

VRA EAC Community Hour

Wednesday, August 17 3:00-4:00pm EDT / 12:00-1:00pm PDT

Topic: Vocational Awe in GLAMs

Moderators: Summer Shetenhelm, Lesley Chapman

- Please keep your microphones muted--please use a reaction, raise your hand, or use the chat to indicate that you would like to speak.
- **Video not required**, virtual backgrounds welcome (be mindful of your virtual background selections). Feel free to add your pronouns to your Zoom name.
 - [How to change your name during a Zoom meeting](#)
 - How to provide captions via [PowerPoint](#) or [Google Slides live captions](#)
 - <https://webcaptioner.com/> - Free Captioning Right In Your Browser
- If you'd like to ask a question anonymously, please send your question through a private chat to any moderators listed above.
- **Community Hours are not recorded** for the sake of attendees' privacy and so that all attendees feel safe to express any concerns or questions they may have on various topics.

Attendees are encouraged to take notes under the [‘Community Notes’](#) section of this document.

EAC webpage: <http://vraweb.org/about/committees/equitableaction/>

EAC email: ea@vraweb.org

Submit a topic for a future Community Hour: <https://forms.gle/fENKfkEJjAC6Fqew5>

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Thank you! [Visual Resources Association's Equitable Action Committee](#)

Discussion Prompts (see Resources below):

In the blog post, Ettarh defines ‘Vocational Awe’ as “the idea that libraries as institutions are inherently good. It assumes that some or all core aspects of the profession are beyond critique, and it, in turn, underpins many librarians’ sense of identity and emotional investment in the profession.”

Although the term originated in the library world, we believe it can cover many areas of the GLAM work world.

- What do you think about that definition? Do you feel that it applies to your own workplace or sense of identity?
- If so, how do you see that play out in your work life? How about in terms of work/life balance? What’s the trade-off for GLAM work being a “calling” vs. a job?
- How do you think vocational awe affects knowledge workers in terms of interactions with management or administrators? What power dynamics are in effect?
- Ettarh discusses how white supremacy and gender—specifically how vocational awe is tied to feminized fields such as librarianship, teaching, and social work—uphold vocational awe. How does that affect the dynamics of GLAM work?
- Ettarh states that working together is key to dismantling vocational awe. Have you been able to form groups or collectives at your institution to make a more equitable workspace? What would you like to do?

Community Notes:

- Welcome
- What do you think about that definition? Do you feel that it applies to your own workplace or sense of identity?
 - Definition describes things that did not have a name before, we talked around things, and it covers lots of issues, and how we are expected to sacrifice so much, but a double edged sword because some people give us the benefit of the doubt on many topics, maybe not fully bad, but points out a lot of issues for many of us
 - Idea of modern library as a place of authority on freedom of speech, etc. as if we hold “sacred” knowledge, could be used for good?
 - Contributes to sense of imposter syndrome, position gives folks assumption of our expertise whether we have it or not
 - Can have a negative impact on self-advocacy for raises if feel guilty for asking for more for a “calling,” a “martyr complex”
- If so, how do you see that play out in your work life? How about in terms of work/life balance? What’s the trade-off for GLAM work being a “calling” vs. a job?

- From museum perspective, lots of vocational awe, both internal and external--when introduce self folks are so "awed" in reaction, just by virtue of working in a beautiful environment that is somehow supposed to compensate for historically low pay and high expectations and difficulties around asking for salary and resources, particularly in non-profits with tight budgets. But, inspiring to see how many museums are organizing right now. Also important to think about positionality of staff, as well
- In another art museum, leadership takes the stance that staff are privileged to work there. "While that may be the case, it shouldn't exclude work/life balance and fair compensation."
- Re: calling vs. job (vs. identity), one attendee has always been very deliberate in describing themselves not as a librarian, but as someone who works in libraries. "I've found that the statement 'I work as a librarian' serves to disrupt the mystique." So many stereotypes and assumptions attached to "librarian" and never felt comfortable, for some of us is not a calling, but a job we do for compensation. Important to say, I don't do this for free or for social fulfillment
- Describing yourself as a "librarian" makes it sound like you did this great thing, but if you say "work in a different department in a library" that labor feels less valuable, but still labor!
- "Learning about the term vocational awe, early on in my transition to working in libraries has actually been a powerful tool for me to negotiate and set boundaries for myself when applying for jobs."
- Benefits an institution for us to think a "calling" doesn't deserve adequate compensation
- "Really helpful to learn how to actually have a life outside of work too"
- "Coming into this career, I learned a lot from previously working in the 'calling' of teaching about the importance of setting boundaries and being able to 'pause' your heart when it comes to issues of compensation etc."
- Some still don't feel like this type of work is work--don't feel like working hard enough labor, so feel guilty to be paid to use mind instead of body to work
- Not all of us have parents who went to school and some of us had to work at a young age, can be hard to think of our jobs as real work with that comparison
- "This is so heartening to hear about these powerful changes in outlook from folks coming into the profession".
- Another with parents who are all military and family is in HVAC so after seeing their labor it feels very different.
- "I always feel that I inhabit another universe at work and a different one with my family which just adds to a sense of guilt I have about being able to look at art all day and be paid to do it. And also to the imposter syndrome connection....always afraid 'I'll be found out'"
- Background and class and interactions had in our lives, affects how our vocational awe manifests itself
- The exhaustion doesn't feel justified sometimes

- No time or resources causes scope drift, and can get in the way of our appearing flexible with our desire to do the “higher calling” tasks
 - artist designed t-shirt by Japanese-German artist Kota Ezawa (a treasure) that reads "Working in art is not working." It's a saying that has at least two meanings.
- How do you think vocational awe affects knowledge workers in terms of interactions with management or administrators? What power dynamics are in effect?
 - Comes back to notion of “privilege to work here”
 - Disconnect between high paid admins/boards and staff and hours--some places will hire people at a number of hours just below the limit for benefits, etc. So, you may have to have multiple jobs, even within the organization
 - But, seeing folks fighting back these days--hope continues. We need proper compensation! Takes a lot to turn it around
 - If you work at a non-profit, there are tax forms that are publicly available
 - “I wonder if imposter syndrome is more keenly played out in these power dynamics...felt more by those not in positions of power, females, etc. I try to take stock of that imposter syndrome feeling (which I also feel), but consciously fight against it as I do see my job as labor (albeit in a place I enjoy working).”
 - “I see this working at a non-profit where ultimately decisions on hiring, compensation, etc are determined by the board and highest paying roles in Admin and Development (and board is mostly very wealthy people who have no idea what the day-to-day of most staff is).”
 - Did the pandemic change vocational awe in our institutions?
 - Some supervisors felt “well this is what we do” so exacerbated expectations of staff to be there at all hours during a crisis
 - And loss of staff and no one replaced when they left--adds to expectations
 - “For those in academic departments, my supervisor changes every few years. I am very lucky that our pandemic supervisor who has been very pro labor and told us yesterday when two of us got sick this week, ‘there are no emergencies in art history’ as both of us guiltily said to ourselves, ‘the semester is about to start--we can't be ill!’”
 - Thankfully some of us have supportive supervisors which can really shape these issues
- Ettarh discusses how white supremacy and gender—specifically how vocational awe is tied to feminized fields such as librarianship, teaching, and social work—uphold vocational awe. How does that affect the dynamics of GLAM work?
 - Sometimes there is a terrible assumption that this is a “hobby.” More of an airy hobby profession
 - Some of that is the historic roots of the “professor husband.”
 - The guy who said, “They pay people to do that? Why?”
 - “‘hobby’ profession = passion = vocational awe”
 - “COVID and the amount of Zoom meetings did make me realize who on staff was married to Silicon Valley IT people vs who wasn't”
 - Gender stereotypes playing out in different ways

- GLAMS often equated with service and femininity, but also misdirected reaction against being a service worker which adds to making it seem like something feminized is bad
- “And as a female, have had my work questioned in technical areas by males in the room”
- “I will never forget when I was studying art history in undergrad, people often asked me ‘Why do you want to major in art history? That’s for rich white women with spare time’ 🙄 Luckily I did not let that stop me.”
- “Being of service is not the same as servitude”
- “I wonder too if service equates to caregiving...historically feminized”
- Public service librarians viewed differently than reference librarians or research librarians, etc
- “Oh, grad school roommate on the value of my MA: ‘I was going to say neither of us is doing anything important, but I’m curing cancer, so..’.”
- When we think of the demographics of who is in the more forward facing positions, have been more female/female identifying folks on the front lines
- “During lockdown I felt like my work was so meaningless compared to the essential workers being hammered on the front lines. I am still actually struggling with this.”
- “There’s another aspect of GLAMs which vocational awe touches on which is the sheer number of volunteer / intern / un-paid / low-paid work that these institutions rely on to operate.”
- Have been pandemic moments when we are sitting at home working remotely thinking “what are we doing right now?”
- Good thing during pandemic that folks got to realize what our skills are
- “With the pandemic the librarians are all at home working and the access staff are all in every day here, so those with the ‘calling’ are not forced to go in...”
- We want to have meaningful jobs and have a calling
- Please note that we are all part of a larger system, even if we are not doctors, etc. (jobs of perceived higher value)
- “Yes the ever-present catch 22 you need experience to get FT jobs in the field, but the only experience offered is PT/unpaid/grant-funded etc.”
- Ettarh states that working together is key to dismantling vocational awe. Have you been able to form groups or collectives at your institution to make a more equitable workspace? What would you like to do?
 - These sorts of discussions are important, those of us hiring need to be aware of when we are hiring internships, etc.
 - “That’s key...not perpetuating that attitude of ‘I paid my dues so so will you.’”
 - Those with unions or forming unions have to really keep working to improve conditions, always more work to be done
 - A lot of this takes a long time
 - “Inverse unionization” as places struggle to fill staff positions
 - “Folks are firmer now about deciding against working in exploitative or toxic work environments. There’s good and necessary push-back.”

- Important make spaces to recognize value of compensation and unions
- “At the same time, we are also hiring people who want to make career changes, know the role is underpaid, and take it anyway out of desperation...going back to the power of vocational awe so...still work to do.”
- Quote from podcast: “...equality is not pie. There’s no taking away. If equity is to occur, it’s not pieces of pie. As people from the margins take more equity, it doesn’t mean that there’s less equity for everyone else. Rather it is, hopefully, a renewable resource, one that never runs dry. That is obviously a long way from now and perhaps idealistic. But when I think of a better world, that’s what I think of: a place where change is embraced and people work as a collective rather than working in opposition to each other and to one’s own interest.”

Resources:

- **Article** - Ettarh, F. (2018). Vocational awe and librarianship: The lies we tell ourselves. *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, 10.
<https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/>
- **Blog post** - Ettarh, F. (2017, May 3). Vocational Awe? WTF is a Radical Librarian Anyway. <https://fobaziettarh.com/2017/05/30/vocational-awe/>
 - **Name pronunciation:** [Fo-BAH-Zee] [Eee-tarh]
- **Podcast** - Hannabach, C. (Host). (2019, October). Fobazi Ettarh on the Limits of Vocational Awe (No. 98) [Audio podcast episode]. In *Imagine Otherwise*. Ideas on Fire.
<https://ideasonfire.net/98-fobazi-ettarh/>
 - **Ending quote from the podcast:**
 - “...equality is not pie. There’s no taking away. If equity is to occur, it’s not pieces of pie. As people from the margins take more equity, it doesn’t mean that there’s less equity for everyone else. Rather it is, hopefully, a renewable resource, one that never runs dry. That is obviously a long way from now and perhaps idealistic. But when I think of a better world, that’s what I think of: a place where change is embraced and people work as a collective rather than working in opposition to each other and to one’s own interest.”