

## ‘Critical Plagiarism’ as Discursive Labour: A Conversation with Leah Modigliani

By Laurel V. McLaughlin and Leah Modigliani

As an artist, professor, and critic, Leah Modigliani practices what she calls ‘critical plagiarism’. The multifaceted process queries how power, history, and aesthetics are constructed and maintained within a ‘theatre’ of discourse(s). Modigliani’s ‘critical plagiarism’ performs the discursive labour of deconstruction and subsequent reconstruction of historic speeches through strategies of their own making: citing, editing, and inserting—whether clandestinely or directly—autobiographical information. Consequently, this discursive labour not only reveals its own conditions of production and circulation, but ‘produces’ a performative call to action through Modigliani’s incisive dialogue between past and present. The following conversation emerged from a studio visit in January 2019 and subsequent email exchanges concerning the speeches as artistic interventions, and particularly focuses on Modigliani’s ‘plagiarized’ speech of Canadian labour activist William A. Pritchard, ‘Spectre Of The Future Accused’, and its accompanying performative installation.



**Fig. 1:** Leah Modigliani, *Spectre of the Future Accused* (detail), Sept. 30, 2017. Humagram video projection on the site of Marshall McLuhan’s University of Toronto classroom. Photo: Yuula Benivolski.

Laurel V. McLaughlin (LVM): *In our last studio visit, you mentioned several speeches that you selected, examined, edited, 'plagiarised', and inevitably, thought alongside. Could you discuss one or two of these speeches, and outline when they've appeared in your practice? It strikes me that they act as a theatre of sorts within your larger body of work, in that the speeches bring together numerous threads from your practice.*

Leah Modigliani (LM): Over many years I have redeployed historical speeches in my creative work. I have since begun calling this practice *critical plagiarism*; which might be described as a method of selectively revising past voices for political use in the present through auto-biographically inflected *rewriting*. My interest in speeches dates back to when I created a sculptural installation titled *The Great One* (2002–05), that centered around a video reenactment of the retirement speech of hockey player Wayne Gretzky, which I performed verbatim for the camera (*The Great One*). This piece was different from my recent use of speeches, because I did not change the text, and because it only obliquely referenced politics through my choice to re-gender Gretzky as a female athlete. My more recent work is more explicitly political in content. Since then, I've creatively adapted a number of historical speeches by notable figures like Alexis de Tocqueville, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Emma Goldman, and the less well-known figure of Canadian labour organizer and socialist William A. Pritchard.

Working with these speeches combines what I enjoy doing most: researching history, critically examining how discourse mediates or reestablishes dominant power dynamics, and practicing the craft of writing. The rewriting of these speeches is the closest I come in my work to an improvisational practice. The most important aspect of adapting these speeches is choosing which historical speech I want to work with in the first place. Usually there is something in the original text that I relate to personally; something in the writer's original words that strikes me as being very contemporary and I can imagine myself as the author of these same words. I'm struck both by the continued relevance of their ideas in my own time and the evidence of changing social norms

that remain embedded in the texts. I am aware of the unconscious and implicit biases of the original writer's social position, so I try to update their texts to conform to my own personal politics while preserving the broader philosophical, moral, or theoretical ideas with which I identify. Through the labour of revising these older discourses I publicly endorse specific social values, and assert that my individual voice matters, while demonstrating my personal and professional solidarity with the ongoing collaborative struggle towards greater social justice.

*LVM: You reflect further upon critical plagiarism as artistic intervention in your essay 'Critical Plagiarism and the Politics of Creative Labour: Photographs, History, and Re-enactment', classifying it as part manifesto, part biography, part auto-biography—between art and scholarship. The construction of this intermediality actually composes part of the discursive labour, no? It acts as an acknowledgement of the precarity of dissenting speech under capitalism, and also performs an alternative positionality.*

*LM: The characteristic that all these speeches share is that they speak to the conflict between the human desire for autonomy and the varying degrees of societal structure by which we are governed and oppressed. The choice of non-conformity; that is, my choice to work in between 'forms, authorities, politics, and genres', as you said so nicely, rather than define myself in the career marketplace as one thing ('modern and contemporary art historian' or 'sculptor', etc.) is an active choice not to constrain my creative and intellectual interests and capabilities. It is also necessarily an active choice not to pursue the commercial art market, which requires a kind of simple branding or reductively imagined 'specialization' to find success. I reject the idea that one person can't be excellent at more than one thing; and, as much as possible, I want to limit my exposure to unfree social relations grounded in market dynamics. I'm attracted to speeches that overtly profess and reckon with the writer's conflict regarding their passion for an ideal that they feel is at odds with the contemporary status quo.*

itself to them. It means a risk; it means giving up small material achievements. It means going against 'public opinion' and the laws and rules of one's country. There are few people who have the daring and the courage to give up what they hug at their hearts.<sup>6</sup> They fear that their possible gain will not be the equivalent for what they give up.

As for me, I was not born and raised – I 'grew'.<sup>7</sup> I grew with life, life in all its aspects, in its heights and in its depths. The price to pay is high, of course, but unless you are willing to pay the price, unless you are willing to plunge into the very depths, you will never be able to remount to the heights of life.

Naturally, life presents itself in different forms to different ages. Between the age of eight and twelve like a lot of girls I dreamed of becoming an Angel, or a Blondie or even a Madonna.<sup>8</sup> I longed to avenge the limitations of my sex, to climb through the glass ceiling and throw the glass shards around on the way up. When I was fourteen I retreated to the studio to draw and compose romantic poetry, trying to connect to others, silently planning my escape from the conservative values of my little town.<sup>9</sup> When I was seventeen I suffered from unrequited love, and I drove around drunk on my bicycle until I broke my wrist and

4. American indebted households are carrying on average \$15,593 in credit card debt; \$153,184 in mortgage debt and \$32,511 in student loan debt as of November, 2014. See Tim Chen, 'American Household Credit Card Debt Statistics: 2014', *Nerd Wallet Finance*, November 2014, accessed online November 11, 2014 at <http://www.nerdwallet.com/blog/credit-card-data/average-credit-card-debt-household/>. Chen's numbers are aggravated compiled from data provided by the 2010 US Census, the Federal Reserve's Aggregate Revolving Consumer Debt Survey and Survey of Consumer Finances (2009). Student loan debt has increased significantly over twenty years. According to data findings released by the US Department of Education in October 2013, 'In 2009, a larger percentage (31 percent) of graduates in repayment faced high monthly loan payments (greater than 12 percent of their monthly income), than their counterparts in 1994 and 2001'. Also, significantly, the average cumulative debt in constant 2009 dollars increased from \$15,000 in 1994 to \$24,700 in 2009. See Jenny H. Woo, 'Degrees of Debt: Student Borrowing and Loan Repayment of Bachelor's Degree Recipients 1 Year After Graduating', published by the National Center for Education Statistics at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2014/2014011.pdf> (accessed November 10, 2014). This issue is reaching a critical mass and is becoming a significant political issue for Democrats in the 2016 elections, with Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren and Hillary Clinton all prioritizing theoretical solutions to the problem of student debt in their political campaigning.

5. Emma Goldman makes a general reference here to the incompatibility of submission to God with Anarchism's core belief that man should submit to no authority other than his own autonomy. Goldman's 'bungling god' echoes the tone of Mikhail Bakunin's description of a God angered by Adam and Eve's transgression in the Garden of Eden in 'God and the State': 'The good God, whose foresight, which is one of the divine faculties, should have warned him of what would happen, flew into a terrible and ridiculous rage; he cursed Satan, man, and the world created by himself, striking himself so to speak in his own creation, as children do when they get angry; and, not content with smiting our ancestors themselves, he cursed them in all the generations to come, innocent of the crime committed by their forefathers'. Rather than all-knowing, God is imagined as an immature child not yet in control of his own emotions

Fig. 2: The text set in Helvetica font is Goldman's original text and the text set in Times font is Modigliani's.

Leah Modigliani, 'The Snake and the Falcon', *Anarchist Studies* 23.2 (2015): 89–97.

Leah Modigliani

92

suffered the embarrassment of having to explain it. At eighteen I went to Cairo and dared to walk alone through the City of the Dead, until a young man chased me out, screaming apologies for thinking he could grab me and kiss me. I too wanted to scream all the time, but to do so while dancing.<sup>10</sup>

Then came America, America with its promises of freedom, opportunity and meritocracy. So, like many before me, I went to be educated in and by San Francisco, the home and heart of the Left.<sup>11</sup> Living that life however now cost a pretty penny, so I subsidised my creative pursuits with student loan debt and waitressing work, serving cheap drinks to drunk cable-car drivers until the manager hit another waitress and I quit.<sup>12</sup> My youth was filled with the images and sounds of a changing world, and they leaked into my soul without me realizing it, so that tears occasionally rose out of me at unexpected moments.

I quietly minded this empathy, not knowing what to do with it. And together we marched for the students in Tiananmen square, and together we watched the Berlin Wall come down without yet knowing what that meant, and together we marched for the fourteen young women murdered in Montreal.<sup>13</sup> Through it all, we asked 'What does it mean

and not yet able to accept the consequences of his actions. Michael Bakunin, *God and the State* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1970), p10.

6. Edward Snowden is a notable contemporary exception.

7. The original lines by Goldman reads 'As for myself, I can say that I was like Topsy. I was not born and raised – I "grewed"'. Goldman is likely referencing the character of Topsy in Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. When asked by Miss Ophelia whether she knows that God made her, the slave girl answers 'I spect I grow'd. Don't think nobody never made me'. See: Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (London: J. Cassell, 1852), p207. To 'grow like Topsy' became a common way of expressing how one might have developed without a particular plan in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century. As a relatively privileged white middle-class woman living into the twenty-first century, however, I am uncomfortable with appropriating Goldman's reference to the black character of Topsy and so I have eliminated it.

8. I am referring to three things: the popular television program *Charlie's Angels*, which was broadcast on ABC from 1976-1981, and featured three female detectives originally played by actors Kate Jackson, Farah Fawcett-Majors and Jaclyn Smith; the proto-punk band Blondie (formed in 1974) fronted by charismatic singer Debby Harry that enjoyed widespread success with the release of their album *Parallel Lines* in 1978; and of course the Material Girl herself, American singer-songwriter Madonna Louise Ciccone who became a star with the international release and success of her first album titled *Madonna* in 1985. These women, for different reasons would inspire the imaginations of young ambitious female teenagers like myself born in the late 1960s to early 1970s.

9. Between the ages of nine and seventeen I lived in Victoria, British Columbia, a place then and still marketed to tourists as 'a piece of Olde England'.

10. The original line, 'but at sixteen I decided on a more exalted death. I wanted to dance myself to death' is one of the most quoted excerpts from Goldman's speech. I edited it to be more in keeping with my own psychology and biography.

11. I moved to San Francisco from Victoria in 1995 to attend the Masters of Fine Arts programme in sculpture at the San Francisco Art Institute. I chose to go there without first

Anarchist Studies 23.2

**Fig. 2:** The text set in Helvetica font is Goldman's original text and the text set in Times font is Modigliani's.

Leah Modigliani, 'The Snake and the Falcon', *Anarchist Studies* 23.2 (2015): 89–97.

*LVM: In the same essay, you begin to outline the collaborative aspect of this discursive labour: 'They [the speeches] nonetheless exist as labour in the present and beg for continuity with such labours of the past' ('Critical Plagerism'). So, how do you view your own labour—or authorship—alongside those of the original authors such as Emma Goldman? I'm referring to the section above where you insert your experience directly within hers beginning with, 'As for me [...] on pg. 91. Are you collaborators, cross-temporal interlocutors? And then why do you insert the autobiographical, as seen in this excerpt?'*

LM: I understand these utterances as a kind of time travel—your description of a 'cross-temporal interlocutor'. As public texts of some renown (these texts were historically preserved while presumably many others were not), the original speaker self-consciously addressed future readers, and established themselves as what Foucault has called a discourse initiator. A discourse is a collaborative form of labour that is acted upon over time. In my work, I am consciously placing myself in conversation with a number of historical figures who established a discourse that continues to speak to my contemporary condition long after they are gone. My critical plagiarism is essentially a way of making visible the work that goes into critically contributing to the discourse in the present. In my view, revealing the nature of invisible labour is crucial to recognizing the complexity of people's lives today, and the inequities of our current social system. Popular activism today includes fighting for recognition of deeply embedded structural racism(s) and economic compensation for it, fighting for higher wages and increased expenditure on social safety nets, and more open discussion about what people are paid for what kind of work. All of this activism has emerged through visibility of issues. Visibility is thus key to social reform. Like others, I am reckoning with the differences between the work I do as a scholar and artist, and the work that has been and continues to be invested in various forms of socio-political activism. What 'work' does art do? In my case, the dialogues with historical figures in the past that I enact through critical plagiarism strengthen my solidarity with progressive ideas that I want to preserve or highlight in the present.

In such a spirit on my part and on yours we face our common difficulties. They concern, thank God, only material things. The value of working Americans' labor has precipitously decreased in recent decades; taxes on the wealthiest Americans have declined; government of all kinds is faced by serious curtailment of income and States ability to fund integral social programs like public education has weakened<sup>3</sup> even as corporate lobbyists fund the methods of government in greater sums than ever before; the withered leaves of manufacturing lie on every side<sup>4</sup>; families have no savings and are increasingly carrying too much personal debt.<sup>5</sup>

More important, despite their possession of material goods bought at prices cheaper than ever before, many of our under employed citizens face the grim problem of an existence that cannot sustain them, toiling with little return.<sup>6</sup> Only a foolish optimist can deny the dark realities of the moment.

<sup>3</sup> According to a Dec. 2014 report by the United States Government Accountability Office, commissioned by the US Senate's Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, state funding for public colleges decreased 12% overall, and 24% per student, between 2003-2012, while tuition in public colleges increased 55% over the same time period. Student enrollment at these same colleges in the same years increased by 20%, making the deficit of funding that much worse. See: Melissa Emrey-Arras, GAO-15-151 (Dec. 2014): 7; accessed online Jan 15, 2015: <http://www.gao.gov/assets/670/667557.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Between 1970 and 2000 the amount of manufacturing jobs was relatively stable in the United States, between 17-18 million. 5 million manufacturing jobs have, however been lost since 2000 due to the effects of ongoing trade deficits much higher than in earlier decades. See: Robert E. Scott, "Manufacturing Job Loss: Trade, not Productivity, is the Culprit," Economic Policy Institute, August 11, 2015. Accessed online on Jan. 11, 2015: <http://www.epi.org/publication/manufacturing-job-loss-trade-not-productivity-is-the-culprit/>

<sup>5</sup> Working Americans lives have become more precarious in recent decades. They are working longer hours per week, have accumulated more personal debt, are suffering the unsustainable rising costs of college education, and the value of their labor generally pays for less than it did even three decades ago. The necessity for two working adults to pay for the costs of one family's expenses (historically understood by economists as a family of two adults and two children) in conjunction with little to no savings means that there is little buffer in place to ward off economic collapse if one adult loses their job, or if the family is surprised by a large unexpected expense. Middle income families (53% of the US households in 2008 earned between \$34,000 and \$110,000 annually) are working eleven more hours a week than they did in 1979, according to a 2010 report on work family conflict released jointly by The Center for American Progress Organization and University of California's Center for Work-Life Law: Heather Boushey and Joan C. Williams, "The Three Faces of Work Family Conflict," <http://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/issues/2010/01/pdf/threefaces.pdf> (accessed Jan. 17, 2015). American indebted households are carrying on average \$15,355 in credit card debt; \$165,892 in mortgage debt and \$47,172 in student loan debt in 2015 (student loan debt was an average of \$32,511 in 2014). See Erin el Issa, "American Credit Card Debt Study 2015," *Nerd Wallet Finance*, accessed online Jan. 17, 2015 at <http://www.nerdwallet.com/blog/credit-card-data/average-credit-card-debt-household/>. El Issa's numbers are aggravates compiled from data provided by a poll they conducted amongst 2,017 adults on Nov. 2-4, 2015, and data acquired from the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, Federal Reserve Bank of New York, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, US Census Bureau, and US Department of Agriculture. Student loan debt has increased significantly over twenty years. According to data findings released by the US Department of Education in October 2013, "In 2009, a larger percentage (31 percent) of graduates in repayment faced high monthly loan payments (greater than 12 percent of their monthly income), than their counterparts in 1994 and 2001." Also, significantly, the average cumulative debt in constant 2009 dollars increased from \$15,000 in 1994 to \$24,700 in 2009. See Jenny H. Woo, "Degrees of Debt: Student Borrowing and Loan Repayment of Bachelor's Degree Recipients 1 Year After Graduating," published by the National Center for Education Statistics at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2014/2014011.pdf> (accessed Nov 10, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> There is a popular misconception that lower and middle income earners have less disposable income than in the 1970s because they buy too many commodities they don't really need. Elizabeth Warren and Amelia Warren Tyagi call this "The Over Consumption Myth." In actual fact, after tracking American's spending on specific products they conclude that Americans are now spending 21% less on clothing, 22% less on food (groceries and eating out combined), and 44% less on major appliances since the early 1970s. See: Elizabeth Warren and Amelia Warren Tyagi, *The Two Income Trap, Why Middle Class Parents Are Going Broke* (New York: Basic Books, 2004) 15-17.

Fig. 4: Leah Modigliani, *Only a Foolish Opportunist Can Deny the Dark Realities of the Moment A Presidential Address*, unpublished script, 2016.

Roosevelt's words are presented as blue Times font, and Modigliani words are set in red text.

*LVM: This process of reckoning that you mentioned becomes visible in the aesthetics of your critical plagiarism. For instance, in your adaptations of the Goldman speech, you use footnotes and the double column to denote temporal distance and continuity. In your ‘plagiarizing’ of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s ‘The Only Thing We Have to Fear Is Fear Itself’, from 1933, seen above, you make use of footnotes, various colors, and fonts to distinguish voice and edits. In ‘Spectre of the Future Accused’, 2017 seen below, however, your edits are seemingly inconspicuous, until they are uttered (through emotive directives). Could you discuss the ways that you’re making your discursive labour both visible and invisible here?*

LM: In all of this work I am trying out different tactics for making visible the changes from the original. That impulse for revision comes from the history of feminist deconstruction, which allows for new meanings to be derived from the inconsistencies, exclusions, or implicit biases of older texts. It seems to be a deeply embedded part of my character to be skeptical of all inherited hierarchies and perceived truths. Because of this, I want to announce my own position as someone working on the discourse as it evolves. I want the reader to be made aware of the multiplicity of voices contributing to the idea. In the FDR and Goldman speeches, I felt it was productive to signal how I interpret the concepts of ‘socialism’, ‘anarchism’, etcetera, from my position as an educated ‘middle-class’ white North American woman in the 21st century. Although it was also based on a courtroom speech, the text I wrote for ‘Spectre of the Future Accused’ was a script that would be performed by an actor in a ‘holographic’ video projection outdoors in a public art festival. As such, there would be viewers, but not readers, so I needed to visually signal the changes I made to the text through the image of the character (the male protagonist was purposefully re-sexed as female and performed by a female actor) and through her references. Her speech is an



artful combination of early 20<sup>th</sup> century references and cadences (taken from Pritchard's life as expressed in his original speech), mixed with obvious 21<sup>st</sup> century references and cadences (inspired auto-biographically by my own experiences). I also gave the actor direction about how and when to emote certain lines, which are based on my own lived experience. In 'Spectre', my critical plagiarism was performed quite literally.

And yet, for the first time in the history of the Labor Movement *The Communist Manifesto* has been plucked from a citizen's home library and dragged in as evidence of a seditious conspiracy to destabilize the democratically elected government. The State is arrogant and powerful enough to claim "this is poison," "this is seditious" merely because they want to. It's like saying there a million people standing here in front of this Courthouse, when in fact you and I can look around and see that only a few dozen are standing there. Just because you say it is true, doesn't mean it is true.

*[taking tone of teacher again]* Remember how Galileo, when he heard about the telescope that the Dutchman Lippershey had invented, immediately figured out how to make one himself, and looking through it at the sky he saw things the naked eye could not. At the time thousands of people went around saying "I can only believe my own eyes," and so denied the existence of Jupiter's four moons that Galileo had seen. And the lawyers of that day came around and said "If Jupiter has four moons Galileo must have made them himself and stuck them into his telescope."

So, here I am today, centuries later, utilizing fact-based economic research to tell you that Capitalism has become so intense; has become so complex; and grown to such a degree that it can no longer guarantee a living wage to all its workers even as their productivity has increased and investors' profits rise. When I tell you that "Workers' net productivity has increased more than 70 percent in the last fifty years but inflation-adjusted salaries have only increased 8 percent;" [2] what do I mean?

**Fig. 5:** Leah Modigliani, 'Spectre of the Future Accused', 2017.

LVM: *As you just said, while all of your speeches are text-based, 'Spectre of the Future Accused' (2017) critically plagiarizes Canadian labour organizer William A. Pritchard's Address to the Jury concerning his involvement in the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919, which is then performed by actor Lexie Braverman. Playing Pritchard, Braverman defends herself against federal charges of Seditious Conspiracy and Common Nuisance for conspiring to organize a strike. Could you say more about this work in relation to its site and history of labour activism?*

LM: 'Spectre of the Future Accused' was commissioned by curator Barbara Fischer and the City of Toronto for the all-night Nuit Blanche festival in 2017. Nuit Blanche has a large public audience of about a million people who attend the annual all-night event at the end of September each year. I wanted to acknowledge three key aspects of the show: Fischer's curatorial theme of 'Taking to the Street', that 2017 was the centenary of the October Revolution in Russia, and I felt my work should relate to the outdoor site of its display in Toronto.

I created a ghostly figure who hovers above the old University

of Toronto classroom where media scholar Marshall McLuhan once lectured. A jury box and gallery benches were placed on the ground in front of the levitating figure for audience seating. The spectral figure defends her socialist beliefs to the public jury who, having sat in the provided seating, are implicitly tasked with adjudicating her fate. The script is adapted from the 1920 courtroom speech of William A. Pritchard, who defended himself against the Canadian government's charges of seditious conspiracy for allegedly helping to organise the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919. The latter was the biggest organized labour strike in Canadian history (30,000 people walked off their jobs). It was deemed very threatening to the federal government who feared the strikes would spread across the country, and so sided with employers. The federal government arrested many organizers, including Pritchard.

His original courtroom defense summary lasted 24 hours, and when published was 219 pages long. As in the other speeches I've adapted, I changed the script to correspond to my own voice, edited it down to 77 minutes spoken, and then hired a female actor (Lexie Braverman) to convincingly portray a contemporary social activist. Originally I wanted to create a hologram, but a true hologram is technically impossible at human scale. Instead, we hired a company to project her as a 'humagram', a high-tech video projection used in advertising campaigns and dead celebrity performances that can look very three-dimensional. In popular culture, holograms always appear visually dated (like R2-D2's projection of Princess Leia in *Star Wars*), or else they represent something futuristic, since in reality this technology is always just out of our reach. So, the hologram is never 100% in our own time. I thought this choice of medium complemented Marshall McLuhan's writings about the temporal nature of media.

Pritchard's original speech to his jury shows the pedagogical imperative prevalent in the work of labour organizers like himself in the early twentieth-century. Socialist newspapers like the *Western Clarion* (of which Pritchard was the editor) were written to and for the working classes, and are by today's standards quite intellectual. Articles were written with the purpose of educating workers to the structure

of local and federal politics, their legal rights, and the moral basis of their struggle for personal and financial gains. When Pritchard took the stand to essentially defend his life's work, he used his courtroom time as a public platform for educating the jury and the public about the history of socialism, why workers should fight for their rights, and why his political beliefs were for him simply common sense. I was attracted to his speech because I found his ideas to have renewed currency and relevancy today.

In adapting Pritchard's speech, I wanted to call attention to the resurgence of interest in socialism by a younger generation whose future life prospects under the current neoliberal world order are diminished. I also wanted to amplify the commitment to teaching as a critical form of activism. My interest in Pritchard is linked to my observation that we are witnessing increasingly virulent forms of protest by disenfranchised, poor, and unemployed or underemployed youth around the world. These protests will likely continue, and will be met by increasingly entrenched and weaponised state apparatuses. In my view, the reasons for this are not significantly different from one-hundred years ago: anger and fear over deeply embedded legal and economic colonial racism; gross income inequality; weakened or non-existent social welfare systems (which are increasingly obvious under COVID-19), and fears of immigration. These have been attenuated and complicated by the speed of information and the climate emergency. In this context, it seems important that art can draw out the historic parallels of labour organization and political revolution. It's a productive form of solidarity, this conversation with the past.

*LVM: Labour organization and the necessity of revolution have perhaps never felt more urgent than presently as global ways of living and economies buckle under the effects of COVID-19 pandemic<sup>1</sup>, and revelations of systemic*

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<sup>1</sup> The World Health Organization's timeline of COVID-19 outlines the virus's emergence in December 2019 and global spread through the publication of this interview. Countries across the globe ordered lockdowns, stay-at-home orders, business shut downs, pandemic health care procedures, and social-

*racial injustices continue to come to light. In this surreal contemporary moment, where rhetoric—specifically misinformation—garners the power to spread ill-will and illness alike, how might ‘critical plagiarism’ be mobilized as performative practice?*

LM: This is an important question. In April, before the current protests against racial injustice after George Floyd’s murder exploded, I was mulling over performative strategies of re-enactment with my graduate students in photography. We were reading Rebecca Schneider’s important book *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (2011). One of Schneider’s central premises is that time need not be a fixed moment, that indeed time(s) may recur and may be revisited, and that all times involve intra-temporal negotiations. What is at stake in such returns is the promise of the future and our ability to intervene in the past. This is what critical plagiarism offers: the appropriation of progressive labour done by texts and images in the past for their selective *re-vision* and *re-use* in the present for the future. In regards to our truly unprecedented current situation, we may find our way forward by revisiting writing and reporting on related historical incidents; finding lost or forgotten documents about the management of the Spanish Flu, critiques of white supremacy, advocating for minimum living wages; arguments for socialism, and general critiques of capitalism, amongst other useful topics worthy of *re-visiting* and *re-versioning*. An everyday practice of critical plagiarism can prefigure what will come by assessing what we already know to be true and boldly asserting it.

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distancing, drastically changing the social, political, and economic landscape of 2020. Concurrently, protests in the United States concerning police brutality erupted 25 May 2020 and continue to the date of this publication, calling for the defunding and divestment of policing and systemic addresses and future actions against racism.

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