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**LABOR**  
**POETIC** 2  
**LABOR!**  
into the archive

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**CURATED BY JILL MAGI**

DEBT  
(AND IMPRISONMENT)

LOTTERIES

AMERICAN SYSTEM

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**ROB FITTERMAN**  
**PAOLO JAVIER**  
**MARYAM PARHIZKAR**  
**ELENA RIVERA**  
**JOHANNAH RODGERS**  
WITH AN AFTERWORD BY  
**STEPHEN MOTIKA**

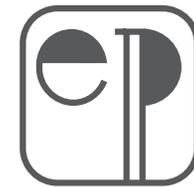
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LABOR  
POETIC  
LABOR!  
2:  
INTO THE  
ARCHIVE

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JILL MAGI

ESSAY PRESS LISTENING TOUR



#26

## ESSAY PRESS LISTENING TOUR

As the Essay Press website re-launches, we have commissioned some of our favorite conveners of public discussions to curate conversation-based chapbooks. Overhearing such dialogues among poets, prose writers, critics and artists, we hope to re-envision how Essay can emulate and expand upon recent developments in trans-disciplinary small-press cultures.

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“The word, like the plow, the chisel, the needle, the spindle, is a tool. Of all the materials man works with the tool word is perhaps the most social. It is through the word that you speak to others, influence others, tell other what has happened to you.

“Everyone must make this tool his or her own. You must not be afraid of this tool simply because you have not had a formal training in its use. With practice, like any other tool, it will turn to your hand.”

(Meridel Le Sueur, *Worker Writers*)

## Labor Poetic Labor! 2: Into the Archive

—Jill Magi

This project begins with a mistake. Page 28 of my book *LABOR* reads:

November 4, 2007: I went to vote and then went to look for the meaning of radical and found myself at home scrolling through the archive’s electronic finding guide. In front of the screen my body no longer registered basic needs: food movement water. Weeks later I pushed away stood up and presented the proper identification. I was in.

The date is wrong. It was November 4, 2008, and I had just voted in the first Obama election. I cast my vote and came home depressed, committed to finding “radicality,” and I ended up starting a new book.

When I was proofreading *LABOR*, six years after its beginning and two oceans away, I couldn’t remember if U.S. presidential elections happened in odd or even years. I freaked out. Distance and the

immanence of publication had me spinning, and at the last minute I sent this change (from correct to incorrect) to my publisher, who may have wondered why an off-year election could have mattered so much.

And so my “there where things commence” (Derrida’s reminder about the origins of the word “archive”) is a slip, an inaccuracy that reminds me to accept the instability of history’s record in response to the archive’s commandment: *Begin!*

Which brings me to the archive and poetry and five other writers.

In November 2014, I invited five poets to go into the Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives (as I had done in the fall of 2008), and to “process” its holdings documenting U.S. labor history. With Susan Howe’s claim in mind that poetry is “felt fact,” I wanted to see what word workers would make in the face of a history that claims, repeatedly, despite various forms of erasure, that its actions are vital in the present tense. Despite this insistence on labor history’s vitality, the “dreaminess” of labor activism is even apparent in the voice of the workers themselves. For example, in the face of a contract victory (and here I quote again from *LABOR*, from the files of the 1989 Asian Garment Workers in the New York City Oral History Collection) Katie Quan speaks reality into being:

We took no cut in pay, we took no cut in holidays. It’s not some dream. It did happen. It’s not some dream.

I thought poets were well equipped to read the archive’s dreaminess, indeterminacy and anxieties, and to make something brand new. So I asked Rob Fitterman, Paolo Javier, Maryam Parhizkar, Eléna Rivera and Johannah Rodgers to go and make whatever they wanted to make, and they agreed. The staff at the Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives said “Yes” to this project and made it happen. The voices inside this archive (whose felt facts matter, whether or not we find them or this moment “radical”) came out from the archive’s shelter on the evening of March 25, 2015. I am grateful to everyone who gathered that night in “a room without maps with pearls lined up in curving rows”—a room I dreamt of and wrote in *LABOR*. A room of many commencements and never a mistake.

# A TEST OF LABOR (Work-in-Progress)

ELÉNA RIVERA

## Introduction

When you plant a garden each leaf, each flower is unexpected, each sedum, each vine, especially after a long cold winter: one never knows what will grow. Beginning with the finding aid, one yearns to find the words, the phrases, the sentences that will pullulate and grow. I let my own work history guide me. My interest from the first was the personal, anything about the jobs women did, and the treatment they received doing those jobs. I was most interested in beginnings, where the women had come from, what their social standing was, the kinds of jobs they ended up working in, and the treatment they experienced as workers. I wanted to listen to interviews about how women got to a place in their careers where they were driven to join a union, *had* to improve their job situation. Impressed by the courage of these women, what they achieved, the humor and tone of their various voices, I in turn contended with the many questions, memories and personal experiences that their words sparked in me. “A Test of Labor (Work-in-Progress)” is an effort to comprehend an experience of work that is contrary to the Benedictine idea of work as a conversation with God, and rather about work as a job, a job that dehumanizes, compartmentalizes, and devalues the worker in a society that is rich in labor, talent and

opportunity (as Simone Weil puts it: “to strive from necessity and not for some good—driven not drawn—in order to maintain our existence just as it is—that is always slavery”). “A Test of Labor (Work-in-Progress)” is an attempt to voice, and give voice to how complicated and painful our attitude toward jobs and the people who do those jobs are, and how this ends up affecting everything.

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“We sit in darkness and watch an illuminated world.”

Listen to voices and see movements—  
in the brume, the angular, the markers,  
beginnings,  
where we saturate ourselves.

Our questions affect the equilibrium—  
words laid out on a carpet covered floor  
—we watch the words, words grow

She takes the baby out in a stroller to Central Park, walking and pushing the stroller. Fortunately the baby is sleeping. Some women in the park make comments. She can hear them (the scrape of them): “So young to have a baby!” To her they say, “Your baby is so cute,” as they approach eyeing her. Clowns on target. The wheels of the stroller scraping the pavement. She doesn’t want a baby, not this baby, no baby. She wants money, escape.

"I didn't have the clothes."  
Oral History in the Archive:  
Father put newspapers in  
the bottom of my shoes.

I never wanted to stay there,  
where I was. The routine.  
Enough food but barely enough.  
"Always behind in payments."

Listen to my story  
Listen to her story  
Listen to our story

At/in the Archive

"It's not today, so different than those days."

A house on the hill, cleaning the house on Nob Hill, in San Francisco,  
sixteen and filled with rage. Above the fog, there are holes in this  
place. She minds, minds seeing her mother clean her friend's  
mother's houses. Her mother. She minds, her mother doesn't mind.  
It's a job. She has a job. The daughter climbs the hill to her job.

The disadvantages of  
The destitution of  
Divorce of

We have to make changes.

When you don't have access to the Oral Histories  
or your mother-tongue  
you can lose your way.

"I just felt as if I was trapped.  
I thought if this is what life  
is about, then I don't know  
why I'm here."

The philosopher said, "To strive from necessity...not for some  
good...  
in order to maintain our existence...is always slavery."

"I used to babysit for their children."  
No mother-tongue here just labor:  
"When you're depressed you don't want  
to participate." "I wanted to disappear."

In San Francisco, she sits, waits with her mother who waits for the  
welfare checks and food-stamps. She waits and watches the light

coming in from the window, in this place, south of Market Street.  
As if in a film. Bought popcorn and m&ms for the double-feature.

There are others too, many others in this place.  
It's inside her, now, how she watched the others, in this place.

When you rely on an image in your mind, and mind, the body  
sinks, here in this most beautiful of cities by the Bay, the shimmer of  
the water, the shine.

#### Garment Workers in the Archive.

Wears the same skirt, spit it out, at school. "Can't you afford another  
skirt?" other girls spurt. This one is a wrap-around denim skirt, hand-  
me-down (remember those?). A friend she's getting to know tells  
her that sewing and making your own things is a way to get around  
not having clothes. Her friend makes clothes out of patterns. Her  
friend's mother makes jewelry. Her friend teaches her how to sew  
(then able to get a job as a seamstress, later that year).

"Gave her a thorough examination before she started working."

Ordering  
Washing

Cleaning  
Hands deep in water  
Lemon bars  
Wheat-germ honey brownies  
At the bakery—  
A sharp cold strong wind against leafless branches in the sunshine.

Who's next?

How do you want it?

Do you want your bread sliced?

For here or to go?

Smells of dill-bread stick,

and the burn from falling

asleep at the beach—

"Why has there never been a mystic, workman or peasant, to write  
on the use to be made of the disgust for work? Our souls fly from  
this disgust which is so often there, even threatening, and try to hide  
it from themselves by reacting vegetatively..."

"the system and what it does  
to people...they don't even  
know what is happening to them."

Coming up against the language—  
in a composition.  
Children with lost tongues.

Murmurs...

"At Ellis Island my mother's name...  
changed from Basha to Bessie."

Will always know more than one tongue.  
The Immigrant will always know more than one tongue.

At Ellis Island, noticed  
the breaking up of families:  
I came home crying. Why  
did they have to break up  
these families?

Heartbreak,  
these borders,  
wanting to go back.

Boundaries redefined,  
uncertainty redefined.

"No such thing then as child working laws."  
"All my life I was on welfare."  
3) "My father just glad to get a straight wage."

Judged by the kind of work you do.

Women's voices in the Archives

"I would've stayed at home..."

Hired by the city of San Francisco for a job on how to learn to get  
a job:

She notices she's the only "white" teen. She wants to get away  
from home, wants to be able to do something else than work as a  
cleaner or with food. She minds working with food. She finds out  
about this job that will teach her how to get a job; it pays minimum  
wage. Takes the bus up and down Fillmore. The "job" consists of  
talking about your abilities with the others, learning how to write a  
résumé, and learning how to do an interview (practicing on video  
tape). The teens are all happy to have this job, this kind of job. She  
likes to help the others too. The bus travels over the hills, to and  
from, passes pastel colored buildings. They would help each other  
out, the teenagers (she likes helping the others out), then came  
the interviews, all over the city. She was the first (being "white") to  
get a job.

How people take things for granted.  
"When one has very little...one doesn't."

Learned two things at the bank:

About how to forge checks, so as to recognize a forged check.

About her name and how she looked.

Each teller's name is engraved on a little plaque. A customer comes up to her window and says, "Is that your name?" "Yes." "These days anyone can call themselves by any name," he says, "I mean, this is a Hispanic name. I mean, you're not Hispanic." The girl across the divide dumbfounded, defensive: "Yes, actually, I am. I was born in Mexico City, and my parents are half-Hispanic, and..." "Sure, sure, that's what you say," his voice has gotten louder, "Anyone can say that just to get a job." The manager comes over, "What's the trouble here?" She looks down as if she's done something wrong.

"The Labor Rights movement has been my Civil Rights," the postal worker said—bringing people together centered "around their labor rather than their pigmentation."

She says, "it really is a class system."

In the meantime  
give expression, give utterance,  
figure out what matters.

"A secretary in small places."

Before this one I had a "series of bad jobs, I guess what you would call sexual harassment now, started me wanting to work for the city, and I thought it would be temporary."

Not alone

She then got a job as a receptionist in a downtown firm.  
filing            answering phones            greeting people  
Her body all day in a chair—

Cheer up, at least you have a job.

The train goes round and round.

What do you find in the Archives?

You don't work just to have a job,  
"if you're going to work make  
sure you get paid for your labor."

She's working as a receptionist in San Francisco near the TransAmerica Building. What she doesn't like about it is having to wear pantyhose and skirts. Skin can't breathe in pantyhose (she buys the kind that hold her stomach in). When she's accepted into a theater program in New York, she tells the people she works with that she's moving to New York. A secretary takes her to lunch and says, "I once dreamed of doing something like this, but was too scared. It's important never to let go of your dream."

When she got paid for work as an actress she felt elated,

as if she had gotten away with something.

Then she's number 259 in an Actor's Equity casting call.

The holes in the crown.

"friendly pat," squeeze, pinch

She is going for a job interview, down near Wall Street, to work as a waitress. She's never been in that area of the city before. The restaurant is narrow, darkly lit. First she is asked to sit down and fill out an application form. She has all the pertinent information written down, so all she has to do is copy the information (she learned her lesson well). Then talks to a stout red-faced man in a grey suit. He's wearing a tie. He asks her questions about her résumé. He tells her that the waitresses in his restaurant wear uniforms. She says that's fine (she's had to wear uniforms before). Before dismissing her, he says he will call her. She looks down, shakes his hand. On her way out, notices one of the waitresses, dark hair, lots of thick blue make-up around the eyes. The skirt of her black and white uniform is cut right where her underwear ends. She walks outside into the light and walks and walks.

The waitress said:

"I could see very clearly in all  
the restaurants I worked in,  
the difference between the boss  
and the workers. It's a very raw

thing in a restaurant because  
the boss is usually around a lot."

"Customers identify much more  
with the owner. Often they don't  
even see you...that kind of invisibility  
is part of it. It allows them to treat you  
in a lot of cruel ways, expecting servile  
behavior or expecting to be flirted with."

A restaurant, nothing—  
being told to—  
does a worker need?

Erased, then partially erased, then again  
"Sexual harassment...about power and not about sex."

Lost among the rubble?  
Grandmother's voice, mother's—  
In the Archives, papers, oral histories...  
Do you hear/fear them?  
Are you really that special?

The young woman has a piece of paper with an address on it.  
She is walking through small streets, past abandoned buildings,

warehouses, very few shops, pale gray clouds—degrees of gray, brown, black, traces of brick red. She has never been in this neighborhood before. No wisteria. She is in New York on the Lower East Side. Gets to the narrow building and the air around it is thick with the smell of chickens. She's buying a chicken with head and feet attached; this is the only place one can buy them this way. She is buying a prop for a theater production. As the assistant stage manager this is her job. For six weeks she will have to come here to buy a chicken with head and feet attached.

And what of a word like "carnage"  
What kind of slaughter, butchery,  
massacre? Who's next?

#### Grievances:

1. TV ad: "I really move my tail for you."
2. "our weight checked...supposed to weigh 130 pounds"
3. "First six months on probation, on call, at the mercy of scheduling"
4. "rush, rush, rush" said the stewardess, "running up and down the aisle"
5. The black attendants were made to look white, make up, hair.
6. "Grooming checks" "had to have long legs"
7. Pilots "used to being served"
8. "girls, that's what we were, girls...someone to herd around"

"At PAN AM you need a union."

Does a worker need a tongue?

Her friend is petite, strong, with long thick hair in a ponytail that goes down to her waist. Loud music. People at the banquet have just eaten appetizers; their appetite is for talk, for the dancing that has not yet begun. Servers are carrying trays of metal-covered plates, serving the main entrée. The friend is serving at the table next to hers. One of the customers reaches below the skirt of her pink and maroon uniform so that he can touch her ass, right before she is about to serve him. She flips the content of the plate onto his lap and walks away.

jokes, verbal suggestions, intimidation  
constantly being tested,  
out in the field.

"That's how low the estimate  
of my own marketability, of my  
own skill was," says the editor,

“not because I thought  
I wasn’t talented or capable, but  
because the work world had  
already taught me that”

“We open our mouth and they hear the higher pitch.”

Pitched forward into the caustic.

“in different languages”

Chinese saying: “The big fish eat the little fish.”

Does a worker need a tongue?

What to call her?

The language difficulty.

The firefighter said, “Terminology is a big deal”

The media is incredibly insensitive.

“The Archive is on fire and we are faceless.”

A lady fireman?

Firemen stoke fires on trains.

People can’t tell.

“Issues of language a big deal for us...  
goes to the heart of our identity.”

At a desk typing. Notes cut and recut, pasted over. Bending over to read the handwriting. The typing becomes words and the words evoke. Grammar ties them together, and then something is understood. But what? Something only hinted at really. Does it change anything? What about contingency? Listening to CDs in the Media Center. Something heard, read, some idea entered the mind and stayed there. Who minds them? Are the words fixed? If we fixate on them what happens to them? Isn’t there a whole other perspective? What if shame is attached to certain words? Do we write them? Do we dare?

A matter of inflection

In a maroon and pink polyester dress and apron, in black leather shoes, down a block long ballroom that matches the uniforms, she moves quickly, setting down a tray and serving the ten people around the table. One man’s hand grazes her behind as she bends forward to serve him.

Not being able to say no.

Silence.

Not being able to make a simple statement.

“rush, rush, rush”

“People in jobs like mine  
ought to be in a union.”

Accidentally brushing against your body  
In the mind  
one minds  
when one is found  
one makes steps  
into land minds.

At the Grand Hyatt hotel—a strike, so there’s no work. She was on the picket line one day and there was a lot of thick anger because of the scabs (that “tag”) going in to do the work. After the strike many of the waiters left and went to work at the Marriott instead. She remembers feeling sorry for the scabs; they just needed work. She left the country soon after that so she felt “outside” of the struggle.

1912 headlines:

Strike riots in N.Y.

Employees stand firm

Police draw guns on rioting waiters

Hiring colored men

Women urges hotel workers to organize

Union of maids forming today

96 are arrested in Waiters Riots outside Waldorf’s

Waiters strike gets bad slump

3,000 waiters out from 29 hotels, six restaurants

“Scabs were being brought  
in and slept there at the hotel.”  
The strike was lost. I joined  
the picket line, “starvation pay.”

Funds were purloined (by whom for whom?)

“Women are not really in those positions...that will make the front page on any regular basis at the Times & some of the other lower-ranks newspapers.”

Daughter, daughter

“We are archivable, which means  
we can easily be forgotten”

She’s teaching English in France. Makes enough to pay rent and buy baguettes and cheese. One man takes classes from her because he wants to go out with her. He smells as though he has poured an entire bottle of perfume on his body. They meet in cafés and still she can smell him for days afterwards, but she can teach English and she needs the baguettes and cheese.

Packing up/Leaving/Carrying the Suitcase—

Another language.

*"La ligne qui part du quartier ouvrier jusqu'à l'usine ne change pas au retour."*

Born in China where she became a teacher. In the U.S. worked as a waitress, and in a garment factory: 5:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. in the factory, then 7:00 p.m. back to work as a waitress.

"She works very fast," the interpreter adds.

Constantly being tested again out in the field

Her first day of work at a woodworking school in Boston's North End neighborhood, the oldest neighborhood in Boston; it reminds her a little of Europe. She commutes there from Providence. The person whose job it is to coordinate classes is showing her what the job entails. The most complicated part of the job is the financial part. The woman is showing her the dense spreadsheet. A moment later, the woman presses a button and in an instant the spreadsheet is gone. "Oh well, it's probably best that you start from scratch anyway."

Tethered by a moment; how it tells the future.

CD and transcripts available.

She works in a library now, Special Collections. It's her birthday and she lives in Providence. Lunchtime and her supervisor says, "Take as long as you want, today is your birthday." She smiles, thanks him for his kindness, leaves his office. Lunch with her friend goes over by a half-hour. Later that same day, at the end of the workday, her supervisor comes up to her and says, "When are you going to make up that half-hour?"

The editor learned:

"About 9 to 5

about elitism in the office,

about indignities,

about feeling powerless to protect yourself, to stand up for yourself,

about favoritism in the office,

about office politics,

about discrimination against women, against the young.

I learned a great deal in that first year."

The supervisor in the stately building calls the woman in for her yearly review. He hands her the form and lets her read it. "But I don't understand," she says, "you said I was doing excellent work and here you've given me a 'good!'" "Good is like a B," the archivist says. He's from a very "special" Ivy League school. "But you said I was doing excellent work! And I have been doing excellent work." "I gave you a B because otherwise you have no room for

improvement." "I don't care about room for improvement, my evaluation should reflect the work I'm doing." He doesn't see it that way. He is the one who evaluates.

The question is (if we keep it very simple),  
whose role is it to assess?  
Who can appraise another?

The philosopher said, "Workers need poetry more than bread. They need that their life should be a poem. They need some light from eternity."

Voices in the Archives: activists, organizers

—to listen where one hasn't—

Give ear to:

"tremendous amount of violence  
on behalf of the growers..."

Some strikers left to find jobs elsewhere

"teamsters with two-by-fours."

Set up daycare centers so women could strike.

Police were very violent.

Grievances

Boycott over pesticides: "One

worker died after going into a field  
and the owner instead of getting  
him to a hospital took him across  
the border into Mexico."

Alone

Has anyone asked the workers what they need?

"Where is the space for joy?" the artist asks.

What does the person coming home from their job need?

I went to the union to handle grievance,  
because I was asked to work three times more  
(after some cutbacks). Result is that I  
became shop steward of the union. "Most  
nurses aids were white, still, they elected me."

Talk, tell, vent, verbalize  
Reckoning with others

Workers finding a tongue in union

Workers finding a tongue in a union

Women finding a tongue in their union

Only thing you have as a worker is your labor.

"Sometimes it pays to withhold your labor?"

Not alone

"I had discovered something,

I'm a worker like everybody else"  
"I'm on the other side of the fence  
from the supervisor."

Effects Economical Emotional

"Never be ashamed of where  
you come from because that  
gets you where you are."

We are always "Reckoning with  
the power-line of ancestry."

"I could see the children so  
hungry, so ill-fed."

"No such thing then as  
child working laws."

She's watching children in a daycare center, in a wealthy suburb  
north of San Francisco, among the eucalyptus. A brother and sister  
are not allowed to eat "snacks" because the parents are vegan. Both  
of the children are very thin. They don't have the energy to play with  
the other children, or even to grimace. One day the girl faints. The

daycare worker gives her apple juice and graham crackers. She's  
younger than her brother, and eagerly takes the food. Her brother  
won't tell on her.

At the volunteer hospital:

"The patients were so grateful,  
they were so nice to me; it  
made me feel good." "I thought  
well maybe I want to be a nurse."

The first black nurse at the hospital.  
Her name is Lillian.  
"always wanted to help others"

"I didn't have Sunday off" (left  
in charge on Sunday) "I had to  
complain about it"—In charge,  
but not in charge—"couldn't tell  
them what to do." She spoke to  
the supervisor then got one  
Sunday off a month

Grievances

They hadn't integrated African Americans  
and Hispanics, with women there's the problem  
of being a double-minority:  
"But being a woman is worse than race."

Statement

We articulate our lives around work—  
People and their pursuits...  
The dress, the stance, the verbiage.

New Yorkers at Work: Oral History

Individuals fought for workers' rights, votes, unions.

"It was natural. I'm a joiner of  
good causes, especially those  
that protect teachers."

It's a test, our testimony—  
Writing,  
those of us who have a choice—  
A test of labor, that's what we're here for.

And the mind is its own place.

Plan, read, prepare, lecture, guide, mentor, support, read, grade—  
Students then evaluate?

The chair of her department at a very large, wealthy university,  
suggests that she apply for full professor, going from adjunct-

associate professor to adjunct professor. She's very excited,  
especially by the prospect of getting a raise. Her chair looks into  
what needs to be done for her and emails her soon after to tell her  
that she might as well "not bother." The thing is that to get the  
title of adjunct professor she'd need to do everything that a full  
professor does to get tenure, that all the work would not be worth  
it. The thing is she's been teaching at this university for over thirteen  
years. Now enrollment is low, so there's been cutbacks. The thing is  
after thirteen years, she is not guaranteed a job. How has she come  
to this? How has she become something added to another thing  
but not essential to it?

Voices in the Archives: "The conditions caused communism"  
"The conditions"

Transcripts available

Brenda, Bertha, Olga, Rosa, Shui,  
Della, Sonia, Naomi, Cindy, Kitty,  
Mary, Goldie, Sokie, Suki, Joyce,  
Susan, Liz, Ruby, Rosalyn, Elena,  
Josie, Lillian, Teresa, Belle, Shirley  
Philoene, Dolores, Katie, Kathleen

One man's job, she notes on her way to the Archive, is to engrave  
in gold in the marble wall of the library the names of the library's  
benefactors.

Still tired. Shoulders ache. She's worrying this morning about finding a job. The thinking runs like this: "If I get that temp job will they expect me to wear a skirt? What did the woman mean by 'a very professional office'? A skirt? I only have one skirt. And can I really type 50 WPM? Can I do the job? I'm a good worker. I can learn very quickly. I could do anything. Maybe I'll get that administrative-assistant position for that project at the university? Full-time though. And only 16,500 a year; that's terrible. Maybe they won't expect me to wear a skirt there. I could ask if the position could be made part-time. And what if I don't get anything?" She wants to write. She wants a job just so that she can stop focusing on looking for a job, "really it would be better if it was part-time."

At a desk, typing. What does it mean to write about labor? How does one respond? The blue dragon in her dream frightens her. Does she dare? At a desk, "constantly being tested out in the field."

A thin elderly woman bends over  
near the supermarket on 91<sup>st</sup> Street,  
picks up a piece of litter.

## Notes:

"We sit in darkness and watch an illuminated world."—Nathaniel Dorsky, *Devotional Cinema*

"To strive from necessity...not for some good...in order to maintain our existence...is always slavery." —Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Craufurd

"Why has there never been a mystic, workman or peasant, to write on the use to be made of the disgust for work? Our souls fly from this disgust which is so often there, even threatening, and try to hide it from themselves by reacting vegetatively."—Simone Weil, *La Condition Ouvrière*, trans. Siân Miles

"The archive is on fire and we are faceless."—Jill Magi, *LABOR*

"*La ligne qui part du quartier ouvrier jusqu'à l'usine ne change pas au retour.*"—Dany Laferrière, *Je suis un écrivain japonais*

"We are archivable, which means / we can easily be forgotten"—Thom Donovan, *Withdrawn*

“Workers need poetry more than bread. They need that their life should be a poem. They need some light from eternity.”—Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*

“Reckoning with the power-line of ancestry.”—Gabrielle Civil, performance artist

All other quotations are taken from the oral-history collections at the Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, a public archive located in New York University’s Bobst Library.

My deepest gratitude goes to all the women whose struggle has made my life, and the advantages I’ve had, possible, including Jill Magi whose invitation to read at the Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, to respond in some way to the collection, gave me the opportunity to encounter/re-encounter themes/aspects/memories that have deeply marked me. I am also grateful to the librarians and assistants at the Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives whose labor aided me in finding the necessary materials to generate this piece.

I keep the parenthetical “Work-in-Progress” of the title because the work of living, the work of labor, and the work of understanding why we do what we do continues for me to be “in progress.”

## Labor Library and Dave

ROB FITTERMAN

## Introduction

This text combines material repurposed from the Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives and a new piece I'm writing, titled *Dave*. In *Dave*, a book-length poem, the office worker Dave is addressed by various fellow workers and authorities, but never is given voice to respond.

---

Dear Comrades: attached is a copy of my transcribed notes of Gerard's speech to the NYS Extraordinary conference June 23<sup>rd</sup>. Please note that I wasn't present for the first few minutes of the speech and therefore the first part is missing. In the body of the speech there may have been a few things left out, but I believe that I got most of it. Comradely, C.

A throng of unemployed routed in attempt to rush doors—many trampled, including children, in retreat. Officers fire pistols in air.

Here, Dave, I thought you would like a copy of this. Someone dug it up last year. No one I spoke with was in St. Louis at the time so I cannot elaborate on any of the names in the article. In struggle, SD

NOTE: NEW PHONY LEFT, Nat'l caucus of labor committees and its U.S. Labor Party CIA-FBI sponsorship. Role of stool pigeons, and agent provocateurs.

Florence Peterson, Director of Industrial Relations U.S. Department of Labor, described the situation thus: "The 1877 railroad strikes against wage reductions, irregularity of employment, and displacement of engineers caused by the introduction of the double-header freight trains of 34 cars, were marked by much violence, and, for the first

time in this country, federal troops were used to quell strikes. It was estimated that some 100,000 troops were under arms.

Dave, I decided to send you a copy of this, which brings back memories. Of course you weren't old enough at the time but I bet you heard about happenings like this.

*You can never kill the people for there will always be more  
Like the water in the ocean, like the sand upon the shore.*

I'm sorry I took so long to get this to you. I thought that the mail would be better than the computer, bc the telephone is not a good way to communicate such material, and the print-out you get from the DW is difficult to read. So here is the outline of my report to the District Convention. I understand Mildred is also sending you hers. See you in Cleveland, Comradely regards, T.

Dave: note that the address of the Minnesota Historical Society is different on its stationary than on its envelope.

As the crowd broke out and ran, several of the bolder spirits threw stones at the police detail. Some of whom had temporarily been blinded by a gas bomb.

We stayed at the Hilton in Denver—it was just OK. They had a gym and a sauna but no 24-hour access which seemed really dumb because everyone there was like working crazy hours for the

convention and came back super late and no gym access, so what's the point?

Bricks hurled through window hits clerk—megaphones appeal to leaders leads to outbreak.

The Communist Party of the Eighth Assembly District, Recognizing its responsibility to the thousands of workers in the neighborhood, keeps its doors wide open at all times. Members of the party are always ready to listen to people's problems and to help in solving them.

(Page missing for 1938 election results)

Settlement Houses:

Labor Temple—14<sup>th</sup> Street near 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue

Lavenberg Corner House—335 East 12<sup>th</sup> Street

Musical School Settlement—55 East 3<sup>rd</sup> Street

Stuyvesant Neighborhood House—74 St Marks Place

NOTE: a literature shop is established in our section headquarters. It carries a full line of Marxist Literature—pamphlets, papers, magazines, and also interesting novels in several languages.

It's not a security conference Dave, it's a security seminar.

A Special Letter to industrial workers—employed and unemployed.  
Dear Sisters and Brothers, This letter is written especially for you

who work in the mines, mills and factories of our country. Or who have been laid off. We want you to join our party, the Communist Party, USA. Our party is on the move.

It took you two weeks, Dave, to learn this program and now nobody wants to use it.

At the rally there will also be music, dancing and live entertainment. It will be an evening of solidarity and unity with those who share our commitment to a peaceful, healthy, just and secure future. And you can add your voice to ours in saying it's time for a real change, a People New Agenda in our country. Please join us. We'll be expecting you.

Dave, are you going past the mailroom? Could you, like, just drop these off? Thanks, dude, I'm like doing a million things here.

A discussion was held on the kitchen. Decided that women were not needed after 9 PM. Shifts to remain as decided. If there are more women in the kitchen than needed, they were to work on other committees. A request came from Brother Gerard for two women volunteers to work in the office at 460 North Sarah.

We are bracing ourselves for a real body blow, Dave, this is not good news. There's a real erosion of consumer confidence here. The internalization and preferencing on order flows is going to influence our pricing big time.

eggs 2 dozen / cranberry sauce 2 cans / milk half gallon / pork chops 45 / pork sausage 1 lb / radishes 3 bunch / celery bunch / jello 2 boxes / 2 cans tomatoes / 1 head cabbage / 25 cent boiled ham / cookies 1 lb

We're getting wings in the office, Dave, you in? We're looking at Platter #3: 100 boneless wings, or 50 boneless and 50 with bones, 2 buckets of fries, 2 lbs. of potato salad or coleslaw. We can get half spicy and half mild, unless you're also ok with spicy, but I'm not gonna get *atomic* spicy, I got that once and it's too much, even for me, and I can do spicy believe me, but I think everyone is good with regular spicy, I'll double-check. So, that's good right?

A check-up was made on the sale of the buttons. Money for 45 buttons was turned in. Everybody is doing their best to sell the buttons.

Nah, it didn't really go down like that Dave. I gave Anthony the initial shipping estimate of \$4,000 but Don said they'd pay anything, so Don told them \$6,000, and of course they walked on the whole deal. I mean, they're not complete idiots, I'm sure they got other bids. Anyway, Don is not even with that outfit anymore, it was a complete mess. Of course, Anthony took the heat, some heat, but it's not his fault. I'm just glad it wasn't on my watch, you know, I just gave Anthony the initial, and then Anthony gave that to Don. So then I hear from Karen in accounts that the whole thing is a complete mess and she's not happy and that's probably why you heard about it, whatever, I'm just glad I'm out of it.

Brother Cooper talked briefly about the other Ford strikes in other cities, and how they were getting along. He thanked the auxiliary for the big part they had done in helping to make the strike a success. He also reported on the activity of our parade so far. Sister Smith proposed the kids to march in a group of their own, and it was voted that they should.

Digital Master Images: Sample Technical Specifications for Photograph Collections (PDF file)

- NDLP Project Planning Checklist (American Memory technical information, Library of Congress)
- Standards Related to Digital Imaging of Pictorial Materials (especially photographs) - Lists organizations that develop standards; citations to specific standards for digitization, file formats, storage media and repositories; and information about scanning targets (PDF file)
- What to Look for in a Scanner - Guidelines for selecting a scanner for photographs (PDF file)

Dave, what are you thinking! Why did you cc the whole fucking department on this? This is not a whole department issue, Dave... it makes you look really bad, it makes all of us look bad. For God's sake, why don't you just cc the whole fucking world! This is only about 4 people: you, me, Helen, Rog and maybe Stephanie and that's it. No one else even knows what this is about Dave. This is a dick move, man, I mean really.

Click here. No here. Click here, Dave. Click on this. Click on this, right here. Right here Dave. Dave! You're not listening to me. Click on this, then click on this right here, here, here, OK.

# Notes for the Smallest Link

## Introduction

MARYAM PARHIZKAR

The text that follows is a series of preliminary notes (for what project, it remains to be seen). It came about as a result of Jill Magi's commission: a working document of resonances, the result of impulsively searching for a piece of my own possible genealogy in an archive that I could not envision acknowledging it. When I first searched through the Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, the first keywords I searched for were: "restaurant worker," "Salvadoran" and "Iranian"—all pieces of my immigrant parents' identities. I found overlap between the latter two keywords in a collection of English-language pamphlets from the Reference Center for Marxist Studies, categorized alphabetically by country of reference.

Sitting with these documents, at times glossing through them and at other times attending closely to their language, I found myself thinking about growing up and coming to the gradual awareness of where, in time and place, my family came from—diasporas of the late 1970s and early 1980s in two distinct countries with complicated registers in the United States. I was thinking about the predominant refugee-oriented narratives of those diasporas (of the Salvadoran

Civil War and Iranian Revolution), and how there are people who complicate the notion of refuge. My mother and her sisters came to Texas as migrant restaurant workers, hoping to send money to their family during a difficult economic period back home. My father came to the same state on a student visa, after years of service in the pre-Revolution military, to study electrical engineering. Even through the Revolution he had intended to return home, but his mother asked him to stay in the U.S. until events subsided. During that time my parents met by the coincidence of a wrong phone call (though that is another story). They married, started a family and became U.S. citizens—committing them to this country for the next several decades, in spite of the ebb and flow of complication that results from being continuously alien.

These pamphlets were not intended for my education, though I have also learned from them. What they describe feels very distant from what I know through my blood ties. Perhaps this is why I can only provide the results of my impossible relationship to them. The title, taken from one of the pamphlets (*El Salvador: The Smallest Link*, by Rafael Menjívar, 1980), maybe acknowledges this sense of strain: how to connect to information that should describe a part of me, but nevertheless feels foreign? But the mention of the link, too, comes because I wonder what to make of a love that connects—that makes being-with possible for aliens with distinct, though totalizing histories. What to do with this strange love that, by desire embedded within these encountered documents, should have been impossible?

---

*El pueblo vencera*

*[el pueblo vencerá]*

The negotiation of an accent:  
a people united, or  
will win  
will defeat

An Illustration:  
target on an isthmus,  
resonances of elsewhere  
upon elsewhere

An isthmus as that for which  
to negotiate theory  
burdens in subtitles:  
  
to make a grieving legible  
to those who do not  
know grieving in this way:

I do not want to grieve defeat but find a choreography.

\*

A young boy embracing machinery  
in a message: a cover pose, something like  
a smile—translation by which we file as:

liberation movement, as  
country, as  
tug on another plane, as  
structures of opposition

—and what sounds in structures—quote: *a new pair of shoes is a  
fantasy which, if it materialized, would be a cause for celebration.*  
Breakdowns of land ownership, 1980: 60% for 2 %: 20% for 8%:  
20% for 90%— — — —

\*

On this day of an encounter in an email someone I met once months  
before writes me for the first time, tells me, *The past is ever present  
and meanwhile people intend to keep living* (MJ).

\*

The heavy isthmus  
the smallest link

the unexpected juxtapositions, for instance:

Texas Instruments: *largest employer in the country, I learn  
a repetition of vital interest—  
what it means to reiterate the phrase—*

first and last place in the state  
to hire my father as an engineer

In the end they both turned to the kitchens  
and this was where they became vital:

vitality as synonymous with refused,  
or  
alien, or  
just tired

\*

In New Haven I learn that nearly all the non-union workers on the  
campus are Salvadorans. And every time I hear something like this—  
as I have so many times in my life—I immediately think, how did  
they all get so far up there?

\*

I am thinking of navigation in an institution that takes my money,  
feeds me on subsidy.

I am thinking of who feeds me—how a cafeteria woman says to me  
with resignation:

*What do I know, I am just a worker.* I had asked her for a sign that  
she could not locate.

\*

I look for any sign of myself, or, rather, of what I think might be signs  
of myself in crevices.

Person as *subject to*, or  
person as subject

person by registration—

in other words:

demands of articulation:

define emotional register:

\*

I said I had not seen so many of myself before, not expecting to  
weep, institutions no place for weeping. To negotiate a theory that  
is not legible here is to dwell in space of feeling between bodies.  
Suppose someone tells you, contrary to a dominant narrative: *I*

*lingered over a border because I fell in love.* Begin again, go back.  
Not so much to mourn grand losses  
but to know what came.

1978: My broke father in Dallas, marching in circles, six other Iranian  
students in freezing rain. *And look where we are*, he says in his  
restaurant clothes. *It's not good to be too much activist, my baby.*

My mother, circa 1980: *I remember: we would walk by the churches  
where the activists, young people mostly, had taken sanctuary.  
They would hand out flyers in the street.* I sometimes wonder if  
I misremember the story or if it is just all too unbelievable. *I went  
to school, walked past the church and came back to see all those  
young people scattered across the pews.*

And this alongside Joan Didion telling us about all those bodies  
on the beach. How she lingered for a week, inscribed them in a  
novella, upped and left, went back home.

\*

To intervene with intervention: get in the vessel, go to work, make  
a home now. Certain transiences were easier in those times before  
a wall kept out the undesirable wreckage, all left behind. To be  
in control of the situation is to sit with documents: disassemble  
their framework with eyes alone, acknowledging all the repertoire  
unspoken for. Yesterday I said to the scholar, *I had never seen so*

*much of myself here before, and then I wept. Though I did not want to. And then, the scholar said: Some things are worth weeping for.*

\*

I remember that I have come here to work:

to be a resonator, an isthmus between bodies—

to linger over

because

or

as

*to love*

# Wealth Begins with Human Need: Machines Can't "Read," or Remediating *Marx's Capital, Volume 1*

JOHANNAH RODGERS,  
WITH KARL MARX, ALBERT  
DRAGSTEDT, STEVE PALMER AND  
THE TAMIMENT LIBRARY & ROBERT F.  
WAGNER LABOR ARCHIVES

## Introduction

This project began, as many of my projects do, at the invitation of Jill Magi. In this instance, asked to engage with The Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, my response began with some very simple but, I feel, pressing questions related not only to this project, but to several other creative and academic projects that I am involved with as a writer and as a teacher of writing in an educational system that is becoming increasingly industrialized: what does it mean to be able to write? what does it mean to be able to read? To respond to these questions, one must choose a perspective to answer them from.

Education is currently (or perhaps always has been) big business. As such, it only makes sense that an industrial model would emerge. In an era in which certain humans may very well be becoming (or have already become) commodities, one can only point to or point out this fact, and ask questions about humans and machines, their relationships and the potential consequences of these relationships. Karl Marx is not the only author to have considered these relationships. However, he did so in ways that, I believe, remain pertinent and relevant. As part of a project having to do

with how texts function and how humans and machines interact with these texts, I here have combined human and machine reading in a remediation of the first chapter of the first German edition of Marx's *Capital*, Volume 1.

What follows is a textual compilation that includes work by me, Karl Marx, the translator Albert Dragstedt, the electronic compiler Steve Palmer, the editors of the website Marxists.org, librarians and other staff members at the Tamiment Library, the Library Committee at the Reference Center for Marxist Studies, and the authors, designers and printers of several pamphlets related to labor education projects and housed in the Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives. The following text was read aloud and accompanied by a projection of a [short video](#).

---

Wealth begins with human need.

The science of commodities may be in the form of society.

One kind of relationship is expressed in bootblacking, soap, gold,  
wheat and iron. A geometrical example, its visible figure  
is labour. Segments of time, like hour, day, might seem to change  
yarn into cloth, but

After propitious weather, impropitious weather.

In a small volume of space, Jacob doubts that  
Diggings discovered in wild conditions can be  
The coat. From this viewpoint, the coat is not a coat.

Incarnations lurk in the deployments of useful labour.

Where a need for material wealth is, labour is the precondition of  
Existence. Different instances lurk inside the coat.

What is more, now we recall 10 yards of linen, 20 yards of linen,  
Objective expressions of the same person.

Today, trousers make tomorrow shifting friction.

A banker plays a big role. The simple human being is merely  
quantitative. Various proportions of linen are human.

If one coat  $x$ , then two coats  $2x$ .

But now assume that this contrary motion expresses purposeful  
activity.

In extensions of time, fruitfulness lurking must be value.

A specific quantum, relative constant, sterility.

Growing flax in place of sheep now influences our power of  
abstraction.

Linen makes its earthly appearance, swats different flies.

By equating both things it reveals itself as meaning.

In its mundane reality (coat) is composed exclusively of labor.

In reality this crystal is very murky. A web of flax turns into chimera.  
But labour counts as coat since it is woolen comfort, buttoned up  
essence,

An equivalent. The jumping off point of all difficulties.

Similarly cannot express concrete labour insofar as fashion considers  
The mystery. As far as the coat is concerned, the coat is doing the  
coat, however modest it may be. On the one hand, being  
is an equivalent

Just as the coat was.

In the expression "linen was equated," the linen relates itself to  
Consequently.

Coffee = tea = iron = wheat = labour.

Is as if alongside  
Lions, tigers, rabbits and all other actual animals. Just as linen was  
Completely indifferent to hence, now counts as labor, expressions  
of values  
Counting only quantitatively.

A possessor is indifferent to human needs. At the same time,  
Evanescent, the coat holds, coffee follows tea and is socially valid.  
Imagine actually, reciprocally, in linen.  
Fashion precisely is the reason why they did not become family,  
which is what all human "socialness" must be.

Just as, lurking, they obtain in a contradictory, exclusive kind of  
As, if. Illusion strengthens itself as metamorphosed by the fact that  
Twenty yards of linen = one coat = etcetera.

But each of these equations reflexively, obviously, specifically,  
Conceptually, is a sensual thing.

The table remains wood. The mystical character is human brain,  
nerve,  
Muscle, organ of perception or labour. Labour. Labour.  
Labour. Necessity compels the totality.  
The shipwreck begins. Books are required.  
All relationships contained therein were one part.  
But another part must be the manner of this division,  
Comparable only in such a case to labour, transparently comes the  
puzzling.

Objectified husks concealed unconsciously instinctive in their brain.  
The mystery lurking under the apparent motions.

The producers lie, which veils the insanity.  
But if coat, boot, etcetera, then the social appears in exactly this  
insane  
Form. Historically determined, social relationships, persons, appear  
as  
Objects to one another.

The umbilicus—labour—can only disappear as fog.

So if commodities could speak, they would say:  
"Now just listen, 'Riches are the attributes of man; value is the attribute  
of commodities'"; now is an immediate contradiction.

## Notes

This text is compiled from text taken from an [English translation](#) by Albert Dragstedt of the first chapter of the first German edition of Karl Marx's *Capital*.

# In the Matter of Arbitration

PAOLO JAVIER

## Introduction

This poem is based on the first-ever arbitration hearing between New York University and United Automobile Workers. It's a historic case, to say the least, and set the tone for (and result of) the many others that followed it.

---

I.

between International Union  
UAW, AFL-CIO and Local 7902  
& New York University

In accordance with collective  
bargaining between the two  
above-named parties

the Undersigned Designated  
as Arbitrator to hear and decide  
the following stipulated:

*Did the Employer violate Article X  
Section A (1) by failing to provide  
termination*

*pay to the Grievant after the 2003-  
2004 academic year?  
If so, what shall be the remedy?*

Hearings hold on January 26 &

February 15, 2006 at the offices of  
the American Arbitration Association

in New York City  
at which time representatives  
of the parties appear. All concerned

are afforded a full opportunity  
to offer evidence and argument  
to examine and cross-examine

witnesses.

The Arbitrator's Oath is waived.

The witnesses are sworn.

## II.

*March 29, 2004. Dr. John Kuo Wei Tchen, then  
director of the Asian Pacific Islander American  
Studies Program, to Grievant:*

"I've decided not to reappoint you  
for teaching Intro Tagalog  
next year. I want to start anew  
and see if we can get the numbers up.  
Your evaluations have been so-so

and the numbers have been poor, esp.  
this current year. I believe we have little  
time left to prove to Dean Santirocco  
this is a language students want to  
learn. Sorry to inform you via email  
but didn't want to continue playing  
phone tag. We've had a good run  
and I know you've put much effort  
into teaching. If you'd like, let's sit down  
and talk on Monday when I'm back."

*October 24, 2004. Grievant  
to Dean Matthew Santirocco:*

"I am writing to request  
my termination pay pursuant to  
Article X of the contract between  
New York University and UAW  
Local 7902 and the agreement  
authorizing these payments for  
the 2003–2004 academic year  
entered into between the parties  
on October 5, 2004.

I  
was  
not  
re

ap  
point  
ed  
for the 2004–2005 academic year after  
having taught for ten (10)  
consecutive  
semesters.”

*January 4, 2005. Dean Matthew  
Santirocco to Grievant:*

“Section X,  
paragraph A  
states that  
eligibility is  
contingent on  
prior  
good  
service  
for not  
fewer than  
six  
consecutive

semesters  
during the  
three acade  
mic year  
period  
immediately  
preceding no-  
tification of  
non reapp  
-ointment.  
As you know,  
the Asian  
Pacific  
American  
Studies Program,  
in which you  
held an  
appointment  
as an Adjunct  
Instructor,  
terminated  
your services  
at the end  
of the Spring  
2004 semester  
because of  
performance  
related

issues  
during your  
final year  
of employment.

As such,  
NYU is not  
required to  
provide you with  
termination pay,  
and declines  
to make  
said payment.

I  
wish  
you  
all the best  
in your  
future  
endeavours.”

III.

the Union asserts the Union maintains  
the Union views the Union disclaims  
the Union argues

*I provided good performance  
for six semesters straight*

the Union perceives the Union denies  
the Union specifies the Union describes

*I taught I graded  
I awarded credit*

the Union contests the Union recounts  
the Union highlights the Union surmises  
the Union regards the Union underscores

*minimal level of credibility  
limited negative evidence  
hearsay and no student  
witnesses against me*

the Union considers the Union discloses  
the Union denies the Union confirms  
the Union remarks the Union pinpoints

*positive letters about me  
from the students*

the Union complains the Union attests  
the Union construes the Union disputes  
thus the Union attacks the Union challenges

*testimony of Director of Student Affairs  
Sheelagh Cabalda who did not document  
any concerns about my performance*

the Union blames the Union renounces  
the Union disagrees the Union portrays  
the Union criticizes the Union notes

*all my students successfully  
completing my courses and  
not disclosing any problems*

the Union senses the Union downplays  
the Union observes the Union insists  
the Union detects the Union interprets

*no factual basis exists for the  
negative memorandums from  
Cabalda who did not even perform  
in any supervisory function*

the Union deems the Union explains  
the Union repeats the Union mentions  
the Union recognizes

*as adjunct, I lack  
the guarantee  
for future  
appointment*

In contrast, the Union elaborates

*I have the right to  
receive  
termination pay*

In the absence of evidence, the Union finds  
the Union requests the Union urges

**IV.**

Employer asserts present dispute does not  
Employer maintains dispute involves whether

It is the position of Employer that termination pay provides  
Employer stresses “prior good performance” standard

Employer emphasizes Dr. Tchen found Grievant  
Employer comments Director Cabalda handled student affairs

Employer notes Director Cabalda believed department  
Employer highlights Dr. Tchen based decision not to

Employer specifies Grievant received poor evaluations  
With respect to student enrollment, Employer contends

Employer points out students identified Grievant’s  
Employer relates that an adjunct, such as Grievant, lacked the  
contractual

Employer submits the Arbitrator should not substitute own judgment  
Employer considers such determination to be

Employer refers to certain longstanding judicial other precedent  
On basis of certain judicial precedent, Employer perceives

Employer summarizes Dr. Tchen made valid decision  
Employer concludes no unlawful discrimination

Employer reasons no contractual violation  
Employer urges

It is the assertion of the Employer

to stress  
to emphasize

to comment  
to note

to highlight  
to specify

It is the position of the Employer

to contend  
to point out

to relate  
to clarify

to submit  
to consider

According to the Employer

refer  
perceive

declare  
summarize

conclude  
reason

the Employer urges that  
the grievance be denied

*for Jill Magi*

## AFTERWORD

—Stephen Motika

Jill Magi's *LABOR* marks a departure and deepening of the author's own writing and poetics. The book springs from Magi's crisis around her own professional situation and her inability to get decently paid work as a teacher of liberal arts students at several colleges in New York City. Her position, equally personal, poetic and political, opened up a new channel of writing and resulted in an interstitial text comprised of documentary poetry, fiction, research notes and a handbook form. Magi's book collapses the boundaries and borders found in the ordered world of archives. It represents a mosaic of human experiences, voices and findings around labor in American life, while trying to come to terms with Magi's own position in the workforce.

The research for *LABOR* was done in the Taniment Library & Robert Wagner Labor Archive housed at NYU's Elmer Holmes Bobst Library, a major resource for the history of labor unions as well as of leftist politics in New York and the Northeast in the twentieth century. Both these collections sprung up from small socialist organizations (one a school funded by a theater camp in the Poconos, the other a labor council). The New York University that accepted the donation

of the first of these archives in the 1960s was very different from the New York University of today. Magi's work thus insists upon taking inspiration from, and being empowered by, an archive attuned to and celebrating labor—even as that archive finds itself situated amid the confines of the neoliberal, globalized university.

The somatic experience of encountering this archive is important, and the recent performance event that Magi organized there helped to connect both authors and audiences to the documents, records and books stored within. The five poets made their way through the collection (accessed online and/or in person) to create pieces based on their discoveries. The concept of labor and the records they found opened up an extended form. Each performer mentioned possibilities for this research to dovetail with or to initiate a longer project. Seriality was in the air: the streams of language representing various voices, the records aligning and diverging. I think I can say that this opportunity to present the considerations of laborers and their experiences also demanded innovation. The long twentieth century offered many breakthroughs and achievements and eventual setbacks for American labor. These five poets use experimentation and inventiveness in language to bring new energy and passion to these archives, to enliven and inform a radical life and practice. They remind us of the importance of our own future in labor and the necessity to take further progressive steps to protect all workers.

## AUTHOR BIOS

ROBERT FITTERMAN



**Robert Fitterman** is the author of 14 books of poetry, including *No Wait, Yep*, *Definitely Still Hate Myself*, *Rob's Word Shop*, *Holocaust Museum*, *now we are friends*, *Rob the Plagiarist*, *war, the musical* and *Notes On Conceptualisms*, co-authored with Vanessa Place. His long poem *Metropolis* has been published in four separate volumes. He teaches writing and poetry at New York University and at the Bard College, Milton Avery School of Graduate Studies.

PAOLO JAVIER



**Paolo Javier** is the former Queens Poet Laureate (2010-2014), and the author of *Court of the Dragon*, *The Feeling Is Actual*, *60 lv bo(e)mbs*, *the time at the end of this writing* (Small Press Traffic Book of the Year) and the collaboration with visual artist Ernest Concepcion *Goldfish Kisses* (Sona Books, 2007). He edits *2nd Ave Poetry*, an online journal/micro press.

JILL MAGI



**Jill Magi** is an artist, critic and educator who works in text, image and textile. Her books include *LABOR*, *SLOT*, *Cadastral Map*, *Torchwood* and *Threads*. *Pageviews/Innervisions* was recently published by Moving Furniture Press/Rattapallax. From February–April 2015, Magi wrote weekly commentaries for *Jacket2* on “[A Textile Poetics](#).” After nearly two decades piecing together part-time teaching gigs, Magi joined the faculty at New York University Abu Dhabi, where she teaches poetry and writing through textiles to students from all over the world, and where she is learning the intricacies of global labor flows, structured inequality and the transnational movement of capital.

STEPHEN MOTIKA



**Stephen Motika** is the author of *Western Practice*, and the editor of *Tiresias: The Collected Poems of Leland Hickman*. His poetry chapbooks include *In the Madrones* (Sona Books, 2011) and *Arrival and at Mono* (Sona Books, 2007). Motika has held residencies at the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council’s Workspace in New York, Millay Colony for the Arts in Austerlitz, New York and Zentrum für Kunst und Urbanistik in Berlin. He is the publisher of Nightboat Books, artistic director of Poets House in New York, and is on the Stonecoast MFA faculty at the University of Southern Maine.

MARYAM PARHIZKAR



**Maryam Parhizkar** writes, researches and works via her musical training. She is completing her MA concentration in American Studies at the City University of New York Graduate Center. By day she doubles as an early-music series administrator and co-managing editor of Litmus Press. She is the author of a chapbook, *Pull: a ballad* (The Operating System, 2014). A chapbook-length essay on Sun Ra, Clarice Lispector, reckoning and resonance is forthcoming from Portable Press at Yo-Yo Labs this year.

ELÉNA RIVERA



**Eléna Rivera** has worked as a banquet waitress, a dishwasher, a bank teller, a receptionist, a salesperson, a seamstress, an artist model, in a library, as an encoder, an actor, a letterpress printer, a science explainer, an editor, a translator, a teacher and a writer. Her most recent publications include: *Atmosphered*, *Overture*, *On the Nature of Position and Tone* and *The Perforated Map*. She won the 2010 Robert Fagles prize for her translation of Bernard Noël's *The Rest of the Voyage*, and is the recipient of a 2010 NEA Fellowship in Translation.

## JOHANNAH RODGERS



**Johannah Rodgers** is a writer, visual artist and educator whose work explores representation and communication across media. She is the author of *Technology: A Reader for Writers*, the digital fiction project entitled *DNA* and *sentences*. Her visual works include the *Excel Drawing Series*, featured in The Drawing Center's Viewing Program, and *The How Much Project*, which explores (via digital and analog visualization tools) the intersection of aesthetics, civic literacy and social action in relation to income inequality in the United States. She teaches writing and literature at the New York City College of Technology.

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