

**B. AUBREY FISHER MEMORIAL**

**20**  
**10**

**LECTURE**

## **Performance, Human Rights, and the Dignity of Labor**

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*Twenty-Fourth Annual B. Aubrey Fisher Memorial Lecture*

*University of Utah, October 21, 2010*



**Department of Communication**  
**University of Utah**



# Performance, Human Rights, and The Dignity of Labor by D. Soyini Madison

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## Introduction

*Then a ploughman said, "Speak to us of Work."*

*And he answered, saying:*

*"You work that you may keep pace with  
the earth and the soul of the earth..."*

*...Always you have been told that work is  
a curse and labour a misfortune.*

*But I say to you that when you work, you fulfill  
a part of earth's furthest dream assigned to you  
when the dream was born.*

*And in keeping yourself with labour, you  
are in truth loving life.*

*And to love life's labour is to be intimate  
with life's innermost secret.*

Kahlil Gibran, from "The Prophet"

*Yah/kenow tub tell 'bout mah maid work*

*Ab reckon ab really can' say much 'bout it*

*Ab jus' know people think maid work is like being a slave  
Servant like that.*

*Seem to me any job yah get*

*Yah got to serve somebody*

*Yah serve yo' chil'ren yah teachin' in school ain't yah*

*Yah ub doctor yah servin' the sick*

*Yah a preacher yah servin' the church*

*Seem tub me if yah got a job makin' money*

*Yah gotta be servin' somethin'*

*Everybody serve somebody else thas workin'*

*Ab feel when yah serve somebody's house thas a big service...*

*Where yah live at is important, ain't it?*

*(I said, "Yes mam, it is very important")*

*Well then.*

Alma Kapper, former sharecropper  
and domestic worker

*“I am fighting hard to win a contract, I am fighting hard for justice for everyone here, and I am fighting hard for justice for all workers.”*

Mercedes Ayvar, picket line of the Congress Hotel, Chicago, Illinois

*I am 59 years old... I lost my job last fall when the company I worked for folded. I have sent out resumes, posted on every job site I can find...and get no response. I have lost my home and have been scraping by on unemployment—and now that is gone too! This is now getting desperate! There is no work, no work.*

James Smith, unemployed factory worker in Detroit

It is an honor to present the B. Aubrey Fisher Memorial Lecture this evening. I will pay tribute to the Fisher Lecture by turning to the topic of labor and how we might think about the ontology of labor as it relates to human survival. In this day and age labor is fraught with contention on all sides of the political, social, and cultural divide. I will share my thoughts on labor through the intersections of human rights, performance, and the dignity of labor by first discussing labor as a human right; second, I will take up notions of temporality and utopia in re-imaging new possibilities for labor; and third, I will illustrate how we may re-imagine these new possibilities through the rhetoric and symbolism of performance.

## Labor as a Human Right

Kevin Kolbren, scholar of transnational labor regulation and governance, speaking primarily from the position of human rights law, states:

Labor movements do not necessarily benefit from the legalism, elitism, or the individualistic and philanthropic frames that often define human rights approaches to workers rights. The international human rights movement is not fundamentally committed to examining and questioning fundamental economic

relationship in society, nor is it committed to direct action as a method—or workplace democracy as a goal—to the same extent as the labor movement (2010, 484).

Despite the differences between the labor movement and the human rights movement, we are finding more and more that labor rights activists want to take advantage of the status of human rights discourse and the effectiveness of certain human rights strategies (450). However, the long-standing criticism of unions and labor rights organizations is alive and well with a vengeance. The general thinking is that labor advocates are primarily concerned with special, rent-seeking economic interests that work to benefit membership to the detriment of the economy as a whole, i.e., they are corrupt and self-serving in that they

work for the interests of members rather than the greater good (461). This negative perception of unions has compelled

the labor movement to attempt to redefine itself within a framework that has obtained widespread intellectual, cultural, moral, and political support through the discourse of human rights. Calling a particular right a “human right,” in both law and popular discourse then suggests that the right be accepted as a universal human need. Labor rights as human rights therefore shifts the labor discourse from wages and special interest politics to ethics and morality. In other words, activists and labor law scholars seek to harness the “hegemonic status of human rights discourse” in order to gain public support for a number of legal, political, and strategic objectives (462).

Many have warned of the problematic tensions between human rights discourse and strategies and the discourse and strategies of labor rights; mindful of their different purposes and histories they actively caution against linking human rights with labor rights. However, I want to argue that some amount of caution may be needed in promoting certain linkages between the labor rights and human rights movements, only because (in most cases) a false dichotomy exists

between the two as well as a narrow and limited acceptance of the scope and vision of each. The caution argument rests, for Kolbren and others, on certain basic assumptions: human rights are primarily oriented toward limiting the power of the state, and labor rights are primarily oriented toward limiting the power of private actors in the market; human rights constitutes an ethos of individualism—freedom from individual persecution—and labor rights constitutes an ethos of collectivity—freedom of association and collective bargaining; human rights constitutes a more philanthropic approach—“we are here to help you”—and labor rights constitutes a more self-determined approach—“we are collective agents of our own destiny;” human rights is determined more by civil and political rights—taking up torture, imprisonment, free speech, failed states—and labor is determined more by economic justice—social rights, full and productive employment by virtue of being human.

Now, let us turn the page on these tensions between labor and human rights. There are many of us who understand the caution but are recasting the human rights movement by reaching beyond the dichotomies listed above and taking up a more expansive view of human rights. In this view law is inseparable from the philosophical and performative interventions that augment civil and political rights with economic justice and where critiques and interventions upon neoliberalism become integral to our agenda. There are also those in the labor movement who are taking a wider view of work to

include informal work and non-traditional work, who are re-invigorating the movement by seeking solidarity, across communities and borders, beyond demands of fair wages to include health care, political and civic participation, and social equity, or what Joel Handler calls “Rights of Exhortation,” i.e., the assertion of “one’s self-worth and entitlement over one’s role in society” (Kobren, 467). This includes fair wages, but it also means full citizenship. It means work, but it also means the opportunity to do the work, in the words of

**...to labor constitutes the human condition.**

**By labor, in this instance, I mean work and the ontology of work as well as its poetic experience and imaginings about itself.**

Alice Walker, “that our soul must have” (Walker, 520). It means to “imagine another world” and reach for the performativity of the utopian not as a nowhere land of perfection and bliss but as a society where everyone is guaranteed work, because to labor constitutes the human condition. Labor then becomes a human right like clean water and like the air we breathe. If Gibran is right in asserting that labor is “to keep pace with the earth and the soul of the earth” we all must have labor to survive and therefore guaranteed the opportunity to labor.

What do I mean by labor? By labor I mean a mental and/or physical task, i.e., an assigned or designated effort toward a material end or towards economies of invention, purpose, and survival. By labor I mean a great effort emanating from and toward materiality that ironically encompasses imagination and futurity. By labor, in this instance, I mean work and the ontology of work as well as its poetic experience and imaginings about itself. By labor I mean the possibilities for thinking in terms of the utopian: the here, the now, and the future in this place or an imagined performative place. I also mean contemplating existential drudgery, like Prometheus’ unending hell and the cruel destiny of repetitions and torturous boredom. By labor I mean work and that which both entails work and exceeds it, i.e., the work of the brain and the work of the body that is both separate and inseparable under the infinite temporalities of labor. By labor I mean a job and its resonances, i.e., something that one must get done and the emotional af-

fect, material context, and shared belonging that give it form and make it integral to what it means to be human and that make our

access to and need for labor a human right. Like freedom, “Labor becomes truly critical when it is shared” (Chang 2010, 91). I am arguing that we all are and we must be a labor force together. Briankle G. Chang states:

Labor matters. It cuts and cuts into matter... the mother of all. To labor is to affirm life which begins with labor... Inasmuch as the fact of labor is that with

it life begins and goes on, the truth of life is that labor defines, that is, makes finite, much of what we do and are in life, that labor, having always and already begun, survives its own manifold articulations, including all that seeks to negate it. . . . The transition from one type of labor to an other thus not only brings a change in the forms of life in which one finds oneself, it also demands a change of the lenses through which one views the history that is just past and one's own place in the history that is now unfolding (90).

If we believe that "labor affirms life," brings life into being and sustains it, through its excesses of forms and performances, then the jobs we do, the work we embody, implicates our survival and history's unfolding present.

## "Never Cross a Picket Line"

*A woman enters from upstage left; she is trying to make her way downstage, past a throng of human shadows. The figures are circling the stage; they are walking from left to right and right to left in desperate motion. They are searching, but we do not know what they are searching for or why. The shadows are oblivious to the woman and the woman is not affected by the shadows. She appears ignores them. They are only backdrop for her story. Her attention is only with the audience and her story. The woman moves past the shadows and sits downstage center. She welcomes the audience with a playful demeanor that becomes a striking contrast to the searching shadows upstage. When the woman speaks, the shadows lose their desperation and begin to move in slow motion.*

The Woman speaks:  
"Never cross a picket line" were the first words I ever uttered. Never cross a picket line were words as sacred in my house as father-son-holy ghost were in other homes. Crossing a picket line was like crossing over into a dark, empty void where you turn-in your membership card to ever being right about anything again. You cross a picket line and you were forever in the abyss of "the wrong side" about everything.

*As the woman speaks, some of the shadows upstage begin falling to the ground, as if tired or sick; the other shadows hold them up helping them walk the journey—the search. There are shadows that fall and do not rise. Others lay still, motionless.*

The Woman speaks:

My father was a Union man. He was the president of the Hotel Service Workers Union Local # 593. But, he was also a father who sang to us at night about pretty white horses and cradles that rocked. He was also the best Louisiana cook there ever was and made the best gumbo I've ever tasted, still. He was a husband who wanted my mother to stay home and take care of the "girls" and her garden. She grew tulips. My father was a Union Man. Being in the Union was his saving grace.

*As the woman continues to speak, there are only a few shadows left, still walking in slow motion and searching. They are holding on to each other, as if it is only each other and the desperate search that keeps them all from going under.*

The Woman speaks:

My father used to say there are no bad people there are only people without opportunities. Before he was president of the Union, my father was a waiter. He waited tables at the Sherman Hotel at night and sold newspapers during the day. He would come home from the paper stand, change clothes, and then leave out again in his waiter's black jacket and white shirt. Every night he and my mother would count his tips. The tips help pay for my tuition at St. Edmunds Episcopal Grammar School and for me and winter coats for my sister and me.

*Suddenly the shadows stop. They all stop. One shadow begins to dig deep in the ground with its hands. No longer in slow motion, this single silhouette starts digging—digging, digging with a fierce urgency. The others now fall to the ground to dig; all of them are now digging quickly and urgently.*

The Woman speaks:

My father said he was a labor man, because to labor is to be alive. He said he was a labor organizer because to labor with dignity was to be civilized. He always said your labor should be your ticket to freedom not the doorway to slavery.

*The woman now turns her back to the audience and gazes at the shadows upstage. As the shadows dig into the ground, a small spring begins to sprout. It is water. A small spring of blue water is now projected on an upstage screen. The shadows dig faster; they keep digging and the small spring grows larger, and larger. The screen now represents a surging force of blue water. The shadows taste the water, drink it, play in it, and bathe in the water. The Shadows come alive again in the water. They are a rainbow of unidentifiable forms and colors.*

## Temporality and Utopia

On Monday, October 18, 2010, in the *New York Times* Robert Reich wrote:

It's a perfect storm. And I'm not talking about the impending dangers facing Democrats. I'm talking about the dangers facing our democracy. First, income in America is now more concentrated in fewer hands than it's been in 80 years. Almost a quarter of total income generated in the United States is going to the top 1 percent of Americans. The top one-tenth of one percent of Americans now earn as much as the bottom 120 million of us. Who are these people? .....they're top executives of big corporations and Wall Street, hedge-fund managers, and private equity managers. They include the Koch brothers, whose wealth increased by billions last year, and who are now funding tea party candidates across the nation. Most Americans are in trouble. Their jobs, incomes, savings, and even homes are on the line. The perfect storm: An unprecedented concentration of income and wealth at the top; a record amount of secret money flooding our democracy; and a public becoming increasingly angry and cynical about a government that's raising its taxes, reducing its services, and unable to get it back to work. We're losing our democracy to a different system. It's called plutocracy.

**We must then ask ourselves: "What is most desirable in this existential present that will push us toward a future we desire?"**

I am interested in how the right to labor can make a material difference—how it can make materiality and un-make it—in this present time but also in the future, for futurity. If as Chang states, “matter is the mother of all,” the proposition that physical matter is the ultimate reality, then it follows that all existence, including consciousness, affect, and ideology emanate from the overarching dynamics of matter or, more precisely, a political economy of physical and existential phenomena. The core idea is that human behavior and society is fundamentally shaped by the social and technical organization of economic production and exchange. Obviously the processes of social change can never be attributable to culture, knowledge, or ideas isolated from the material conditions of human life or in the way economic activities and arrangements then value, reward, and organize the sociality of space and time (Conquergood, 2005).

The question then becomes: What do we do now? I believe one of the first things we need to do is to re-think the nature of labor and how the right to labor becomes more urgent and expansive when we begin to consider how the ontology of labor is inherent to most or all living species as well as to the affective and emotional dynamics of human survival. To consider the ontology of labor is to re-envision our material and affective life-worlds and the future. In doing so, this moment of “plutocracy” that Reich describes is not a fatalistic forecast of our future, but a warning for a better one. Labor as a human right, and the ontology of labor as inherent to human survival, must encompass futurity. Therefore, we must excavate the possibilities of temporality. Tem-

porality is defined as: of or relating to or limited by time; worldly; secular or lay; characteristic of or devoted to the temporal world as opposed to the

spiritual world; Lasting only for a time; not eternal; passing through our temporal existence; of or relating to time as opposed to eternity; of or relating to earthly life; of or relating to grammatical tense or a distinction of time; of or relating to time as distinguished from space; of or relating to the sequence of time or to a particular time;

chronology. We must then ask ourselves: “What is most desirable in this existential present that will push us toward a future we desire?”

The question begs for a better future than what the present holds for us now. In my worry over the right to labor, temporality, and the futurity, I turn to theories that equate the future with the utopian. Jose Munoz states: “Something that should mobilize us, push us forward. Utopian is not prescriptive it renders potential blueprints of a world not quite here, a horizon of possibility, not a fixed schema”

(2005, 225). In citing Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, Munoz adds that “utopia is primarily a critique of

the here and now, it is an insistence that there is, as they put it, ‘something missing in the here and the now’” (226). If the utopia is within a present that “pushes” us toward a multiplicity of possible futures—alternatives and potentialities—then this becomes a hope for a better world. Munoz goes on to state: “...but in this instance, I dwell on hope because I wish to think about futurity; and, hope, I argue, is the emotional modality that permits us to access futurity, par excellence.”

This “emotional modality” that accesses the future through “hope,” I find most compelling and generative through art. In the inter-animation between art and futurity, it is “hope” that is now embodied and made eventful. For Felix Deleuze art can function as a “line of flight,” that is, an unending signifying and material force that both traverses and combines individual and collective subjectivities and desires, challenging common sense and normativity, as it pushes it to the limit in its combinations and reconfigurations. The connective, expansive and de-territorializing character of lines of flight, when considered in terms of art, “draws our attention to the ethical dimensions of art.... Art makes possible, it enables us to broaden our horizons and understanding, sensitizing us to our own affective dimension in relation to the world as a whole” (Lorraine 2005, 144). For Munoz, it is this move toward a utopian aesthetics that “fuels the political imagination” and does the labor of enacting a politics of futurity (228).

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In summary, how then do these notions of materiality, temporality, futurity, art, and hope, particularly as they are manifest through the art of performance, relate to the dignity of labor and labor as a human right? First. If utopia can provide “blueprints of a world not quite here” and guide us toward a horizon of possibility because “something is missing in the here and the now,” then Reich’s plutocracy serves only as a warning to push us beyond this present toward inventing multiple future possibilities where labor, in its

myriad forms, becomes a right and an opportunity for us all. Second. It is at the realm of our emotions, our affective lives and the desire for a better future—

without pain and want—where our “emotional modalities” and our structure of feelings become the driving force to re-imagine fundamental economic relations where labor becomes a guaranteed right for every human being on the planet. Third. It is art that creates “lines of flight,” where we are exposed to unending signification, symbols, and material forces that both traverse and combine “individual and collective subjectivities and desires” that then show us the way to challenge normative and hegemonic ideologies of labor, with invigorated hope, to think labor anew as dignity, a dignity that is aligned with principles of democracy. Fourth. Art “fuels the political imagination” and enables us to be all at once enraptured, inspired, and disturbed pushing us from the imagined to the real where social movements are born that ferment direct action toward economic justice in the distribution of labor and wealth.

## The Rhetoric and Symbolism of Performance

(Excerpts from Andrew Ross’s essay: “The Making of Sustainable Livelihoods.” Forum on Labor in Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies, Briankle G. Chang, Editor, March 2010.)

*A woman about sixty years old enters downstage center. She moves in and out of different characters performing as “Readers.” They are standing all about the stage; each is*



*holding an oversized book with the word LABOR written in large letters. As the old woman circles the Readers she begins speaking as they silently read, intensely, focused on their oversized books:*

Woman One:

My grandfather was an Indian Negro. He knew how to work with his hands. He would say: "Give me your rags. Give me what you don't need." He used to make rugs with them rags. Yes he did. He tied the rags on a pole and make rugs. He could make corn shucks out of baskets too. You know, everybody wanted to buy my grandfather's baskets.

*The woman now picks up her own "Labor" book that is lying on the stage floor. She now joins the other Readers and begins silently and intensely reading from the book as one of the upstage Readers begins reading out loud:*

Reader One:

"The financial meltdown may well deliver on a plate the easy-to-exploit working conditions that employers have pushed long and hard for... (Ross, 93)."

*A woman downstage right enters the stage. She, like Woman One, begins speaking as she weaves slowly between the Readers standing about the stage*

Woman Two:

I worked at the Ford plant for twenty years. It was the place I knew. It was what I did and everyone who worked there, well, we were family. It is all gone. Like part of me is gone. It is not just the wages; it is my life—the routine of my life. We were an extended family. I've been trying very hard to rethink time and what a day...just a day really means.

*Like Woman One, Woman Two now picks up her own "Labor" book that is lying on the stage floor. She now joins the other Readers and begins silently and intensely reading from the book as one of the downstage Readers begins reading out loud:*

Reader Two:

If and when jobs reappear, they have to look less like lottery tickets....

*Everyone should have a right to choose their own balance of freedom and security in employment and we should craft*

*policies to ensure that making the wrong choices does not prove catastrophic (94). A man downstage Left enters the stage. He, like Woman One and Two, begins speaking as he weaves slowly between the Readers standing about the stage.*

Man One:

I hate my job. I watch the clock until time passes. I want to feel what it's like to love what you do. I want to do work and know that I have done something that it means something. That I am worth something.

*Like Woman One and Woman Two, the man now picks up his own "Labor" book that is lying on the stage floor. He now joins the other Readers and begins silently and intensely reading from the book as one of the downstage Readers begins reading out loud*

Reader Three:

The people formerly known as employees for those who answer to that description are increasingly thin on the ground. Can they learn how to behave like stewards of peoples' livelihoods, by committing to workers in the long term? (95).

*Man Two enters from upstage center. He is a young man in his early twenties. He walks downstage center straight through the readers, as he brushes past several of them on his way to speak to the audience. All the Readers turn from their books to look at him.*

*He speaks to the audience and stops just in front of the book, lying before him, on the stage floor. He looks at the book but does not pick it up.*

Man Two:

If you don't have a job then how can you be a man? I been looking for a job for over a year. I don't feel like a human being. I can sell drugs.... that's what some of my friends do. Yep, that's just what they do. Where do you go when you don't have a job?

*Stage is black*

We do performance, in this instance, to address the problems that "beset our world." Performance becomes less a mirror to hold up reality as reflection for us all to see, but more like a "line of flight" where we take the Brechtian hammer

to the mirror and crack it open. Performance can trick material time; it can outlaw chronology; it can delimit the boundaries of the present; and, in the process, something gets done. Performances then become, according to Richard Schechner, “encounters in the realm of doing” where a “through-line of action” is made through the symbolic. Performance temporality changes time; it can now play into the realm of the future and tease the fixity of a specific time within this through-line of action. Performance is about many things, one of them being about the alchemy of living in multiple time zones and possibilities toward futurity that imagines what human labor can do in the unfolding of history. Performance, human rights and the dignity of labor are illustrated through the performative, whether manifest in fatherhood memories of unions and picket lines under the backdrop of the collective work from wandering souls who dig for the miracle of water and win in the raw labor of their shared need for survival or whether in the rhetorical fragments of cautionary tales and a political economy that asks the practical question: *Where do you go when you don't have a job?*

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## Endnotes

- <sup>i</sup> This is the title of one of the themes and missions of The World Social Forum, an international grass roots organization whose purpose is to work toward alternative futures through the championing of what is described as a counter hegemonic globalization movement. The World Social Forum also serves as a global civil society of sorts in bringing together an array of non-governmental organizations, social movements, and advocacy campaigns from all over the world.
- <sup>ii</sup> These definitions are drawn from Merriam-Webster online dictionary and further elaborated in the essay "The Reflexivity of Labor" by D.S. Madison (see references).
- <sup>iii</sup> Political economy, generally understood, as the interaction between politics and economics— interactions that cross local, national, and global boundaries. This is affecting both the micro and macro, the local and the global, domains of social, civic, and cultural life. I'm drawing the concept most explicitly from the book, *Acts of Activism: Human Rights as Radical Performance*, by D.S. Madison and the collected essays, *Landscapes of Inequality*, edited by Collins, et.al. (see references).
- <sup>iv</sup> Definitions of temporality are drawn from Merriam-Webster online dictionary and further elaborated in my essay "The Reflexivity of Labor" (see references).
- <sup>v</sup> Stuart Hall's notion of the problems that "beset our world" are discussed most powerfully in his book on representation by the same title (see references).

## **B. Aubrey Fisher**

B. Aubrey Fisher served as a faculty member in the Department of Communication at the University of Utah from 1971 to 1986. He began his professional career as a high school teacher and radio announcer in South Dakota. After receiving his Masters and Ph. D. degrees from the University of Minnesota, he spent four years on the faculty at the University of Missouri.

Professor Fisher was a prominent scholar in interpersonal communication and communication theory. His published work includes three books and more than thirty-five articles and book chapters. He was considered one of the most notable and influential communication scholars of his time. He held numerous offices in professional organizations, including president of the Western Speech Communication Association, president of the International Communication Association, and editor of the Western Speech Communication Journal.

The B. Aubrey Fisher Memorial Lecture was established by the Department of Communication in 1986 to recognize Professor Fisher's outstanding achievements and to provide a forum for presenting original research and theory in communication.

## **D. Soyini Madison**

D. Soyini Madison is Professor of Performance Studies at Northwestern University, with appointments in the Department of African American Studies and the Department of Anthropology. She is also an Affiliate in the Program of African Studies. She received her Ph.D. in Performance Studies from Northwestern University in 1989 and taught at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for 19 years before returning to the Northwestern faculty in 2006.

Professor Madison focuses her research on the intersections of local activism, the political economy of human rights, and indigenous performance tactics. She is interested in how applying a performance analytic to local and public acts of activism generates a poetics of understanding and an embodied epistemology concerning how activism is constituted, its dimensions of imagination and creativity, and its rhetoric and politics. Madison's current research examines the performance tactics of selected transnational labor union movements and the oral histories of union leadership that reflect specific public demonstrations of labor justice and disputes.

Professor Madison has received numerous teaching awards, including the Tanner University Award at UNC-Chapel Hill for "Outstanding and Inspirational Teaching," the National Communication Association "Spotlight on Scholars," The J. William Fulbright Senior Scholar Award, and The Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Research Award.

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