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Meaningful Work when Work Won't Love You Back: Sociological Imagination and Reflective Teaching Practice (Reports From the Field)

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abstract: This essay explores the tension between pursuing meaningful work in instruction librarianship and the realities of working in a society in which many jobs provide little fulfillment or pleasure, or, as the journalist Sarah Jaffe puts it, "Work won't love you back." Drawing on a recent conference keynote by Anne Helen Petersen, C. Wright Mills's conception of sociological imagination, and an ecological model of teacher agency, I propose that one way librarians can sustain their teaching practices and preserve their well-being is by actively investigating how social structures and relationships influence their teaching roles.

Introduction

In this essay, I explore the tension between pursuing meaningful work in instruction librarianship and looking honestly at the realities of working in a society in which, as Sarah Jaffe puts it, "Work won't love you back."[1] I first reflect on the library conference talk by Anne Helen Petersen, "How Do We Make Passion Jobs Sustainable?"[2] I then connect Petersen's ideas to conditions that are more specific to academic and instruction librarians, including the experience of having or lacking agency in one's teaching role (teacher agency). Drawing on C. Wright Mills's concept of "sociological imagination" and the ecological model of teacher agency posited by Mark Priestley, Gert Biesta, and Sarah Robinson, I propose that one way to sustain our teaching practices and preserve our well-being is by actively investigating how social structures and relationships influence our teaching practices and teaching roles.[3] As we explore our complex relationships to the ecosystems in which we work and teach, we can individually and collectively recognize possibilities and limitations of our teaching, and strive to make those ecosystems healthier and more sustainable. At the same time that we support and sustain ourselves and one another in our teaching, we can also affirm the importance of our lives beyond work.

Essay

In April 2022, writer and journalist Anne Helen Petersen spoke to online attendees of the Conference on Academic Library Management (CALM) in a closing keynote address, "How Do We Make Passion Jobs Sustainable? A Conversation about Burnout, Demoralization, and the Expanding Job."[4] The talk struck a chord. Many attendees asked for a written version, which Petersen soon published in her *Substack* newsletter with the title, "The Librarians Are Not Okay."

"Your job has become incredibly difficult," Petersen began. "And even though I can't understand the very specific ways it has become difficult—what a life in your shoes feels like—I do understand the overarching ways it has become difficult, and think we should spend some time acknowledging them . . . First, you work passion jobs, and passion jobs are prime for exploitation."[5]

As the talk unfolded, Petersen outlined numerous ways that academic librarians— like those in other "passion jobs" such as teaching, nursing, and social work—have been working under increasingly challenging conditions. These conditions include:

- a feminized profession in which "caring" work tends to be undervalued and undercompensated even while demands increase,
- understaffing, as many have left the profession (often because of retirement, burnout, low pay, or the unhealthy habits and competitive culture that is characteristic of academia) and open positions remain unfilled, and
- the various crises of higher education, such as stretched budgets and pressure to prove value with quantitative measures that cannot capture the actual importance of the work.

Add to this, as Petersen acknowledged, numerous other global crises: climate change and accompanying weather catastrophes, systemic racism, the widening of socioeconomic inequalities, and the continued damage of COVID-19 on people's health and general well-being.

This constellation of circumstances underscores that individual self-care, while potentially helpful, is not enough to address an apparent rise in burnout and demoralization within librarianship. While taking a vacation day here and there is important, ultimately what is needed for healthier and more sustainable work are structural and institutional changes. Petersen also acknowledged the difficulty of making such changes, especially for individuals who are in positions with less power, who are often the most adversely affected by unsupportive work conditions.

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But this was not to leave librarians in despair. At the same time that Petersen emphasized the need for those in administrative and managerial roles to advocate for more equitable and healthier workplaces, she also suggested individual actions that people can take in their everyday lives and habits, including building worker solidarity and, with that, greater collective power.

As Petersen acknowledges, librarians, like those in other "passion jobs," do not come to their profession for a high salary, though most of us do still work, in part, for a paycheck that us to pay their bills and hopefully have some financial security. Most of us choose this work because we care about the ideals that we associate with it (for example, learning, knowledge, meaning making, equitable access to information, helping others access beneficial resources or services), and because we want to help others and do work that aligns with values like care, equity, and supporting the common good. This motivation reflects a human and healthy desire to experience a sense of meaning, purpose, connectedness, and agency. When we do not experience such qualities in our work lives, we are more prone to burnout, resignation, and depression, among other deflating feelings.[6]

But talking about finding meaning and purpose in work, and more specifically work in "passion jobs" and "helping professions," is tricky. On one hand, finding meaning and purpose in one's work is known to promote better well-being in and beyond the workplace.[7] On the other hand, expecting a job to be a steady source of meaning can set us up for the disappointment, demoralization, and burnout that Petersen describes.

The expectation that work will fulfill us personally may also make us more susceptible to what librarian Fobazi Ettarh identifies as "vocational awe." Ettarh defines that attitude as "a set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in notions that libraries as institutions are inherently good, sacred notions, and therefore beyond critique."[8] Many readers are likely already familiar with Ettarh's work, and related discussions. about vocational awe have continued to grow. Vocational awe, Ettarh explains, contributes to a professional culture in which many librarians frequently accept without question unjust conditions, low pay, and toxic workplaces. Vocational awe helps to perpetuate a status quo of unfavorable circumstances that often result in low morale and burnout among librarians, as Kaetrena Davis Kendrick has illustrated in extensive research on librarians' experiences of low morale.[9] Research shows that the negative effects of such work environments can weigh especially heavily on librarians who belong to racial and ethnic minorities.[10]

Unsupportive and toxic work conditions have rightly received increased attention since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, when showing up in physical workspaces literally became a life-or-death issue. Labor journalist Sarah Jaffe's 2021 book *Work Won't Love You Back* documented how a lack of agency in the workplace is characteristic of labor in capitalist systems.[11] Jaffe also illustrated ways that the value people place on work, how they identify with their jobs, and the unrealized and unrealistic hopes and expectations that work will "love us back" have shifted throughout history. Knowledge work and the gig economy, which relies on temporary and part-time workers rather than full-time, permanent employees, have gained a large presence in our culture. At the same time, the idea that people should love their work and bring passion and devotion to it has become commonplace. In professions such as teaching and librarianship, love of the work itself and care for people are often presented as compensation enough, even though this does not pay the bills and is often accompanied by unfair employment conditions. The idea that

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loving your work is a sufficient reward is finally receiving more pushback, as people witness the real ways that employers often treat them as dispensable.

How do we reconcile the fact that "work won't love us back" with the desire to engage in personally meaningful work? Or with the fact that we bring our complex emotional and relational selves to work? Budget cuts, layoffs, low salaries, workplace bullying, toxic leadership, and questions about COVID-19 safety in classrooms and public spaces are all unfortunately common in our profession. The shameful feeling when you believe that a colleague's accomplishment, which you want to celebrate, is a sign of your own inadequacy. The frustration when one colleague's spoken idea is ignored or rejected in a meeting, until someone who possesses a favored position says the same thing. and the suggestion then receives praise and is attributed to that second person's novel thinking. The message that before multiple open librarian positions in an institution can be filled, the library must prove its value by doing more with less to show itself worthy of resources that were once understood as essential.

Shifting Perspectives and Everyday Work Habits

The growing body of literature on librarian burnout and vocational awe underscores the importance of rest and worker solidarity. It has also made me more aware of my own impulse, especially in the earlier years of my career, to look to work as a key source of not only fulfillment but also self-worth. I am not alone in this tendency. Academia and the highly competitive and individualistic culture in the United States train us to equate work with our identity and human value. Particularly in the early stages of my librarian career, whether a class went well could make or break my day. I regarded whether a conference proposal was accepted as an indication of whether I belonged in the profession. I was compelled to respond to e-mails as soon as possible—despite intellectually being opposed to this habit, a part of me believed that quick replies would show I was a competent librarian. In this rush, my breathing was often shallow. My heart raced, my shoulders and neck tensed. It was only at the end of the day that I would realize I had been in a state of hypervigilance all day, and by then it would take my body several hours to calm down. Somehow, I was never doing enough, even when I tried to convince myself that I was. These tendencies were in part ways of coping with the competitive nature of academia and the demands to demonstrate value and a return on investment. While I wanted to resist the cultures of competition and corporatization that are commonplace in higher education, I was (and am) still part of that system, and part of me continues to buy into it.

For a while, I thought these habits were simply reflective of my own personality. While there is some truth to that assessment, the longer I have been in this profession, the more I have come to see that my anxiety and accompanying habits are actually fairly common in this field, and to some extent in academia more generally. Petersen also acknowledges this situation, as she considers how overwork and overidentification with one's job are linked to structural factors. She connects the common workaholic propensity in higher education, in part, to the precarity and scarcity that pervade the academic job market. (That market has become increasingly unstable, even for those in seemingly secure positions). Fortunately, my orientation toward work has become far

more balanced and sustainable over the years. I am now in my mid-career, and I have gained more experience and confidence in my abilities and knowledge. I also feel I have a better understanding of academic and library culture, which has generally made it easier to navigate. I do not feel the same precarity that I did earlier in my career, but I can still fall into the anxiety-driven ways of working that I have described. Like many librarians, I have moments when I feel burnt out, when it is hard to see a purpose in what I do, when I have seemingly used up whatever finite amount of energy or creativity I had, and I do not know if I have anything more left to give.

I wish that the conditions described by Petersen, Ettarh, Kendrick, Jaffe, and myself were rare exceptions. Unfortunately, they have increasingly become the norm. At the same time, I take comfort in the acknowledgment that experiences of alienation and atomization at work are largely the result of specific social and cultural contexts and conditions. In recognizing how my own tendencies are connected to larger culture, structure, and systems, I gain a little distance from unhealthy habitual ways of working or thinking. I also recognize that I am hardly alone in these systems, even in the moments when I feel isolated. We are all affected. From this perspective, it becomes easier to imagine building stronger connections with others. Through those connections, we are better positioned to pursue alternatives to the employment conditions that fail to sustain most of us. It becomes easier for me to shift small habits, such as a tendency to perceive inconsequential tasks as urgent. Over time, these small changes have not-so-small effects.

The importance of balancing a desire for meaningful work with demanding relatively safe, healthy, and fair work conditions is especially apparent in teaching. There, the spotlight is often directed on us and we seek to support students in a shared learning process. We need to be wary of instilling too much awe in the work that we do; at the same time that teaching and learning are ideally experienced as meaningful and purposeful activities. I also believe that teaching is more rewarding when our workplaces are supportive, and we therefore have the time, space, and resources to rest and nurture ourselves and our relationships outside the workplace.

Bringing an Ecological View of Agency and Sociological Imagination to Critically Reflective Library Practice

The previously discussed research about the often unhealthy work environment that exists in academia leads to questions about the choice and agency we have in our workplaces and, in the case of instruction librarians, in teaching. To what extent do we choose our actions, thoughts, feelings, and experiences, and to what extent are they determined or shaped by factors that are beyond our control? The topic of agency, and in particular academic librarians' teacher agency, is something I have been researching over the last couple of years.

Agency is essentially the ability to affect one's experience and environment, and to act and make choices that align with one's values and goals. Teacher agency refers more specifically to teachers' abilities to enact agency in their instructional work. Research shows that a sense of agency is essential to preventing burnout and experiencing meaning.[12] A lack of agency may contribute to the high levels of burnout among instruction librarians, while enacting agency when teaching tends to be positive and often energiz-

ing.[13] (The January 2024 issue of *portal* will include a research article that reports on my research on academic instruction librarians' conceptions of teacher agency and their affective orientations toward the concept.)

As instruction librarians are aware, numerous factors are outside our control when we teach. In one-shot sessions, we often have limited knowledge of, or influence over, the classroom culture that has developed before the session and a small amount of time to build our own relationships with a class. Many librarians have developed strong partnerships with teaching faculty, yet doing so takes time and fertile conditions. In both one-shot and librarian-taught, credit-bearing classes, how much sleep or food students have had is beyond our control, but these factors have huge impacts on how students engage and interact. In other words, while we often have choices about how we approach teaching, the outcomes of those choices are determined (and in some ways constrained) by our environments and contexts.

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Nonetheless, in more individualistic countries like the United States, there is often a widespread emphasis on being an active agent who autonomously chooses how to be in the world. Despite our awareness of the limits of our individual choices in the library classroom, in my personal experience it is not uncommon for many of us to blame ourselves when teaching does not go as planned, as if whatever did not go as we hoped is solely due to some personal shortcoming. Stated differently, we may sometimes perceive that we have more control and agency over a situation than we do. We may sometimes view ourselves as solely responsible for how things turn out. The notion that libraries need to, and can, demonstrate the positive impact of a one-shot session or an online tutorial on student success falls in line with an oversimplification of the complex factors that shape students' experiences and learning. It also reinforces the idea that libraries and librarians must do more, even if doing so runs them into the ground. In my experience, this kind of self-blame tends to add unhelpful layers of stress and anxiety for people who are already doing their best. On the surface, it may seem like an overstatement to say that my personal unease about a challenging hour of teaching is related to larger structural issues. But studies by fellow teaching librarians on the gendered nature of professions like teaching and librarianship, the service ethos of library instruction, emotional labor, and the prevalence of impostor syndrome among instruction librarians illustrate that often the emotions we feel about teaching are connected to larger social and structural conditions.[14]

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Of course, self-blame is not unique to librarians. As sociologist C. Wright Mills wrote in 1959 in his seminal book *The Sociological Imagination*, there is a tendency for people in industrialized societies to view personal experiences and challenges as simply individual

and often to see themselves as responsible for managing and resolving such "troubles," In actuality, however, their experiences are tied to larger social structures and conditions.[15] Mills used the phrase the "sociological imagination" to refer to a person's ability to see the connections between their individual challenges and larger societal structures and processes. He believed that it was through recognizing "personal troubles" in relation to "public issues" that individual and social conditions could improve.

Complementary to Mills's sociological imagination is an "ecological" model of teacher agency, described by education researchers Mark Priestley, Gert Biesta, and Sarah Robinson. While often agency has been understood as the ability of individuals to act independently, an ecological model of teacher agency challenges the idea that a single agent determines what happens in a classroom. The ecological model invites us to think more structurally and relationally, as we consider the larger systems and environments in which we interact and how our unique experiences and circumstances are embedded within larger ecosystems. It requires that we consider individual actions and experiences in relation to shared ones.

As I have explored education research on teacher identity and teacher development, I have found an ecological model of teacher agency to be particularly generative. It offers a fresh way to look at how I experience meaning and value in my teaching. In reflecting on both my teaching and students' learning in this way, I become a little less concerned about whether I did things "right." I am then better able to shift my attention to the many factors that may be influencing my teaching and students' learning. These circumstances may include, for example, who in the room has or has not had enough sleep and food; the class climate; how an assignment was designed and whether students have been engaged with it and related course materials; my relationship with the faculty member and how we understand our teaching roles and negotiate with one another; and my own mood and energy level. These conditions within my more immediate environment are influenced by numerous other factors, including the campus culture and an understanding of librarians' teaching roles and social positions within the library and across campus.

Through investigating the subtler ways we can understand our everyday personal experiences in relation to larger public issues and social structures, we may notice conditions that on the surface seem insignificant. For example, we might discover a wider range of factors within and beyond the classroom that influence students' learning and engagement and, with that reflection, identify or explore new approaches. Some librarians and instructors start a class by giving the class a silent moment to slow down and to mentally set aside unhelpful distractions. Some institutions provide instructors with healthy snacks to hand out. We might be better able to take a curt e-mail or comment from a colleague or a faculty member less personally when we consider the pressures and worries that many people are carrying (while still caring for ourselves and not accepting abusive treatment toward anyone). We may challenge any tendencies toward excessive self-blame, while also looking honestly at our contexts and what choices we have within them. Growing interest in reflective practice and critical librarianship among instruction librarians over the past decade suggests that many in the profession may appreciate and benefit from exploring Mills's conceptualization of the sociological imagination in relation to their teaching.[16]

When I recognize these varied conditions that influence students' learning, it becomes easier to challenge any impulse toward unproductive self-blame for what is beyond my control, while I also remain open to how I am interacting in my environment. This is not a way of shirking responsibility or disengaging. To the contrary, I am usually better able to reflect constructively on ways that I can act to support student learning when I view the situation with sociological imagination. With this wider lens, I can also more easily appreciate that I exist in relation to larger systems and structures. I am not a hermetically sealed automaton that should complete a job with precision and perfection. With that wider view, I am better able to recognize that we are all working in systems that are regrettably often profit-driven. I can nonetheless often find, and create with others, spaces of care in which we experience purpose and connection that sustain us more than draining us.

This is not to say that doing so is easy, or that there is a cookie-cutter way that will fit all situations or eliminate all challenges. But that intention, especially when collective, can be a powerful creative force. It can open new possibilities that may not have initially been in view. In a culture of pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps messages, the sociological imagination can enable us to resist notions of perfectionism and habits of self-blame. At the end of the workday, we can go home feeling a little freer to engage with experiences that are not related to our jobs or professional identities.

The more I teach, talk with fellow librarians and educators, and explore how we develop as teachers, the more deeply I appreciate the numerous factors that influence our teaching experiences and how we and our environments are ever-changing. When I lose sight of this, I am heartened when a colleague or friend reminds me that I can consider another view by looking at aspects of our systems and structures with curiosity. And I try to return the favor whenever the relationship and environment are conducive to doing so. Sometimes this simply means asking a seemingly uneasy colleague how they are doing and listening to their response. Sometimes it also means thinking together about different angles from which to consider an experience or a challenge. Other times, it may involve more conversations and actions that develop over time. When librarians individually and collectively exercise our sociological imaginations, we can more fully support ourselves and one another, whether on a single day or over longer career trajectories.

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Again, for me, practicing sociological imagination and taking an ecological view of teacher agency are not about shirking responsibility for my own missteps or believing I have no choice or power. Doing so is about questioning assumptions that I often carry and that do not actually serve me or my students. These unhelpful assumptions are often rooted in my own all-or-none thinking and tendency toward perfectionism—the idea that my teaching defines me, the notion that all my classes should go smoothly and seamlessly, and a common tendency for librarians to be viewed as subservient or of less value than others like teaching faculty.

Bringing sociological imagination and an ecological view of agency to our everyday teaching and workplaces enables us to examine and reflect critically on the structures and systems in which we work, consider how we wish to be and interact in those spaces, and identify concrete actions we can take that support those intentions. With such reflection, we can better resist vocational awe and simultaneously experience the generative qualities of awe and wonder that so often drive meaningful inquiry and the lifelong process of learning.

For me, this means pausing more often, making a more conscious practice of slowing my breath when I notice it quickening, recognizing that most e-mails are not urgent and most activities in the library are not emergencies, carving out time for focused work that is free from e-mail, and honoring after-work hours as times for other aspects of life. It also means advocating for colleagues to have the time and space they need to feel more at ease and supported at work. It means accepting that we work in imperfect systems that are slow to change and still identifying ways that I can act, alone or with others, in ways that align with what matters to me.

While I have primarily focused on individual daily work habits, and on teaching experiences and actions when interacting directly with students or faculty, the work of sociological imagination is most powerful when done collectively. What I have described as sociological imagination might also be understood as central to the kind of critically reflective practice that educator Stephen Brookfield describes in his article of the same name. As Brookfield writes, "Although critical reflection often begins alone, it is, ultimately, a collective endeavor. We need colleagues to help us know what our assumptions are and to help us change the structures of power so that democratic actions and values are rewarded within, and without, our institutions."[17] Zooming out from the classroom to our workplace environments, institutions, and professional cultures, we also need the kind of worker solidarity that Petersen calls for. As she asserts, "Solidarity is not 'we're like a family here'" (something that many "passion professions" often encourage). Rather, solidarity is recognizing one another "as fellow workers, worthy of respect, worthy of control over their own time, worthy of a job description that they're capable of actually fulfilling."[18]

This collective work is often harder to make happen. Especially when you are tired or feel unsupported in a social context, having a quiet space set apart can even be an act of self-preservation. That said, I think most librarians share the wish for healthier workplaces, have some unease with the competitive nature of higher education (even as many of us also feel we must, to some degree, play the game), and prefer to have supportive connections at work. Many of the issues that I have described in this essay are also being discussed much more openly in academic librarianship and more specifically in instruction librarianship. The degree of interest and engagement in those topics suggests librarians are eager for more of this frank dialogue and solidarity.

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This interest is apparent in the growing library literature and professional development on burnout, emotional labor, toxic leadership, and building more equitable work-

places and work cultures. The fact that Petersen's keynote was invited and seemingly well-received at the Conference on Academic Library Management is further evidence of a cultural shift toward building healthier and more supportive library workplaces. Sociological imagination and an ecological view of teacher agency are tools that can help us enact individual and collective agency in our teaching and in our profession.

Acknowledgment

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Notes

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