

# Afterword: Rethinking Rhetorics of Gender and Labor

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Our edited collection *Women at Work: Rhetorics of Gender and Labor* was published in 2019, and at that time, we, along with our seventeen contributors, set out to meditate on the relationship between gender and work, identifying it as an underexplored area in rhetorical studies writ large and feminist rhetorical studies more particularly. We saw the value in taking on this inquiry, asserting that "to be able to argue for how, why, and on what terms one works is critical to human existence," since "[w]ork affects one's sense of independence, quality of life, daily sustenance, individual and familial survival, intellectual engagement, personal happiness and fulfillment, innovative thinking, and entrepreneurial spirit" (3-4). We prioritized the connection between gender and work, asserting that this pairing would especially "revea[[]] the special and significant challenges women have faced as they have attempted to understand and intervene in the conditions of their labor" (4).

Little did we know that just a few months after the publication of our collection, our understandings of and experiences with work would dramatically change due to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. By March of 2020, the country went into lockdown. People who could work virtually did so (or tried to), creating new workspaces within their homespaces. Front-line workers—nurses, doctors, grocery store workers, and delivery people—stayed on the job and placed

themselves in harm's way, often working with limited access to protective equipment or safety protocols. There was a clear class divide in terms of those who could telework, with one Pew research study finding that "62% of workers with a bachelor's degree or more" were able to work from home compared to "23% of those without a four-year college degree" (Parker et al.). Mothers especially were doubly tasked with working virtually and supporting their children's online schooling; in consequence, mothers disproportionately exited the workforce to care for their children, and the nation experienced what some termed a "female recession" or "she-cession" (Khazan). These dire concerns were further deepened by anxieties relating to a faltering economy and job loss. Such radical and almost immediate changes to work prompted many people to reflect critically on the role their jobs and labor played in their lives, as the nation was abuzz with news of individual and collective acts of work-related resistance, social media activism, union organizing, and calls for establishing more human (and humane) relationships to work.

As we write now in 2024, seeking a sense of normalcy since the onset of the pandemic four years ago, this new reckoning with work is prominent in the public imagination. Given our contemporary context, then, Michelle Smith and Sarah Hallenbeck's *Peitho* cluster conversation "Gender and the Rhetoricity of Work" could not be more exigent and kairotic. The essays herein give *Peitho* readers the opportunity to consider and reconsider definitions of and engagements with work and especially to explore how power and rhetoric continue to animate work experience. We thank Michelle and Sarah for creating this opportunity, and we especially thank the authors in this *Peitho* issue for directing our field's attention in new ways. In this afterword, we sit with these essays, appreciating them for how they reorient our understandings of work and offer new heuristics for continued inquiry.

In "Work and the Rhetorical Enactment of Disability," Kristina Bowers exposes the institutional logics that make it difficult for those with long Covid to apply for, receive, and maintain Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) benefits. In particular, medical models of disability centered on workplace productivity take priority over a "claimant's embodied knowledge or experience," and a neoliberal understanding of personal responsibility displaces "government, community, or even workplace resources" in favor of an "individualized mandate" to manage care. Bowers's call to further study these discourses is of pressing interest to feminist rhetorical scholars, particularly given the higher rate of Covid cases and death experienced by minorities; the disproportionate effect of Covid on women-dominated employment sectors; and the disproportionate burden of unpaid care duties that fall on women (Luck et al.; Yavorsky et al.). This work is a reminder too of how women have historically engaged in collective action to challenge the medical establishment and unfair labor conditions, and calls *Peitho* readers to acknowledge—and act on—the need for both historiographic and contemporary empirical research to better understand these practices.

In "Not Just Doctors," Lillian Campbell attends to the experiences of women of color working in healthcare through a case study of three tele-observers in a Virtual Intensive Care Unit.

Though requiring minimal formal training, the position necessitates considerable rhetorical skill as well as often-unrecognized embodied medical knowledge, skills devalued in the institutional contexts in which these women work. At the same time, these women's healthcare work offers them a degree of autonomy and job security rare for workers in low-prestige roles in the health-care industry—and elsewhere. Campbell asks readers not to forget that women of color are overrepresented in low-wage and hazardous jobs in health care (Dill and Duffy), and her work amplifies recent calls in feminist rhetorical studies to prioritize working-class women and their undervalued labor (Hallenbeck and Smith; Keohane; Popp and Phillips-Cunningham). Campbell invites us to think more critically about the rhetorical, emotional, and embodied capacities and labor necessary to navigate these specific health-care contexts. She especially encourages consideration of the trauma these women witness from afar but are unable to act on relieving, and to meditate more broadly on the unaccounted workplace trauma marginalized workers may experience across employment sectors.

In “You Have Time and You Should Cook, *Tonight*,” Ashley M. Beardsley explores the rhetoric of popular cookbook author and television host Rachael Ray, known for her use of “fake-outs,” shortcuts that cooks can use to elevate simple preparations to impress guests and family members. Beardsley finds that Ray promotes agency for her audience by “recovering and circulating cooking knowledge” and employing a teaching style reminiscent of learning alongside a family member. At the same time, in “emphasizing women's responsibility to cook” and underplaying planning, preparation, and clean-up time Ray “contribute[s] to normalizing gendered invisible kitchen labor.” Beardsley's treatment raises questions about the extra scrutiny women in the public eye (like Ray) receive, the ways by which domestic rhetorics may simultaneously leverage and constrain women's agency, and the extent to which women entrepreneurs may both promote and undermine feminist discourses. Beardsley further calls readers to consider how workspaces are privileged and the ways time is accounted for in “discounted” spaces like the home, where “labor-saving” devices and stratagems have often reinforced gendered work expectations. Building on Beardsley's essay, we ask: What other instances of time-compression inside and outside the home are we missing? What rhetorical tactics enable this compression and what are the consequences?

Ashley Hay's essay “TikTok's Excessive Labors” suggests the ways that relationships to labor have been altered by what digital media scholars term the “platform society” (Dijck et al.), one in which social and economic life is increasingly mediated by digital platforms and driven by neoliberal logics. Hay finds that even a successful online entrepreneur as Repairman67 must negotiate an uncertain landscape of ambiguous platform policies, oblique algorithms, and shifting audience expectations that challenge old understandings of content producer and content consumer. Hay also makes clear that sex workers, no matter how seemingly empowered, operate in a market rife with exploitation, their precarity exacerbated by platform technologies and cultures that blur public and private boundaries (boyd) and by ambiguously articulated and capriciously

enforced regulations regarding what constitutes “sexual” content. This work emboldens disciplinary understandings that online writing ecologies are not neutral spaces, but rather increasingly mediated by commercial interests that ultimately own the spaces where “public” life takes place. Hay thus summons digital feminist scholars to consider how platforms like TikTok are spaces of work and to attune themselves to the labor-related concerns that come to life when considering social media from this perspective.

We find in Kelsey Taylor Alexander’s “The ‘Anti-Work’ Movement” a specific case of how the Covid-19 pandemic catalyzed a widespread interrogation of work. Here, Alexander considers the anti-work movement—a movement that challenges prevailing assumptions that one’s identity is reliant on work, that questions the risks workers are expected to make on the job, and that encourages people to “lesse[n] their investment in work and se[t] boundaries that clarify a separation between work and life.” More specifically, Alexander explores how the popular Reddit forum *r/antiwork* responded to scrutiny as a result of a *Fox News* interview with its moderator that cast the group in an unflattering light. While the community initially suffered a drastic loss in membership, it “rebuilt [itself] upon a shared foundation of an imagined future where work is no longer exploitive and detrimental to life itself.” In centering anti-work discourses, Alexander invites readers to interrogate the assumptions and expectations we have about work, to re-imagine the kinds of practices and lifestyles that we want to maintain as workers (and as humans), and to question the lack of sustainability in many of our work environments. Of course, feminist scholars must consider how the anti-work movement reverberates across lines of difference, power, and privilege to explore who makes these calls for anti-work (and for whom) and how work gets redistributed within new anti-work contexts like “quiet quitting.” This essay too should inspire historiographic investigation regarding how the current anti-work movement engages both reformist and radical movements from the past that have impacted the ways work is understood and practiced.

Read together, the contributors to this *Peitho* conversation prompt readers to meditate on how work has changed in our lives and surrounding contexts, and to think critically about the ways power and privilege intersect with work. These essays ask readers to reflect upon how the Covid-19 experience has introduced new and recast familiar terms of work, and they encourage scholars to explore emerging discourses surrounding paid leave, domestic labor, long Covid, access fatigue, virtual work, time-space compression, productivity, care work, digital/social entrepreneurship, the Protestant work ethic, anti-work, remote work, work’s temporality, emotional labor, efficiency, quiet quitting, and more. These contributors too compel readers to think about who has access to work and what kind; what supports (childcare, paid leave, scheduling flexibility, social security, tax credits) are available to certain workers; and what *other* labor workers need to take on to be able to work. For readers laboring in universities, where marginalized students and scholars are disproportionately burdened by inequitable labor loads (Hsu and Nish; Kynard), this *Peitho* conversation encourages readers to inspect our own institutional contexts and to investigate—and even intervene into—how work is distributed, recognized, and compensated. And of course, these

essays summon feminist scholars to consider how their theoretical, political, and pedagogical dispositions orient them to this conversation and what new kinds of intellectual work these dispositions position them to take on. As respondents, too, we recognize our own perspectival limitations, and we hope that readers of this conversation will be inspired to pursue diverse lines of inquiry we have not yet imagined.

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