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The Pandemic Politics of Cultural Work: Collective Responses to the COVID-19 Crisis

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Abstract
The scope, unevenness, and severity of the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on cultural work has been widely acknowledged. This article turns to how sections of the cultural industries responded to the onset of this crisis. Our account is based on document research completed during the first wave of the pandemic. We gathered news reports, impact survey results, policy recommendations, open letters, event announcements, and other grey literature generated by a range of organizations in the cultural sector, including trade unions, professional associations, and activist groups, among others. Framed by the concepts 'labouring of culture' and 'policy from below,' our thematic analysis of this material reveals that cultural workers responded to the pandemic by surfacing the idea of cultural production as work; by enacting practices of care and mutual aid; and by proposing policy changes. These collective responses are marked by multiple tensions, particularly between rehabilitating the status quo in the cultural sector and radically reimagining it for a post-COVID-19 world.

Keywords

Introduction: The labouring of culture in pandemic times
COVID-19 has destroyed lives and livelihoods across the globe, and as we write, in the autumn of 2021, the pandemic's fourth wave is receding, albeit unevenly and tenuously. This article looks primarily at the early stages of the pandemic, at a time when policymakers were torn between difficult choices and traumatic options. Countries were plunged into recession, as a sudden surge of job losses revealed gaping holes in hollowed-out welfare states. The crisis produced a range of political responses, with critical voices seeing it as a once-in-a-generation chance to abandon neoliberalism (Care Collective 2020), while many governments preferred to use extraordinary stimulus to keep the existing show on the road, or even to deepen privatization and surveillance (Klein 2020).

This article concerns the pandemic's impact on the cultural industries, a range of practices from the live arts to media. Many of these industries were hard hit, with venues closed; festivals, shows, and events cancelled; film and TV production halted; and an almost-total shutdown of the mobility that underpins urban cultural economies (Naylor et al. 2021). Meanwhile, middle-class audiences, in various states of lockdown, consumed record amounts of mediated content, with massive expansion in video streaming and digital gaming (BBC 2020; Smith 2020). Our focus is not on the pandemic's economic effects on the cultural industries, but rather on collective responses to the crisis by workers in this sector whose labour and livelihoods were upended.

During the first wave, we set out to explore how the cultural sector understood the COVID-19 crisis, what demands it produced, and to whom these demands were addressed. Guided by these concerns, we undertook document research online, from mid-March to early-July 2020. Given the immediacy and fluidity of this crisis, we adopted a broad and flexible search strategy, spanning grey literature, journalism, and social media. First, we collected international news stories for accounts of the state of the cultural industries amid COVID-19 using the database ProQuest. As a primary objective of this research was to gauge cultural workers' collective responses to the pandemic, we next gathered documents from the websites of a sample of organizations of cultural workers from a cross-section of cultural industries, both longstanding ones, such as trade unions, professional associations, and sectoral bodies, and activist groups and campaigns that came together as a result of the pandemic itself. Finally, we searched Twitter and Google for fundraisers, campaigns, and petitions initiated by cultural workers, their organizations, and allies. We chose to collect documents that were readily available online partly because other qualitative methods, such as interviews or a survey, risked intensifying the time pressure on cultural workers and their organizations when their priorities were supporting their communities during a moment of crisis.

We collected 739 documents, including news stories, impact survey results, organization statements, policy proposals, open letters, government communiques, and event announcements. While the documents derive from diverse sources, a key criterion for inclusion in our database was that the documents addressed not only the pandemic's impacts on cultural workers' livelihoods but, crucially, also measures to mitigate these impacts. Collecting documents generated by, or representing, a range of sectors and agencies in the cultural industries allows us to assess the extent of inter-sectoral collaboration in the face of the crisis. As these documents were produced

quickly, our research archive is a valuable resource for gauging how sections of the cultural sector saw and responded, in real time, to a historic crisis. Our database is not comprehensive. Our searches were limited to English-language sources, with most documents addressing the North American and European contexts in which we work and conduct our research. The documents operate at a variety of spatial scales: though most make demands of national governments (which were generally in charge of COVID-19 support measures), some address the supranational (e.g., the EU), and others are more local or regional. We hope, however, that this study can inform more international comparative research on cultural workers' responses to the pandemic. Taking a thematic analysis approach (Nowell et al. 2017), notes were taken on our corpus of documents to identify and record patterns, or 'themes' (Braun and Clarke 2008, 79), in relation to our overarching research concerns.

What is striking about these documents is how persistently they surface the idea of cultural production as *work*, a perspective often concealed in official accounts of the creative economy and missing from most discussions of cultural policy (Banks 2007; Banks and Hesmondhalgh 2009). Repeated emphasis on income loss and unemployment, for example, is a reminder that cultural products, far from being simply an ephemeral expression of creativity, arise from material conditions that cultural workers share with legions of workers across other parts of the economy. In this light, our archive can be read as documenting a contemporary variation of what Denning (1997, xvi), in a study of American cultural industries in the Great Depression era, called the 'laboring of culture.' Denning uses this concept to signal the widespread uptake of the language of work, 'the new visibility of the labor of cultural production' (xvii), the unionization of cultural workers, the entrance of working-class people into cultural-sector employment, and the spread of 'social democratic culture' (xvii) in and through the industrial apparatus of cultural production—all of which reflected and reinforced a 'cultural front' shaped by a shared experience of crisis.

Addressing an altogether different historical conjuncture of the (partial) labouring of culture, this article is structured around three themes that emerged from the documents we gathered: the recognition of cultural work as (essential) work; expressions of care, solidarity, and mutual aid; and proposals for policy changes. Our thematic analysis contributes to cultural labour studies an account of how cultural workers and their organizations responded to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. As an intervention in cultural policy debates, we conceptualize these responses as 'policy from below,' which centres cultural workers and their associations as often-overlooked agencies that propose, shape, and push for measures to improve cultural workers' conditions (de Peuter and Cohen 2015). While much of the literature on cultural work rightly centres experiences of precarity and exclusion, we locate our research in a current of this literature where cultural work is *also* foregrounded as a site of struggle, collective organizing, care, and alternatives-making (Alacovska and Bissonnette 2021; Cohen 2012; Sandoval 2016). And to emerging scholarship on cultural work and the pandemic (Banks 2020; Comunian and England 2020; Eikhof 2020; Walmsley et al. 2022) we offer an account grounded in how workers themselves perceived and responded to the crisis (see: Pacella, Luckman, and O'Connor 2021). In our conclusion, we reflect on what our archive might tell us about the contemporary politics of cultural work more broadly.

Beyond documenting cultural workers' collective responses to an unfolding crisis, we highlight a multiplicity of tensions in the material we gathered: between freelancers and employed workers, between cultural institutions and cultural workers, between narrow sectoral claims and cross-sector and cross-class solidarity, and between continuity and change in the conditions of cultural work. Much of the material we gathered, for obvious reasons, concentrates on stopping the crisis from worsening, or restoring former funding levels; a smaller fraction presents potentially transformational demands–for basic income, for example. This opens onto what, we argue, is a central tension running through the documents–that between the different fixes proposed, or the nature of the transformations being demanded, and, by extension, the entities seen as capable of redressing the problems. In essence, although it is far from binary, these responses are marked by a tension between rehabilitating the status quo in the cultural sector and radically reimagining it for a post-COVID-19 world.

'Artists are Necessary Workers': Framing cultural production as work
Prior to the pandemic, if cultural workers had imagined their sector's doomsday scenario, we doubt they would have pictured completing quite so many questionnaires. Yet as galleries, venues, film sets, and other sites of cultural production shuttered in March 2020, the initial impulse of many organizations, from funders to unions, was to run an impact survey. In almost certainly the most concentrated effort to date to gauge cultural workers' conditions, a raft of surveys in the early months of the pandemic yielded uniformly alarming findings. A UK survey of 5,600 workers by the entertainment industry union Bectu (2020a) found that 71% of freelancers feared they would not be able to cover their bills. A California Arts Council (2020) survey of more than 3,000 art sector workers reported that 84% were ineligible for paid family leave, disability insurance, paid sick leave, or workers' compensation. And I Lost My Gig Canada found that 96% of nearly 800 respondents were 'stressed about their income' (Hill 2020, 12). The pandemic's toll on cultural workers' livelihoods varied, often sharply, by field, employment status, social location, and jurisdiction. On balance, however, report upon report documented the speed, scope, and severity of the economic fallout from the pandemic's first wave among cultural workers.

By summer 2020, the problems were even more apparent. The UK's Creative Industries Federation (Oxford Economics 2020) reported in June 2020 that two-thirds of businesses expected to lose half their income, and that one in seven respondents had less than four weeks' worth of reserves. In addition to the performing arts and media sectors, visual arts and craft surveys also revealed lost income and commissions. As a-n The Artists Information Company (2020) reported, most artists' livelihoods are dependent on spaces (e.g., crafts fairs, small galleries) being open and events happening. Even large-scale art markets, from Frieze to Art Basel, were cancelled or went online, while the Ontario Association of Art Galleries (2020) estimated that 98% of galleries were already closed in March 2020. In the a-n survey conducted in late-March 2020, 60% of visual artists predicted a loss of at least half their income. The California Arts Council (2020) drew attention to the double-sided challenge for both organizations and workers, with organizations reporting that two-thirds of events had been cancelled, but 85% of workers having lost income through such cancellations. And in what was to become one of the defining themes of the pandemic's effects on culture, while 58% of

organizations assessed that they would be ineligible for any state support, some 84% of individuals feared the same.

It was not long before the effects of cancelled shows, closed venues, and postponed tours resulted in unemployment among cultural workers. Several of the surveys undertaken in March and April predicted this (Ontario Arts Council 2020), and by June it was becoming a reality. Freelancers in particular were hard hit as in many states the schemes designed to support businesses or alleviate unemployment were concentrated on employers and unless self-employed workers were registered as businesses (with several years of tax receipts to show for it), many missed out. This was pronounced in the cultural sector where nonstandard employment and zero-hours contracts have proliferated. While this is problematic even in 'normal' times, the pandemic left such workers with little or no safety net and a lack of information, advice, or guidance on how navigate the crisis.

The centering of livelihood issues in the documents stands in stark contrast to the tendency to marginalize the idea of cultural production as work in creative economy discourse and cultural policy (Banks and Hesmondhalgh 2009). Fusing cultural work and the growth imperative, discussion of the creative economy in cultural policy generally glosses over problems of cultural labour markets, in part because of the assumption that such work is inherently good. This discourse reflected a particular model of work–entrepreneurial, highly skilled, flexible, endlessly adaptable–that underpinned a neoliberalized labour market in which workers' rights and institutions of solidarity were being stripped away. It is not that social concerns have never had a role in this policy imaginary–those developing policy, particularly in the cultural sectors, often embraced wider ethical and political issues–but these concerns did not always include working conditions (Oakley 2014).

More recent years have seen the boosterish creative economy narrative challenged and have witnessed the emergence of a variety of cultural labour organizations and campaigns across the globe (de Peuter and Cohen 2015). The problematic nature of the cultural industries with their heavy dependence on unpaid work as an entry criteria and related exclusions rooted in gender, age, race, ethnicity, and class (Brook, O'Brien, and Taylor 2020) have forced policymakers to pay attention. Alongside that, changing business models, the growth of streaming services, the emergence of new gatekeepers such as Netflix and Amazon, and cuts to public cultural funding have combined to squeeze pay and prospects in sectors recently held out as the future of the digital cultural economy. What was once predicted to be a more democratic future for cultural production and consumption has turned out to be very far from that, often deepening longstanding conditions of precarity for cultural producers (see Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy 2021).

The marginalization of problems of work in traditional cultural policy debates has been reinforced by a reluctance on the part of some cultural producers to identify as workers for complex reasons ranging from the unpaid nature of some cultural production to the notion of 'calling' that can be at odds with the idea of cultural production as labour (Oakley 2014). The COVID-19 crisis has changed that materially, making cultural work a focus for both cultural and economic policy discussion as never before. Given this, and the devastating effects of the pandemic on all sorts of employment, the documents we collected generally stress the increasingly precarious

nature of cultural work rather than the creative economy trope of flexible entrepreneurship. They seek to make visible the vulnerability of cultural workers because of their employment status (often self-employed) and the nature of work organization (freelance and on-demand) and the particular impacts of the pandemic on this work.

The plight of cultural workers was covered extensively in the media. As evident in our documents, some of this coverage focused on the claim made by cultural workers that they were 'essential' or 'necessary' workers. The term 'essential worker' was used by most governments during the pandemic and particularly during lockdowns to designate healthcare workers but also retail workers, delivery drivers, transport workers, police and firefighters, teachers, childcare workers, and those working in food production, distribution, and utilities. Such workers were excepted from the requirements or advice to work from home, which in many cases was not possible and, to varying degrees, were prioritized for services such as COVID testing or for personal protective equipment.

It was into this brief but heady moment of worker recognition that cultural workers sought an intervention, pointing out that many of us kept ourselves entertained through increased consumption of cultural products during months of lockdown. An exemplar of this, Dance/NYC's (2020) campaign, 'Artists are necessary workers,' stressed the importance of artists in 'leading tourism, strengthening education, fueling the economy, and ensuring our health, wellness and imaginations.' What could sound like a straightforward creative economy script was strengthened by references to diversity, humanity, and equity in helping to imagine New York City's post-pandemic future. In other cases, the role of cultural workers in the rebuilding project was linked to other causes–one document called for 'More Culture! More Europe!' to restore the EU's legitimacy among its exhausted citizens ('Manifesto More Culture!' 2020), while others invoked culture's role in fostering solidarity or increasing support for diversity ('Music Sector Joins Together…' 2020).

What was frequently missing from such cultural sector campaigns, however, was much sense of cross-class linking to other essential workers. While arts organizations joined in support and praise for healthcare workers in particular, their own claims were sometimes set against those of other workers. A particularly egregious example was an ill-thought-out UK Government campaign to encourage cultural workers who were laid off during the crisis to retrain for other sectors (Brewis 2020). The aggrieved response of those who had spent many years training to work in the cultural sector was understandable; less so was the snobbishly-tinged outrage at the suggestion that they might retrain as plumbers or Amazon warehouse workers. In the documents we collected, cases of solidarity across the cultural sectors were plentiful, links to workers' struggles in other sectors were less so.

Expressions of care and solidarity

Cultural workers are often held up as a 'new laboring subjectivity,' embracing entrepreneurialism, individualism, risk, and uncertainty (Gill 2014, 516). Such a characterization neglects how cultural workers resist and collaborate to change their conditions (Cohen 2016; Sandoval 2016). Although we caution against the use of celebratory language that claims an end to the deep-held beliefs of hyper-individualism,

the documents we gathered show a clear movement towards collective action to address the material needs of cultural workers at the start of the pandemic. Challenging the view of cultural workers as 'self-centred, calculative and individualized subjects' (Alacovska and Bissonnette 2021, 136), our archive reveals many instances of solidarity amongst workers in the cultural industries and demonstrates a commitment to 'care and care-giving practices.'

We situate these efforts under the umbrella of what Ferguson (2020) calls 'life-making,' a practice that can be seen in spaces and activities that support life, not capital. Life-making can take the form of tending to physical needs such as food, clothes, or injuries, but it can also encompass more ephemeral needs, like for love and knowledge. During the first wave of COVID-19, cultural workers contributed to life-making through crowdfunding campaigns, developing health and safety guidelines, resource-sharing, the refocusing of skills to support frontline workers, issuing calls to action, and putting pressure on government agencies. These activities demonstrate an expanded form of workplace solidarity amidst not only the crisis of the pandemic, but the crisis of precarity.

A key concern across the documents we reviewed was that freelance, contract, and self-employed workers had little, if any, access to emergency funds. In the UK, the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme, for example, was unavailable to workers who earned less than 50% of their income from self-employment (Komorowski and Lewis 2020). And the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit initially excluded self-employed workers who had access to other income streams or who made less than $1,000 per month prior to the pandemic (Alang 2020). Rather than create the conditions of precarity, however, the COVID-19 crisis exacerbated them. Despite evidence of the shifting terrain of work, governments across many countries had been criticized long before the pandemic for failing to adequately protect the self-employed, gig workers, and freelancers. Such workers have limited access to formal channels of complaint (Jones and Pringle 2014) and are underrepresented in unions and labour organizations, making formal coordination difficult (Presence 2019). Unlike workers in other sectors, many cultural workers do not have the ability to work remotely. Against this backdrop, petitions and letters called for governments to recognize the plight of gig workers, demanding an urgent restructuring of emergency aid programs. Claiming over 500,000 members, the US-based Freelancers Union (2020), for example, encouraged members to tweet at, call, and email their governors on May Day, letting them know that 'Freelancers are not an afterthought!'

To close gaps in government emergency support, workers also turned to fundraising campaigns organized by unions, associations, and independent groups. While demonstrative of networks of care and support, these campaigns make evident the economic vulnerability of cultural workers. Most funds were raised through donation-based crowdfunding campaigns, commonly used to address absent or deficient governmental social welfare programs (Dressler and Kelly 2018; Coutrot, Smith, and Cornelsen 2020). The need for emergency funds were so overwhelming that some groups were forced to stop accepting applications.

The funds raised by these initiatives were largely oriented towards much-needed short-term emergency relief; however, some groups, such as the Atlanta Artist Relief Fund (AARF), expanded into full-fledged advocacy organizations (AARF 2020). Originally

started as a GoFundMe based out of Atlanta, Georgia for artists who lost their jobs during the pandemic, the AARF is now one of the US's only direct service organizations. Seeing the desperate need for support, the AARF now helps artists navigate unemployment, find affordable healthcare, connect to therapists, and access meals. The expansion of the AARF is an example of how the need for emergency relief laid bare the broader material needs of cultural workers beyond the limits of the pandemic (Thiel 2015).

Many fundraisers spanned cultural sectors, using, for example, the broad category of 'artists,' but a few also raised funds for workers outside of the cultural industries. One such outlier was the Toronto-based Glad Day Bookshop's (2020) Emergency Survival Fund for LGBTQ2S artists, performers, and tip-based workers. The organizers noted that income sources are not always traceable for artists and tip-based workers, making them ineligible for government assistance.

Outside of funding campaigns, we found instances of cross-sector solidarity. In Canada, the film and television members of Unifor (2020), Canada's largest private sector union, worked to provide personal protective equipment (PPE) for frontline workers for example. Unifor represents workers across sectors in communications, transportation, resources, manufacturing, and services, including health care. Unifor media workers created PPE using their sewing and 3D printing skills for members in the health care sector and donated costumes from medical dramas to frontline workers. And in New York, the public health project Masks in the Wild (Leon 2020) harnessed the creativity and skills of cultural workers to provide free masks to the public. This mutually beneficial aid allowed artists to gain a stipend in exchange for the creation of PPE for New Yorkers. It is noteworthy, though, that Masks in the Wild, while providing a platform for mutual aid, was not a grassroots initiative, and was made possible through a philanthropic organization.

In addition to the contribution of physical resources, we found a high level of knowledge sharing amongst worker organizations in the cultural sector. Resources included health and safety guidelines for members; advice on how to apply for emergency benefits; access to funding; and workshops for mental health. Health and safety guidelines included not only government guidelines, but also sector-specific requirements and safeguards for cultural workers. These provided additional support, and a safety net, for workers who might be facing unsafe workplaces. Organizations such as the American Guild of Musical Artists (2020a), for example, retained a panel of medical experts to assist with their analysis of reopening procedures to ensure the safety of their members, and the Directors Guild of America (2020) encouraged their members to contact them with any offers of work so the guild could 'review it and consult with the employer.'

Finding and navigating the often-opaque and dispersed resources available to cultural workers during the pandemic is difficult—and made more so in industries when workers lack formal institutional support or representation. Addressing this concern, a group of producers and culture makers began the 'Freelance Artist Resource Producing Collective,' a short-term strategy for connecting American artists to the resources they needed to protect their livelihoods. This group's website brings together actions, fundraising campaigns, mental-health resources, and webinars in an ethos of communal

resource-sharing. Such online spaces act as a form of mutual aid, responding to the unmet needs of cultural workers left adrift in the crisis.

The expressions of solidarity and care present in the documents we gathered challenge the entrepreneurial narrative of atomized cultural workers. These campaigns provided mostly temporary relief. This is not surprising considering the urgent need for support amidst an unprecedented global crisis. However, the focus on the immediate need for care should not obfuscate how the crisis of precarious work preceded the COVID-19 pandemic, which is one of the tensions made clear in the proposals for policy change forwarded by cultural workers.

'Groundbreaking system update'? Policy from below
To reflections on a 'new imaginary' for the post-pandemic cultural economy (Banks and O'Connor 2020) we add a survey of policy changes proposed by cultural workers themselves–through their collective organizations–at the onset of the pandemic. While the state is typically assumed to be the primary agent of labour and cultural policy formation, we frame these propositions as 'policy from below,' which recognizes cultural workers, particularly in the context of collective organization, as vital agencies that propose, develop, and advocate for measures to protect and improve the conditions of cultural work (de Peuter and Cohen 2015). When the pandemic struck, many workers across the cultural sector faced similar challenges; but the documents we collected reveal a diversity of desired policy responses. Highlighted in our overview is not only the range of policy from below, but also the tensions between, on the one hand, measures that sought to remedy a perceived exceptional emergency and restore the pre-pandemic status quo, and on the other hand, interventions that emphasized longstanding systemic problems and sought to radically reimagine the field.

First are calls for sector support. The gathering of evidence through flash impact surveys not only conveyed organizations' care for their members but also prepared the case for government assistance. Often via joint letters, organizations appealed for emergency financial support, stressing that culture was among the sectors hit hardest by the pandemic and warning of impending crisis. 'Without adequate measures,' stated a white paper from the European Creative Business Network, 'the (Creative and Cultural Industries) death rate will be exponential' (Trautenberger and Fesel 2020, 5). More restrained was a letter to EU budget-makers signed by nearly 80 organizations, stating, 'our sectors find themselves in danger of partial collapse,' and calling on the European Commission to earmark a share of recovery funds for the cultural sector and enlarge the EU's culture budget ("Europe's Cultural and Creative Sectors Call…" 2020).

Several groups made similar pleas for emergency funding while simultaneously airing longstanding grievances about the underfunding of culture (Culture Action Europe 2020; European Theatre Convention 2020). Many organizations, however, made industry-specific recommendations, from tax credits for film production to rent holidays for venues (FilmOntario 2020; Save Live Arts 2020). It was common for calls for sector support to seek justification in the particular 'expediency of culture' (Yúdice 2013) that has solidified under neoliberalism, with arts and culture framed as an 'economic engine' and 'necessary investment' (KEA European Affairs 2020; Canadian Independent Music Association 2020). Calls for relief also invoked culture's capacity to 'uplift the human spirit' ("The Arts Sector and COVID-19 Relief," 2020) and facilitate post-pandemic

'healing' (International Council of Museums 2020), redoubling the burden on cultural production to perform the social work of repair and cohesion.

Some calls for sector support went beyond seeking emergency funds, however, by identifying structural problems in individual industries that the crisis had thrown into stark relief. As heightened public dependency on news coincided with media layoffs during the early weeks of the pandemic, journalists' unions, for example, outlined expansive proposals for industry reform. In the US, the NewsGuild's (2020a, 2020b) Save the News campaign was presented as a 'fight for long-term solutions to the crisis facing the news industry,' including reduced media concentration, alternative ownership models, and 'public financing of journalism.' Similarly, the UK's National Union of Journalists (NUJ) (2020a) released its News Recovery Plan, the aim of which was to not only 'sustain' journalism through the crisis but also 'reimagine' the industry beyond it. The NUJ plan spanned short-term measures, like a tax on tech giants and denying public monies to publishers who cut jobs, and long-term measures, like supporting journalists' co-operatives, expanding access to journalism careers, and establishing employee representation on the boards of media organizations. Such detailed proposals suggest that media unions' pre-pandemic policy development work allowed them to harness the COVID-19 crisis as an opening for policy intervention.

A second set of calls focused on income relief for individual cultural workers. When many governments announced emergency financial support for the cultural sector, some organizations and commentators critically observed that the relief flowed disproportionately to institutions rather than to individuals (Artists' Union England 2020; Olah 2020). Culture Action Europe's (2020) proposal of a 'solidarity fee,' to be distributed by institutional funding recipients to individual freelancers, signalled a deeper issue that several cultural worker organizations took pains to explain in their policy communiques: that widespread self-employment and project-based work within the cultural sector means that workers lack access to social protections predicated on a standard employment relationship. Indeed, cultural workers' organizations were among the first collective voices to urge governments to provide income relief expressly for independent contractors. In Canada, the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees called for 'exceptional emergency measures that will adequately support all of the behind the scenes workers … including freelance workers, by expanding the class of persons entitled to employment insurance…' (IATSE Canada 2020). Similarly, the NUJ (2020b, 2020c) pushed for supports 'specifically designed for the self-employed,' launched a social media campaign #ForgottenFreelances, and supported the Federation of Entertainment Unions' call for 'an income guarantee for freelance and self-employed workers.' In several countries, unions, independently and as part of coalitions, also mobilized their members to put pressure on politicians to pass legislation from which cultural workers stood to benefit, like the US Heroes Act (e.g., American Guild of Musical Artists 2020b).

In jurisdictions where relief schemes for self-employed workers had been rolled out, worker organizations in the cultural sector were often quick to highlight that many of their members were falling through the cracks. Bectu (2020b) spearheaded a petition calling on MPs in the UK to make changes to the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme, for example. In Canada, a similar benefits program, the Canadian Emergency Relief Benefit, was initially criticized by several organizations, with groups such as visual

artists' organization CARFAC and the Directors Guild of Canada addressing letters to politicians recommending the revision of eligibility criteria to accommodate cultural workers' income realities such as erratic year-to-year earnings. One relief measure that was lauded by artists was the Berlin Senate's aid package, which included grants of up to €5,000 for the self-employed (Brown and Rei 2020). As first-wave emergency benefits were set to wind down in Canada, cultural workers' organizations, from the Writers Guild of Canada to Canadian Actors Equity Association, advocated for extending these programs. While there were multiple recommendations for supporting self-employed cultural workers, from income averaging to rent holidays (NUJ 2020d), calls for income relief generally focused on ensuring that cultural workers had access to universal programs.

One policy communique captures the normative claims of creative economy discourse when it invokes the cultural industries' 'crucial role in building more resilient, sustainable, inclusive, and fairer societies' (European Network of Cultural Centres 2020). Yet a frequent finding of critical research on cultural work is that these industries tend to foster precisely the opposite outcomes (McRobbie 2016). This gives context to the third set of calls pushing for the reform of institutional practices that perpetuate labour precarity and inequity within the cultural sector. These interventions speak to problems of cultural work that predate, but were intensified by, the pandemic. Unpaid labour, for instance, was troubled by the Dramatists Guild of America, which, amid the embrace of livestreaming and other methods of online presentation, urged members: 'Don't let the coronavirus become yet another reason used to battle against the idea of paying you for your artwork' (Faux 2020). Other organizations insisted on compensation standards for virtual presentation and expressed the need to protect artists' economic rights as their work is increasingly made available online (CARFAC 2020a, 2020b). There were also calls to expand access to cultural work, a component of both the NUJ's News Recovery Plan and the NewsGuild's Save the News campaign. The expansive nature of some calls for labour reform in the cultural sector is encapsulated by a Welsh initiative to require arts organizations receiving emergency funding 'to commit to a "cultural contract" covering areas' from 'fair pay' to 'workforce diversity' to 'wellbeing' (Redmond 2020).

This third set of calls flags systemic labour problems in the cultural sector, including class stratification. Online petitions created by ad hoc groups were most immediately motivated to prevent gallery and museum support staff from being laid off, for example, but also denounced entrenched hierarchies of power and privilege in non-profit art institutions. 'We have a simple demand,' declared NYC Art Workers (2020): 'before a single museum worker is laid off, let every mid-six- or seven-figure museum director draw a salary of zero. Let our wealthy trustees, who so expertly raise money for council field trips and directors' first class-flights, fundraise instead for staff retention.' Also fighting staff cuts, a UK petition called out the hypocrisy of art institutions: 'At a moment when museums and galleries claim an interest in their diversification, why do they de-fund the very people and communities made most vulnerable by the current crisis?' (cited in Bishara 2020).

Cultural workers and their allies resort to open letters and other public-facing genres partly because these workers lack representation within institutions. It is notable, then, that some groups responded to the crisis by calling for increased voice in the making of decisions whose outcomes affect their livelihood. In the UK, for example, the

Dance Committee of the union Equity wrote to National Portfolio Organisations (NPO), asking: 'Will NPO's commit to put more freelance artists in paid positions on their boards to ensure that freelance voices continue to be heard in a meaningful way across the country?' (Equity Dance Committee 2020). Broaching the democratization of cultural institutions, calls for worker representation on company boards and political bodies were made by several organizations, with the Writers Guild of Great Britain (2020) proposing a 'UK Creators Council as a mechanism for better dialogue with the creative workforce and to understand its needs and viewpoints as we emerge from the crisis.'

Refusal of the pre-pandemic status quo was most pronounced in a fourth set of calls, the spirit of which is captured by the European Writers Council (2020, 19) when it asks, 'is this crisis a chance for a groundbreaking system update?' These interventions are differentiated by the range of grievances they respond to, the systemic critique they are rooted in, and their temporal and political horizon: rather than seek a temporary fix, they set out to radically reimagine the conditions of cultural labour for the long term. Take, for example, the manifesto published on May Day 2020 by Art Workers Italia (AWI), an autonomous group that had formed during the pandemic. Setting its sight on the 'restructuring of the entire sector,' AWI (2020) proposed a raft of measures, from compensation standards to the extension of social protections to independent contractors, the development of a 'professional charter' for arts workers, and transparency and inclusivity in arts funding.

It is in this fourth set of calls that we find demands that look beyond the cultural sector and advance a wider social transformation agenda. An exemplar is *No Going Back: A COVID-19 Cultural Strategy Activation Guide for Artists and Activists*, published by the Center for Cultural Power, an Oakland, California-based organization led by women artists of colour. Positioning artists as narrative-makers, specifically translators of policy alternatives, this guide frames the pandemic as a 'moment to embrace our most ambitious and transformative ideas for creating the world we need' (Treibitz et al. 2020, 6). Taking direction from 'movement platforms' of the Movement for Black Lives, the Green New Deal, and Caring Across Generations, *No Going Back*'s policy proposals forefront both the disproportionate impact of cascading crises on racialized and Indigenous communities and the necessity of centering care in long-range efforts to 're-imagine' the social order (Treibitz et al. 2020, 21).

This final set of calls advances what can be read as 'directional demands,' the 'realisation' of which, writes Trott (2007), 'would necessitate not only a break with the present state of things, but open up the potential for … possible future worlds.' An example of such a demand is that for basic income, whose elevated profile is one of the pandemic's most striking consequences on policy discourse. Several cultural worker organizations came out in support of it, including Art Workers Italia, Artists Union England, the Musicians Union, the Scottish Artists Union, and many more (Scotsman 2020; Artists' Union England 2020; Art for UBI 2021; Pryke 2020). Some groups advocated transitioning emergency relief benefits 'into an ongoing guaranteed income program' (CARFAC 2020c). In Canada, a group of artist-organizers, in collaboration with the Ontario Basic Income Network, wrote an open letter calling for a permanent Basic Income Guarantee signed by 34 organizations representing 75,000 artists. Addressed to the Prime Minister, this public letter argued that access to basic income would not only provide economic stability to artists but also 'support the remarkable creative capacity

of individuals and provide employment opportunities, bold visions and community inspiration' (A Public Letter… 2020). But the signatories' demand was not narrowly focused on artists. Naming historical, systemic inequities, the letter called on the Canadian government 'to remove the financial obstacles faced by our most vulnerable, to alleviate gender-based poverty, and to address the economic inequality based in persistent racism and colonialism.' The group's call for an 'unconditional basic income program that guarantees an income floor to anyone in need' is an example of what Weeks (2011, 220) theorizes as a 'utopian' directional demand, a demand 'capable of cognitively reorienting us far enough out of the present organization of social relations'– by, for example, delinking artists' income from secondary jobs and a competitive granting system–'that some kind of critical distance is achieved and the political imagination of a different future is called to work.'

Conclusion: Post-pandemic possibilities for the politics of cultural work
As we've shown, cultural workers and their organizations responded to the onset of the pandemic by elevating a work-centred perspective on cultural production, by enacting practices of care and mutual aid, and by proposing policy alternatives. What broader insights into the politics of cultural work today, and, in turn, considerations for future labour research in cultural policy, might be drawn from these initial responses to the COVID-19 crisis?

For one, they point to increased openness to a worker identity. Early in the pandemic, the labouring of culture raised the profile of worker identity–even if, as in the case of healthcare workers, its political possibilities tended to be contained by sentiments of gratitude rather than articulated through a language of class and redistribution. In the context of the cultural sector, the uptake of worker-centred forms of self-understanding–fraught terrain historically–was not the result of a sudden pandemic-fuelled awakening. Rather, it built upon momentum for cultural workers' rights that had been gathering in the 2010s in the face of the financial crisis, austerity, and widening inequality, from campaigns against unpaid work in the art world to union drives in digital media.

We argue that the pandemic discourse on cultural work is marked by deeply contradictory impulses. Although there was evidence of cross-sector collaboration, for example, the majority of collective responses covered by our research took place under the umbrella of the cultural industries. Precarity provided a gathering point for workers across the cultural industries, but communiques and campaigns, with few exceptions, failed to consider how their struggles aligned with those precariously employed outside of the cultural industries. The tensions in the pandemic discourse on cultural work is crystallized, too, in how work itself was positioned in relation to the crisis. Many documents centred on getting 'back to work' as promptly, and safely, as possible. This urgency not only reflects the necessity of paid work to survival, but also signals how relating to work foremost as a source of self-fulfilment can foreclose a collective politics of cultural work. But if some responses saw *work* as the solution to the crisis, others spoke of a longstanding crisis *of* cultural work, emphasizing the continuity of precarity, rejecting a return to normal, and calling for sweeping structural reforms.

The responses we've surveyed do not, then, neatly support the view that intensive attachment to cultural work leads inexorably to individualization. In the informal mutual-

aid initiatives that emerged from and for cultural workers we catch glimpses of the other-oriented ethics of care that animate the social relations of cultural work (Alacovska and Bissonnette 2021). Gestures of collective support, like grassroots crowdfunders, are nonetheless ambivalent, expressing the 'undercommons' (Harney and Moten 2013) of cultural production *and* the depth of professional habituation to self-reliance and scarcity.

While we've stressed the heterogeneity of the policy proposals forwarded to mitigate the effects of the crisis, we should not skip over the more basic fact that proposals were made. The surge of propositions reviewed in this article reflects an often-overlooked facet of self-determination in cultural work and cultural policy: workers' capacity, in the context of collective organization, to craft policy to protect, improve, and transform the material conditions of cultural production. Just as the precarity of cultural work is not new, so, too, the development of policy alternatives by and for marginalized workers has been a long-running current of cultural labour activism (de Peuter and Cohen 2015). In the same vein, the readiness with which unions in the cultural sector made recommendations to government in the earliest days of the pandemic reaffirms the importance of the labour movement's commitment to policy development.

This policy advocacy reveals, moreover, the political generativity of making demands, whether they were framed as such, or, more timidly, as 'calls' and 'recommendations.' As Weeks (2011, 219) writes, the demand can be understood as 'both an analytic perspective and a political provocation.' For Weeks, the demand's focus is 'less on the work of building a preconceived alternative than on provoking the agents who might make a different future' (222). From this perspective, our documents can be read for not only their policy content but also their political form. Unions, as we would have expected, lobbied government and mobilized members around income protection measures. More notably, several cultural-sector unions were pushed amid the pandemic to assert new kinds of demands–to endorse paths to income security beyond the wage relation and collective bargaining such as basic income, for example. Demands whose urgency was elevated by the crisis also provoked the formation of new autonomous worker organizations and activist campaigns, from Art Workers Italia to Basic Income for the Arts, many of which were born-digital and led by workers without stable employment. Finally, several coalitions formed around specific demands, amplifying the voice of individual cultural worker organizations. These coalitions, especially where they reached across subsectors and integrated unionized and non-unionized workers, test the possibility of a broader-based movement of cultural labour today.

In these ways, our archive reveals inklings of a stretching of the bounds of the politics of cultural work. Critical to this are responses that pushed beyond a generic figure of the cultural worker and brought into focus the differential distribution of pandemic hardship across social locations. Wider–and contested–efforts by worker organizations to confront anti-Black racism within the cultural sector awaited the resurgence of racial justice movements in summer 2020 following the police murder of George Floyd. In the period covered by our research, there were significant, if relatively rare, interventions that refused to detach the conditions and capacities of cultural workers from wider struggles for racial, economic, and climate justice (see: Treibitz et al. 2020). As the pandemic recedes, albeit unevenly, we are seeing signs of what

O'Connor (2022) has called a 'reset' of both the cultural sector and cultural policy. This represents a change after a period when questions of politics and ethics seemed subsumed under a dominant 'creative economy' approach. Alongside discussion of inequalities and exclusions, there is a renewed focus on other forms of cultural practice and other business models, from public ownership and volunteerism to social enterprise and co-operatives.

An expanded politics of cultural work is evident, too, in calls that were not restricted to temporary relief or regulatory tweaks but instead pressed for extensive sector-specific reforms to redress structural problems in the cultural labour economy in a more lasting way. Responses that criticized how emergency funding had flowed more generously to institutions than individuals, for example, potentially prepare the ground for a reckoning with resource allocation in the cultural sector. This issue was picked up later in the pandemic in *Solidarity Not Charity*, a report on strategies for reorienting the charitable arts grant system toward supporting new and reparative institutions of economic democracy, including worker- and community-owned co-operatives (Linares and Woolard 2021).

Perhaps the most apparent shift in the politics of cultural work during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, was that cultural workers' claims scaled up to the level of the state, as many demands centered on expanding access to universal social protections. While assessing their longer-term effects is the task of another study, these early collective responses to the pandemic—one crisis that overlaps and compounds a host of societal crises—leave us with strategic questions about where to fight precarity in the cultural sector most effectively. They also serve as an emergency reminder of the necessity of listening to workers and their organizations to envision alternative scenarios for the cultural economy.

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