Organizing and Occupational Culture at Amazon Fulfillment Centers

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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I argue that workers can find meaning in their work through the connective process of organizing. I demonstrate how metric-driven workplaces like Amazon severely impact worker culture. I discuss Amazon as a worksite both through outlining the economic forces that contributed to its rise as a uniquely powerful corporate employer and exploring the online laborlore of the Amazon worker on the social media site Reddit. Finally, I analyze my fieldwork with Amazon workers through a folkloric lens and center the contemporary worker within the boundaries of laborlore scholarship.

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INTRODUCTION

Laborlore scholarship is a subfield forged in extremes. Its rise in popularity in the 1970s abutted years of decline within scholarly publications. Archie Green's early work[1] was a prelude to this laborlore boom, while Robert McCarl, Jack Santino, and Jim Leary contributed vital research to the sub-field in the 1970s. Historically, much of the research centered on primarily male-dominated and blue-collar occupations[2], implying a correlation between class and generation of folk expressions. Scholarly interest in occupational lore appears particularly susceptible to cultural and socio-economic changes. Trends in research wax and wane, but the complicated and inherently political nature of laborlore makes it especially vulnerable to appropriation as a subfield. Occupational data can easily feed into corporate consultant reports and productivity analyses, where the culture of the marginalized can be used as a tool of further oppression. The tension between the public presentation of an interlocutor's traditions is felt throughout folklore scholarship, but the study of occupational lore presents an additional ethical challenge: potential interference in an interlocuter's source of income. In this paper, I use the terms *occupational folklore*, *laborlore*, and *worker culture* synonymously. *Organizing culture* refers to the customs associated with labor organizing, specifically in regard to direct action, and unionization.

Much of early laborlore fieldwork involves the oral narratives or folksongs of manual laborers in the United States; folk groups which were often composed of recent

[1] See Green's "'Dutchman': An On-the-Job Etymology"
[2] See Henry S. Kernan's "Idaho Lumberjack Nicknames" or Wayland D. Hand's "California Miner's Folklore: Below Ground"

immigrants. This initial dynamic combination of cultural expressions and religious beliefs was a rich source for the majority of early occupational lore, particularly the lore of miners. As expected, the use of rituals and superstitions correlated with a high level of danger or risk death associated with the job. Similarly, themes of the supernatural are typically found in the lore associated with jobs like airline professional or fishermen, where accidents are occasionally catastrophic and daily tasks are surround by a high level of variability.

Early studies seem to focus primarily on oral lore, either personal or occupational narrative. This focus has obvious advantages, as it is the easiest type of data to gather and analyze in relatively large quantities. Folklorists often disagree about who should be included in workplace lore. Should supervisors and management be included? Do they contribute to this culture or is the culture partly based in opposition to these positions? Does the researcher gain a comprehensive understanding of an occupation if the organization of the workplace is not incorporated in the study? If one includes corporate input does the folklore become meaningless or cease to be folklore at all? Debates surrounding organization theory and its relationship to occupational lore led to infighting in the subfield.[3] Though the debate around who are the "folk" within a workplace or occupation continues, I focus on occupational lore as a central component of class-based conflict. If organizational theory "de-emphasiz[es] the labor management boundary" there is danger in muddling the roots of worker expression and depoliticizing working-class culture (Michael 1995, 145).

[3] See Michael Owen Jones' "Why Folklore and Organization(s)?" and Robert McCarl's "Response to Michael Owen Jones's Article, 'Why Folklore and Organizations?'"

Other approaches focus on the self-identity of the worker, whether through the material culture of the workplace, occupation as performance, or job-specific rhetoric. Yvonne Lockwood's (1984) study of factory workers and their artistic creations made from scrap materials used extensive employee interviews and vivid descriptions to create a provocative text. Her analysis derives from a combination of behavioral, psychological, and structural approaches. Similarly, Michael Bell (1976) provided his interlocuters at a Philadelphia-area bar the space to verbalize their perception of their jobs. This methodology allowed for agency and acknowledged the worker's ability to consciously engage in occupational performance. There are many moving parts in any given workplace, and successful researchers recognized this challenge. Occupational lore is ultimately the study of communal cultural expressions, yet it also can be filtered through the individual. If we define the "folk" of occupational folklore as a group who share a "linking factor," through their work, then their status within that occupational structure must also be considered (Dundes 1969, 472). I argue that workers in non-supervisory roles are inherently a marginalized group, as their positions are both more precarious and less "respected" than supervisors. Not always free to express themselves while on the job, we may imagine their material and verbal lore existing in liminal spaces; in the hidden spaces in warehouses, expressed in small bars before workers travel back to the domestic realm. Benjamin Gatling's research with gig workers in Washington DC, one of the few contemporary sources I found that centers occupational lore, focuses on the immigrant experience and precarity. Like others before him, Gatling calls for more focus on occupational lore, yet his study is more a treatise on class and trauma than a documentation of occupational expressions.

Challenges in this sub-field are numerous. The unofficial father of laborlore, unionist and folklorist Archie Green, produced an incredible body of work throughout his life, and tirelessly campaigned for the continued study of occupational folklife. Green's relentless calls for a scholarly focus on the worker coupled with the rapidly changing political and economic landscape of the 1970s and 1980s created a feverish environment of renewed interest in occupational culture. Yet as factories shuttered and manufacturing jobs were relocated from the United States to overseas, occupational folklife became an increasingly difficult subject to study. I argue this is also the result of increasingly ambiguous occupational groups. As many jobs became part-time, requiring individuals to work two and three positions to earn a living wage, union power decreased and work began to consume more of the average person's life, without the community and tangible benefits of the physically exhausting yet stable manual labor jobs.

The study of occupational lore is at a crossroads, and severely lacking in contemporary data. I seek to fill this gap in scholarship through my research with Amazon workers in the Pacific Northwest, where I explore the impact of short-term, flexible jobs on expressive culture. Towards this goal, some of the questions I pose are: Has the degradation of working conditions in the Unites States rendered occupational folklore obsolete? Are harried and exhausted workers still producing joyful, antithetical, or meaningful lore? Does the survival of occupational folklife depend on organizing and labor unions? At what point does organizing itself become occupational culture?

To answer these questions, I conducted eleven months of ethnographic fieldwork that included informal interviews and digital fieldwork. My main interlocutor Brian, worked at Amazon as a "salt," or someone who takes a position with the expressed

purpose of covertly organizing from the inside. The other workers I spoke with were less involved in the goal of unionizing Amazon, but were either actively trying to improve their workplace, or involved with the Democratic Socialists of America and so had left-leaning and labor friendly political views.

In this thesis, I argue that workers can find meaning in their work through the connective process of organizing. I will also demonstrate how metric-driven workplaces like Amazon severely impact worker culture. To accomplish this, in Chapter One, I outline the history and culture of labor organizing. In Chapter Two, I discuss Amazon as a worksite both through outlining the economic forces that contributed to its rise as a uniquely powerful corporate employer and exploring the online laborlore of the Amazon worker on the social media site Reddit. Finally, in Chapter Three, I analyze my fieldwork with Amazon workers through a folkloric lens and center the contemporary worker within the boundaries of laborlore scholarship. My overarching goal is to make a meaningful contribution to laborlore scholarship through an exploration of contemporary worker culture, organizing culture, and a new era of worker power.

CHAPTER I

THE CULTURE OF ORGANIZING

The cultural expressions that arise from labor organizing and unionism broaden our perspective of what it means to be a worker. Picket signs and slogans tell us what workers desire, while direct actions like sabotage reveal their intent. Beyond the picket line and off the shop floor, tales of labor and personal narratives give us broader access to their struggle. Through a folkloric lens, labor organizing comprises nearly equal parts oral, material, and customary lore—yet it is largely undocumented and understudied. In the United States, early organizing efforts in the 1890s were especially precarious, and exhausting—successfully organizing required unrelenting efforts by organizers to build community on the shop floor, educate fellow workers in political theory, and actively demonstrate solidarity.

Organizing culture is worker culture. In practice it facilitates the generation of occupational lore. Without workplace stability, it is difficult for workers to develop occupational traditions. In this chapter, I examine the wins and losses within the twentieth century U.S. labor movement in order to better understand the challenges contemporary workers faced. In so doing, I trace the path of the labor organizer, arguing that it helps us better understand the culture of struggle today.

A central concern of the labor organizer is power. Organizing is the process by which workers flip the power dynamic inherent in their workplace and together build collective strength. Workers who determine the state of their working conditions define the terms of their lives. Organizing is a connective, generative process which facilitates

the exchange and repetition of in-group values, forefronts issues of broader class struggle, and allows for cultural expressions grounded in collective struggle and community.

The folklore of unionism is well-established in the work of Archie Green, John Green, Robert McCarl, and Jack Santino, who helped to designate the protest songs of miners in West Virginia and the slogans of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) as valuable folkloric expressions. In terms of organizing-specific folklore, there is not a designated genre as such, yet it can be found in the form of song lyrics, strike signs, buttons, chants, and worker-penned cartoons. It is grounded in struggle and urgency—there is always a message, always an "ask." These colorful expressions of class solidarity were creative and didactic, and reflected the political reality of workers in the early twentieth century. The shifting cultural landscape of unionism brought an increasingly bureaucratic approach to organizing and as a result, the labor movement saw a decrease in visible, spontaneous, and subversive expressive tactics (Jasper 1997).

Decline of Union Power

The labor movement and subsequently unions themselves faced both structural and cultural backlash, with losses felt from early strategic political policies like Taft-Hartley and four decades later, a sort of labor loss bookend in the failed Port Authority Transit Corporation (PATCO) strike. In the 1980s, with external threats from automation, deregulation, and overseas outsourcing, as well as internal corruption and leadership missteps, the union movement became much quieter. Though some of labor's most effective tactics were in their final stages of dismantlement during this time, the chipping away of worker power and worker prospects began decades earlier.

In the mid-1970s, corporations began hiring strike firms as union-busting consultants. Founded by former law enforcement members and primarily staffed by military veterans, strike management was reported to be "one of the fastest growing specialties in the security industry" (Logan 2008). Though this trend increased during this period, it was not a new tactic in policing labor activity. The employees of strike management firms followed in the tradition of the infamous Pinkerton security guards, who infiltrated unions and used violent methods in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to suppress union organizing and destroy active strikes. "Permanent replacements" are employees hired by management to work during an economic strike. There were "numerous instances" in the mid-1970s of management provoking strikes during bargaining sessions in order to replace striking union workers (Logan 2008). Unsurprisingly, this tactic increased fears around organizing itself. As workers decided if they would sign a card to form a new union in their workplace, they had to weigh the possibility of immediately losing their jobs if their union went on strike. Any added precarity in the unionization process is a gain for management. Professionally orchestrated strike-breaking paired with an increase in powerful conglomerates cleared the path for the 1980s, the age of union disempowerment.

In a post-industrial world, labor is still naturally bound to economic forces and heavily impacted by technological shifts. Without proper workplace protections, workers continue to be subjected to exploitation, violence, and death in the name of capital. A labor union is just one of the means by which workers can begin to correct the socioeconomic imbalance inherent in the capitalist structure. Through union membership, one gains access to a larger community and is thereby immersed in union culture—and

connected to the collective struggle. Folklorists Tristam Potter and Hennig Cohen argue that the remaining culture of unions is a type of "plastic protest lore" that is mechanically doled out to members instead of dynamically created and transmitted (Coffin and Cohen 1974). This process transposes the culture of the union onto members and mutes the regional or ethnic identity within these groups (Coffin and Cohen 1974). This view holds some truth. When unions operate as a bureaucratic, top-down organization, there is reason to discourage the cultivation of member-led cultural expression. However, when workers organize themselves and claim control of their workplace and their lives, they create a dynamic and reproducible culture (Sennett 1973). As I outlined in my introduction, I will be addressing these issues directly in my thesis through questions such as: Are worker-led unions essential in fostering a flourishing occupational culture? At what point does organizing itself become occupational culture? The labor history I explore in this chapter provides essential context towards answering these questions.

Union Structure and Labor History

When touting the historic accomplishments of unions in a broader sense, one may refer to the establishment of the weekend, an eight hour workday, or overtime pay. Tireless organizing by unionists made these life-changing legislative wins possible and improved the material conditions of millions of Americans. However, over the last fifty years in the United States, union power has been systematically eroded. In 1935, the passage of the National Labor Relations Act saw union density rise to 12.8% of all jobs, increasing to an all-time high of 34.2% in 1945. By the 1970s, union density had dropped to 23.4%. In 2022, it is 9.4% (Romero 2023). Though this decades long decline is steady,

it is not reflective of public opinion of unions, nor does it indicate a naturally occurring process of obsoletion. The decline of union power is, in large part, the result of deliberate acts on behalf of lobbyists and government officials with powerful influence on and connection to the political economy of the United States. Partial blame for labor's current weakened state also lies within unions themselves. Corruption among leaders and bureaucratic structures dulled the voices of the worker and snuffed the fire of their fight. Beginning with the expulsion of communist members and other radical unionists during the Second World War, powerful union leaders removed some of their most passionate and dedicated organizers. Much of contemporary union culture continues to focus on improving labor laws, supporting labor-friendly politicians, or relying on mobilization strategies in lieu of "shop floor" organizing (Uetricht and Eidlin 2019). Though these forces (intentionally or otherwise) have largely been successful in their efforts to weaken the power of working people, there is a historical precedent which indicates that through collective action and a commitment to the collective struggle, worker power is strong enough to secure victory against exploitative management and union-busting bosses. However, the path to unionization is very often dangerous—both financially and physically. It is from these tragic, climactic events that the labor movement has cultivated tradition and partially defined its legacy.

In the late twentieth century, as Americans moved further from the days of miner ballads and sympathy strikes, the labor movement became an inscrutable entity. The public perception that unions guaranteed a middle-class life was on the decline by the late 1970s, but internal pressure within leadership also conspired to transform unions into more top-down corporate structures and democratic, rank and file led unions dwindled in

size and power. At the same time, politicians and the business class have continued to wage war against the working classes. Global outsourcing, erosion of labor laws, land acquisition in the global south, the gig economy, factory shutdowns, unpredictable scheduling, rising rent costs, and devastating medical debt have all contributed to this struggle. In the introduction to "No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age," Jane McAlevey (2016) argues that in academia, unions are not classified as social movements. The exclusion of labor unions and organizing from the broader category of "social movements" limits its recognition as a vital part of a continuous struggle. Laborlore scholar Archie Green (1976) recognized this shift and named the trade unions of the 1970s as "socioeconomic institutions" that fundamentally transform members through an ascension in class. In his groundbreaking work, *Only a Miner* (1972), Green was ambivalent about the future of folklore within the labor movement. He bemoaned the loss of cultural expressions and "symbolic language" as an inevitable consequence of socioeconomic stability. To Green, union membership is then inextricably linked with middle-class assimilation.

Within the labor movement, tales of dramatic strikes and moralistic fights dominate much of its historical narrative. These stories are often anchored with tales of fallen heroes such as martyrs like Joe Hill or idols like Mary Harris ("Mother") Jones, who became canonized into a kind of folk sainthood. Hill was a songwriter and dedicated organizer with the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), executed after a trial still marked by conspiracy and rumor. His alleged last words, "don't mourn, organize!" often appear in various pro-labor propaganda. After Jones lost her husband (an ironworker) and her four children to yellow fever, she dedicated the rest of her life to fighting alongside

workers in the labor movement. Hill and Jones are arguably the most recognized folk heroes in labor history. In union lore, tales of massive, "spontaneous" strikes and uprisings that spring from a lone rebel leader are told to inspire and educate. For example, in November of 1909 Clara Lemlich, a garment worker in New York City, famously rose up in the crowd of shirtwaist workers who were gathered to discuss a general strike. Lemlich, speaking in her native Yiddish, demanded action in no uncertain terms (Schofield 1984). The resulting strike, the Uprising of the Twenty Thousand, lasted two months and helped transform the working conditions for women garment workers. The strike united workers together within an industry and demonstrated the importance of community support in a prolonged fight. Though Lemlich and Hill may be regarded as folk heroes within the labor movement, they are not recognizable figures within broader American culture (Green 1976).

Within the labor movement, there is the tendency to imagine these firebrand figures as individuals suddenly moved to action, as if overcome with a sudden sense of justice that moved them to action. The framing of these stories can function as a shorthand to convey complex movements and ideologies but centering the individual in stories of the labor movement (or any social justice movement) erases the context of the revolutionary spark. As organizer Daisy Pitkin explains, these stories ignore the work of the organizers who make these uprisings possible. The crowd listened to Lemlich that day in New York because they knew her. She'd spent time with her fellow workers, organizing (Riccio 2022).

Centered within these battles both small and large are the workers who organize. They were on the picket line during the 1894 Pullman strike[4], in the coal fields of Colorado in 1914[5], working the automobile plants of the 1930s[6], and in the streets of Memphis in 1968[7]. They faced the possibility of economic ruin, bodily harm, and death. We know that workers died, lost their jobs, families, and communities for the right to organize. Contemporary confrontations between capital and labor or capitalist and worker are perhaps less overtly violent; the explicitness of intention is now wrapped in corporate platitudes and softened through the need to disregard the class struggles of the past.

Worker power in the United States hit its peak in the 1930s, propelled by the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), the passage of the 1935 National Labor Relations Act, and further influenced by the more radical members in the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). This surge of unionization naturally necessitated a more comprehensive categorization of work, demonstrated by the distinction of trade or craft unionism and industrial unionism. Craft unionism, the preferred organizational tactic used by the American Federation of Labor (AFL), categorizes workers by specific skill, such as electrician or painter. Conversely, industrial unionism arranges workers by industry as a whole, as is the case with autoworkers and steelworkers. The tension between the AFL and CIO originated from the AFL's resistance to organizing within manufacturing, and its persistent focus on trade unionism.

[4] National boycott and strike involving the Pullman Company and the American Railway Union which shut down freight and passenger trains, requiring federal intervention
[5] Uprising of workers with the United Mine Workers of America, resulting in the Ludlow massacre
[6] General Motors sit-down strike of 1936, also known as the 'strike heard round the world'
[7] Memphis sanitation strike of primarily Black workers, supported by religious leaders and Martin Luther King Jr.

By the end of the Second World War, unions were in a position of strength and influence. Approximately 15 million Americans held union jobs and union power was expected to continue to rise. The "strike wave" of 1945-1946 brought out over five million workers to the picket lines, sustaining a total of 4,600 strikes. Powerful figures like John L. Lewis of the United Mine Workers (UMW) and Walter Reuther of the United Auto Workers (UAW) rallied union members to secure wins against corporate giants like Ford Motor Company. These successes were hard-won but short-lived. In 1947, congress passed the Taft Hartley Act, which, with its overtly anti-union measures can only be seen as a direct retaliation against worker organizing and widespread strikes. The Taft Hartley Act covers an array of disempowering tactics such as procedures to decertify unions, bans on secondary boycotts and sympathy strikes, requirement of non-communist affidavits from labor leaders, introduction of right to work laws, injunctions against strikes that could threaten national security, and the barring of supervisory employees from union membership. These stipulations, along with the rampant anti-communist sentiment supported by the United States government, signaled a dangerous shift in the landscape for the American labor movement.

The elimination of solidarity actions such as secondary boycotts and sympathy strikes had the intended effect of stifling worker power. Without the united disruption of economic power, at least legally, unions lost much of their clout. On the heels of the Second World War, anti-communist sentiment was high, and between 1949 and 1950, the CIO forcibly expelled communists. This decision decreased membership numbers and had an immediate chilling effect on political activity within the CIO. Leftists and communists were among the movement's most committed members, and their expulsion

greatly impacted the culture and direction of the labor movement. Walter Reuther, mentioned above, relied heavily on the organizing skills of these dedicated workers, and much of the UAW's early success is due to their strategic efforts (Goldfield 1993).

Organizing Culture and Direct Action

Organizing, in labor union terms, encompasses a large swath of strategic action and political ideologies. Simply put, it is the method by which workers connect with each other in order to reach a collective goal. In practice, it is a complex and nuanced series of interactions that build upon each other bit by bit, as the worker is brought closer to the center of their own struggle. This is achieved, in large part, through intentional conversations between workers. These conversations can lead to worker solidarity through a broadened understanding of one's working conditions, and this understanding ideally evolves into sustained class consciousness. The worker is then reborn into a collective and through this augmentation the collective is strengthened. In time and with proper preparation, the newly radicalized worker may willingly escalate during employer conflicts and participate in direct actions—the workers' strongest weapon.

Direct action is "[…]any form of activity that cripples the boss' ability to make a profit and makes him/her cave into the workers' demands" (IWW.org). Direct actions are creative expressions, each unique to their worksite and occupation. Tactics that work in a steel mill may not work in the garment industry. The ethnicity or gender composition of a workplace could influence how they approach direct actions, and occupational social structures may dictate what form they eventually take. Regardless of the outcome, direct actions are workers in motion as they attempt to accomplish together what they cannot

accomplish alone. Strategies such as work stoppages, intentional slowdowns, working to rule, sabotage, and "monkey wrenching" have origins in the early days of the US labor movement. Direct actions are repeatable, unique to their occupational group, yet dynamic and often unsanctioned by official union leaders.

Labor organizers, particularly worker organizers, are tradition bearers. Like the occupational stories, jokes, and rituals of fishermen and firefighters, the traditions within labor organizing and unionism have both explicit and implicit purposes. First, there is education and agitation. Second is the mobilization and implementation of direct actions. Third, organizing efforts must be repeated, duplicated, and amplified—often through songs, both oral and print propaganda, and by way of public figures within the labor movement. Ideally, organizing culture creates a path to worker liberation. Organizing culture does not create worker culture, but they are inextricably bound to each other.

The history and culture of labor organizing is largely undocumented. In "Organizing: A Secret History" Sam Leubke and Jennifer Luff (2019) explore historical sources that provide rare insight into the day-to-day culture of labor organizing. There is very little known about what organizing practices in the US looked like in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as labor activists left little records of their activity, often out of tactical necessity, fear of political retaliation, or in reaction to the threat of bodily harm (Leubke and Luff 2019). The AFL, the CIO, and their organizers were certainly powerful in their wealth of resources and organizing tools, but the real losses and gains belong to the workers themselves. The labor movement has its share of heroes and martyrs. Some incidents of violence against workers were so horrific that they became catalysts for worker movements, and at the very least demonstrated just how high

the stakes really were. For example, in the Ludlow Massacre of 1914, Colorado State Police murdered twenty-one men, women, and children while they were protesting their working conditions at a nearby mine.

Performance and Union Culture

I next examine the role of performance in worker protest. The five-month-long textile strike in Paterson, New Jersey employed a series of provocative public protest tactics. In 1913, an entire production boldly outlined worker sentiment and the Paterson Strike Pageant became a spectacle in and of itself. A review in the New York Tribune noted how "Saturday's night pageant transported the strike itself bodily to New York" (Kornbluh 1968). The pageant also featured a mock funeral, complete with "dropped red carnations and ribbons" which then covered the coffin "beneath the crimson symbol of the worker' blood" (Kornbluh 1968). This performance of suffering was a protest which, through the embodiment of worker pain, provides both critique and catharsis. Over fifty years later, elements of religiosity and sacrifice were integral to the United Farm Workers (UFW) boycott campaign. UFW leader César Chávez went on a hunger strike, evoking imagery of the "saintly martyr" while religious leaders performed daily masses in an effort to solidify solidarity and identity within the broader movement (Jasper 1997). Chávez's choice to connect with workers through the numinous also attracted significant media attention to the UFW strike, which became a crucial influence on the public's opinion of the farm worker movement. Images of Chavez and Dolores Huerta leading a streaming line of workers waving HUELGA! flags in a sort of pilgrimage, their shoes worn and faces gaunt, reflected the image of noble, selfless suffering in the name of a

larger cause. This connection to purity and suffering may have helped combat attacks from powerful agriculture lobbyists and politicians who preyed on the fears and prejudices of white Americans. If opponents of Chavez wanted to paint the workers as violent and unreasonable, they would have to contend with a holy pilgrimage and its martyrs.

In her research on the 2011 Wisconsin labor protests, folklorist Christine Garlough (2011) examines the folk performances during the 2011 Wisconsin protests, and focuses on aspects of critical play, rhetoric, vernacular tactics present in the protestors' political expressions. Protestors created locally-inspired group chants, spliced current events into popular culture references, and communicated their own sense of disenfranchisement through public performance. Garlough sees the Wisconsin protestors as engaging in the "creative interrogation" of society and defines critical play as "play that performs power relations in order to engage in social critique" (2011, 351). She notes how, through a mock funeral procession, the protesters "enter into public suffering" by engaging with folk practices associated with death. Indeed, pageantry and theatrics is a well-documented tactic when workers must publicly raise the stakes (2011, 355).

Examining the same political event as Christine Garlough, folklorist Casey Schmitt (2013) analyzes the generated lore though a similar lens but focuses on shared knowledge and culture. In this way, the protestors form a "vernacular counter public," a group that denounces official narratives but is also bound by a shared identity. The incident that preceded this mass protest was a proposed change in unionized public sector employees' working conditions, resulting in a massive, collective protest with over 100,000 participants. With their roots in the working class struggle, the Wisconsin protests represent contemporary union culture. Schmitt

argues that shared chants, symbols, and jokes united "blue collar and white collar" demonstrators who "would have never spoken or encountered one another before" (2013, 395). Though the protestors were from varied backgrounds and professions (like most mass protests), they shared an important cultural bond—unionism. Schmitt focuses on the protesters' expressions of regionality, and how through collective opposition they "construct[ed] a message about Wisconsin values…and thus physically reified their own perspectives" (2013 400 page number).

The performance of union power intersects with worker culture in historian Michael Rosenow's (2020) study of nineteenth century miners in Illinois. Rosenow tracks the cultural and societal changes around death and dying through this folk group and demonstrates the way symbols and ritual can effect change. Though his work is not based in a folkloristic approach, it is an historical account of the evolution of material and expressive culture. In the period between 1861-1909, coinciding with the rise of the middle and upper-middle classes, occupational deaths increased with rampant industrialization. The resulting tension can be observed in the disparate death rituals among social classes, and the evolution of death culture within Illinois miner groups offers a distinct view of this variation in funeral custom. Rosenow traces how the American Miner's Association and United Mine Workers of America unions cultivated those customs, which in turn effectively demonstrated the power of the union and the sanctity of miner's lives.

Rosenow discusses how most of the literature on nineteenth century death beliefs focuses on the middle class, and details how the scientific naturalists shifted death rituals from the importance of the soul and the individual to post-death familial grief and the

increasingly ornate funeral practice. The Civil War created the necessity of a more removed funerial process and coupled with the Protestant view of death as a release from bondage, the middle-class began to see a good death as a "well managed" death. Rosenow (2020) terms this cultural shift the "dying of death." However, death culture of the working-class miners was still focused on the emotion, on tragedy and fear. Rosenow quotes the famous "Only a Miner" work song to illustrate the miner's feelings of injustice of expendability. Miners, mostly immigrants, struggled against this changing culture of death, and searched for ways to commemorate fallen workers in ways that were appropriate in the industrial era. The often-gruesome nature of a miner's death provoked outrage at an unregulated industry and resulted in the desire to publicly commemorate the loss of an all but invisible person to the average middle-class citizen in the nineteenth century. The daily threat of gruesome death plagued miners' lives, and after the two very public disasters at the Avondale and Diamond mines in 1869 and 1883 respectively, the struggle and desire for union power increased.

Rosenow links this rise in union power to the amplification of miner death rituals. Union leaders realized that to effectively convey the message that miners' lives were important, necessary, and vital to the capitalist economy, they could not allow miners to have a "bad death." This resulted in the use of union funds for elaborate funeral customs and monuments, and unions began new rituals to cultivate a meaningful culture of death. After a miner's death, the union charter would be draped in cloth for thirty days, evergreens placed on the grave, and union references peppered throughout funeral services. Rosenow contends that these practices were an effort in a "broader pattern of union culture building" and helped solidify the idea of union membership as insurance

for a "good death" (2020, 27). By attending to the spiritual and material needs of the worker, union culture could be embedded in the lives of their families as well—thus expanding the circulation of their traditions and values.

The folklorist Archie Green is one of the only scholars whose documentation of laborlore includes union culture, tradition, and ritual. Green (1993) discusses the history and meaning of *sabotage* and its relationship to workplace organizing. The concept of working "clumsily or destructively" is a known tactic among disgruntled workers who feel they are being shorted wages or respect. Narratives about such methods abound and represent, according to Green, a ritualized way to commemorate and amplify previous protests as well as to provide inspiration for current actions. For Green, ritual is not only something scared or celebratory. Workers' stories about violations of basic rights are "patterned oral forms elevated to ritual status…[; w]orkers caress everyday talk until it emerges as sacramental wafer or wine" (1993, 333). One example Green cites recalls when workers who cut their shovels down to protest "small wages, small shovels," a repeated action that dates to the late nineteenth century and can be traced across Europe and the United States (1993, 327). As Green claims, "dangerous work demands talk," which became a core precept for contemporary union organizing in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and after (1993, 355). In the casual conversations between workers in the breakroom, or the workplace jokes swapped in online forums like the Amazon workers' Reddit forum I examine in this thesis, contemporary workers engage in traditional patterns whose origins are rooted in industrial shop floor culture. Using the concepts of occupational ritual and the everyday enables a reframing and understanding of worker culture.

The story of labor is told by the workers, the marginalized, and the radicalized. Initially, an organizer moves in quiet determination as they build a structure underground and out of sight of management. Workers share stories to strengthen each other, and if they share these stories far and deep enough, real power is possible. Bonds between workers facilitate the growth of the individual, and freedom is won when they gain control over their time and their body. Occupational folklore is born from leisure and from struggle—when do workers have time to tell each other stories about their job, to develop ritual? Worker culture is forged during work, and organizing culture helps determine the conditions of that work. Without both, the worker remains unseen, and the story untold.

CHAPTER II

CORPORATE OCCUPATIONAL CULTURE & CONTEMPORARY ORGANIZING AT AN AMAZON FULFILLMENT CENTER

In *The Corrosion of Character,* sociologist Richard Sennett argues that contemporary capitalism functions as an "illegible regime of power" (1998, 10). The absence of a clear enemy makes a fight difficult to win, assuming that one realizes there is a battle occurring in the first place. One of the many difficulties facing the labor movement in the age of conglomerates and corporative culture is the obfuscation of power. Jeff Bezos does not take daily walks down the aisles of Amazon fulfillment centers to inspect employee pick rates. Instead of an ever-present looming boss, there is a convoluted web of managers, supervisors, and coworkers who work alongside a constant digital surveillance to ensure proper employee compliance. Employees are able to monitor their own work statistics in real time, their self-surveillance another extension of Amazon's all-knowing panopticon. How does occupational culture manifest in such a hostile environment? This chapter seeks to answer this question by examining contemporary occupational structures, the role organizing plays in the generation of culture, and digital spaces as sites of resistance. There is scant contemporary research in the culture of unionizing or the culture of independent unions. Therefore, in order to better understand the concerns and opinions in a set of workers, it is useful to examine the informal culture of employees who work for corporations where there have been unionizing efforts or a successful unionization drive, such as the JFK8 Amazon fulfillment center.

In order to understand the current issues within the contemporary American workforce, it is helpful to understand the role of Post-Fordism. After the economic growth of the postwar era, the 1973 recession created a crisis of sluggish economic growth and reduced mass production. In an effort to solve this crisis, manufacturers turned their focus on global markets, increased product diversity, and flexible production (Gartman 1998). Post-Fordism created the perfect environment in which corporate culture dominates and destroys organic worker culture. Richard Sennett (1998) argues that this is achieved in three ways. First, the inherent flexibility of many contemporary jobs encourages workers to stay in a given position for a short amount of time. If the conditions of a job become intolerable, there is little incentive to stay and organize with coworkers around a particular issue or set of issues. Leaving is easier than staying. These conditions result in fleeting or superficial connections among coworkers as workers constantly file through a revolving door of short-term positions. Second, the shift from work as career to work as a temporary gig transforms the relationship between occupation and worker. Sealed within amorphous, unstable work schedules, workers are detached from their labor. They are free to work as much or as little as they like, but employment without commitment and security creates an inhospitable environment for organizing. This then becomes an issue of worker identity. If a worker does not consider their job to be a career, or see themselves as possessing valuable skills, then they will not identify with their work. In fact, many people do not want to see themself as a warehouse worker or a DoorDash driver. Third, there is the problem of skill development and the integration of self**.** Mechanization and automation create an environment in which

workers are essential only in their momentary place in a convoluted line of labor and movement (Sennett 1998).

It is true that the latter, mechanization and automation, were always the worry of unionists, however the growth of this phenomenon in the workplace today is unlike any mutation labor activists of the past could have predicted. Workers press buttons on screens, put items in bins, shop in deserted, warped grocery store warehouses—their work mimicking common tasks they do in their everyday lives. Instead, they perform such actions for unknown recipients, faceless customers, which serves to reproduce endless anomie. Amazon's many robots actively gather data from their human co-workers, tracking and monitoring them. This is not to say that individuals cannot find meaning in their work. Some gain satisfaction from their average metrics or try to surpass the hourly quota of items packed for shipment. Yet according to my research, Amazon workers typically dislike their work in the fulfillment centers, and often distance themselves from it as an identifier, or view the position as a temporary stop on their way to a less physically demanding or more lucrative job.

Such conditions, combined with inconsistence of time and an unpredictable work schedule, allow for the easy insertion of a manufactured culture. Corporations know that a unionized workplace is a threat to both company structure and company profit. Organizing is the most readily available power workers have to change their working conditions. Therefore, it is vital that even in arguably demoralizing jobs inside of loud, isolated warehouses, there be a hint of the familiar, a small sense of the collective with just enough calculated rewards to keep the workers in a suspended state that is perhaps a few degrees from disgruntled enough to leave. The corporate culture becomes the worker

culture. It overpowers stressed and exhausted workers without regular schedules or dependable coworkers. In online spaces like Reddit, however, workers are free to tell jokes, mock the company, and express their fears in an anonymous space, on their own time. Yet this also brings Amazon into life after work. In some ways, it has replaced beers after work or the weekly card game. I will further explore this concept in a subsequent section of this chapter.

A core focus for the American labor movement during the nineteenth and early twentieth century was time—the duration of an average workday, the right to leisure, essentially how an individual could control and determine how to spend one's life, eight-hour block by eight-hour block. Labor unions and collective worker action can claim victories like the eight-hour workday and safer, more humane working conditions, but over a century later, the control of time has been wrested from the hands of working people. Mass production and automation have long been a specter that haunts the labor movement, yet post-Fordism has hardly granted significant reprieve from the drudgery of work.

Since the early 1970s, industrial deregulation, the outsourcing of jobs to the global south, and the strategic union busting that multi-million dollar corporate firms carried out, laid the groundwork for unlimited consumer demand and a focus on a deceptive notion of workplace "flexibility." The result is a churning, alienated workforce who work in contingent positions as they struggle to create meaning amidst an environment of forced corporate culture. As I will describe in Chapter Three, Amazon's unique approach to corporate culture creates a dominating employer presence through manufactured ritual and lore. Though my fieldwork and research is centered on the

workers and union organizers of Amazon, where I find these symptoms of occupational cultural decay to be extraordinarily pronounced, they are by no means unique to this worksite. We work so we can live, and, increasingly, our work is tracked, timed, analyzed, logged, surveilled, and studied. This fundamentally alters our sense of self, our connection to others, and our culture, extending far beyond the now ubiquitous warehouses and loading docks that line the outskirts of our towns and cities.

Amazon is the second largest employer in the United States, with over a million and a half employees, just behind Wal-Mart's two million. Amazon prides itself on its mastery of time and space. Its power lies within its ability to control how fast or how far objects and workers move, a successful manipulation of expectations. The logistics industry—which includes large companies like UPS and FedEx, are bound to a constantly ticking clock, a speeding truck, a clacking conveyor belt. For many Americans, access to a seemingly unlimited variety of products at the click of a button is now an expectation. Select your desired vitamins, lip gloss, batteries, scissors, cat food, cold medication, wedding canopy, or moth balls; then perhaps pick the next day shipping option and receive your item tomorrow.

Yet, fifteen years ago this was not the norm. Originally formed in the 1990s as an online book retailer, Amazon has grown into a ubiquitous global logistics giant that has fundamentally changed traditional supply chain management and the structure of the American retail consumer model (Olney and Wilson 2020). The rapid rise of e-commerce as the dominant mode of consumerism is the result of this new logistics revolution. Prior to this era, streamlined logistics management techniques resulted in the success of corporate retail giants and big box stores such as Wal-Mart. Amazon, however, took

streamlining and efficiency to new levels. Amazon's creation of a system specifically designed to be efficient in global shipping enabled it to create and then meet previously unheard of consumer demands, which further drive unsustainable consumer expectations.

It is increasingly easy to erase the human element in our daily transactions; arguably, the advent of corporate online retailers has hastened this process exponentially. Yet there is still a human involved when one selects next day shipping, when one presses the "buy" button on an impulse purchase late at night. Approximately one million people in the United States work for Amazon. They are the workers who sort, pick, pack, and ship goods around the clock to anyone with internet access and a credit card. This significant group of workers are rarely referred to as a relevant workforce, if they are referred to at all. Yet these contingent positions, often subject to at-will employment laws, are a rapidly growing and precarious labor group.

Throughout my fieldwork with Amazon workers and "salts" (employees who take positions with the expressed purpose of organizing a union from within), control over one's time continues to be a major labor issue. Historically, labor organizers use direct actions such as "working to rule" and sabotage to achieve their goals.[8] Workers wield those tactics, along with strikes, against management's control of production, motion, money, and time. Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) founder and organizer Bill Haywood describes a strike as an "incipient revolution" (Kornbluh) 1964: 51), and I suggest that the reclamation of time may also be the reclamation of joy, power, and true freedom.

[8] Also known as malicious compliance, workers follow protocol to an exacting degree which results in an intentional slowdown that cannot be criticized by management as it is the technically correct working standard.

In *Folklore From the Working Folk of America,* Tristram Potter Coffin and Hennig Cohen (1973) briefly assess the role of unions in the maintenance of worker folklore, pointing to the persistence of union songs and "taletelling" within unionized spaces. Coffin and Cohen deem the purposeful continuation of union lore as superficial "plastic protest lore" that dominates the regional or race-based lore generated by workers. Interestingly, they note that in the absence of a union, folklore "dwindles away into a few lingering superstitions" (1973, xxxiii). In *On The Line: A Story of Class, Solidarity, and Two Women's Epic Fight to Build a Union*, labor organizer Daisy Pitkin (2022) describes her emotional reaction to telling the story of the Triangle Shirtwaist fire during a training session for new union organizers. The 1911 fire is the worst industrial disaster in U.S. history and many of the 146 victims were women and immigrants to New York. Pitkin notes her purposeful repetition of this story, emphasizing how important the emotional elements of the tragedy are to the story of the International Ladies' Garment Worker's Union (ILGWU)., This oral tradition functions as an educational model and works not only to convey a group's values, but also to serve as a cautionary tale. Perhaps most importantly, it connects worker struggles across time and space. Pitkin's experience refutes Coffin and Cohen's claim that union lore is manufactured or akin to a corporate-created "culture." The legislation after the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire marks an important turn in workplace protections, but it is also the story of exploitation and deep loss as well as eventual victory. Pitkin's retelling reinforces the story arc of labor reform efforts, serving as an archetype for the circular nature of struggle. As we see here, the introduction of a cultural and historical union framework into even corporate workspaces can help generate a sense of purpose and encourages workers to see their work as

meaningful. This shift in relationship between work and worker, or rather, finding the language to define the skills you have and the labor you produce is a powerful process. Organizer Juan Valdez of the immigrant-led group Make the Road New York likens the "ritual" of his work to religious gatherings in a church (McAlevey 2016:. The repetition of weekly meetings at the same time, place, and day gives the structure for a group to develop cohesion and establish a deep sense of trust with each other.

When a person organizes their workplace they exist in a state of duality. The rise in accessible union educational materials and the shift to online during the COVID-19 pandemic while many workers were working long and dangerous hours, resulted in a powder keg of worker dissatisfaction. As the working conditions for many became untenable and dangerous, workers were isolated from the world of white collar workers but not from each other. They began talking to each other, and they did so online. Workers connected through social media platforms, online forums, and Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) social platforms like Discord, where they could freely express opinions about their workplace. Independent unions and a general renewed interest in labor organizing sprung up seemingly overnight during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Worker interest in labor unions increased in the three years since March 2020, as public support grew alongside their efforts.

Chris Smalls, an organizer for the Amazon Labor Union (ALU) and former employee at JFK8 in Staten Island, was fired in 2020 for staging a protest about his working conditions. In a media perfect, David-and-Goliath-like narrative, Smalls, along with Derrick Palmer and a dedicated team of worker organizers, spent two years organizing a Staten Island fulfillment center (JFK8) and successfully won a union vote in

April of 2022. One aspect of this successful campaign that often gets overlooked (and perhaps purposively so) is the presence of salts, workers who take a position with the expressed purpose of organizing from within. Those workers, deemed the "new militant minority" by political theorist Mie Inouye (2022), are part of a historical legacy of labor organizing. In the 1930s, members of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) used salting as an organizing tactic. And like their predecessors, salts at Amazon used William Z. Foster's 1936 manual *Organizing Methods in the Steel Industry* to plan their strategy for unionizing the fulfillment center.

Salts actively contribute their knowledge of labor history and vision of collective power to the organizing drive, providing context for workers who are not politically engaged or class conscious. In the past, established unions effectively sponsored salts and provided them with the necessary support to endure their two simultaneous, demanding jobs. As Inouye (2022) notes, five of the six salts at JFK8 were independent of a union or organization. A former salt in the courier industry explains that salting as a strategy can be successful, given that there is a high level of access to workers and the trust that is gained through naturally-forged coworker relationships (Dall and Cohen 2002). Salts understand the workplace because they are workers, and they are able to engage in daily organizing conversations that traditional union organizers cannot have on the shop floor.

Salts must be both delicate and strategic. They must be good workers who do not draw undue attention to themselves. They must be well-liked and respected, and they must perform their covert mission in a way that does not draw suspicion from management or coworkers. In the case of JFK8, the return to historically "radical" strategies such as salting was bolstered by more traditional organizing techniques such as

one-on-one conversations and workplace mapping, resulting in a successful union drive. This strategy, or lack thereof, is a precarious one. Organizer MK Lees (2020) argues that although salting can be effective as part of a larger campaign, it can easily become an organizing liability. Salts can assume leadership, alienate workers with aggressive tactics, or impose their political views in inappropriate ways. Inexperienced salts may not have properly trained in organizing techniques and are not held accountable for their work. This lack of connection to a larger community and a vision of the larger labor movement can isolate the salts and negatively impact their work.

This is precisely what happened at Amazon in 2021. Nearly two years later, the Amazon Labor Union is in a state of disarray. Accusations of undemocratic leadership fueled the formation of a reform caucus, and the future of organizing at Amazon remains uncertain (Leon 2023). Though salting proved a successful tactic in the organizing effort at JFK8, the ultimate outcome was a union without true collective power or leverage against the employer. In general, labor union leadership view salting as a risky, cost-prohibitive organizing tool without a reliable success rate. It is unclear whether or not established unions will once again adopt this method of external organizing, or what role the salts themselves will play in the long run for the contemporary labor movement.

Impact of Organizing on Worker Culture

Decreased control over working conditions can increase workers' feelings of alienation and dissatisfaction (Hirschfeldand Feild 2000). Through organizing, relationships between workers can deepen as they become further integrated into their workplace and in each other's lives. There is a saying in organizing: if you don't know

who you're fighting for, you don't know *what* you're fighting for. In other words, you must understand the needs of your coworkers through a genuine connection before you can move forward together. In this way, community plays a crucial role in a successful organizing campaign—shifting relationships between workers as well as shifting community that exists outside the workplace. To illustrate the necessity of integrating community into organizing work, McAlevey (2016) explains that in contrast to industrial workers of the 1930s, the contemporary workforce has a significant number of women who work a job as well as perform unpaid labor at home—they cannot leave work back at the factory. McAlevey argues that in order to effect real change, organizing must connect the capitalist structures and political systems that impact working conditions, domestic life, and a broader community.

Another important piece of a contemporary union campaign is the efficient use of social media and the ability to interface with the public in a strategic way. These campaigns must have channels to quickly spread propaganda and hammer specific messaging while managing any possible legal constraints. Through videos on TikTok and Instagram, or infographics on Twitter, workers share their personal narratives, daily routines, and creatively frame the details of their once-hidden occupations. From such videos we learn how many drinks a barista must make on a busy shift, or what the inside of an Amazon delivery truck looks like during peak season. This allows a broader audience to gain a deeper understanding into what these workers do and the reasons surrounding their decision to unionize. Linked together across digital media, workers on the campaigns can support each other from different regions, creating a boundaryless web

of union support. When combined with effective ground level organizing, this style of network could feel more like a traditional organizing model.

ALU leaders worked with Unite Here and the United Food and Commercial Workers during their campaign. Their semi-hybrid model speaks to the shifting landscape of the new labor movement and demonstrates the desire of workers to determine their own conditions on their own terms. Highly surveilled corporate entities like Starbucks and Amazon offer little in the way of transparency, and, until very recently, communication has been a one-way street. Independent union campaigns are open, their websites declare their needs, their social media accounts blast out photos of working conditions and comradery. Recent unionizing efforts are demystifying and personalize the everyday—from our morning coffee to the trivial household items we buy every week. For both worker and consumer, it is an awakening.

When on strike or during a protest, workers from Amazon and Starbucks use signs, posters, puppets, and creative bricolage to express the personal and the political. They design their messages for multiple audiences: workers who share insider culture, the public at large, the media, and, of course, management. In comparison to the high number of successful Starbucks union drives, Amazon has had only one: the JFK8 facility on Staten Island that the Amazon Labor Union (ALU) organized. The surprise ALU victory on Staten Island on April 1st, 2022, came just before two failed unionization attempts in Bessemer, Alabama, which the Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union (RWDSU) ran. The ALU has not been able to replicate its JFK8 success, losing two more New York elections and later withdrawing their union petition for a warehouse in California (Thorbecke 2022).

Slogans from the worker-led ALU rallies are more explicit and emotionally charged than those of RWDSU. For example, compare ALU's "We're Not Machines, We're Human Beings" to RWDSU's "Stronger Together." A small sample of Amazon worker protest signs reveal a need for effective translation--that is, what will best convey the nature of this work to outsiders while reflecting the lived experience of workers? The "We're Not Machines, We're Human Beings" and "We Are Not Robots" slogans both contain arresting visual and emotional elements which tap into basic principles of human dignity. Reminiscent of the "I Am A Man" slogan from the 1968 Memphis sanitation strike, these signs express the pain, frustration, and anger of Amazon workers while simultaneously touching on the larger issues of automation and abuse. Amazon employees in fulfillment centers face numerous workplace hazards and experience a high rate of workplace injuries (Paul 2022). Workers experienced an increased workload from the uptick in online purchases during the COVID-19 pandemic while working in crowded warehouses with inconsistent masking or sick leave policies (Varner and Kerr 2022).

As of 2021, over half of the Amazon workforce were men, and nearly 70% identified as Native American, multiracial, Latinx, Black, or Asian. In contrast to the Starbucks worker demographics, the employees at Amazon are far more diverse, and skew male. Although there is no official data on age range of employees, anecdotal evidence from message boards and online forums suggest Amazon may be more diverse in this area as well. These factors may well contribute significant organizing challenges, as cultural and linguistic barriers must be accounted for and navigated properly. The diverse demographics of Amazon workers may also reveal more insight into the prevalence of simple, striking messaging from organizers. Signs focus on health, money,

and dignity, with few puns or humorous imagery. Amazon signs from ALU rallies and independent protests include:

"We're Not Machines, We're Human Beings"
"Amazon Hurts Working People"
"Bezos' Billions: Stolen From Working People"
"We Are Not Robots"
"Our Health is Just As Essential"
"Amazon Has Made $74B During Covid While We Risk Our Lives"
"If We Are Essential, Treat Us As Such"
"Amazon: Stop Union Busting"
"Amazon Workers: Shut It Down! Clean It Up! Unionize!"

Public-facing employees like Starbucks workers have a clear organizing advantage over warehouse or industrial workers: their work necessitates that they engage in constant communication. This aids in coworker bonding and allows for organizing conversations to naturally evolve over time. By design, there is very little employee interaction within Amazon fulfillment centers, and each employee is highly surveilled with a time-based app. The ALU organizers at JFK8 overcame this obstacle and engaged with their coworkers outside of work but near enough to their worksite to have widespread access to employees. Organizers cooked food in parking lots and served their coworkers, demonstrating care, building trust, and creating the space for meaningful conversation. Sharing food is a powerful way for a community to bond; coupled with political education, it can result in a perceived threat to existing power structures (Portorti 2017). The management at Amazon clearly recognized this threat and reported Smalls to the police while he dropped off food for workers at JFK8. Amazon employees watched Smalls get arrested for distributing chicken and pasta, an incident that swayed at least one undecided employee (Leon 2022). Organizers also purchased a heater that they placed in the bus stop near the fulfillment center that provided an additional space for trust building

and organizing conversations. When contemporary workers are isolated from each other, traditional ways of establishing trust and building community become powerfully relevant.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the rise of worker disillusionment created the perfect environment for new organizers and natural leaders to flourish. An important element of emergent organizing is the process of a worker overlaying organizing culture atop their occupational culture—thus creating a layered, new meaning in one's work. This generative combination creates positive associations with work that may otherwise feel unrewarding or unappreciated. One organizer for Starbucks Workers United, Leo Hernandez, describes his work as a new experience of community and connectedness, and, through the process of unionizing, he feels "empowered" by "taking action" (Higgins 2022). Like the workers who become involved in salting campaigns, organizing an unfulfilling workplace can bring satisfaction to socially conscious employees who otherwise may not have the opportunity to engage in social justice movements or politically progressive work. Similarly, Amazon employee Maloney (pseudonym) became involved with the Amazon Workers Solidarity Campaign based in Portland, Oregon and organizes while on the job. He finds the organizing work "has given him hope" and states that "[…]if there's one thing that makes me want to go to work, it's organizing. That's why I still love this job" (as quoted in Zielinksi 2019). This dynamic and emergent change in both union culture and contemporary occupational culture is a synthesis of two compromised structures. The weakened union movement is revitalized by a surge in disillusioned low-wage workers, who are taking it upon themselves to do

the work that established union leadership has not. It is a condemnation of institutional unionism and the state of contemporary labor (Nolan 2022).

Online Laborlore

In *Wobblies, Pile Butts, and Other Heroes* folklorist and unionist Archie Green asserts that "dangerous work demands talk" (1993, 355). Green describes the ways in which workers recount industrial accidents with cautionary flourish and explains how these stories then become ritual; they teach technique and "perpetuate lore". Since March of 2020, many workers, some for the first time, have faced danger in their workplace. For others, the danger has always existed, but the threat of a deadly pandemic perhaps recentered their awareness of mortality. In short, all in-person work became dangerous and thus demanded talk. This came in the form of social media posts, personal narrative, protests, and subversive humor. Talk also turned into organizing.

In "Characteristics of Occupational Narratives," Jack Santino (1978) identifies five types of occupational narrative: *cautionary tales*, *first day on the job*, *the good old days*, *pranks*, and *characters and heroes*. Cautionary tales are widespread across many occupations and serve as a teaching tool. They are structurally similar to occupational ballads, but they offer a practical lesson in workplace safety or spell out the consequences of breaking a taboo. Veteran workers tell *first day on the job* and *the good old days* narratives and inevitably have tales about "how things used to be," usually with an implicit suggestion that the old ways are preferable to current regulations. Stories that revolve around pranks often overlap with other narrative types and may be antithetical (when tricking the boss) or involve an initiation on the first day of a job. Santino's last

category is *characters and heroes*, which includes a large portion of occupational narratives. This category introduces the concept of the contemporary occupational folk hero, a recurring real-life character in these stories. Based in reality but containing archetypal characterizations like the trickster or hero, these stories more closely resemble traditional literary texts. In contrast to typical folktales, the featured character in the occupational folktale is richly detailed and retains the personality quirks of the depicted employee.

As with Santino's research, whose occupational narrative categories are derived from his work with employees at a telephone company, the majority of research on occupational culture is based in unionized workforces. In highly surveilled workplaces like Amazon fulfillment centers, time and productivity are continually tracked and evaluated. At Amazon in particular, a "rule by algorithm" controls workers; it measures and analyzes workers' productivity, creating a stressful and often dehumanizing workplace (Struna and Reese 2020, 85-101). Despite this reality, workers still find ways to express their frustrations, tell jokes, tell stories, and swap techniques; but this may be increasingly relegated to the internet. These occupational folk expressions are what folklorist Robert Glenn Howard calls "participatory media," or folklore that is "technologically mediated" through online discourse (Howard 2008). All Amazon fulfillment centers share similar structural and cultural design, and positions within Amazon have identical delineations of labor. This facilitates a digital occupational vernacular with a low entry barrier, subverting Amazon's system of isolated labor. I argue that spending time in online occupational forums offers additional insight into

contemporary worker culture as these forums increasingly function as a replacement for more traditional employee designated spaces.

The online community r/AmazonFC on the aggregate site Reddit, reveal a wide variety of employee concerns and practices that may be useful in understanding the needs of precarious workers. In this section, I examine the posts, comments, memes, and interactions made by workers on r/AmazonFC. With Santino's framework in mind, there are several parallel categories that appear within these occupations that align with the *characters and heroes, first day on the job, and pranks* categories.

***Us vs. Them* (*Characters & Heroes*)**

In the r/Amazon FC subreddit, employees had many complaints about the confusing administration systems and pacing of their work but frequently blamed other coworkers for workplace difficulties, often referring to them by their position name. A frequent joke in the subreddit is the perceived traits of the "water spider," a position that keeps other stations stocked with materials. Water spiders are the Lotharios of the Amazon fulfillment centers; they are almost legendary figures with a seemingly supernatural ability to win over the women of Amazon workplaces. A post by BigJim2346 titled "WaterSpider took my girl." laments the loss of a girlfriend and warns others to not let their "girl get caught up in the WS game." The post has 468 "upvotes" but the comments offer no sympathy to BigJim2346, who outs himself as a "PA," or process assistant—a supervisory position. Another post begs Waterspiders to "stop flirting" and to "please help me lift up this box that's literally half my weight and size combined." User Cronizone is a newly trained Waterspider who posted that they "[d]on't

feel horny yet like the folktales talk about," clearly anticipating some sort of corporeal transformation. Comments range from sincere welcomes to shock at the idea of someone who actually received training upon hiring.

First Day on the Job

As previously mentioned, Amazon has a higher than average turnover rate, resulting in a constant stream of workers with little to no warehouse experience. This is reflected online, where frequent posts from new hires ask other users for advice on their first day. The replies to these posts typically skew helpful rather than mocking, commenters give practical advice regarding footwear, hydration, and sleep scheduling. Advice typically centers around combating the negative physical side-effects of the job, followed by management of paid time off or breaks, and general warnings to "get out while you still have the chance."

Subversive Humor (*Pranks*)

In r/AmazonFC, users mocked the rules of their workplaces and bonded over ridiculous or crude experiences. These posts would frequently feature comments from assumed veteran workers who tease newcomers or answer earnest questions with jokes. Though not outright workplace pranks, humorous jabs such as those below keep newbies on their toes.

> **u/PapiLjj posted in r/AmazonFC**: "What's the worst thing you've seen besides sex toys?"
>
> **Pxrple_Reign replied**: "My sanity slipping away"

GoldenFleeceGames replied: “Back when I packed at smf1, I had an order that consisted of two books.

1: How to deal with miscarriages.

2: Mien Kampf”

jfkdktmmv replied: “40lbs of the gas station nacho cheese”

Dave_3888 replied: Not the worst or even close, but there was a book called ‘How to make work not suck.’ I spent a few minutes reading it viciously.”

Post: u/temocnews What is one unspoken rule here at Amazon that you know of?

Cyrusthemarginal replied: “If you really really put out and make a huge rate, they will leave you in that spot until you either quit or die of exhaustion.”

Hosangtapejob replied: “Never be good at a job you don’t want to do.”

Pigeonsass: “If it isn’t broke, they’ll break it. If it’s broke, they’ll never fix it.”

Union Discussion

The topic of unionization elicited perhaps the most disparate opinions within this Amazon subreddit. Union-related posts in the Amazon subreddit were more emotionally charged and often led to heated disagreement. Users sometimes accused each other of infiltrating the forum, either from the radical left or from Amazon management. Users often cited their belief that their position was a “job, not a career” and that it was a reasonable pay for unchallenging work. Other worker subreddits, such as one for Starbucks employees, have a favorable view on unions, and many knowledgeable users answered questions or corrected false information. By contrast, a good portion of commenters in r/AmazonFC seemed to have a negative past experience with unions,

perhaps indicating a wider age demographic among workers. We see one example thread below:

> **u/WeAreGod posted in r/AmazonFC: "**Should use this sub to unionize. If we could get everyone who works at Amazon to join this sub and stay connected we could all do things together as a whole. If we want longer breaks, getting everybody connected on here will help spread awareness and help bring together peaceful protests such as getting everybody to take break 5 minutes longer. They can't fire everybody. I think this sub is the beginning of unionization."
>
> **AostaV replied:** "Naw. Not interested in being in another weak union. We have no leverage. The only strong unions left in this country are filled with people that can't be replaced with a half a day of training. Like the teachers union. I'll keep my 15-20 dollars a week your union would take for dues Norma Rae"
>
> **u/Otherwise_Computer60 posted in r/AmazonFC:** "The only union I'd ever join is the International Brotherhood of Water Spiders. Together we unite to steal your girl."
>
> **u/a13z12 posted in r/AmazonFC:** "Union vote: workers at an Alabama warehouse resoundingly reject a push to form the company's first US-based union."
>
> **obmar-belac replied:** "Welp, here's to seven more years of holding in my pee pee…cheers [mug of beer emoji]"

These online jokes, narratives, and informal advice columns are digital reflections of a changing worker culture. What does it mean to be a contemporary blue-collar or

service worker? There is not an absence of culture in these workplaces, but there is a new battle being waged between corporations and workers—a battle for the control of culture. Whether workers express themselves through subversive humor, memes, or organizing, it is clear that occupational culture is always generated, even in isolated workplaces such as fulfillment centers. Yet, Amazon and other corporations have capital on their side, and successfully exploit the contemporary tension between self-identity and work.

The recent spike in union organizing cannot be attributed to a single causal event, rather it is the natural backlash to a half-century of increasingly consolidated corporate power and strategic policies designed to weaken union power. The COVID-19 pandemic was undoubtedly an important catalyst in this process. As more sectors of American life went online, blue- and pink-collar workers bore the emotional and physical brunt of this shifted dynamic. With much of the country glued to their phones and computers, workers posted their occupational conditions to a largely sympathetic public and understood their own power as essential workers. Through an examination of organizing strategies, material culture, and personal narratives such as those I've presented here, a clearer picture of this unique cultural landscape becomes clearer. Worker to worker organizing, reproducible strategies that are visible on social media, and modified leftist tactics can be combined to achieve a successful union campaign. However, the steps after a successful union drive are crucial to sustaining energy throughout the contract process. With a deeper understanding of contemporary occupational culture and the process of independent unionization, workers and their allies can work towards a sustainable and just future of work.

CHAPTER III

FIELDWORK & INTERVIEWS

In the debate over how to define and categorize occupational lore, the concept of "the factory" often appears. In his study of machinists in Boston, Bruce Nickerson (1974) asked, "Is there folk in the factory?" In his "Industrial Lore: A Bibliographic-Semantic Query," Archie Green (1978) deliberated the standards of inclusion for industrial and laborlore. Green points to George Korson's (1935) work on traditional customs within industrial occupations and social movements. Korson challenged folklore scholars to consider the setting and location of folk groups—if loggers were a folk group, Korson asked, what distinctions then excluded coal miners? Extending these parameters, Green calls a coal mine essentially "an underground factory" that is isolated from society, its folk group connected through solidarity and bonded by a constant threat of disaster. Yet, as the industrial landscape of the United States shifts to predominately overseas production, even the modernist institution of "the factory" has begun to seem antiquated. While "the factory" could still stand in for a variety of industrial work today, the contemporary occupational landscape is much more complex.

In this chapter, I argue that "the factory" as a site of laborlore should be expanded to include the phenomenon of Amazon fulfillment centers that have begun to dominate the American labor landscape. Through interviews and observation, I explore the laborlore and experiences of one group of Amazon workers in the Pacific Northwest. In my novel study, therefore, I seek to make a significant intervention in the approach to contemporary occupational folklore.

Methodology

Through my eleven months of ethnographic research with Amazon fulfillment center workers, I sought to learn more about Amazon's face-to-face worker culture, in addition to the worker culture I was exploring through digital spaces. Though I believe that online folklore, particularly the kind that Amazon workers create about their own workplace that I discussed in the last chapter, should be unequivocally welcomed into the occupational lore category, the fulfillment centers are loud, isolating, and inherently liminal spaces, seemingly not conducive to the production and transmission of folklore. I did not doubt that worker culture existed in some form at Amazon. As folk groups are defined by Alan Dundes (1969) as "two or more" people with something in common, it stands that every job where multiple workers interact must be considered a folk group with its own lore. At Amazon, however, many workers are physically isolated and must work as quickly as they can to make "rate" to keep their metric scores at acceptable levels. "Rate" refers to the number of items per hour an employee can locate from inventory and transport for packing and shipping. This reinforces competition not cooperation between workers.

There is also competition, whether subconscious or not, with a non-human laborer—the robot. Statistically, the warehouses and fulfillment centers that use robots have higher workplace injury rates. These machines work beside the worker and against them, as increased productivity from non-human laborers forces human workers to adapt to an unnatural pace. Workers who work alongside robots suffer greater injuries from the faster-paced, repetitive motion that their position now requires (Del Ray 2019). How could worker culture flourish in such an inhospitable environment? As I became closer

with Brian, my primary interlocutor who was a salt attempting to organize Amazon workers, the question expanded to include organizing. If a workplace is considered inhospitable to occupational culture, could organizing in one's workplace become a transformative experience that creates meaning for the worker? Does an organized workplace protect and generate laborlore?

Due to the constraints on time and resources for this project, I could not diversify the sample of workers I interviewed. I relied on contacts given to me by a graduate student who was active in the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), which was the connective thread among the workers in this project. The result was that the group of workers were relatively politically active or class-conscious, had some amount of higher education, and spoke fluent English. The four workers I interviewed, however, held different positions within Amazon and came from relatively diverse backgrounds in terms of geography and socio-economic status. To increase my study's diversity of content, transmission, and subject, I included digital folklore. I did not interact directly with the subreddit users, instead choosing to observe and "lurk" within these online communities. This allowed me to access a large amount of worker-generated content we saw in the last chapter, most of which centered on jokes and antithetical themes that were not as present in my interviews.

Though I preferred to hold interviews in-person, I deferred to my interlocutor's choice between a Zoom call or in-person. If we met in person, I paid for lunch or coffee. I interviewed Brian twice, and we have since become friends. I am grateful for his help with this project, and I would not have had access to the other interlocutors without his work and personal vouching on my behalf. I asked basic demographic questions as well

as inquired about general work history. The majority of questions focused on the experience of the job, the culture inside, and if coworker bonds extended outside of work. My intent in exploring the whole experience of Amazon workers was to better understand the physical and psychological impact of their work. I could not physically be inside the warehouses, so I wanted to know about the sounds in that space, the feeling of the work, and how elements of time and the presence of robotics affected those experiences. I also included questions about unionizing. I'd originally intended to focus more intently on salting and unionizing, but half of the workers I interviewed were not actively organizing at Amazon. In our interviews we discussed politics and organizing through Brian's work and the larger project of the DSA.

A selection of my questions include:

1. What does a shift at Amazon feel like?
2. What do you think about when you're working?
3. Do you have any inside jokes with your coworkers?
4. Are you friends with your coworkers?
5. What do you think about when you're on the job?
6. What are some unspoken rules at Amazon?
7. What are some things that you enjoy about the job? Some things you don't enjoy?
8. How do you feel about the Staten Island Amazon union?
9. Have you heard anyone in management talking about unionizing? Any of your coworkers?

Organizing and Performance

To organize in any space requires a kind of performance. To be an efficient organizer or salt in a workplace, you engage in two simultaneous performances: the work and the organizing. Michael Bell's (1976) study of bartenders at Brown's bar in Philadelphia is instructive in this regard. Through performance theory and social organization approaches, Bell, a folklorist, asserts that the bartenders use "strategic manipulation" of "patron energy" in different ways to maintain and control the social environment inside the bar. Bell defines these roles as artful performances, used by the bartenders to create distance between their social and occupational selves. In addition to this function of identity maintenance, Bell suggests that occupations can have artistic and social value beyond the material gains they provide. Such service workers' performances are centered on a deliberate interplay between patron and worker, while an organizer's performance, either as an undercover salt or more openly, is confined to their fellow coworkers. Once a workplace is organized, the performance then goes public, and collective action is demonstrated to show strength and power. Workers at Amazon do not have a union, though there have been multiple attempts to organize workers at fulfillment centers. Here I explore how, in a workplace without a union, cultural cohesion and low levels of camaraderie, workers express themselves and process their work.

In her study of autoworkers in Michigan, folklorist Yvonne Lockwood (1984) examines on-site worker-created art and its relationship to the worker, their job, and their craft as a whole. Lockwood takes a behavioral approach with her interlocutors, as she assesses the psychological and material ways that art created in the workplace can professionally hinder or personally embolden employees. There is a political angle and an element of secrecy involved in this study, as most of the activities of the workers are not

sanctioned by management. Lockwood is fairly explicit with her views on workplace alienation, capitalist structures, and the negative consequences of a sanitized job environment. She maintains that the sanctification of work and industrialization in the United States led to repetitive and simplified jobs, which in turn causes feelings of "meaninglessness, powerlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement" in workers' lives (1984, 204). When workers create art from scraps of leftover materials, it allows them to integrate work and leisure, and thus they can regain a sense of satisfaction and pride. Lockwood describes the pieces made by workers in detail, and through her interviews offers a compelling case for the positive effects of this practice. As these pieces are usually made from work materials, her analysis of the arts' function affirms similar theories in scholarly studies of self-taught artists.[9] She describes women who work at a laundry service and quotes their own words to detail the ways they derive pleasure and relaxation from using scraps of discarded textiles to make quilts. The survival of folk art and traditional craft within these environments feels significant and is a fascinating example of a cultural continuity evident in similar folklore studies (e.g. Sheriff and Cerny 1996).

In contrast, the workers at Amazon do not typically have the luxury of time or a connection to their work materials. Instead, they produce speed and motion. For the phenomenon of workplace created art to be a product of psychic integration, one must agree with Lockwood's initial assessment of their material reality. Lockwood addresses the common view that blue-collar workers are of lower intelligence, or that they must not

[9] Wojcik, Daniel. "Outsider Art, Vernacular Traditions, Trauma, and Creativity." *Western Folklore* 67, no. 2/3 (2008): 179–98.

find pleasure in their job. She counters this by arguing that these workers do take pleasure in their work, but it is usually found in this liminal space between work and leisure. Though of course it is impossible and counteractive to mandate artistic practices in the workplace, Lockwood sees this type of outlet and personal integration as crucial to the well-being of blue-collar workers.

Workers at Amazon have no such outlet. The workers I've spoken with have complex feelings surrounding their time at Amazon. They consider it practical but unfulfilling work, the last option during an occupational dry spell, and a job not a career. Despite these less than ideal circumstances, workers have each found a way to utilize their strengths and interests to create meaning in their workday. Notably, each worker connects their time at Amazon to something larger than the job itself. Brian, Arthur*, J*, and Marissa were all involved with their local chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). Only Brian was at Amazon with the sole intention of salting or organizing from within. As previously discussed, salting is a controversial strategy in contemporary labor movement. Yet Brian does not embody the typical shortcomings that often plague the militant minority organizer. He is working class, over 40 years old, and his life experiences, including his time in federal prison, have imbued him with a no-nonsense yet non-judgmental sensibility. After a cup of coffee and some mild vetting, a member of my own union gave me Brian's contact information. In the organizing world, Brian is what we call a natural leader. People listen to him, respect him. He is tall and carries himself with purpose, but he is not loud or ostentatious. He is humble, he listens closely when others speak. Workers can learn these skills if they become educated in organizing principles and are given the resources and time to develop as leaders. No one

is born with the knowledge of how to win a union election. However, as with performers of any kind, charisma and presence are ineffable qualities that can make the difference between an effective organizer and an inspiring one.

Brian is in his late 40s and worked at Amazon in 2020 before he was fired in December 2020 or his alleged role in a physical fight. He's had a range of jobs over the years. His first job was working room service and busing tables at a restaurant inside a Holiday Inn. He served mostly retirees and oil workers who came down to Anchorage from the North Slope for a couple of weeks before they returned back to work. While in prison he did kitchen prep as well as furniture assembly. He spent a few years at a bakery making bread, and now works for United Parcel Service (UPS).

The first time I spoke to Brian was in July of 2022 when he unexpectedly phoned me. Although we hadn't confirmed a time, he called at the time I suggested in a previous text. I struggled to get my headphones untangled and plugged into my phone. The conversation started off slightly stilted as I paced around my kitchen; it was bright and beautiful outside, windchimes ringing in my neighbor's yard. I was dyeing a pair of pants and a dress red and black respectively. A tub of murky black water with swirled cotton sat on the back deck. Awkward in the beginning as we gave introductions, he mentioned he was talking to his sister in Florida and I asked where she lived, though I've long forgotten the towns there. Brian talked a lot and spoke rapidly, often apologizing for going on tangents or talking too much. He was very generous, informed, and good-natured. Brian has a family, and when we first spoke he was about to start work at UPS. Previously, he worked making prison furniture and was a baker that unionized his workplace there. My notes from July are typed up in stream of consciousness style, trying

to keep up with Brian's lightning fast speech: *"Scramble for pallet jacks, for hand scanners, not enough batteries, not enough working terminal or hand stations, complete a survey before you can use this, tell me about the bathrooms, tell me about the managers, tell me about coworkers, constantly polling workers, constant pressure from the management to give data, wifi is a massive data capture."*

Four months after our initial phone call, Brian and I finally met in person at Rose City Book Pub in Portland, Oregon. The first part of the drive was beautiful--the mountains in the distance, one or two snowcapped, still foreign to me; farmland, squat buildings, shifting tree species and soil; signs that ask, "WHERE WILL YOU SPEND ETERNITY?" A giant "BOOMERS FOR BERNIE" sign appeared on the opposite side of the road.

I arrived late. Brian was wearing a red hoodie and shirt and has large dark-framed glasses. Sitting on mismatched furniture, he appeared shorter than his actual height--I saw how tall he was only after our two hours together. He had a gentle air, animated yet calm and understanding. We sort of knew each other, as we'd listened to each other's podcasts. I listened to one 30-minute episode of his *Sunder* on the drive up to Portland. In the podcast, he described how he robbed a bank in the late 1990s. Brian was very easy to talk to, I felt at ease with him. I bought him beers. I drank black tea from a comically ornate teapot. It was his Friday; his son was making breakfast for dinner—waffles.

After our meeting, I drove to the hotel in Edgefield as the sun was setting, the ocean to my left, airport to my right. The roads were dark and winding. It was quiet, windy, and cold. I stayed in the hostel section of an old hotel, which at various times served as a poor house, retirement home, and tuberculosis infirmary. A massive structure

surrounded by expansive grounds and farm fields now used to grow grapes for the hotel's line of wines, it echoed with histories of the unwanted and forgotten, the less fortunate and the infirm. Just two miles north was an Amazon fulfilment center, and I imagined a reality where these two histories converged, where this hotel housed the Amazon workers and the surrounding area became a company town. My room was $40, my cheeseburger was $19, and I walked the halls until I was tired enough to sleep in a barely disguised tuberculosis ward.

Though it's a difficult job, Brian enjoyed salting at Amazon because it's "grounded in direct work." Amazon demands a constant and unrelenting pace, and organizing workers naturally trace this frantic and churning energy. Workers who are angry enough to organize are also angry enough to quit their jobs, to move on to yet another short-term gig. Salts share the same conditions with the workers they're attempting to organize. Ideally, this dynamic assists in diminishing the outsider status of the organizer. There is an inescapable element of subterfuge, of omitting or avoiding the truth, yet Brian felt that salting gave him a deeper connection to his job. As he revealed, "Well, the thing that I really liked about it was having a permission or having a sense of like you're doing something larger than just working a job. This job is important and that actually makes it much better in some ways for me at least my experience. So, part of it is being like you have a covert mission that you're trying to fulfill." It is also the feeling of getting one over on the boss, of effectively being paid by the company to organize its workers. For workers like Brian who organize on the job, it means that they are not participating in their own exploitation.

Carey Dall and Jonathan Cohen's (2002) article on their experiences as salts within the courier industry in San Francisco is useful in both constructing a broader view of contemporary organizing models and emphasizing the lack of scholarly work on the subject of salts. Working with International Longshore and Warehouse Union, they analyze the reasons why their campaign was successful—their gender, ethnicity, and social standing granted them access—and provide a convincing argument for this organizing tactic. Dall and Cohen claim that "salting…provides the kind of rank-and-file driven organizing that leads to a mobilized and active membership" and that in general, workers are sufficiently equipped to organize their coworkers, reducing the need for union staff (2002, 36). They point to social bonding, camaraderie, and being able to "speak in terms or tongues" that coworkers can relate to as important elements in successful salting. This element of shared experience is powerful, drawing parallels to participant observer fieldwork and embodied understanding.

Brian put me in contact with another person who organized while working at Amazon. Arthur[*], a white man in his early 30s, took a job at Amazon during a low point in his life, after being laid off during the pandemic. When he was 20 years old he worked in a steel processing factory in Ohio, and ever since he's been very focused on "industrial hygiene" within workplaces. This is his main concern while working at Amazon. Arthur meticulously documents workplace hazards while on the job, often taking time to rearrange dangerously stacked shelves that he deems hazardous to his coworkers' safety. He explains:

[*] Pseudonym

> **“**You know, I'm a political type. I have no illusions about Amazon, right? Just going, look, they're bad. They cut corners, watch for them. Right? But that doesn't really inform you about anything except the fact that they're not good […]I worked in a steel factory making steel for a summer job. And I you know, It's very cool, but it's a dangerous space. They were pretty fastidious about industrial hygiene and the way my brain works that I kind of look for what can go wrong. I find myself kind of being pretty good at like watching for safety things. So I figured as a matter of looking out for my fellow workers, looking out for myself, and also it's kind of a puzzle.”

I asked if he thinks there is a comparison to today’s working conditions and labor organizing at Amazon to industrial work of the 1930s and 40s. He responded, “It’s boring work turning a screw day in, day out but you know what? Like we can cope with how boring that job is by having time off and time and pleasure to enjoy yourself with your family or friends when you're done. I reckon if it was working there, it can work in [that Amazon warehouse].”

By March of 2023, I’d been communicating with Arthur for a couple of weeks over the encrypted communication app Signal, which is used in many activist circles in order to protect privacy and ensure a more secure conversation. He messages me and asks to reschedule our meeting, moving it up to a couple of days from then. I don’t mind at all, but it does mean that I have to get up very early to drive to Portland in the rain to meet him for breakfast. I drive as fast as I am comfortable driving down I-5, a highway often clogged with logging trucks heading north.

I arrive a few minutes before our meeting, and Arthur is running late, so I have a bit of coffee and settle into the majesty that is Katie O'Brien's. It looks fairly unassuming from the outside, just a traditional Irish bar on a non-descript corner of a busy street. Inside, however, it is an absolute masterpiece. High, dark green textured ceilings match the high-back leather rolling chairs pulled up to the low service counter. Pitted and worn down felt-like carpet (also green) covers the floors, with wood paneling framing red diner booths along the walls. The server is a woman in her late 20s, and she seems unfazed by my reaction that the basic breakfast plate comes with three eggs. *Three* eggs? She nods. My audience for that reaction is not in the room.

Arthur arrives and takes his time with the release forms, emphasizing that he trusts me, but he just wants to look them over, which I encourage. Arthur is eats a giant diner breakfast while telling me his life story and work history.

He becomes very serious while describing the various workplace hazards he's documented while at Amazon. He describes what he believes would happen if there was a fire in a warehouse and people were working in the cooler: "if a mass casualty were to happen—" and lists off a chain of possible disastrous circumstances. It just so happens that a very discordant series of repetitive electronic notes are playing over the speakers, making his hypothetical nightmare narrative sound like one of those moments in an apocalyptic movie where a scientist is relaying to a rag tag crew just how dire the situation really is. Arthur is very involved in local politics and community organizing, and describes his organizing work at Amazon as pretty "low level," but he's "digging the furrows" for future salts and organizers.

He describes 2020 as “when the world ended”; his tone is recognizable to me as someone who also went through an enormous life upheaval during that time. He says he lost his job, was selling plasma, borrowing money from family, and it was the worst time of his life. He hopes to never feel that way again. At Amazon, he worked in what he describes as a giant grocery store with no customers and no check out. It’s a striking description that really gets to me, these places that are almost recognizable as something you’ve interacted with your entire life, except they are stripped of meaning, memory, and people--a simulacrum of an errand. You’re providing a service to someone, yet you’ll never see the results or reap the rewards.

Arthur describes the sensory deprivation of working in the cooler, the most dreaded position. It’s cold, reaching into shelves with gloved hands, looking through a balaclava, zipped up in a protectant Amazon suit. Arthur works like a journalist, like an undercover detective. Even before he was approached by a fellow DSA member, he was documenting trip hazards and inaccurate company explanations for lapsed safety protocols. He shows me his hands; they have rough pink patches below his knuckles and some down closer to his wrists. He says he first got them while working in the steel plant. Harsh little particles and chemicals get under the skin, and he had to wash his hands frequently. He thinks working inside the freezer at Amazon made them worse. He says when he was a kid riding his bike his hands would always get really cold, so maybe it’s just his bad circulation. I say I’m the same way; my hands are perpetually freezing. I think of the expression “cold hands, warm heart,” but I do not say it because I’m not sure it will land with Arthur. I worry it would come across as patronizing, though I really think it suits him, and maybe that’s all the more reason to keep it to myself.

I ask him what he imagines the unionization of Amazon to look like. I ask if he sees it as sort of the heyday of industrial unionism: good factory job, you punch in, you go home, you have enough to support your family. He says yes, something like that. He thinks that everyone who works a full-time job should have enough to live on, that people used to be able to take vacations with their families, own a car. People commute to work at Amazon, something he seems to find shocking. Arthur smokes a pipe; he asks if I smoke and offers the option of taking a break on the patio out back. There is a septic truck or a construction truck or just a very loud truck abutting the outdoor patio; the industrial roar is distracting and disorienting to me. Arthur doesn't seem to mind and packs his pipe with tobacco from a Kline electrical zippered pouch. I smoke a cigarette from a pack I keep for emergencies and laugh while apologizing for my hideous lighter, saying, "This is very much a vibe and it's very much not my vibe." He tells me I don't have to apologize. I know I don't, and maybe I'm self-conscious because I'm tired and doing something new, or maybe my own insecurities around class are right where they always were.

I interviewed J and Marissa separately on Zoom. J is a former teacher who was laid off after department cuts. The available teaching positions he was offered were single classes—not enough to survive on. He worked several positions at Amazon as a stop gap during unemployment but now works solely in information technology (IT) there. Marissa is a Latina woman in her twenties, studies social work and has a minor in psychological health and well-being. She commutes forty minutes to Amazon and typically works a second job when she's not in school. She is a "Problem Solver," someone who processes broken or otherwise deficient packages in the warehouse. All of

the workers I speak with had fraught feelings around time or speed, the difficulty of relationships between coworkers, and the psychological impact of their work. For some of them, the negative aspects of their job were not enough to justify leaving Amazon, and for others, it was simply not a choice they could make.

I noticed a number of themes emerging in my interviews. As seen below, I have divided my interview results into three categories: *Time and the Body*, *Ephemeral Culture*, and *Liminal Spaces and Interiority*. These categories are representative of the tension between the intense physicality of Amazon work and the company's attempts to control what is beyond the body, such as artistic expression, community, and a sense of place.

Time and the Body

In 2021, Amazon employed thirty-three percent of warehouse workers in the United States, but forty-nine percent of all warehouse injuries occur at Amazon work sites. Of these injuries, eighty-nine percent were severe enough that workers could either not perform their usual duties or were forced to take time off of work (Strategic Organizing Center 2022). Amazon's demand for high worker efficiency leads to nearly double the industry's average injury rate. The average length of employment is only one year (Wong 2020). As Brian emphasizes, "They don't allow you to ever build those teams that work safely. You're constantly being rotated. You're constantly being pushed here[…]people are leaving. Like six weeks is the average. When I was there, workers worked six weeks. They'd run out of time off labor. And so you can't … the safety required to actually do the job well."

J echoes this churn and burn approach to employment at Amazon and described performing the same tasks in his fulfillment center for ten hours every day. J and his coworkers would unload the contents of shipping trucks into pods, place them on pallet jacks to transport across the warehouse, then lift the pods to store them in the "robot cage." He says that the people who work in that fulfillment center are "[P]retty much robot[s] in terms of what they do. They would replace them I think with robots if they could, but they can't, because it's a little bit more complicated yet at this point, anyway. Because again, like, it's all about data, it's like, how fast can we move things? Because that's what the business thrives on right?" Marissa noticed a shift in the "community aspect" of her fulfillment center after the addition of a new building nearby reduced their average volume. Before construction, the pace of work and the level at which employees had to perform prohibited casual workplace chatter—there just wasn't time. Now that the fulfillment center is no longer operating at a frantic pace, she says that "a lot of people are friends with each other." Similarly, J believes that Amazon fulfillment centers in smaller towns are "the kind of place(s) that could have a union" because workers typically stay in their positions for a longer period of time. These fulfillment centers operate at a slower pace and are an appealing option in locations without economic growth or local industry. The pay at Amazon is above what most other employers offer, and the workforce is more likely to be connected through an existing organic community.

Ephemeral Culture

Amazon manufactures and disseminates a corporate culture throughout workplaces that are designed to be hostile to organic worker culture. They award pins

which function as a type of merit badge to workers after the completion of “peak,” the busy season around the holidays, or for perfect attendance. “Peccy,” the official mascot of Amazon, is an orange creature with giant cartoon eyes, two stout legs, and an Amazon arrow for a smile. Peccy is a nickname derived from the idea that as a company, Amazon has “peculiar ways.” J agrees that the company is peculiar but doesn’t see their corporate culture as inherently negative. As J reflects, “I've never seen a warehouse job where they welcome you with an orange carpet while you walk down a gauntlet of management to like house music and everybody's I think, legitimately stoked to see you like to some degree, you know? Their whole thing is like, they try to make the workplace a good, a cool place, a nice place, and I think they succeed a lot of the time.”

Another “peculiar” element to daily work at Amazon is the use of radio. Workers start their shifts with a group exercise that is inspired, J says, by Japanese work culture. While music plays, workers perform synchronized movements together. To encourage participation among the new or reluctant employees, numbers are taped to the floor and prizes are awarded to whomever happens to be standing on the corresponding number. Usually, management thanks the worker who is standing on the random number. Though Amazon’s corporate culture dominates time and space, workers continue to find ways to express themselves. For J, this took the form of a game that a coworker created; he and his coworkers called it “Manager Manager.” The game highlights the absurdity of corporate management structures. J described the game, “It was like a square tile game where you try to make managers connect. So, it started with your manager, and it went all the way up the chain of management from your manager, and it just took their pictures,

and you had a match picture to picture to like, disappear, and then they would change to their manager, you know they would just go to the chain until you got to Bezos."

Supervisory and IT positions tend to provide more opportunities for downtime. These workers are shielded from the high level of surveillance that is present on the fulfillment center floor, and the physical demands of their jobs are much less intense than that of a warehouse worker. This relative freedom affords workers the time and space to contextualize their work, seen in the game above. Workers flip the power dynamic as they use their specialized skills to manipulate management.

I ask Marissa about what she and her coworkers create while on the job. She responds, "sometimes we would like, cut [the boxes] up or like make a face out of it or somewhat like, draw on the back of it. […] But sometimes people will like drawn something like in free time, like on a sticker. Or an extra label or something." She says they only stay up for a couple of days before they're taken down. I say, "Everything's so transitory." She replies "Yeah, that's the whole thing, actually."

Liminal Spaces and Interiority

Brian believes that people have a natural tendency to take pride in their work. As a former baker, he tells me, "It's hard to feel bad about making bread." He enjoys camaraderie in a workplace and producing a product that he can feel good about, like high-quality bread. The difficulty with Amazon is that taking pride in your work usually means moving faster and pushing your body beyond sustainable limits. For him, working together with people you trust and being good at your job "has a level of freedom." As Brian explains, "There's people who are really excited about being skilled at loading

robotic cabinets, right? There's challenges people would [do] where [they'd say] 'I loaded 4000 packages in a period of time.' And that's an insane rate, right? That's not sustainable. You will destroy your body. There are people who, that's how they want to be. Like, hey, how do I show that I'm good at what I do and feel pride in my work?"

As a Problem Solver, Marissa feels she is "providing some sort of purpose," that it feels like the only productive job in the warehouse. She appreciates her flexible schedule and says she could never find a job that could replace the need for Amazon. For her, the steady, predictable, and relative ease of her job allows her to focus on school. There is some amount of cognitive dissonance when she speaks about continuing to work for Amazon: "That's what I tell myself, but it's like, you know, do I really believe that? I don't know." Marissa and I end our conversation with a discussion of her ideal job. She says she wants to work with people in a more meaningful way through social work. Like Arthur, she vocalizes the strange feeling of providing services for a never-ending list of unknowable customers, musing,

> "It's like, who are these customers anyway? We don't ever see them because you're not like interacting with customers in the way that you would like with retail, for instance. [A]t my job, I go to work and then my work is done, which is a good thing, obviously. But it's also like there's nothing to even potentially carry home with me, in any way, at all. So, I'm very detached from it overall, ultimately, because it's like, and I've had this conversation with other people, it's like, what purpose do we serve? What attachment do we have? And the second most common question is: why am I still here?"

Out of all the workers I spoke with, J had the most positive view of his work. As an Amazon Robotics Floor Monitor (AFM), he was responsible for solving issues that occurred on the "robot floor" of the facility. The building he worked in had four stories on one side, and two stories on the other. The four stories are the Amazon Robot (AR) floors. It's called the robot forest. J enjoyed this work because there were no metrics to meet, and little to no supervision. Away from the fray of the fulfillment center floors, J describes a dark, confined environment that's "not built for humans." He must wear a protective vest and a kindle equipped with a mapped-out path that communicates his location to the robots. This ensures that they will not enter his predetermined path, which could cause him serious injury. Moving through a tunnel of pods with a flashlight and a radio, J would assess the issue alone in the dark, away from "prying" management and relentless metrics. He admits that there have been issues in the robot forest, narrating one particularly egregious example,

> "[O]ne woman she got trapped out there in a way, because her kindle went down and she had a safety perimeter around her, so the robots were not going to enter, so she was safe. But her kindle couldn't connect, so she couldn't get out and her radio signals weren't strong enough so we couldn't contact her. And we realized that she was out there because we track everybody that's out there. And we realized that she wasn't moving, and we couldn't reach her on radio. So, they send us out there to find her. I wasn't one of the people that found her, but another guy that I worked with found her, and she was like she was just really upset and like she was crying, and, you know, kind of freaked out. It was fine, she wasn't injured or anything, but just really freaked out. She actually quit that position she was

like, ‘I'm not doing this anymore, it freaked me the hell out.’ It's kind of creepy in there. It's like working in like a sewer or something, where it's just kind of dark, you know.”

A position at Amazon can be a lifeline for someone who is unexpectedly unemployed, formerly incarcerated, or who perhaps just wants a career change. Some struggle to pay their rent with just one job, some have medical debt or are recent immigrants to the United States. The job is easy to get. There aren’t multiple rounds of interviews, and you’ll know within days, if not hours whether you’ve been accepted for the position. The immediacy in the hiring process foreshadows the pace of the work. For Brian, J, Arthur, and Marissa, there was enough to make them stay. The motivation that kept Brian working was organizing, spending time building relationships with coworkers and contextualizing their experience. Arthur needed a job yet used his knowledge of industrial hygiene to document company negligence and keep his coworkers safe. He created his own purpose. Marissa takes pride in her work, but feels ambivalent about that pride—what is the value of being a good “Problem Solver” at Amazon? Does she want to feel proud? J is uniquely positioned in that he is not under the pressure of the ever-present metric; he has more autonomy at work and has less overtly critical opinions than the others I spoke with. He doesn’t mind the dark quiet of the robot forest.

It is difficult to form meaningful attachments to work that is always in motion or to bond with coworkers who may be gone in a few months. If one cannot find pride and meaning from work itself, it must be created. It may look like organizing for a better workplace, making art from shipping labels, or playing computer games where the joke is on the boss. However, the clock is ticking. Time is Amazon’s business; speed is their

demand. At what point does the frenzy burn out too many workers, run through too many bodies? As Brian often says, you can have something fast, cheap, or good, but never all three.

The workers at Amazon are not a monolith. Fulfillment centers across the United States employ a diverse group of people, many of whom do not stay in their position for longer than a year. These are sites of transition and movement—both the workers and the stock on the shelves. Indeed, they are not a cohesive group. In order for Amazon to be successful as an ever-expanding corporation, its workers must be stressed, competitive, tired, and alone. In this environment, occupational culture lives in the shadow of its corporate sponsor, expressed as a momentary drawing or antithetical game. Yet this is increasingly what more and more jobs today are like, a daily reality for million of people. One way workers have attempted to make meaning in their work lives is organizing, while others are resigned to simplifying their work experience through detachment. It is imperative that laborlore scholars interrogate their views of what occupational culture is in light of these stark changes, in order to determine how this impacts the field and the lore itself.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, through examining the current conditions of worker culture in the United States, I've illustrated the impact that corporations like Amazon have on contemporary occupational culture, and how organizing can generate meaning within a workplace. In doing so, I've attempted to answer the questions: How does occupational culture manifest in hostile work conditions? And, does an organized workplace protect and generate laborlore? Through an exploration of contemporary working conditions and expressive culture at an Amazon fulfillment center, I've shown the obstacles many workers face as they try to make meaning in their workplace. The results of this research contribute to folklore scholarship by filling a gap in contemporary laborlore.

Historically, joining a labor union has been one of the only opportunities that working-class people have to gain real power. This power manifested as a way for workers to determine their own working conditions through collective action and a credible strike threat. These tactics were so successful in obtaining large-scale economic gains for working-class people, that officials passed federal laws like the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 in order to stifle worker power. Twenty-five years later, Post-Fordism's emphasis on flexibility and consumer choice created an ever-expanding need for market growth, resulting in an unprecedented export of jobs overseas and slashed long-term occupational stability. The resulting occupational precarity, combined with a strategic disempowerment of labor unions, has severely impacted worker power and worker culture.

Amazon's rise from an online bookseller to a ubiquitous, irreplaceable service and global logistics giant is an unprecedented trajectory. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic

accelerated the public's need for shipped goods, as stock ran low on the shelves of local stores and many jobs went remote. Along with an increased workload, workers at Amazon and in other essential positions experienced higher levels of COVID outbreaks. These dual pressures created an atmosphere where workers were under high occupational stress yet recognized the importance of their role. It quickly became the perfect environment for organizing, with many workers finding a sense of meaning and a feeling of control in otherwise chaotic circumstances.

My fieldwork with Amazon workers shows a hybrid of digital and traditional expressive culture within short-term, high turnover jobs. Unable to spend time together while on the clock, many workers use online forums to share techniques and circulate insider humor in unmonitored spaces. In addition to these more subversive and hidden worker spaces, some workers attempt to organize their workplace as a method of meaning-making. Other workers see their position as a means to an end, and though they may be sympathetic to unionizing efforts, they are not actively organizing. Amazon discourages opportunities for workers to create organic worker culture together. Instead, the company creates its own "peculiar" rituals as a way to dominate cultural production. Throughout my interviews I found workers often referenced aspects of the body, physically and in connection to place or time. For example, there is a continuously running clock that tracks a worker's movement for the entirety of their shift while documenting the pace of their work. Workers also discussed elements of liminality, of feeling betwixt and between, in the context of their jobs, mental state, and the fulfilment centers more generally. The proliferation of non-human workers and constant

surveillance in their workplace contributes to this sense of disconnect between the outside world and the environment inside Amazon.

Due to time constraints and physical limitations, I was unable to use participant observation as a method in my research. Though this is a difficult method to employ in highly-surveilled workplaces, I believe it should be considered for future studies with occupational fieldwork. In addition, occupation-specific digital spaces offer an incredible wealth of fascinating insider culture and should be explored further.

Work increasingly dominates the majority of people's lives. Many workers today must have two jobs in order to survive. For many wage workers, work blends and bleeds into the domestic realm—it can stay in the body and inhabit the mind, even as they sleep. As work expands, it distorts what is meaningful. In order to understand what the marginalized think, feel, express, and create, folklorists must look to work, and understand that the folk are always leading the struggle. In order to address this shift in the occupational landscape and renew contemporary laborlore scholarship, folklorists must endeavor to expand the scope of and renew focus on the study of occupational lore.

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