pink Bloque philosophy) in creating social and political change.

Performing Audit or The Public Servant

In January 2013, Jason Vance, a librarian at Middle Tennessee State University, started documenting “the destruction of public staplers through their general use at the reference desk” on Twitter and on the domain deadstaplers.tumblr, which exists as a kind of proto-library catalogue (Vance, 2019). Each of Vance’s broken stapler images is accompanied by a one-line obituary, usually about the cause of death. Vance has also engaged in library stapler analytics research (average life span 15.3 days) and has characterized himself as “self-taught stapler triage nurse” and “mad scientist in a tower laboratory” in relation to stapler repair activities (Vance, 2013). Vance’s dead stapler project is a satirical homage to the invisible care-labour that librarians perform at public service desks and the way cataloguing can fetishize obscure objects of dubious importance. The project also acknowledges the paradoxical expectation that, on the one hand, public service and information organization labour doesn’t really matter, and on the other, we can and should measure and quantify the value of this work through intensive meta-analysis and ultimately, published research. Vance’s appropriation of the obit form on his tumblr site and rhetorical anthropomorphism of the stapler in other writings also recalls Ettarh’s (2018) work on vocational awe and critique of the positioning of librarians as “first responders, social workers, and other clinicians.”

Vance has published about Middle Tennessee State’s “Staplercide!” problem in respected venues like *C&RL News*. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Vance has successfully turned a parody of research into “institutionally

recognized” research by publishing it in a respected professional newsletter. The dead stapler project, which is both absurd and banal, is arguably as much a critique of the profession’s preoccupation with audit and scholarly output as it is about the more trivial, affective experiences of the everyday public servant. Of course, *C&RL News* editors (and the rest of us) are in on the joke, but Vance’s subversive methods have allowed him to enter, occupy, and disrupt a space that is typically rhetorically hegemonic. Education scholar Amy Metcalf speculates that non-scholarly rhetorical formats, like a tweet or photograph, have the power to “interrupt the text-centric production values of the neoliberal academy” and “confron[t] assumptions about the place and form of academic critique” (2019, 44). While Vance’s method may feel more silly than strategic, upon closer inspection, I’m not unconvinced that the silliness is not a strategy in and of itself. Or perhaps I have just spent too many hours at the reference desk, bent over a broken stapler with a pair of needle-nose pliers.

Performing Care after Capitalism

Since 2015, the librarian and archivist Charlie Macquarie has installed a number of “site-specific, small scale libraries at selected locations around the American West” as part of an “itinerant project” he calls the “Library of Approximate Location” (2019). The libraries—sometimes physically installed and other times collaboratively performed or virtually enacted—occupy spaces and reinsert the commons as “an aesthetic, creative, and political act” (Macquarie 2017) in ways that critique the political and economic systems that have worked to colonize and define the west “as a vast, techno-industrial megastructure” (Macquarie 2019). The library sometimes looks like a small bookshelf with a sign installed at the bottom of a “notable hole” (often a bomb crater) in a desolate stretch of desert in Nevada, sometimes it’s a metal pyramid with a small solar panel and an internet connection in Utah’s Green River Missile Range, and sometimes it’s a reading ritual performed in the streets of Reno, Nevada (Macquarie 2019).

In talking about and documenting the library installations, Macquarie frames “library” as a “conceptual space” that potentially enables a reconceptualization of material and ideological exchanges, which is to say that his work is about imagining a world outside of capitalism beginning with the library—a “space in which the terms of exchange are already different” (2017). For its patrons, each library becomes a new ontological opening in which the possibility of new relational systems might be invented to tie together “family history and the landscape” (Macquarie 2017). As a location-specific and affective project, the library of approximate location refers always to a specific family history and a specific landscape. The project, which

performs non-neutrality by reacting directly to environmental conditions and community needs, offers insight into alternative ways of thinking about information exchange and library labour as a series of temporary, collaborative, expressive, and anti-capitalist acts. The library also disrupts and transforms the space where it is installed in ways that draw attention to industrialized violence but uses a kind of prefigurative speculation rather than militant revolt as methodology. Through the mode of documentation that Macquarie favours to record the installations (they are often ephemeral) and their impact on communities and landscapes—his writing is personal, narrative, and sentimental in a way that is pointedly anti-academic—we might take away strategies for documenting or physically manifesting our own affective experiences and histories.

Performance as Soft Power

As the examples above illustrate, performance tactics potentially offer new modes of resistance that cannot be folded neatly into reality. They offer a kind of road map for new possible routes that might convey us beyond the work that we thought was bottomless and the academy that we thought was boundless. An absurd performance can expose the hypocrisy of managerialism and “the ways in which the [prevailing] system is crushing” us while simultaneously offering new relational and rhetorical possibilities for understanding how a culture is created (McGregor and Yousefi 2018). By circumventing the logical avenues in which criticism normally takes place—from scholarly journals to sincere, militant street protests—and often, by obfuscating the target at which criticism is leveled, absurd performances confound and disrupt systems in which power is encoded, enacted, and consolidated. If we think of performance as social practice, then we might integrate performance tactics into existing (serious) campaigns for institutional change. In relation to the funding crisis at CUNY, such practices notably offer ways for “members of our community—students and faculty of colour, precarious workers, undocumented students and those with disabilities—who are either unable to engage in direct action campaigns or can only do so at great risk” to engage in activism (Almeida 2020). Making art together can also “help us counteract some of the feelings of disempowerment, isolation and anxiety that prolonged austerity creates” (Almeida 2020).

Performances, like the ones described here, might not directly transform material conditions in institutions or upend oppressive socio-political systems, but they resist, in ways both insidious and strange, retribution and coercion. The best performances can enact an “ethics of empathy and care that provides the route to a deeper equality” (Adler and Sloniowski 2020, 371) and build “soft power” to gradually change “the ways people think” and the “kind[s] of communities they create” (Bruner 2005, 150). These

performances can be subtle—sometimes when I play (with only mild exaggeration) the meta-satirical role of *librarian at public service desk in a school of technology during an internet outage* or *librarian conducting information literacy instruction in a classroom with a broken projector* (“just imagine the databases”), the simple acknowledgement of the gap between what education is supposed to look like and what austerity reduces it to can serve as a kind of release valve and a strategy to connect with students through humour and turn what might otherwise be a failed education encounter into a critical discussion. Performative activism—because it is emotional and embodied and often participatory—can change how people feel in oppressive environments, determine what they feel empowered to do, and can offer new modes of expression that are subversive, and surprisingly, joyful.

In relation to my own performance experiments, I’ve become less interested in political coherence than with the potential of expressing things in new ways and subtly changing how people feel (years of performing feminized care labour have made me surprisingly adept at this). A year into the #MessagesForTheMayor project, I’ve delivered dozens of messages about everything from DeBlasio’s failed presidential campaign to his lack of follow through on his climate emergency declaration to (most recently) his failure to close schools and public libraries (and gyms) when COVID cases in NYC began to climb. I’m not sure if my project has had any measurable impact on the mayor’s policies but I know that the messages are getting through and that the mayor must feel something in relation to them. The project has also led to some meaningful discussions about local politics with other YMCA regulars and people in my community who follow the project on social media. Using performance as an organizing and teaching tool and as a vehicle for social connection has taught me that joy and humour in the face of oppression is defiant, and is itself an assertion of political power.

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