A Union of Poets: The Literary Bodies of the Industrial Workers of the World

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My current research project focuses on ethnographic and archival investigations into the cultural production of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW or "Wobblies"). The IWW is a global industrial union with a strong focus on green and ecological unionism, as well as historical ties to movements like Earth First! and ecological theorists like Gary Snyder. Throughout my research, I have come across a field of cultural production and distribution that is deeply embedded in environmental issues and ethical plateaus that emerge from environmentally conscious, anti-capitalist struggle. Union organizers, activists, and authors constantly navigate interlocking economic spheres—from prefigurative commons structures, cooperatives, and utilizing capitalist industries—in attempts to create and distribute literature in ways that do not damage ecologies and that build alternatives to capitalism. Often this creates contradictions between communistic goals for free distribution and environmental and labor concerns. For instance, the desire for both free distribution and inclusive cultural production engenders ethical complications as union members are aware of the need to use ecologically destructive digital infrastructure. This digital infrastructure also needs to be rented and purchased from companies that increasingly rely on the most extreme forms of rentier economics, ecologically devastating supply chains, and intense labor exploitation.

The wider book project explores the literary and cultural activities of this radical, anti-capitalist union. It argues that the IWW's literary and aesthetic practices open a new field of research and offer crucial interventions into literary studies. Drawing upon my academic background in anthropology, philosophy, and literary studies, I develop an interdisciplinary methodology for analysing the social forms of literary creation and interpretation. This is necessitated by the contours of the union's literary activities. The IWW constantly exceed academic and common understandings of what objects of literature are and how to interpret them. IWW work often complicates notions of genre, authorship, and, due to the internationalism of the union, "national" literatures. These complications are compounded by the union's attempts to escape from capitalist modes of producing and distributing its cultural products. This project challenges literary studies that focus only on the interior configurations of the text, its meaning, or literary significance. Part of this challenge resides in cultural activities, which are not normally recognized or studied as a properly literary activity: soapboxing, stickering, altering religious songs, spontaneous political slogans, impromptu street theatre, and chanting. These activities foreground ephemeral performance, the alterations they levy on contested, public space, and the reconstitution of political bodies. And, while it is always possible to excavate hidden resonances to the words uttered in these situations, IWW poets often aim at the mere act of enunciation itself. Stickering and chanting become ways of making present and constituting a field of bodies.

Thus, the project's focus on the IWW, ranging across the union's history and its global scope, is complemented by a theoretical framework that investigates "literary bodies." These literary bodies include the physical, experiential, and active bodies of union members; the various organizational bodies that the union creates to produce and distribute cultural works; the im/materiality of these literary products; archival places that group works together; physical and virtual shared spaces; and, lastly, the imaginative appropriation of these bodies in literary works. This project will show that, through their mutual interaction, these bodies

continually alter each other, recreating habits and motor patterns, bodily and ecological materialities, possibilities for communication, and engendering new practices of literature, art, and revolutionary politics. Literature, as we see it practiced by the union activists and organizers, constitutes a dynamic space-time in which works and acts create vectors for changing ourselves and the world around us. My thesis shows, through ethnographic analysis, archival research, and literary interpretation, as well as a strong theoretical grounding in phenomenology, materialism, and political economy, that the IWW can help us expand the boundaries of what we think of as literature and its representative function. Literary activity here does not merely represent the injustices done to bodies; rather, it directly alters and reconstitutes the power of those bodies. It also creates alternative organisational forms to the various economic, gendered, racial hierarchies and state violences that originally exploited and oppressed those bodies.