Work Requirements

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Work Requirements: Race, Disability, and the Print Culture of Social Welfare. 

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Work Requirements does not aim to present a comprehensive account of US social welfare provision in the decades before the formal creation of the welfare state during the New Deal. Rather, the book turns to the patchwork of public and private initiatives that took root across the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to explore how people on the social margins have historically been conscripted into the unacknowledged representational project at the heart of the work society as such. The print culture of social welfare, in other words, helps us understand the effort that went into making work seem naturally meaningful. This effort is no less pressing today, of course, even after the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act in 1996 sought to “end welfare as we know it.” Indeed, the task of shoring up the noneconomic value of even the most arduous and least profitable kinds of work in the context of social welfare provision is now mediated by an ever-widening circle of actors—from government agencies to public bureaucracies, nongovernmental organizations, nonprofit firms, and mixed private-public ventures. In theorizing how work-based welfare policies are administered on the ground, a rich body of empirical literature has followed Michael Lipsky in emphasizing the authority exercised by “street-level bureaucrats” who operate on the front line of policy delivery. As Bernado Zacka has written, it would be easy enough to imagine these agents as rigid automata bound by the letter of the law. But “they are in fact vested with a considerable margin of discretion.” Not mere “implementation functionaries,” these bureaucrats play a decisive role in shaping workfare policy and “redrawing the boundaries between work and the welfare state.”
The story told in this book underscores the value of approaching these bureaucratic acts of mediation as part of a much older hermeneutic project, an ongoing but rarely acknowledged effort to secure the seeming self-evidence of work’s noneconomic value. As the print culture of social welfare makes clear, this project has not gone uncontested. Indeed, recognizing that work requirements are necessarily formal requirements allowed people caught in the clerical networks of turn-of-the-century social welfare to contest the logic of the market. Questions about whether this or that activity should qualify as work went hand in hand with questions about why a refusal to work on the terms given should be disqualifying—or why work should matter so much in the first place. In this regard, the formal genealogies traced in *Work Requirements* run adjacent to and at times traverse adjacent histories of mutual aid, self-help, and communal care that do not, like the print culture of social welfare, take their bearings from elite institutions or the state. By the same token, the counterfactual histories and impossible futures glimpsed in this book also anticipate more recent and more programmatic interest in universal basic income (ubi). Over the last few decades, writers and activists of all stripes have supported policies that would ensure every citizen a minimum income. For some commentators, such a universal provision would do away with the necessity of the welfare state’s targeted programs (a proposition that, particularly in libertarian elaborations, often loses sight of social and access needs that exceed the “basic”).

For others, ubi would mark a crucial first step toward social justice for historically marginalized people. As Martin Luther King Jr. wrote, “Those at the lowest economic level, the poor white and Negro, the aged and chronically ill, are traditionally unorganized and therefore have little ability to force the necessary growth in their income.”4 Echoing calls by the Black Panther Party and the National Welfare Rights Organization, King identified a ubi as one possible solution to this intersectional crisis. More recent commentators also argue that the shift from an industrial to a “social knowledge” economy should prompt us to rethink our “over-reliance on the labor market” in addressing poverty, inequality, and social marginalization. Ours should be not a work society but a “real sharing economy.”5

To be sure, no concrete proposals emerged from the turn-of-the-century print culture of social welfare. But this archive’s focus on the textual genres developed to mediate between individuals and institutions—and that were used by turns to bolster and interrogate the inherent noneconomic value of all labor—can help answer one of the most common arguments made
against UBI proposals. As the feminist political theorist Carole Pateman has suggested, the criticism provoked in recent years by the unconditional character of basic income centers on questions of reciprocity. Opponents argue that UBI breaches “the principle of doing ‘one’s fair share [in] a co-operative scheme from which one expects to benefit’—because recipients get something from nothing.”6 These arguments, Pateman notes, rely on a “narrow, economistic sense of reciprocity.” The guiding assumption is that receiving any social benefit obligates the beneficiary to make a specific and equitable contribution in return. Dispensing with the morality of the market, Pateman proposes a wider understanding of reciprocity that acknowledges social life “as a web of mutual aid and forbearance, a dense network of interdependence.” From this vantage, social benefits and social contributions “have no strict correlation with one another.”7 The reciprocity that defines citizenship or social belonging more generally is here not a zero-sum game. Instead, Pateman imagines reciprocity as an interweaving of social interdependencies—obligations, responsibilities, and support irreducible to immediate recompense. Reciprocity is thus not something to be acknowledged and made good on, but rather something to be made and remade.

This notion of reciprocity as the making and remaking of social obligations might also describe the turn-of-the-century print culture of social welfare. As we have seen, the same modes of writing and representation used to bolster the noneconomic value of labor in and of itself—and thus to make good on one’s duty to the work society—could also be used to articulate modes of connection and interdependence not grounded in the market. In this regard, the print culture of social welfare shares a striking affinity with the contemporary work of the interdisciplinary artist and weaver Raisa Kabir. Against the backdrop of global capitalism’s eugenic devaluing of laborers deemed neither “useful” nor “functioning,” Kabir’s textile productions explore how “marginalized communities rely—and have always relied—on support networks of care and structures of mutual aid to survive that are separate to the state.”8 In one such exploration, a film titled House Made of Tin (A Socially Distanced Weaving Performance), Kabir asks audiences to reconsider the relations among labor, care, and reciprocity (figures C.1–C.3). The performance was created between pandemic lockdowns in October 2020, when Kabir announced an open call for BIPOC, disabled, and queer participants to collaborate on a geometric textile sculpture. Eight weavers gathered in East London’s Springfield
Park, masked and socially distanced, and—after a shared meal—took their places on the grid that Kabir and their collaborators had set up on the field. Each participant was outfitted with a backstrap loom, created by tying the threads around the body of the weaver. Still used by many of the Indigenous communities with whom Kabir has studied, backstrap looms are usually tied to a tree or post. But in *House Made of Tin (A Socially Distanced Weaving Performance)*, the ends were connected to other weavers, the scaffolding of the performance ultimately underscoring Kabir’s contention that the process of (and preparation for) the weaving mattered far more than did the tapestry produced.

The warp, or the vertical threads, consisted of a variety of bright colors—mints, greens, pinks. The weft, or the horizontal threads woven under and over the warp, was made of wool, leather, and other dense materials. Meeting at multiple points, the warp and weft together created sharp right angles and the overall appearance of a tic-tac-toe game. Some of the strands were tight and thick, but others were loose, knotted, or beautifully messy. A film made of the performance, later exhibited at the Ford Foundation Gallery in New York, captures the same textured multiplicity of perspective, aim, and execution. At times, images are overlaid one on another to show several actions at once; at others, the screen itself becomes a grid, divided into four quadrants, each of which documents a particular moment of performance. Sounds also overlap and echo beyond their diegetic origins. We hear laughter, instructions, and even confusion—but also snippets of jokes, stories of grief, and crip pandemic coping strategies. These and other sounds from the performance itself are mixed together with Kabir’s voice-over, which serves as both an audio description of everything that happens on the screen and an explanation of the weaving process that empowers viewers to imagine themselves as collaborators. We also hear voice memos that participants left for Kabir reflecting retrospectively on their experience of the day.

Ultimately, these various ways of accounting for the collaborative work at the center of *House Made of Tin (A Socially Distanced Weaving Performance)* converge on the recognition that its reward is neither monetary nor moral—the satisfaction or fulfillment that we are taught to expect from an “honest day’s work.” Instead, the performance fostered what one participant called a “slowness and holding space for each other outside the space of capitalism.” The weave of reciprocities simultaneously acknowledged in and created by *House Made of Tin (A Socially Distanced Weaving Performance)*

Performance) are thus irreducible to purely economistic exchange. Indeed, the performance itself—and not the tapestry it produces—amounts to a sign that can only be read in the making. It endeavors, strand by strand, to make legible not the meaning of work in and of itself, but the meaning of being with and for others.
