

WORK REQUIRE- MENTS

RACE,
DISABILITY,
AND THE
PRINT
CULTURE OF
SOCIAL
WELFARE

Todd
Carmody

Work Requirements

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RACE, DISABILITY, AND THE PRINT CULTURE OF SOCIAL WELFARE

**Todd
Carmody**

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION SIGNS TAKEN FOR WORK 1

1 THE PENSIONER'S CLAIM 33

2 THE BEGGAR'S CASE 74

3 THE WORK OF THE IMAGE 119

4 INSTITUTIONAL RHYTHMS 172

CODA REMAKING RECIPROCITY 214

Acknowledgments 221

Notes 225

Bibliography 289

Index 315

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INTRODUCTION

SIGNS TAKEN FOR WORK

In the fall of 2016, Dale McGlothlin went to a busy intersection near his home in southwest Virginia and held up a sign that read, “Need donations to help to feed my family God Bless.” McGlothlin was an unemployed white man in his fifties who had lost the full use of his right arm in a mining accident years earlier. What happened to him afterward was a common enough story in this part of Appalachia, a region hard hit by the collapse of the coal industry and the broader economic downturn. It is a story of disability, unemployment, public assistance, addiction, and jail time—a contemporary portrait of poverty in the United States. McGlothlin was soon joined on the side of the road that day by a man named David Hess, who also carried a sign: “I offered him a job and he refused.” It is unclear how long the two men, evidently already acquainted, stood together or how the drivers passing by responded. But before the day was over, Hess posted a photograph of himself and McGlothlin, signs in hand, on social media (figure I.1). The image quickly stirred an outpouring of ridicule and anger, but also pity, and in time local and national media took note.

To many observers, the photograph of McGlothlin and Hess captured a growing split in rural America between “those who work and those who don’t.”¹ At once somber and provocative, the image seemed to corroborate a spate of recent reporting on how a jobless economic recovery was transforming disability benefits into a de facto public assistance program while still leaving many people in dire need. And yet it doesn’t take much digging to see that McGlothlin’s experience troubles easy distinctions between working and not working. Not only could McGlothlin make more money on the street than in a low-paying job, he told reporters, but he did

Panhandling Post: A Social Media Post Out of Tazewell County Goes Viral



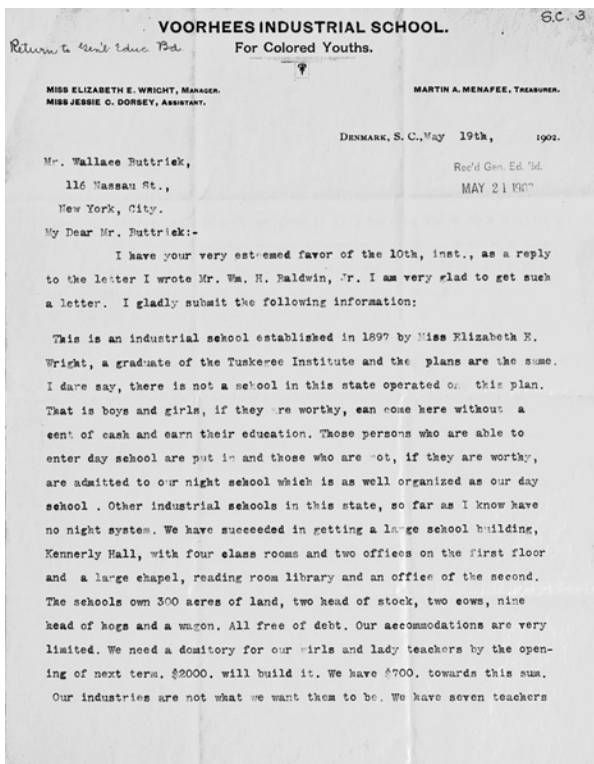
1.1 Homepage of CBS/Fox59 in Ghent, West Virginia, November 22, 2016.
<https://www.wvntv.com/archives/panhandling-post-a-social-media-post-out-of-tazewell-county-goes-viral/>.

his best to keep things aboveboard. He had permission to stand on private property and put in regular hours there.² McGlothlin, it would seem, approached soliciting like any other job. Unsurprisingly, Hess saw matters differently. He argued that “begging” was the opposite of productive work and that anyone who turned down a “real job” forfeited the right to ask for help in the first place.³ Hess also flirted with racist caricatures of the “welfare queen,” hinting that McGlothlin was jeopardizing his whiteness by seeking a “handout.” “I work. You bums should try it.” For all his bluster, however, Hess’s straight talk seems rather more tortuous when we consider the position he offered McGlothlin: promotion work that required “standing on the side walk twirling a sign on the model of other businesses.”⁴ To condemn McGlothlin as Hess and his allies did was thus to see a world of difference between twirling a sign for someone else and holding one’s own. The former was work; the latter was not. But this criticism also obscures the obvious. Given McGlothlin’s limited range of motion, twirling any sign—no matter whose it was or what it said—was out of the question. Not only could he not have accepted the job even if he had wanted it, but

the moral chasm separating work from idleness amounted to just a few degrees of rotation.

Writing more than a century before McGlothlin was forced to defend his work ethic on the side of the road (and online), the Black educator Martin A. Menafee described his experience at Booker T. Washington's famed Tuskegee Institute in strikingly similar terms, though with a rather more upbeat conclusion. Menafee begins an autobiographical essay titled "A School Treasurer's Story" (1905) with a recollection of childhood injury. As a boy, he writes, "I had had one of my shoulders dislocated in an accident and have been able to use but one arm since."⁵ This impairment prevented Menafee from attending the local college but not from enrolling at Tuskegee. Once on campus, he was assigned to work in the brickyard, a rite of passage at a school that prided itself on teaching cadets the value of hard work for its own sake. This posting soon proved unmanageable, however, and Menafee, unable to cover his fees, was forced to leave Tuskegee after less than a week. Not a full year would pass before he returned for a "second trial." This time Menafee lobbied for stenography work in the front office, an assignment that allowed him to finish his studies on time and launch a successful career in educational administration. At Voorhees School, Menafee worked with founder and principal Elizabeth Wright to help build an institution that would survive, if not always thrive, in the difficult years to come. "A School Treasurer's Story" does not dwell on these hardships or anticipate the rocky road that lay ahead for what is now Voorhees College. Once he moved from the brickyard to the front office, Menafee would have readers believe, the rest simply fell into place.

It would be easy to assume that McGlothlin and Menafee share little more than a personal history of injury and impairment. There is no direct comparison to be drawn, of course, between the social circumstances that shape life for a working-class white man in the deindustrializing present and those encountered by Black professionals in the early twentieth century. Nor does the public attention these men garnered seem at all similar. For a brief moment in the news and outrage cycle linking social, local, and national media, McGlothlin was drawn into a morality tale of two Americas—"makers" and "takers." Menafee's story, by contrast, published in a volume commemorating Tuskegee's fifteenth anniversary, is presented as a triumph of Black industrial education—an ableist tale of overcoming adversity, equal parts Washington's *Up from Slavery* and Helen Keller's *The Story of My Life* (1903).⁶ As with the job McGlothlin turned down, however, things seem different when we consider what Menafee actually did



1.2 Letter from Martin A. Menafée of Voorhees Industrial School to Wallace Buttrick of the General Education Board, May 19, 1902, box 122, folder 1110, General Education Board Records, Sc 3 Voorhees Normal and Industrial School, 1902-1920, Rockefeller Archive Center.

at Voorhees. While he was indeed the school's treasurer, Menafée did not spend most of his time balancing the books or doing the payroll. Rather, his primary responsibility involved asking donors and philanthropic foundations for money. Menafée did not take to the street to do this, to be sure. But the letters, applications, and reports he mailed out by the hundreds did proleptically take a page out of McGlothlin's book (figure 1.2). Menafée's task was not only to present Voorhees as a worthy cause but also to assure potential benefactors that he was a professional fundraiser and not a beggar. Armed with business English, Menafée thus also set out to show his work.

Taken together, the stories of McGlothlin and Menafée illustrate what probably remains the most widely held assumption about US social welfare provision, a catchall term I use for government and private initiatives to support people in economic need.⁷ Today it passes for an unassailable truth that only people who work or are willing to work deserve help. This

idea is hardly new. From colonial poor laws to twentieth-century workfare, the social safety net has long been woven of a resolute commitment to the labor market as the only legitimate arbiter of economic resources. From this truism follows another: that it is easy to tell what counts as work and what doesn't. In many contexts this statement would seem all but irrefutable; either goods are produced or services rendered, or they aren't. The issue is thornier, though, with social welfare provision. Whether in the antebellum poorhouse or under Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF)—known today pejoratively as “welfare”—the labor required of beneficiaries usually has far greater noneconomic or moral value than economic value. It matters less that anything particular is made or done than that recipients persuasively perform their potential for self-reliance.⁸ What persuades in one context, however, may not in another. In the early nineteenth century, alms seekers could demonstrate their deservingness by breaking rocks or chopping wood but not by selling handicrafts. The work requirements created by 1990s welfare reform can be met by caring for someone else's children—even one's nieces and nephews—but not by looking after one's own.⁹ Such arbitrary distinctions suggest, centuries of social policy and custom to the contrary, that not all work is inherently meaningful. In fact, because the noneconomic meaning of work is defined by an ever-shifting set of political, social, and cultural priorities, social welfare provision requires ceaseless acts of representation and interpretation. Recipients strive to make their work legible as such, and those on the other end of the exchange—whether charity organizations or federal agencies—assess the results. Work may be the cornerstone of social welfare provision, in other words, but it is not a self-explanatory or universal truth. Work is a sign to be held just so.¹⁰

The Dignity of Labor, or Four Ways of Looking at a Field

Why should we assume that all work is inherently meaningful? And why are people on the economic and social margins so often on the hook for assuring us that it is? Implicit in the stories told by and about McGlothlin and Menafee, these questions are rooted in the broader constellation of ideas and institutions that theorists call the work society. As the philosopher André Gorz notes, work societies consider work at once “a moral duty, a social obligation and *the* route to personal success. The ideology of work assumes that the more each individual works, the better off everyone

will be; those who work little or not at all are acting against the interests of the community as a whole and do not deserve to be members of it; those who work hard achieve social success and those who do not have only themselves to blame.”¹¹ In work societies, in other words, the value of work is not only or even primarily economic. Work is the means by which individuals find recognition in the overlapping social, political, and moral communities that constitute the broader collective. Though it might not always feel this way, we never dedicate ourselves to work out of raw necessity alone. Social and political norms also tell us we should. Recently, thanks to dramatic advances in productivity and automation, this contradiction has become hard to overlook. As the political scientist James Chamberlain has observed, “The value of employment in contemporary society far exceeds its function in distributing material rewards and enabling us to satisfy various needs and wants.”¹² For the feminist theorist Kathi Weeks, the conclusion at hand is clear: work produces not only goods and services but also social and political subjects.¹³ And in so doing, it crowds out other possible modes of political, social, and cultural community. In work societies, we become a *we* first and foremost as workers.¹⁴

Only those whose activities are recognized as work, however, can join this *we*. As such, many people whose lives are consumed by labor are nonetheless excluded from full participation in the work society. As we know from a robust body of scholarship—in disability studies, Black studies, and gender and sexuality studies but also history, political science, and sociology—these exclusions have historically provided a foil for the ideal US worker-citizen, typically figured as white, male, and able-bodied.¹⁵ The economic segregation of people with disabilities, for instance, has long served to justify their social and civic disenfranchisement. As disability studies scholars such as David T. Mitchell, Sharon L. Snyder, Sunaura Taylor, and Jasbir K. Puar have shown, global capitalism assigns value and care to laborers who adhere to ableist and eugenic ideals of properly “useful” and “productive” bodies.¹⁶ Race and ethnicity have also played a crucial role in determining whose work deserves the name. The racialization of low-wage and low-status sectors in our own moment, for instance, is rooted in both antebellum efforts to bolster the whiteness of free labor and the overlapping histories of African American inclusion and Chinese exclusion after Reconstruction.¹⁷ Similar exclusions abound in social policy and critical theory. Just as the 1935 Social Security Act wrote Black

agricultural laborers out of the US welfare state, orthodox Marxism often presumes a white working class.¹⁸ In Cedric Robinson's phrase, historical materialism too often consigns "race, gender, and history to the dustbin."¹⁹ More recently, Frank Wilderson has argued that work itself "is a white category." Wilderson's point is not that Black people have never worked but that the ontological project of white supremacist capitalism never intended for Black people to be workers. They were instead "meant to be accumulated and die."²⁰ Like disability and race, ideas about gender and sexuality are also leveraged to determine what counts as genuinely meaningful work. As feminist scholars like Linda Gordon, Barbara Nelson, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Jennifer Mittelstadt have shown, traditionally feminized practices of social reproduction have long been subordinated to the masculine ideals of capitalist production—from nineteenth-century ideologies of separate spheres to the twentieth-century denigration of domestic and home health care services.²¹

The burdens of life in the work society, it is thus clear, are not shared equally. But given the coercion experienced by even the most privileged, questions remain: Why do we prioritize work above all else? And how have the most economically and socially vulnerable people been made to do the heaviest ideological lifting? In asking these questions, it is helpful to recall that work was not always the center of social life in the West. For much of antiquity, in fact, work was considered a curse. Plato, for instance, equated manual labor with slavery, whereas Aristotle complained that work distracted people from the cultivation of virtue, life's truest purpose.²² Work continued to be seen as an onerous burden into the Middle Ages, though the monastic tradition lent it the additional freight of religious penance.²³ All of this dramatically changed during the Reformation, when Martin Luther brought the Benedictine mantra of *ora et labora* (prayer and work) out of the monastery and into society at large. No longer a cloistered practice of atonement, a lifetime commitment to labor in God's name became the basis for a universal work ethic. The spread and secularization of this ethic is Max Weber's famous subject in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905). There Weber argues that the "coming of the modern economic order" evacuated the Protestant work ethic of its religious ethos and reduced it to a "worldly morality" of rational conduct. By the twentieth century, this "joyless lack of meaning" was fully "in the saddle" and no longer needed the "transcendental sanction" of the Reformation.²⁴ "The Puritan wanted to work in a calling," Weber concludes. But "we are forced to do so."²⁵

As a psychological justification for why we work so much, the Protestant work ethic has proven surprisingly resilient. By the mid-nineteenth century, as Daniel T. Rodgers notes, industrialization and the factory system rendered Weber's theory functionally obsolete. Even as a "rhetorical shibboleth," however, it remained authoritative enough to provide nakedly exploitative industries with a steady labor force.²⁶ In the Fordist era, the work ethic's anachronistic hold only grew stronger, the increasingly fragmented nature of industrial production notwithstanding. Given recent developments in global political economy, we might well wonder whether the work ethic has finally run its course. As Annie McClanahan argues, there is good reason to suspect that workers tolerate "the austerity of low-waged life" only because they have to.²⁷ But the work ethic retains its force even today, due in no small measure to progressive reappropriations by feminist, antiracist, and unionist initiatives. As Weeks notes, these projects have sought "to expand the scope of the work ethic to new groups and new forms of labor." But in so doing they inevitably reaffirm the power of the work ethic itself.²⁸ A similar dynamic is at stake in the blurring of work and personal life that has become a familiar touchstone in the neoliberal present. To "discover oneself" in work is not to escape the logic of the market, but instead to embrace economic rationality as the truest measure of individual authenticity. From Wages for Housework to the creative class and the gig economy, the work ethic lives on.²⁹

In addition to the Protestant ethic, work societies also find a conceptual touchstone in the labor theory of value. The subject of considerable debate, both historically and among contemporary scholars, at its core the labor theory of value maintains that only labor can produce economic value. As Adam Smith states in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), labor "is alone the ultimate and real standard by which the value of all commodities can at all times and places be estimated and compared."³⁰ From Smith and other classical economists, most genealogies of the labor theory of value turn to Karl Marx, who is said to have sharpened these insights into a critique of the commodity form. We must first understand how capitalism expropriates economic value, this narrative cautions, before we can abolish the structural conditions that alienate laborers from their labor. The conceptual legwork would seem well worth it. In reclaiming their labor, workers regain nothing less than their very humanity. In arriving at this conclusion Marx combines British classical economics with Hegelian idealism, from which he learned to grasp labor as both the source of all economic value and the "self-confirming essence of man."³¹ Demystifying capitalist

exploitation, it thus follows, allows workers not only to enjoy the fruits of their labor but also to experience work as self-realization. As Erich Fromm noted in his 1961 preface to Marx's newly translated *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, labor "is the self-expression of man, an expression of his individual physical and mental powers. In this genuine activity, man develops himself, becomes himself; work is not only a means to an end—the product—but an end in itself, the meaningful expression of human energy; hence work is enjoyable."³²

This is a familiar Marx: the materialist philosopher who transforms the labor theory of value into an attack on the economic structures that alienate us from the very wellspring of our humanity—our labor.³³ But this might not be the only or even the real Marx. Indeed, theorists and activists have in recent years begun to reimagine the Marxist project by questioning the pride of place usually attributed to labor. Although grounded in disparate political and intellectual traditions—from Italian workerism to German *Wertkritik*, US feminist theory, Black studies, and disability studies—these writers share a provocative point of departure. They argue that labor in Marx is not an anthropological constant or the essence of humanity but a historically embedded ideology maintained by capitalism itself.³⁴ The historian and political economist Moishe Postone is a particularly influential voice in this discussion. In *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, Postone contends that a different Marx comes into view when we read *Capital* not as a blueprint of the capitalist edifice but as the unfolding of an immanent critique—an argument that derives its terms from the object it criticizes. Marx, in other words, initially inhabits the capitalist concepts he goes on to attack. As such, it is no surprise that we can point to any number of moments in *Capital* when Marx seems to celebrate "living labor" as the universal truth of human life. For Postone, Marx is here not endorsing but rather working through the labor ideology that sustains capitalism. Marx's own position, stated most succinctly in the third volume of *Capital*, is that there is no there there. Any transhistorical notion of labor as "the productive activity" of humans in general or the "externalization and confirmation of life" is a "mere specter." The ideal of living labor, Marx concludes, is "nothing but an abstraction and taken by itself cannot exist at all."³⁵

Displacing orthodox Marxism's focus on living labor, Postone concludes, is no minor course correction. Doing so requires rethinking the emancipatory aims of the Marxist project itself. Instead of struggling to make work meaningful (once more), a pursuit that is not only bound to fail

but actually perpetuates the structures of domination it means to subvert, we should endeavor to work less—and to organize social life around something other than work. Culminating as it does in this rejection of the work society, it is clear why Postone's argument has found traction across the full spectrum of what Weeks calls "antiwork politics and postwork imaginaries," from economic crisis theory to universal basic income.³⁶ But there is reason as well to linger on Postone's method, which sheds light on a crucial feature of the work society often neglected in these conversations—namely, the role of representation in shoring up the noneconomic value of work. Indeed, for Postone, Marx's point is not only that work is not the essence of human life but also that capitalism goes to such great lengths to convince us that it is. This insight is another and perhaps less likely payoff of Marx's immanent critique: by inhabiting its key terms and rhetorical moves, Marx shows us how capitalism makes work seem inherently meaningful. Whether through the "mysterious character of the commodity form," vis-à-vis the obfuscating explications of classical economists, or in the cultural realm, the work society depends on representation to shore up belief in the noneconomic value of all work. For Postone, there is little doubting Marx's endgame—to have us abandon our commitment to work and remake social life anew. But we should also heed Marx's argument about representation. Before we can dispense with the threadbare social fiction that holds the work society together, Marx warns, we must first learn to read it.

Following Postone's lead, we can thus turn to *Capital* to unpack the role of representation in making work seem innately meaningful. Consider a passage usually thought to underscore how little the consumption of a commodity tells us about the conditions of its production. This notably literary aside follows a more schematic discussion of the "labor-process" in which Marx seems to suggest that all work is essentially the same. Labor, we read there, is at base the "appropriation of natural substances to human requirements" and "the everlasting Nature-imposed condition of human existence." Marx then turns to reflect on why making this point did not require much in the way of specifics.

It was, therefore, not necessary to represent our laborer in connection with other laborers; man and his labor on one side, Nature and its materials on the other, sufficed. As the taste of the porridge does not tell you who grew the oats, no more does this simple process tell you of itself what are the social conditions under which it is taking place, whether under

the slave-owner's brutal lash, or the anxious eye of the capitalist, whether Cincinnatus carries it on in tilling his modest farm or a savage in killing wild animals with stones.³⁷

The taste of our breakfast, Marx reminds us, teaches us nothing about how it came to market. We do not know whether the oats were harvested by enslaved people, waged laborers, or the Roman dictator Cincinnatus on his hobby farm. At first glance, these examples would seem to suggest the variety of ways that the labor process manifests itself in real life. Each would seem to be a particular instantiation of the universal "appropriation of natural substances to human requirements" that defines the essence of work as such. A different conclusion presents itself, however, if we read immanently, bracketing what Marx seems to be saying in order to focus on how he says it. From this vantage, we are struck less by how the pictures Marx conjures differ from one another and from his taxonomy of the labor process than by what all of these ways of imagining work share: they are all representations. This is not to suggest that these distinct modes of labor are at root the same. It is rather to point out how Marx here models the interpretative moves that capitalism makes to convince us that they are interchangeable. Instead of the fungibility of Black bodies or the hypocrisy of ruling-class relaxation, capitalism sees only (and everywhere) "the everlasting Nature-imposed condition of human existence." Marx, in other words, is concerned in this passage less with revealing the truth of labor than with showing us how capitalism looks at a field and makes that truth—in and through representation.

Though Marx's immanent critique of living labor is buried in a rather arcane passage on the labor process, the practice of looking he models here and across *Capital* is far from uncommon in the work society—and nowhere is it more apparent than in social welfare provision. This connection is not as arbitrary as it might seem. For just as Marx turns to the limit cases of slavery and hobby gardening to illuminate how capitalism makes work of any kind seem like work as such, the work society looks to the economic margins and to the make-work demanded of social welfare beneficiaries for much the same purpose. If onerous work that yields little or nothing in the way of profit or satisfaction can be made to seem inherently meaningful, can't all labor? Consider another field, this one at the Craig Colony in upstate New York, a custodial institution that championed farm work for people with epilepsy. In 1896, the colony superintendent declared that "outdoor life is best for the epileptic." In the fields, "the main thing is

labor—labor that demands a real use of muscular force; labor that is systematically performed; labor that opens the pores of the skin, quickens the circulation, brightens the eye, and brings about a healthful, physiological fatigue; labor that has a place in the world of economics; labor that conquers all things.”³⁸ This description unwittingly resembles Marx’s conceptual account of the labor process. Like Marx, the author invites us to watch from across the field but soon beckons us closer—so close, in fact, that we seem to enter the worker’s body. We note how the “muscular force” of labor “systematically performed” radiates across organ systems to the skin before resolving into a “healthful physiological fatigue.” This latter sensation marks the laboring body coming into perfect harmony with the labor at hand, but it also announces the worker’s snug fit in the broader “world of economics.” The conclusion we are to draw is clear: labor is as natural as human physiology. When we read this passage alongside the photographs that often accompanied the Craig Colony’s printed materials, however, a different interpretation seems possible. Not immediately legible as the essence of human life, the labor captured in the image in figure I.3 is disorganized and chaotic. We might be at a loss as to how to read this scene, in fact, were it not for the figure in the middle of the field. Wearing a black jacket and a white hat, the overseer is physically in charge of directing the inmates. But as the compositional center of the image, he also guides our reading of the photograph, providing a focal point to which our eyes return after surveying the haphazard goings-on around him. Transforming the superintendent’s proclamation into an interpretative mandate, the overseer thus shows us how to look at a scene of disorganized milling-about and discern there the revitalizing force of labor as such.

To take our cue from an immanent reading of Marx is thus to recognize how capitalism seeks to persuade us that work is naturally meaningful by obscuring the vagaries of representation. We may need to look beyond Marx, however, to thinkers like W. E. B. Du Bois and the disability activist Marta Russell, to grasp how the universality of labor requires particularized forms of social marginalization. As Russell points out, work societies leverage the idea of disability “to permit a small capitalist class to create the economic conditions necessary to accumulate vast wealth.”³⁹ The inmates at Craig Colony may usefully embody the redemptive promise of free labor, in other words, but they will never share its profits. Black Americans found themselves in a similar situation at the turn of the twentieth century, a moment when white reformers could declare that labor “conquers all things” while still assuming white supremacy to be all but impenetrable. As Du



1.3 Promotional photograph of Craig Colony in Sonyea, New York. Printed in William Pryor Letchworth, *Care and Treatment of Epileptics* (1900).

Bois trenchantly reflected on his famous prophecy a few decades after the publication of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), the “problem of the color line” was also the “problem of allocating work and income in the tremendous and increasingly intricate world-embracing industrial machine which we have built.”⁴⁰ As Du Bois knew, Black labor could become legible in the post-Reconstruction US work society only if it could also signify Black subservience. This necessity is aptly captured in a photograph of a Black woman at work published in Booker T. Washington’s “Chapters from My Experience” (figure I.4). Flirting with a common racist trope, Washington appears to suggest that newly emancipated African Americans were in danger of mistaking white-collar work for idleness: “The colored people wanted their children to go to school so that they might be free and live like the white folks without working.” While probably meant to curry favor with white readers, Washington’s troubling quip nonetheless acknowledges an incisive truth. The point is not that Black Americans do not work, but that Black Americans know it is not enough for them to work; they must also appear to be working.⁴¹ Black labor must be visible and measurable, irrefutable evidence of both economic advance and racial humility. Such is the knowledge this woman ultimately performs. Whatever her labor might yield in material terms, it is meaningless unless her work can be read as a capitulation to white supremacy.

From Marx to the Craig Colony and Tuskegee, it is clear that labor performed on the economic margins is valuable not only for the goods or



1.4 Photograph accompanying the serial publication of Booker T. Washington's autobiography "Chapters from My Experience" in the *World's Work* (November 1910).

profits it produces. This labor is also meant to uphold the constitutive exclusions of capitalist society by persuading us that all work is at base meaningful. Moving from field to field, we get a sense of how widespread this representational project was and remains. But we might also wonder what (make-)work performed on the edges of the market shares with another mode of endeavor whose value is also generally imagined in noneconomic terms, namely aesthetic practice.⁴² Consider a final field, this one overseen by the performance artist Chris Burden (figure 1.5). In 1979, Burden was invited to be an artist in residence at the Emily Carr College of Art and Simon Fraser University in Vancouver. Burden initially declined but soon countered with a proposal of his own. He later recalled:

Rather than meet with students to present and discuss my past work in a teaching context, I requested that I be provided with a wheel barrow, a shovel, and a pick ax. On the first day of my visit, I immediately began, in a vacant lot that had been provided for me, to dig a straight ditch about 2 1/2 feet wide and 3 feet deep. Each following day, students could find me digging from 9 a.m. until 5 p.m. I did not have a specific length or goal, except that I would be digging during the times that I had designated. Occasionally, someone would offer to dig for me, but after trying it for a few minutes they would return the job to me.⁴³

Art historians tell us that the resulting performance piece, *Honest Labor*, was very much of its moment. When in the 1970s and '80s a broad economic shift from manufacturing to service began to transform traditional

1.5 Chris Burden, *Honest Labor* (1979). Printed in Helen Molesworth, ed., *Work Ethic* (2003).



definitions of work, artists across a variety of media set out to interrogate the peculiar nature of aesthetic labor.⁴⁴ Burden and other self-declared “art workers” invited audiences to draw comparisons that were at root analogical: art is (like) work. Determining how exactly art is (like) work, of course, was part of the provocation, the open-ended question that Burden and others put to audiences. To grapple with this question is to recognize, at least implicitly, the formal structure of analogy. As Janet Jakobsen notes, analogies bring two terms into a relation of equivalence but require that the first term is less well known than the second.⁴⁵ To suggest that art is like work is to imply that work needs less explanation than art but also that our grasp of art changes in light of what we know (and presume to be unchanging) about work. From this vantage, *Honest Labor* invites us to extrapolate from what we know about digging ditches to better understand

what might puzzle us about art. There is nothing to prevent us, though, from reading in the other direction. Indeed, from this perspective *Honest Labor* becomes a powerful meditation not on the institution of art but on the work society itself. To suggest that work is like art, after all, is not only to suppose we know more about art than we do about work. It is also to imply that we can only make sense of work using the tools we use to make sense of art. Just as we can only know the truth of art in acts of interpretation, so too is the meaning of work always up for grabs—legible only in and through acts of representation.

At first blush, the labor performed at Tuskegee and the Craig Colony would seem a far cry from Burden's conceptual provocations. There was clearly much less at stake for an established artist dictating the terms of a paid fellowship than for Black and disabled workers laboring under conditions they had no hand in shaping and for wages we can assume were less than fair, or nonexistent. But if we look at these fields as Marx looks at his, a shared representational project nonetheless comes to the fore. We recognize that each of these images telegraphs the inherent dignity of all labor, while also pulling the curtain back to reveal how that dignity exists only in and through representation. Taken together, these fields thus underscore how people on the economic margins have historically shouldered the burden of shoring up the work society—a representational project that, like the aesthetic more generally, at once belongs to and lies outside of the market.⁴⁶ But these fields also suggest that the representational effort that goes into making work seem self-evident might also be used to rather different ends: to rethink both what counts as work and why work should count for so much in the first place.

Showing Your Work

This book is about how we came to assume that all work, even the most patently debasing and plainly unproductive, is inherently meaningful. More particularly, it is about how the Sisyphean task of shoring up the noneconomic value of work is outsourced to people on the economic margins and mediated by institutions of social welfare. From the early republic to the neoliberal present, this representational project has long been crucial to US social life. But it is rarely recognized as such, and with good reason. Acknowledging that work requirements are at base formal requirements—that beneficiaries are tasked above all with performing their commitment to the “dignity of labor”—exposes a contradiction at the heart of the work

society: that the noneconomic value of work, not a universal given, is an arbitrary sign whose meaning must continually be shored up. Critics of the welfare state thus only get it half right when they argue that welfare reform holds poor people hostage “so that the rest of us behave.”⁴⁷ The goal is not only to deter would-be idlers with the threat of hard labor but more fundamentally to affirm the moral value of all work, coerced or otherwise. The poor are held hostage to make the meaning of work legible. Someone has to hold the sign straight.

Work Requirements explores the history and stakes of this unacknowledged representational project. In so doing, it parts ways with conventional works of political, social, and legal history.⁴⁸ I focus less on particular policies or programs than on the formal strategies used to make work seem inherently meaningful across a range of institutional, disciplinary, and cultural contexts. As with any history of the present, the story of how social welfare practice has given representational and ideological cover to the work society could be told in a number of ways. A broad sweep might begin with the spectacle of the “wheelbarrow men” in eighteenth-century Philadelphia—vagrants and criminals whose heads were shaved before they were forced to repair public roads—and conclude with the interpretative authority wielded today by the “street-level bureaucrats” who administer contemporary workfare policy.⁴⁹ My approach is narrower with regard to both historical chronology and representational medium. Rather than sketch out a comprehensive account of the knotty interweaving of representation, discipline, and performance across the long history of US social welfare provision, I explore how social welfare became a specifically textual undertaking at the end of the nineteenth century. My reasons are both practical and substantive. Focusing on a discrete moment in the longer representational project at the heart of social welfare provision lends the chapters that follow a sense of coherence they might otherwise lack. More important, though, is how this particular moment allows us to grapple with the representational project at the heart of social welfare tout court. Indeed, as transformed by industrial print culture and by the forces of modern bureaucracy, the textual practice of social welfare at the turn of the twentieth century laid bare the vagaries of representation and the conceptual work of disability and race more clearly than ever before and perhaps ever since.

Work Requirements is thus a book about US social welfare provision that begins before the advent of the US welfare state proper. Historians usually date that development to the New Deal, an era in which the state-based

programs established by Progressive reformers were gradually expanded and federalized, culminating in the Social Security Act of 1935.⁵⁰ For most of US history prior to the New Deal, social welfare provision was a patchwork of relief initiatives inherited from or implicitly modeled on English poor law. In this tradition, local community members—families, church brethren, charitable organizations, and municipal governments—were responsible for determining how best to provide for (or discipline) anyone in need of economic assistance.⁵¹ These practices varied from town to town and remained largely ad hoc. All of this changed in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In this dawning era of industrial print technologies, expanding communities of literacy, and widespread professionalization, negotiations of social need and deservingness that had once taken place in person were increasingly mediated by the printed word.⁵² Reformers and institutions devised new modes of bureaucratic documentation to determine who had genuinely earned the aid they sought, while applicants navigated a tangle of print genres to prove their commitment to self-help. Although novel in both form and production, these industrial print genres gave new shape to an old ambition. The goal was now to capture the inherent meaningfulness of work on the page.

I call this forgotten archive the print culture of social welfare. This phrase might seem too broad to have any real purchase. Turn-of-the-century US public life, after all, was shaped by a dizzying array of reformist agendas, most of which made use of print culture in one way or another. Names like Jane Addams, Jacob Riis, and Du Bois come readily to mind in this regard. When I use the term *print culture of social welfare*, however, I mean to focus more narrowly on print forms used not to disseminate information, expose corruption, or debate best practices but to actually do the work of social welfare. In this book, then, the print culture of social welfare refers collectively to the documentary genres created by charity organizations, municipal agencies, settlement houses, and reform-minded academics to shore up belief in the inherent value of work as such. The most prominent of these is social casework, but the print culture of social welfare includes a host of other genres used to mediate between individuals and institutions, from invalid pension claims to affidavit blanks and photography. Like the photographs produced at the Craig Colony and Tuskegee Institute, these materials most often fall into one of two categories: documents that surveil the work performed by others, and self-representations of one's own labor. To be sure, the print culture of social welfare is not literary in any conventional sense. But we can nonetheless sharpen our grasp of what

it was and did by looking to the nineteenth-century rags-to-riches tale. Today, of course, the name Horatio Alger is synonymous with the rewards of hard work. Like the penniless bootblack in *Ragged Dick* (1868), however, many of Alger's heroes actually make good thanks only to the generosity of strangers.⁵³ This is not to say that these characters don't earn their keep, but rather that familiar paeans to self-help obscure the particular kind of work they do: presenting themselves as someone who deserves help—someone, that is, whose capacity for economic citizenship is immediately legible. Much the same kind of representational labor is at stake in the print culture of social welfare. Although they often document specific acts of labor, these genres were intended first and foremost to capture an individual's capacity to embody the dignity of work.

Formally speaking, the wide-ranging print culture of social welfare was shaped less by the era's dime novel than by the narrow concept of disability inherited from the poor law tradition. As disability studies scholars have shown, there are countless ways to approach disability as such, whether as lived experience, cultural identity, political minority, or medical diagnosis, to name but a few.⁵⁴ But from the colonial era onward, disability in US social welfare provision was defined as an "incapacitation for manual labor." To be disabled meant to be exempted from the obligation to work, although not from the stigma of dependency. In this way, as Deborah Stone argues, the disability category served a crucial sorting function. It determined who belonged in the work-based system of economic distribution (the labor market) and who could access the need-based system of social welfare.⁵⁵ In early America, deciding who counted as disabled was usually a matter of communal consensus. As the print culture of social welfare emerged in the late nineteenth century, however, bureaucratizing institutions set out to rationalize the process with a range of new documentary genres. These documents would distinguish more accurately and efficiently—or so it was believed—between those who "could not" and those who "would not" work. The goal, however, was to define disability as narrowly as possible and to penalize anyone who did not submit to the market. Ultimately, even people who (were) identified as disabled, as the historian Sarah F. Rose demonstrates, had "no right to be idle."⁵⁶ As such, the disability category was both the exception that proved the rule and a tool of social coercion. It marked the limits of the market's reach while also sustaining the fantasy of expanding that horizon infinitely to incorporate everyone, no matter why they were on the economic margins or how they understood their own bodies, capacities, or relation to work.

So broad was the disability category's explanatory power, in fact, that it shaped how the print culture of social welfare made sense of the volatile relations among citizenship, race, and labor created in the social ferment of the late nineteenth century. As Evelyn Nakano Glenn notes, the abolition of racial slavery and ongoing histories of industrialization, urbanization, immigration, and imperialism upended the labor market in the United States and globally. As a consequence, new mechanisms of economic discipline and disenfranchisement emerged to manage people of color the world over.⁵⁷ In a parallel development, many of these people were also conscripted into the vast networks of writing that charity officials, reformers, government agencies, and academic researchers had begun to compile in the name of social welfare. At base, these documents adapted the questions at the heart of the disability category: Would formerly enslaved people, imperial subjects, and immigrants work for wages? And how could they be integrated into the labor market? Racial and ethnic difference thus entered the print culture of social welfare as barriers to productive citizenship—under the sign of disability. It is no coincidence, then, that many of the same representational strategies and genres were used by urban charity organizations, philanthropic backers of Black industrial education, and boosters of US imperialism. This shared representational project ultimately sought to reconcile the structural expansion of the global market with the moral economy of the work society. Even as capitalism created ever-new ways to sharpen and profit from racial difference, these particularized modes of labor were still expected to embody—and make legible—the universal meaningfulness of labor as such.

The role of the disability category, however, was not uniformly coercive. To many people caught up in the print culture of social welfare, in fact, it provided an idiom of connection across disparate experiences of economic marginalization. *Disability*, after all, named a structural position that could be inhabited by people with physical and/or intellectual impairments and by those whose precarity was (also) bound up with race, gender, sexuality, or class. To be sure, being lumped together as disabled—in danger of falling through the economic cracks—meant being targeted for discipline and even violence in the name of social welfare. But the print genres that facilitated these categorizations also fostered unexpected collaborations and deeply intersectional solidarities. The strange career of the Civil War invalid pension claim explored in chapter 1 is a case in point. While it would be easy to assume that injured veterans were awarded pensions based on the evidence of their bodies alone, the process relied

extensively on personal affidavits. Veterans were called on not only to narrate the details of their service and injury but also to prove that they had truly earned a pension. The ideological work of the invalid pension claim was thus to transform wounds into compensable labor and to ensure that honorable veterans were not reduced to taking “handouts.” The pension claim’s surprising prominence in public life led to widespread misgivings about this narrative alchemy, but also to a history of generic borrowing that spawned the earliest movement for reparations. For the Black activists at the forefront of the ex-slave pension movement, the administrative genre created to redress the wounds of war offered a powerful means of demanding payment for stolen labor. But the pension claim also fostered wide-ranging meditations on the relations between and among different kinds of physical, psychic, and social injuries.

The various genres that constituted the print culture of social welfare could also be repurposed to interrogate the very foundations of the work society. Here as well, the disability category played a key role. For the arbiters of social welfare, as we have seen, the fiction of disability designated the limits of the market’s reach. It marked a boundary to be rigorously policed but also pushed infinitely outward—toward an imagined horizon of full economic participation. Many would-be beneficiaries, by contrast, recognized in the disability category a conceptual language with which to gesture toward or even reclaim a space of endeavor entirely outside of the market. As the unlikely presence of the African American work song in the print culture of social welfare suggests, many of these reclamations implicitly leveraged the disability category’s conceptual proximity to the aesthetic. Strange though it may sound, between the Civil War and the early 1930s—before, that is, the well-known efforts of John Lomax—white social welfare workers took it upon themselves to collect and transcribe Black vernacular work songs. Many of these welfare workers saw this project less as an exercise in cultural preservation than as a contribution to ongoing debates about prison and asylum labor. As explored in chapter 4, however, the efforts of social welfare professionals to make vernacular work songs embody the redemptive value of work were often contested by the people they surveilled. To many Black laborers, the work song was most valuable insofar as it could be used to resist the moral economy of labor it was so often made to embody.

The textual project of representing work as the truest sign of social deservingness thus began with the new industrial print genres that emerged to mediate between individuals and institutions in the latter half of the

nineteenth century. These genres were in turn shaped by the overlapping histories of economic discipline that the disability category brought into relation. From the criminalization of poverty to the rise of Jim Crow and US imperialist expansion, *disability* provided a language with which to identify people thought to be in danger of becoming “socially dependent” and thus in need of being forcibly returned to the work-based system of economic distribution. But while the documentary genres that constitute the print culture of social welfare originated in particular institutional and social contexts, they rarely stayed there. The forms used to reinforce the moral self-evidence of work in one milieu or discourse were just as often taken up in another, crisscrossing ostensibly discrete fields like public administration, economic planning, social science, and even literature and the arts. Tracking these circuitous trajectories across the turn of the twentieth century reveals the effort that went into making work seem naturally meaningful. But doing so also suggests that the print culture of social welfare was not always a top-down affair. Official genres also provided prompts for vernacular improvisation, creating a bureaucratic fake book with which people on the economic and social margins might rethink, remake, or even refuse the model of economic citizenship they were offered. Such is ultimately the value that the print culture of social welfare holds for us today: an object lesson in how to imagine social being and belonging beyond work. We can most easily take this lesson to heart by first asking how the print culture of social welfare built on earlier histories of social welfare and earlier practices of representation.

From Work Test to Paperwork

As even a cursory overview makes clear, the industrial print forms that emerged in the late nineteenth century continued a representational tradition rooted in the poor law system inherited from England. In colonial and early America, this project was guided above all by the bonds of family and religion. Although community members who fell on hard times through no fault of their own were cared for as a matter of course, anyone deemed physically able but unwilling to work faced a biblical ultimatum: “If a man will not work, he shall not eat.”⁵⁸ Such “sturdy beggars” might be “sold” (auctioned to a neighbor who agreed to care for them at the lowest municipal cost), “contracted out” to a family on similar terms, or placed in the almshouse or other local institution (“indoor relief”).⁵⁹ These arrangements disciplined would-be shirkers into the labor market, but they

also stressed the community's role in interpreting the work extracted in the process. Under the vigilant eye of one's neighbors, even the most brutal forms of coerced labor could be made to signify the mutual obligations of Christian kinship. Beginning in the nineteenth century, poorhouses, reformatories, and other custodial institutions came to dominate the practice of social welfare. Here as well, though, the labor performed by beneficiaries was valued less for what it produced than for what it signified. Indeed, Jacksonian reformers championed institutions such as Philadelphia's Colored House of Refuge as an antidote to the upheaval wrought by industrialization and the market revolution. When everything else seemed so dangerously in flux, the "principles of hard work and solitude" that structured institutional life stood as proof that work's redemptive promise still held good.⁶⁰

There was, to be sure, great variation across the disparate initiatives spearheaded by reformers, religious organizations, and municipalities in the early United States. But whether carried out for one's neighbors or for the overseers of the poor, the work required of relief seekers served a common purpose. Whatever product or profit might result, this labor created a ritualized space of performance in which nonmarket exchanges—that is, charity or relief payments—could be made to bolster the primacy of the market. (These performances also naturalized the ideological underpinnings of the particular work society in question, from the reciprocal obligations of Christian community to the coherence of the agrarian *Gemeinschaft* and the ontological erasure of Black humanity.) In the late nineteenth century, the hermeneutic sleight of hand that had long shaped US social welfare practice was given an apt name: the work test. As popularized by charity organization societies and municipal agencies, work tests required "beggars" and "tramps" to chop wood or do laundry in return for food or lodging (figure I.6). It was clear to everyone involved that there were always less expensive and more efficient ways to do the work at hand. As a sorting mechanism that enforced the bounds of the disability category, though, the work test was unrivaled. As one municipal board of charities underscored in 1894, the work test was the most effective means of "preventing those who are able to work, but unwilling, from securing a livelihood by misrepresentation and beggary."⁶¹ Just as important, these closely choreographed spectacles of social discipline made beneficiaries and benefactors into formal collaborators. In what was by no means an equal partnership, these parties endeavored together to make the inherent value of work manifest.

THE WORK TEST.

Everybody seems to be agreed that the best way to get rid of tramps is to apply the work test.

I. WHAT IT IS.

The first question, therefore, is, What is the work test? The essence of the work test is the giving of good food (supper and breakfast) and good clean lodging in exchange for a certain specified amount of hard work.

II. HOW IT WORKS.

The reason the work test is effective is that the tramps do not care so much for good food and lodging as they do for avoiding work. Experience has shown that where the two go together the tramps do not go.

III. CONDITIONS OF SUCCESS.

1. It is an absolute condition of the efficacy of the work test that it shall not be possible to avoid it by going elsewhere in the town. It is therefore necessary:—

(a) That public opinion in the town shall support it; that is to say, that the women of the town shall refuse to give food at the door, and shall refer all applicants to the place where the work test is applied.

(b) That the police shall refuse lodging without work in the police stations.

(c) That cheap lodging houses shall not be allowed to become tramp resorts.

2. One town by itself, however, cannot succeed with the work test, because tramps can easily avoid passing a night in any particular town, and may, in spite of a good work test, infest the neighboring towns, and to some extent also the town where the test is applied. So long as there are in the State towns without a work test, which may serve as stepping-stones for the tramps, these will continue to infest the State. The starting of an efficient work test in Springfield, for instance, has from the first been rendered of less than its normal value by the absence of such tests in the neighboring towns of Westfield, Holyoke, and Chicopee.

Any efficient action, therefore, must necessarily come from some

1.6 *Annual Report
of the Massachu-
setts Civic League
for the Year Ending
November 30, 1903.*
Frances Loeb
Library, Harvard
University. VF NAC
22 M 1938, 1940.



1.7 Sheet of
“Investigation Tick-
ets,” Philadelphia
Society for Organ-
izing Charity, 1880s.
Library Company
of Philadelphia.

The turn of the twentieth century did not put an end to either the performative logic or the physical brutality of the work test. The influence of both remains unmistakable today in the punitive authority wielded by the welfare and carceral states, which scholars often describe as “a single policy regime.”⁶² But we are also heir to a late nineteenth-century development that recast the work test as a specifically textual undertaking in the name of what came to be called “scientific charity.” Inaugurated by a decentralized group of reformers, researchers, and community leaders, scientific charity was born of a desire to modernize and professionalize the largely ad hoc practices of traditional social welfare.⁶³ In theory, making charity scientific meant following the prominent example of the social sciences, which sought to transform social life into an object of rational, scientific inquiry. In practice, however, scientific charity was defined chiefly by a proliferation of new print genres by social welfare institutions of all stripes. Negotiations and assessments that would previously have taken place in person were now mediated by the authority of bureaucratic protocol. No single genre better encapsulates this broad shift from the work test to paperwork than the “investigation tickets” issued by charity organization societies (figure I.7). If in previous generations poor people might be given a hammer and instructed to break rocks, they could now be issued slips of paper telling them where to report to make sure that their files were up to date. No longer a matter of direct oversight and assessment, social welfare provision aimed to commit the meaningfulness of work to the page.

The emergence of scientific charity and with it the print culture of social welfare was part of a wider transformation of late nineteenth-century public life. In a narrative that has become a touchstone in media studies, historians describe how the social changes of the era—from the growing complexity of manufacturing and distribution to the disruptive forces of urbanization, nationalization, and postwar reconstruction—gave rise to both a “crisis of control” and a variety of compensatory responses. The consolidation of modern bureaucracy was fundamental to this latter “control revolution,” as were new communication technologies like photography, telegraphy, telephones, transatlantic cables, and film.⁶⁴ More recent media historians have also added industrial print culture to the list. As Carl Kaestle and Janice Radway argue, the era’s crises could not have been managed without new print technologies and genres. Just as the transportation and communication networks that modern firms depended on would have been inconceivable without printed timetables and rate schedules, the modern state could not have expanded its increasingly bureaucratized reach

without a host of printed manuals, reports, and forms.⁶⁵ As civic groups and social institutions began to take advantage of inexpensive commercial job printing, moreover, industrial print culture gradually came to remake daily life itself.⁶⁶ As Lisa Gitelman argues, individuals came to use printed materials to negotiate “their everyday relationships to and amid many institutions and institutionalized realms at once.”⁶⁷ The spread of industrial print culture was thus not a one-way street. The same genres developed to consolidate institutional authority also created differentiated sites of identification from which to call that authority into question.⁶⁸ As mediated by industrial print, late nineteenth-century public life was “one part Max Weber’s iron cage and another part a conflicted jangle of aspirations, allegiances, and demands.”⁶⁹

This jangle echoed especially loudly through the print culture of social welfare. As we have seen, the documentary genres created to mediate between social welfare institutions and beneficiaries could be and often were used to rather different ends. In time, the widespread circulation of these genres gave rise to equally widespread doubts about the use of print and writing more generally to do the work of social welfare. Many of these concerns, in fact, came to coalesce around the idea of the literary. This is not to say that alms seekers began to think of themselves as novelists—though many did and were—or that philanthropic foundations started soliciting poetic self-reflections.⁷⁰ Rather, public fixation on the literariness of the print culture of social welfare reflected a dawning awareness—at once fleeting and begrudging—of textual effort necessary to make work as such seem inherently meaningful. To many skeptics, the literary connoted above all a failure of documentary rigor. In this regard, the same anxiety about fraud that shaped canonical nineteenth-century US literature in Lara Cohen’s retelling also informed attitudes toward the print culture of social welfare.⁷¹ What, after all, was to prevent wily applicants from mastering a given genre or modeling their stories on what they knew to be a winning formula? Other observers doubted whether bureaucratic objectivity was possible under even the best of circumstances. Who was to say whether a particular documentary genre could in fact capture the truth of labor? Perhaps the entire enterprise was itself merely a literary exercise.

As proponents of scientific charity sought to replace the work test with paperwork, questions about the representation of work thus often gave rise to questions about the work of representation. These anxieties about the economic status of writing were at once much older than the print culture