

The Militarization of Employment Relations: Racialized Surveillance and Worker Control in Amazon Fulfillment Centers

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Abstract

Through a socio-structural analysis, we examine contemporary forms of labor control faced by Black warehouse workers in the southern United States. Grounding our research in critical industrial relations theory and

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centering our analysis in the counter-narratives of Black workers at an Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama, we examine the impact of intensified military-style tactics in the modern workplace, contextualized by historical and regional legacies of racialized labor exploitation, policing, and bodily control.

Keywords

U.S. South, Amazon, racialized surveillance, worker control, critical industrial relations theory

Worker (Black, Woman): You have so many security people there. What's the problem? What is the issue because they intimidate. It feels like we're coming into prison, and they're trying to make sure we don't escape... You know how they let the prisoners out? It's like we're being watched. To me, I watched this movie where you've got the slaves out there, and then they're policing them. You know what I'm saying?

Merging literatures on labor control and racialized policing, this paper illustrates the employment practices at Amazon as a case in point to deepen our empirical and theoretical understanding of heightened forms of worker control through the lens of critical industrial relations theory. Specifically, this paper engages the counter-narratives of Black¹ workers at the Amazon fulfillment center in Bessemer, Alabama, to examine the racialized impact of a set of presumptively neutral employment practices. We highlight the importance of bringing historical and regional context to our understanding of labor control to show how an employer “militarizes” its employment relations through the use of practices such as intensive surveillance, private security and public policing, and plantation-style management. Cumulatively, such practices reflect central elements of amplified regulated control, which is troubling for all workers, but carries additional implications for majority Black workforces—such as in the case of Amazon’s Bessemer, Alabama, fulfillment center—particularly in the southern United States. Because Amazon is widely recognized as an industry leader for its customer-centric order fulfillment and delivery capabilities, we find it a critical case for a deeper perspective on employer approaches to worker control, including performance tracking technology that exposes workers to constant and intense surveillance (Bruder, 2019; Kantor et al., 2021; Struna & Reese, 2020; Vallas et al., 2022), as well as other facially-neutral practices that we assert result in heightened bodily control over subordinated groups.

Critical Industrial Relations Theory

Critical industrial relations theory (CIRT) has recently emerged in an effort to more deeply consider the impact of workers' various social identities, and to better account for systems of oppression when examining industrial relations phenomena (Lee & Tapia, 2021). Rather than ignoring or downplaying racial and other social identities, scholars have centered narratives other than the white working class to better understand labor issues such as new labor activism (Lee & Tapia, 2023a), worker organizing (Lee & Tapia, 2023b; Soni-Sinha & Yates, 2013; Tapia et al., 2017), and worker resistance (Alimahomed-Wilson & Reese, 2021). CIRT engages the basic tenets of critical race and intersectional theory (CRT/I), which require researchers to acknowledge the ways in which racism is omnipresent and normalized (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001); to give importance to historical context for understanding contemporary forms of white supremacy (Harris, 1993); and to deeply examine the power of dominant group interests in understanding incremental progress in racial justice (Bell, 1980). Intersectionality, as both a conceptual tool for understanding identity-based systemic oppression (Crenshaw, 1989) and a methodology for identifying multi-layered oppression in industrial relations systems (McBride et al., 2015; Mooney, 2016; Tapia & Alberti, 2019), allows CIRT scholars to shift traditional colorblind paradigms to identity-conscious frameworks (Lee & Tapia, 2021) that examine how racism is intertwined with overlapping systems of oppression impacting the world of work.

This paper contributes to CIRT by grounding our analysis of worker control in the particular historical and regional context necessary for deeper understanding of the ways in which contemporary forms of white supremacy (Harris, 1993) govern and control Black workers. Moreover, as a critical methodology and analytical tool, we engage storytelling and counter-narratives (Ladson-Billings, 2013) to challenge the often racially hegemonic ways in which labor and employment relations questions are examined. Hence, we center southern Black experiences in our examination of the roots, use, and impact of policing and surveillance practices as a form of worker control.

In the sections leading up to our methodology, we first review literature on labor control and workplace surveillance, laying the foundation for understanding coercive and hegemonic mechanisms of control, particularly in the case of Amazon. We next engage Black feminist theory for deeper considerations of how surveillance has been inherently unequal, underlying the need to take a race-conscious lens when examining workplace surveillance as a means of labor control. Finally, we address the historical and regional

legacies of policing and actual militarization in the southern United States to better contextualize and theoretically ground the impact of the integration of military-style tactics in the surveillance and control of Black workers in this region.

Labor Control and Workplace Surveillance

Coercive and Hegemonic Control

Within the sociology of work, scholars have often focused on labor control to better understand the labor process (Burawoy, 1985; Dörflinger et al., 2021; Edwards 1979; Vallas et al., 2022). Labor process theory posits that in the industrial relations system, capital's goal is to extract the maximum value from workers' labor (for a recent review, see Bagnardi & Maccarrone, 2024). Workers, then, might try to resist this "degradation" or exploitation of work, resulting in capital strategies to control its workforce (Braverman, 1974). Coercive control levers include deskilling the workforce, stripping away worker autonomy so that each worker engages in a specialized set of repetitive and monotonous tasks (Braverman, 1974). Scholars have also highlighted the use of surveillance techniques, or management practices to monitor, record, and track workers' performance and behavior, which are likely to heighten the coercive control and thus potential for worker degradation (Ball, 2010).

Critical sociology research on workplace surveillance has heavily drawn from Michel Foucault's conceptualization of the panopticon. While Jeremy Bentham originally coined the term, referring to an efficient prison system with an observer in a central tower, Foucault shifted the focus to the prisoners themselves and used it as a metaphor to describe a broader set of power relations in society (Elmer, 2012). In writing about the disciplining nature of the panopticon, Foucault (1977) asserted that the apprehension of being subjected to the all-pervading gaze pushes the "worker to work" and become "the principle of his own subjection". In an abstract sense, the panopticon is not only an architecture but also a *process* of surveillance and policing² engaged in a continuous endeavor for maximizing the exercise of power (Elmer, 2012). That is to say that the panopticon acts as a vehicle for surveillance and policing, reinforcing the power asymmetries between the employer and employee at the workplace (Sewell & Wilkinson, 1992).

Building on the panopticon concept, scholars have established explicit linkages between prisons and factory work. Just as in carceral settings, workplace surveillance may be predicated on obtaining compliance via the threat of sanction. These practices are often most pronounced in industries where

labor relations are paternalistic, inter-firm competition is high, and the workforce turns over frequently, such as present-day call centers, retail, and logistics industries (Sallaz, 2019; Vallas et al., 2022). These industries have been found to employ technology-enabled surveillance, including the use of personal data and RFID (Radio Frequency Identification) tags for tracking physical location of employees; biometrics gathered through retina scans, fingerprinting and brain signal mapping; and covert surveillance including examination of employees' social media posts (Ball, 2010). This "electronic panopticon" can thus monitor a range of activities both within and outside the workplace, providing up-to-date information to a centralized controlling authority. For any task gone wrong, such surveillance can also identify the responsible worker in a short time span—it is this promptness that provides the surveillance regime with a formidable disciplinary backbone (Sewell & Wilkinson, 1992).

In addition to coercive mechanisms of control, scholars have emphasized employer use of consent or hegemonic mechanisms of labor control (Burawoy, 1979), through which capital tries to ensure the collaboration of workers by motivating worker self-discipline and eliciting or "manufacturing" their consent (Burawoy, 1979). Within the hegemonic mechanisms, scholars have also discussed the issue of surveillance, and how and why surveillance might elicit sometimes diverse or contradictory worker responses. Sallaz (2009), for example, showed how the intensive surveillance of casino workers in South Africa led to a maximization of control while the surveillance of casino workers in the United States allowed for rule-breaking and incentivized entrepreneurialism, as work was organized through hegemonic control. Furthermore, Elliott and Long (2016), for example, showed how a Big Box warehouse with mostly male workers created an informal status hierarchy using electronic surveillance data. Specifically, workers used that data to compete against each other's performance. Sallaz (2019) showed how gay men, in particular, stayed employed in the call center industry in the Philippines—despite the invasive monitoring—as supervisors would praise parts of their identity, specifically their softer voice, for which they were likely stigmatized in the broader Filipino society. Furthermore, paying specific attention to the gendered dimension of surveillance, Payne (2018) describes how male workers used a company's electronic surveillance data to prove their superiority vis-à-vis their peers, leading to status competition or "manufactured masculinity." This gendered experience to workplace control begs further questions concerning how such policies, as well as worker responses, might vary with respect to race and other social identities (see also, Nelson & Johnson, 2023; Nyberg & Sewell, 2014).

Amazon's Surveillance and Labor Control

A growing body of research has detailed the ways in which Amazon specifically practices coercive and hegemonic labor control by combining old-fashioned, despotic ways of controlling its factory workers with innovative methods of digital surveillance (eds. Alimahomed-Wilson & Reese, 2022; Delfanti, 2021; Kassem, 2023; Massimo, 2022; Zaroni & Miszczyński, 2023). Indeed, the labor process is cut into traditional small, individual, standardized tasks to optimize worker productivity. Furthermore, rather than just a traditional Fordist assembly line, workers are fully dependent on the very same technology to do their work (e.g., the barcode scanner tells them exactly where to go, what to pick, etc.) that is used to surveil them. This form of digital Taylorism, which strips workers of autonomy over their work while under the constant pressures of a highly-surveilled algorithmic pace, has been described as a new form of labor degradation by scholars and workers alike (Anonymous, 2018). Struna and Reese (2020), for example, examined the experiences of Amazon workers in Southern California and focused on the surveillance through automation and digital technology as a type of electronic control. The workers they interviewed—most of whom were Latine—described the constant monitoring of their work as “very stressful” and talked about “holding it” when they needed to use the restroom to “make rate”. Along similar lines, Vallas et al. (2022) highlight, for example, the Units per Hour (UPH) measure, or the number of units workers would need to process each hour to “make rate”, as well as the Time off Task (TOT) measure, or any break a worker takes excluding their official break time, as two specific electronic surveillance measures that heighten the sense of anxiety of an already precarious workforce.

In addition to these despotic forms of worker control, Amazon coerces productivity by creating a culture of “staged fun” (Delfanti, 2021). For example, Amazon incentivizes its work processes through contests where workers can win virtual “swag bucks” (Hamilton & Cain, 2019). Gamification, then, is a form of control that pushes workers to speed up their labor (e.g., Burawoy, 1979). Vallas et al. (2022), for example, show how workers consent to Amazon’s managerial authority as they try to “win” against their co-workers in terms of “making rate” and consider their work a “competitive race”. While such hegemonic control supplements the coercive mechanisms of labor control, many workers see through these attempts, and it has created disillusion or a dissonance between what the company promised as being a special and fun workplace and the reality of the work (Delfanti, 2021). Outside of Struna and Reese, IR scholars have only recently turned a race-conscious eye to the impact of Amazon’s

aggressive surveillance practices. Alimahomed-Wilson and Reese (2021), for example, examined the experiences of Amazon workers in Southern California and drawing on Lee and Tapia's (2021) CIRT, the authors assert that minoritized workers (BIPOC) are disproportionately affected by Amazon's electronic and managerial surveillance, receiving (unfair) write-ups, for example, for TOT.³ In this article we use the counter-narratives of Black southern workers at Amazon to deepen our knowledge of Amazon as an empirical case, but more importantly to use it as a case study for building critical theory regarding the impact of these types of coercive and hegemonic practices on Black workers specifically, given historical and regional legacies of racialized surveillance, policing, and militarization in the southern United States.

Racialized Workplace Surveillance and Black Worker Control

Scholars of race and work have focused on workers' racialized experiences (Nelson & Johnson, 2023; Wingfield, 2010), as well as organizations' racialized employment practices (Ray, 2019). While such practices, including surveillance and other forms of policing under study here, might be portrayed as neutral and objective, racially marginalized workers are subjected to intensified surveillance due to both employer action and institutional systemic inequities. As Van Oort (2019) aptly states, these workers "are not merely low-wage workers who have been abstracted into twenty-first-century data points but are members of populations that have been *tracked and policed by both the state and capital for many years*" (Van Oort: 212) (emphasis added by the authors).

For example, scholars have shown that loss prevention teams in retail outlets are often suspicious of individuals based on demographic traits—specifically Black workers, the homeless, Black women who "dress a certain way", or gender non-conforming individuals (Pittman, 2020; Van Oort, 2019). Moreover, reporting on the U.S. warehousing industry, Gutelius and Theodore (2019) have shown an overrepresentation of young, male, Latine, and Black workers who engage in specific tasks that are under strict surveillance. Because they are left very little room to engage in human interaction with co-workers, their work environment becomes tantamount to solitary confinement—a process for "perfecting" panoptic surveillance and policing.

Black feminist scholars have also long asserted that surveillance is inherently unequal and stems from historical inequalities (Collins, 1998; hooks, 1992). Sociologist Simone Browne (2015), for example, explores contemporary surveillance by identifying its interconnectedness with oppressive regimes that have

their roots in the era of enslavement. She notes that race is usually absent in surveillance theorization and suggests the term “racializing surveillance” as one that “signals those moments when enactments of surveillance reify boundaries, borders, and bodies along racial lines, and where the outcome is often discriminatory treatment of those who are negatively racialized by such surveillance” (Browne: 16).⁴ In certain organizational contexts, these racialized surveillance practices lead to “slavery-laden” labor controls. Shahadat and Uddin (2022) describe the labor-management relations on tea plantations in Bangladesh. According to the authors, one of the main elements of modern enslavement is to extract maximum labor from the workers through constant surveillance (see also Aufhauser, 1973). They describe moreover how promotions to managerial posts were severely restricted and how management dehumanized the workers, treating them as “stupid” or “lazy” (Shahadat and Uddin: 528). At the same time, however, “machine-like” tasks were designed to achieve the maximum usage of labor, reproducing enslavement-like conditions within the organization (Shahadat and Uddin: 528).

Through an analysis of the labor relations of incarcerated workers, workfare workers, college athletes and PhD students, Hatton (2020) identified another form of coercive power, namely, status coercion, which enables managers to exercise “*expansive punitive power*” (pp. 32) [emphasis from the author] on the basis of workers’ dependence status on the employer, such that non-compliance is punished in ways that extend beyond the workplace, thereby impacting workers’ well-being, family, and employment in the long run. Hatton (2020) pays specific attention to the intersections of race, gender, and class, showing how this status coercion power historically and still today affects particular groups of workers (e.g., exploitation of Black prison labor).

Scholars have emphasized more broadly the racialized roots of the labor process and labor control referring to the history of plantation management. Rosenthal (2018), for example, illustrates in great detail how slaveholders were amongst the first to master a type of scientific management or scientific agriculture, recording average picking rates for cotton per enslaved person on the plantation. Slaveholders, especially in the US South, kept very detailed accounting books to determine how much labor their enslaved workers could perform in a given amount of time, pushing towards the maximum output. When enslaved people tried to slow the pace of work, the constant surveillance and (the threat of) violence by slaveholders were used to keep extracting labor. In other words, according to Rosenthal (2018), minute control and surveillance over enslaved people’s labor processes was central in the business history of plantation slavery and encouraged the sophisticated management practices we see today.

Tone policing is another way dominant groups can assert control in the workplace. Race scholars, authors and activists define tone policing as “communication practices that prioritize the comfort of the privileged over the oppression of the disenfranchised.” (Nuru & Arendt, 2019, p. 90; Oluo, 2019). The term is often used to describe the ways in which white dominant groups control Black, Indigenous and people of color by silencing their expressions of oppression (Nuru & Arendt, 2019). In her definitions of tone policing in the groundbreaking book, *So You Want to Talk About Race* (2019), Ijeoma Oluo highlights the racialized mechanisms of control communicated through the ways in which those in positions of authority speak to systemically subordinated groups. According to Oluo (2019), tone policing places the comfort of the privileged individual above addressing the oppression faced by the disadvantaged person. Tone policing occurs when the privileged person in a conversation or situation, redirects the focus from the issue of oppression itself to the manner in which it is being discussed.

Finally, sociologists have also pointed towards the production regimes or the broader political apparatus that regulates the workplace to better understand the different forms of labor control (e.g., Burawoy, 1979; Dörflinger et al., 2021; Sallaz, 2009; Vallas et al., 2022; Wood, 2021). Building on critical race theory then more specifically, when examining a workplace regime based on intense surveillance and policing, we should recognize the “histories and the social relations that form part of the very conditions” that enabled the surveillance and policing in the first place (Browne: 128). As a result, in the US, the racialized nature of surveillance and policing tends to reinforce assumed criminality and has historically been used as an instrument of bodily control as well as of state and capital power accumulation. Thus, in order to more deeply understand the structures facilitating the impact of Amazon’s scaled up and intensified surveillance practices and use of private security and public police on its majority Black workers in Bessemer, Alabama, we bring in literature on policing and militarization, contextualized within the employment relationships in the U.S. South.

Policing and “Militarization”: Black Worker Control in the U.S. South

In line with Kraska (2007), we employ the term “militarization” as a powerful theoretical lens to better understand societal trends, especially in countries such as the United States which place a premium on military dominance. Much like critical sociologists employ the metaphor of the panopticon

(originally referring to a prison system) to deepen our understanding of the labor control process, we engage the concept of militarization to frame our critical examination of the structures that empower and amplify the intensive set of labor control practices in workplaces such as those run by Amazon.⁵ The literature on racialized policing and militarization provides necessary context and allows us to orient our theoretical lens for understanding the impact of such practices, particularly on Black southern workers.

Policing and Black Workers

The history of contemporary policing in the United States has been traced to the slave patrols in the antebellum South, in which the state and white civilians were expected to help supervise the movements of Black people.⁶ These slave patrols wore uniforms and carried weapons. Their main role was to prevent rebellions and capture escaped slaves (Rivera, 2015). When the slave patrols were ostensibly ended after the Civil War and passage of the 13th amendment, southern states responded with “Black codes,” which included a variety of explicit as well as tacit rules enforced by the state limiting the movements of Black people, including the kinds of jobs Black Americans could hold.

Recent scholarship has tied racialized surveillance and policing by the state and enterprises to Black resistance and mobilization in and outside of the workplace. For example, labor historian Austin McCoy (2022) focuses on rank-and-file Black worker organizing in 1970s Detroit in which the Black Worker Congress (BWC) formulated a demand to “Disorganize the State.” Their vision of establishing industrial democracy was driven by their fight against racism as well as the capitalist economy and called for the dismantling of policing institutions (e.g., police, prisons, and military) both inside and outside of the enterprise. According to McCoy (2022), the BWC emphasizes to labor scholars and activists that racial justice, abolition, and internationalism should be central to any vision of worker rights and democracy, both within the workplace and in society at large. Particularly when focusing on the US South, the legacy of state-enforced political, social and economic segregation and exclusion is both visceral and palpable. This “New Jim Crow”⁷ system contemporizes and normalizes the policing of Black bodies as part of daily worker experiences (Alexander, 2012). In response to systemic policing, Black worker attempts to resist and transform racial capitalism⁸ have historically been opposed both by the state and private corporations via a “‘frontlash’ in policing and repression—a scaling up and intensification of surveillance directed at all radicals, especially those working in Black-led organizations.” (McCoy: 64, citing Weaver 2007).

Militarization and the Racialized Workplace

The institutional distinction between the military and the police is becoming increasingly unclear, leaving Black and brown communities poised to be victims of military-like police control and severe underprotection from the state (Gamal, 2016). Indeed, the history of the southern United States includes the actual use of the military to suppress Black and other communities of color- resulting in intensified bodily control to distinct racialized disadvantages which continue in present day (Gamal, 2016). As a result, both within the nation and around the world, the privilege of being free from military control is a benefit of whiteness that is frequently overlooked (Gamal, 2016).

Outside of describing the state control of Black workers, the concept of militarization has been used to understand how central elements of a military model are applied to an organization's process for problem solving (Kraska, 2007). More specifically, organizational militarization refers to practices that recreate or mimic the carceral surveillance historically employed by the state. For example, justice studies scholar Peter Kraska (2007), an expert on criminalization and militarization, examines an organization's "militarization" (i.e., its adoption and implementation of militarism as an ideology for problem solving) by focusing on its use of equipment and technology; inclusion of "martial language, style (appearance), beliefs, and values"; use of "command and control" centers or elite squads; and "patterns of activity modeled after the military such as in the areas of intelligence, supervision, handling high-risk situations." (2007, p. 503). While it is rare for scholars to refer to militarism in our analysis of U.S. workplaces, abolitionist scholars such as Angela Davis and Fanna Gamal, have advanced important theories outlining the shared structures of economic oppression, whose expansion bolsters capitalist enterprises while having devastating impact on Black and other workers of color.⁹ It is with this historical contextualization and conceptualization of militarization that we examine the particular ways in which Amazon exerts control over its workforce, with heightened impact for Black workers.

Methodology

Originally, we set out to examine the extent to which Amazon engages the state, via employment of public police officers on an off-duty basis, at its facilities nationwide. Our initial analysis of public records data¹⁰ indicated that while Amazon engages police on an off-duty basis around the country, such engagement is significantly more prevalent among fulfillment centers

located in the southern “Black Belt”¹¹ (including Alabama) than in other parts of the country.¹² This led to broader questions regarding racialized impact not only of Amazon’s use of public police, but of its broader policies, with regards to surveillance and policing. “Policing” thus refers to the full array of repressive practices to guarantee social order (Browne, 2015; Gourevitch, 2015), while the “police” refers to the actual person of contact, for example, in Amazon’s case under the form of off-duty public police.

As a critical case for analysis, we selected the BHM1 Amazon fulfillment in Bessemer, a majority Black suburb of Birmingham, Alabama, with an over 80% Black workforce at Amazon and located in a deep southern region of the U.S. impacted directly by the systemic segregation of Black bodies under the old Jim Crow system. Bessemer has just over 26,000 residents and relatively high rates of poverty. The facility known as BHM1, which opened in March 2020 with a current workforce of about 6,000, is an 850,000 square-foot fulfillment center and is the city’s largest employer. At the time of our data collection, BHM1 workers were involved in a long-running unionization campaign.¹³

Data Approach and Research Team Design

Adding to the literature in CIRT, we ground our work in critical race theory and intersectionality (CRT/I) (Lee & Tapia, 2021). Specifically, we center social identity-based counter-narratives to better understand the effect of Amazon’s practices on a majority Black workforce in the US South. We employ critical race and intersectional methodologies, in which storytelling is a method for ensuring that “people of color speak themselves into existence in arenas where their voices and experiences are often excluded or muted” (Davis-Faulkner, 2022, p. 18). It is a key instrument in critical theory-making that challenges “universal” worker narratives and instead illuminates lived experiences that allow for stories to come out in an active voice especially around race and racism. Thus, we use semi-structured interviews with intentionality to allow for culturally specific storytelling and the identification of relevant counter-narratives (Delgado, 1989; Lawrence, 1987). We also employed participant observation, moving our research team to Bessemer, to ensure that we had proper regional and local contextualization for understanding historical and structural legacies (Bell, 1980).

Further in line with the CRT/I methodologies, we formed a “coalition” (Matsuda, 1991) of scholars and researchers in which we bring in our own identities and experiences, comprised of Black, brown, and white people—native born, U.S. naturalized, migrant, queer-identified and heterosexual. We engaged with our interviewees—the majority of whom were Black and

from the US South—in identity-centered and intersectional ways. This allowed us to incorporate a CRT/I lens into all aspects of our methodology as well as analysis (Matsuda, 1991). Indeed, in the course of listening to worker stories, it became very apparent to us that interviewee responses and language shifted depending on the identities of the interviewer, particularly with respect to race, gender and ethnicity. For example, when white-presenting researchers were present in the room some of our Black interviewees expressed wariness of speaking openly about the racial tensions they experienced as it might create discomfort towards these white-presenting researchers. Such occurrences highlight the structural obstacles to collecting—and thus incorporating—Black counternarratives and the need for research designs that create safe spaces for important storytelling by racially and ethnically marginalized workers.

Data Collection

Our data collection is centered around semi-structured interviews through storytelling, participant observation, as well as secondary data sources. We conducted 36 primary interviews with workers, labor organizers, and network activists at BHM1 (Table 1). Additionally, we have conducted over 90 interviews across different Amazon sites in the US for use as background material. Our interviews have been recorded and transcribed, using MAXqda for coding. The interviews were conducted over Zoom, in person, and over the phone between November 2021 and November 2022. An initial list of worker contacts came through the union Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU). We then employed snowball sampling, a common method within qualitative research, to reach a larger sample of hard-to-reach participants (Parker et al., 2019).

Interviews lasted on average between 45 min and one hour. When interviewing workers, we would often start from a very open question such as “what is it like for you to work at Amazon”. Over the course of the interview, we would then cover a range of themes such as their employment background, their working conditions at Amazon, promotions they achieved (or not), whether they had ever felt discriminated against by their employer, the relationship with their supervisor and potentially other managers, as well as their perspective about the presence of law enforcement on the parking lots, about the camera’s in and outside the facility, security personnel within the facility, etc. When interviewing labor organizers and network activists we asked about the union campaign, how they perceive the effect of law enforcement during or after the campaign, their interactions with workers, their interactions with law enforcement, and their perspective about Amazon as an employer.

Table 1. List of Interviewees at BHMI.

Interviewee	Race/ethnicity	Gender
Worker 1	Black	Male
Worker 2	Black	Female
Worker 3	Biracial	Male
Worker 4	White	Male
Worker 5	Black	Female
Worker 6	Black	Male
Worker 7	Black	Female
Worker 8	White	Male
Worker 9	White	Female
Worker 10	Black	Male
Worker 11	White	Male
Worker 12	Black	Male
Worker 13	Black	Female
Worker 14	Black	Male
Worker 15	Black	Female
Worker 16	Black	Male
Worker 17	Black	Female
Worker 18	White	Male
Worker 19	Black	Female
Worker 20	Black	Female
Worker 21	Black	Male
Organizer 1	White	Male
Organizer 2	White	Male
Organizer 3	Black	Male
Organizer 4	Black	Female
Organizer 5	White	Male
Organizer 6	Latinx	Male
Organizer 7	Black	Female
Network activist 1	White	Female
Network activist 2	White	Male
Network activist 3	White	Male
Network activist 4	Latinx	Male
Network activist 5	White	Unspecified
Network activist 6	Black	Female
Network activist 7	White	Female
Network activist 8	White	Unspecified

Members of our research team were in Bessemer for a 7-day field visit in February and five-day visit in March. In addition, between February and March 2022, a member of our research team remained in Bessemer. She

attended union meetings with workers and was deeply embedded in a community organization in Bessemer, volunteering and attending meetings on an almost daily basis. The research team also attended worker-led events, leading to many informal conversations with Amazon workers from Bessemer and beyond. We participated moreover in a union rally in Bessemer, a March with unions and other racial justice organizations in Selma, Alabama, conferences in Chicago and Atlanta with Amazon workers, as well as an Amazon worker fundraising event in New York City. These were used as supplemental data.

Our secondary data included twenty-four National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) hearing documents (i.e., BHM1 worker statements regarding their experiences under Amazon's employment relations, including private and public policing practices), media reporting (i.e., systematic scraping of the New York Times, the Guardian, Vox, and Vice), individual twitter accounts of "open and notorious" Amazon worker activists (e.g., Chris Smalls from ALU), the RWDSU twitter (now X) account, as well as organizational reports and social media statements of groups such as Athena (a large coalition taking on Amazon), the National Employment Law Project (NELP), and Good Jobs First. These secondary data—especially when not specifically covering BHM1—were used as background checks against our findings.

Data Analysis: Inductive Approach to Theory

We took on a "grounded theory" approach, using our data to develop theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Hoddy, 2019; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). When coding our interviews, fieldnotes, and conference notes, we went through each line meticulously using often the terms used by the interviewees. This is in line with 1st order analysis or initial coding (Van Maanen, 1979). Our codes ranged from "metal detectors—padding down", to "being treated as criminal", to "Amazon being pedantic", to "I was afraid", etc. In the next stage, we started to aggregate the codes engaging in 2nd order of coding or axial coding. In this way, we distilled the categories to broader concepts such as "Amazon's treatment of workers", "Amazon workers' emotions", "role of the police", etc. In a last stage, we were able to construct our main theoretical concept of "militarization of employment relations" based on three main sub-master codes: "intensive surveillance", "public and private policing", and "plantation-style management". This process of coding and categorization was carried out through many discussions with the research team, going back and forth between the data and the literature, and adapting our node structure through different iterations and in more abstract theoretical terms (Gioia et al., 2012).

Findings

Intensive Surveillance

It's just the fear-mongering that has taken place for years, just to see security. Security are just like police, and it's a lot of them. You know what I'm saying? You have to walk a fine tooth, and you want to make sure that, hey, I don't have anything. You have to go through that constantly.

...

One lady was on her phone, and [security personnel] said, 'get off your phone.' It was almost like you were in the military, and it was all the time, so it was just hearing stuff like that. What's going on? 'Six feet! Six feet!' They were yelling at us. It was crazy. (W2, BI/W)

It's like from the time you walk in that facility, you are on camera. Once you clock on, you are given your badge, you scan your badge, and you have ten minutes to get to your workstation and sign in and start working. From that point...you are monitored throughout the day... and they time you on everything, time you on how often you scan a part and you're not scanning a part. If you walk away to go to the bathroom, then it shows that you haven't scanned anything in so long, so that's TOT, time off task. They actually have signs. I've taken pictures of them. They actually have signs in certain areas telling you how long it should take you to get from that point to a bathroom and back. It's really ridiculous. (W1, BI/M)

[T]ime spent in the bathroom is monitored, and just last week I went to the bathroom, and one of my managers came in, and he said over the radio, yeah, he's in here. Yeah, I can recognize him by his shoes. I was in the stall. He could see my shoes. He said, yeah, I can recognize him by his shoes. (W4, w/M)

Most workers, across racial groups, reported intensive surveillance throughout the facility. Workers reported that more than 1,100 security cameras were installed in the facility and that it felt impossible to escape them. Moreover, Amazon's highly automated surveillance has the capability of notifying supervisors/managers whenever a worker was away from the workstation for longer than a certain duration of time, or if employees were slower at performing tasks than expected. Such intense and routine surveillance was threatening to workers, because even minor deviations from monitored production expectations often invited harsh criticism from supervisors

who could pull up digital footprints of worker performance at workstations. In fact, Amazon's use of surveillance technology was so extensive as to alert supervisors when workers were in close physical proximity to each other, which had obvious implications for workers in the midst of an active unionization campaign.

During Covid they rolled out something called AI-distance-assist, ... it creates ... sort of circles on a video; so, there's a video feed of the surveillance camera and then superimposes ... little ... green circles underneath everybody, but then when two people get within six feet of each other those circles turn red.

And they claim that is to help identify places where social distancing is problematic, but we also know that they are able to identify who people are on the video footage, either by checking when they scan their badge, we also know they have like complex systems of facial recognition technology that they have at their hand ...

The idea that they can identify everybody based on the surveillance footage definitely suppresses worker organizing. (N2, w/M)

Amazon's surveillance was so burdensome that workers and the union filed an unfair labor practice charge with the NLRB during the first union election held in 2021. In that case, Amazon set the official ballot box on their highly surveilled parking lot and put an opaque tent over it, creating the impression that they (Amazon) rather than the NLRB were controlling the election. In its administrative decision, the NLRB agreed (see NLRB case 10-RC269250) that such pervasive surveillance interfered with the laboratory conditions necessary for a fair election. In their testimony before the NLRB, workers described a sense of fear, stating:

When they told us that they were going to put the mailbox up, it was really just a scare tactic. But when they really put it up, right in front of the facility, right next to the entrance, people were really scared. They felt like they were checking on how people are voting and checking on the vote. Can they see me? Are they keeping tally? Workers who were fearful were scared of being retaliated against or losing their job if they supported the union (NLRB hearing document, B1/f)

Notably, the scope and scale of Amazon's surveillance technology was enhanced by the physical structure of the Bessemer facility, which caused workers, some of whom were formerly incarcerated, to draw direct analogies

to actual prisons and prison experiences. More specifically, one union organizer stated that “[I]n certain departments, there’s a second floor sort of...that [managers] can look down on the floor, and you’re being supervised from up top’ (Or6, Lat/M). A worker similarly reported ‘So you might be in the middle of the counting and you’re gonna see them, you know, they act like they ain’t watching you ... but like, you’ll see them half through about ten times within a 15-min period, and it’s like, what are you looking for? They’ve got cameras, so what’s the point of having all of these [supervisors] walking.’” Such imagery of being policed from above calls to mind existing scholarship on surveillance and the panopticon. Indeed, workers told of their experiences with parallels to a paternalistic and intrusive gaze of a hostile, authoritarian government and prison-like structures and conditions:

I’ve never been to prison or experienced that type of atmosphere but the atmosphere on an Amazon warehouse is very depressing, you get barely [any] sunlight, you don’t go outside, your breaks are fifteen minutes... [I]t felt like ‘Big Brother’ was watching me always because you had cameras on your station. (W18, w/M)

I actually did speak to a [formerly incarcerated] young lady in the break room one day... and I said it feels like we’re in jail, because I couldn’t understand all the stairs, and they’re not short stairs or short floors. They’re long stairs that go way up high. The floors are high. They’re elevated for product, and then I said... ‘it looks just like prison.’ She said, ‘it is’...she said the way it’s set up is just like prison. We have the stairs and we’re able to look over the balcony at everybody who’s down, and that’s what she said, that she was surprised. She was happy to have a job also, but she was surprised at how the structure and the way it was designed was almost like how it looked in prison. (W2, Bl/W)

I feel like it’s a prison in more ways than one. When I go in, I don’t go out to turn and go home [ph]. If I choose to go outside and get fresh air, it seems like it’s almost like you’re punished, because you don’t have enough time to walk outside. (W5, Bl/W)

Indeed, workers equated management and private security personnel’s tendency to walk around inside the warehouse with the policing practiced by prison wardens and correctional officers, known to surveil prisoner movements from the rafters. One worker stated that the turnstiles at the facility entrance were like “a full cage” (W8, w/M). In fact, workers and organizers alike referenced the aforementioned prison panopticon in describing the BHM1:

You walk through the doors, and then you have to pass through some turnstiles that use a keycard...literally looks like you're headed into a prison, and then you're confronted with security...then you get to your station, you get to your department, and most departments are structured like a panopticon... Again, it does feel like you're in a prison... if you're packing, the stations are structured such that your manager can be behind you at any time watching you and you wouldn't be able to know...The degree of control that's exercised over employees is pretty extreme.

Workers are kept apart from each other at their stations. In most departments, you're not really able to speak with your co-workers while on the job. That's what they [are] structured. (W4, w/M)

As referenced in the statement above, the carceral-like environment was heightened by physical isolation while at the workstations. Workplace layout, respondents suggested, built to keep workers separated, prevented workers from social interactions and induced feelings of solitary confinement (see also Gutelius & Theodore, 2019). Such harrowing experiences informed one worker's testimony that the leaving this level of confinement after his shift must be tantamount to the freedom one must feel when released from prison. Yet another worker expressed the impact of workplace confinement in terms that conjure chattel slavery: "A couple of times when I walked out of there, I promise you, I said, oh, I feel free."

Markedly, Black workers tended to speak of the intensity and scale of the surveillance using language that expressed feelings of dehumanization and criminalization:

It's like I have to have a legit reason to move my body, am I not a human being? With rights over my body? When I want to use the bathroom? When I eat? (W17, BI/W)

If you have random security checks, a lot could be going off on them, and security are carrying you around the corner, escorting you around the corner. It does something to you mentally because I don't have anything. I'm afraid. Are you trying to plant something on me or something? Are you trying to accuse something? (W2, BI/W)

[S]o many people were complaining about [security screenings at metal detectors] and felt it was an invasion, that they weren't the ones stealing anything, but here you are stopping me on my way out...and then they do a full body scan to see if you have anything hidden on you (W1, BI/M)

While the scope of performance-tracking surveillance was by itself disquieting for Black workers, the severe consequences for occasional underperformance, the intrusion into workers' bathroom breaks, and restrictions on social interaction with coworkers led to feelings of isolation and vulnerability. As we show next, these feelings were exacerbated by Amazon's policing of their workforce through the use of private security officers and off duty public police officers.

Public and Private Policing

In addition to the pervasive and sometimes unlawful surveillance of workers, Amazon expands its policing in various literal ways. Specifically, Amazon workers shared concerns over the presence of both private security and off-duty public police officers on and off its premises, often describing the workplace as a "jail," in which Amazon threatened the use of police intervention to resolve routine HR matters.

Private security personnel are a routine presence at BHM1 (and most Amazon warehouses and fulfillment centers). They are stationed at the entrance of the facility, next to turnstiles and airport-grade metal detectors through which workers pass at the end of their shifts. Workers are instructed to empty out their pockets while passing through security and use clear backpacks so that security guards can see what was being carried especially coming out of the warehouse. These bags are also run through x-ray machines. Some respondents reported being subjected to random checks particularly during unionization drives or arbitrarily being restricted entry into the facility simply because their coffee cup was the wrong size. Others recounted being ordered to go through full-body scanners, and being asked to take off hoodies, pin up hair, or shake out jackets and scarves to reveal any potentially hidden items as common worker experiences. A few respondents also noted that private security personnel patrolled inside the facility, including in bathrooms in case they suspected stolen items were hidden there. As a result of this treatment, even white workers reported feelings of criminalization:

[I]f you're not wearing your jacket on the way out and you just have it draped over your arm, they make you hold it out and shake it for them as if we were the criminals, as if everyone walking out was a criminal. We're guilty until proven innocent, basically.... It's insulting. It's degrading. I just came in. I've just made this company who knows how much money, ... \$1 million a year total. I'm the one making you money and you're accusing me of stealing from you when you barely pay me anything to survive. Who's the thief? It's not me. (W11, w/M)

In addition to feelings of criminalization, Black workers spoke of experiences of violation, embarrassment, and irritation:

When you walked in, you had to have a badge. If you had a jacket on, they had to search your jacket. If you had it on, they didn't search it, but if you had it off, they searched it, and I was like, that's so backwards to me... They said if you walk out and you've got a jacket on, they search your jacket for products that you've been packing. It would be probably five or six security officers in the perimeter of when you first entered the lobby. (W13, BI/W)

I sort of feel violated ...why would you jeopardize your job for, you know, on something that you can go out and buy. It sorted of irritated me for...I felt bad later, I really did. I understand they have a job to do but they didn't understand I was there for the job, and I would not there be stealing or not be monitored like I am stealing. So, it kind of put a bad taste in my mouth, it really did. (W12, BI/M)

In addition to private, in-house security, Amazon more than occasionally hires off-duty public police officers for various tasks. In fact, when we (the authors) were on site, we spotted at least two police cars on the Amazon parking lot. These were cars of the "Bessemer police" with uniformed officers inside in full officer gear, including their weapons. Our interviewees mentioned an increase in police presence during the unionization campaigns and the union election in 2021, creating an "atmosphere of coercion and intimidation" (see NLRB case 10-RC269250). For example, some workers reported a constant presence of two or more police cars on the parking lot. Police positioned themselves at conspicuous locations, such as near traffic lights or facility entrances. Uniformed police officers were also seen either stationed in parked police cars or patrolling the parking lot with their car flashing lights on, as described by a Black male interviewee:

One police sit at the top and one police sit at the bottom with the cherries and berries lights flashing the whole entire time. It's a sense of intimidation. If you make a mistake or if you get smart with a manager- you have any kind of conflict- you fear that you gonna go to jail. (O3, BI/M)

These police officers were off duty for the city, but still wore uniforms and drove around in official vehicles. Similar to Hatton (2020), Amazon uses the state to discipline its workers, via the police, coercing workers to comply. The presence of law enforcement was intimidating to Black and other workers of color, who face heightened level of policing systemically¹⁴, and personally on site.

I've had a run-in with the police onsite for absolutely no reason. I was just walking to my car to take my break. This is when I used to take my breaks in the car. Here comes the police. They roll up. They park right in front of my car, and they watch me eat the entire time. (W3, biracial/M)

It was reported that Amazon frequently engaged or threatened to engage public law enforcement for rather routine HR matters. For example, workers report that they often, without prior notification, learn that they have been suspended or discharged through Amazon's A-Z app. In such cases, worker badges for entering and exiting the facility were automatically deactivated, barring their entry into the facility and ability to speak with human resource personnel. If workers insist on entering the facility to clarify employment relations matters with HR, they were met with threats of calls to law enforcement for trespassing—a threat realized at least once. A seasoned organizer describes aptly the frequent, and arguably disproportionate management response to rather innocuous worker demands:

I have spoken to a few workers before the election last year, and...when they go to work and their badge is not working and they keep trying because 'hey, I don't know why my badge is not working, I need to talk to somebody and find out why' and they would tell them 'If you don't leave, the police will come.' They would see the security of the police around, then they know what it means – they have no choice. Even though they need the job, and they need to know why their badge is not working, they don't have a choice but to walk away. It's either that or they risk, you know, being threatened, for you know, trespassing. (O4, BI/F)

I even had a young man that got arrested at the facility because he was not supposed to be there. But he didn't know that! The only thing he knew was that his card was not working so he could not access the entryway into the building. The only thing he was asking is that he wanted to talk to someone because he had kids, and he could not just go home without making money. That wasn't an option. He told me they told him, 'Well you stay right here, we'll be right back.' And when he turned around, the police was standing behind him. And the police took this young man to jail for trespassing, embarrassed him in front of all of his co-workers. They took him to jail when he was an employee of Amazon. He had not been terminated. We come to find out that they had him on a paid leave. But they still took him to jail. (O3, BI/M)

'[W]hat I have never seen is workers being arrested for things that are management issues, like managerial issues resulting in trespassing, I've never seen that. (O1, w/M)

All told, Amazon's integrated public/private policing practices, including the organizational use of private security and the engagement of the state's police—especially with the use of uniformed off-duty officers—for rather routine human resource matters and loss prevention created a prison-like environment of intimidation and criminalization that was particularly threatening to Black workers. The impact of the racialization of these policing practices, as well as the blurring of the line between state and employer bodily control, is amplified when combined with what we describe as a plantation-style management.

Plantation-Style Management

I've worked across the South in the worst working conditions, the worst rural poultry, the most oppressed workforce in the country, and largely immigrant and Black, and I've never seen workers this afraid of their work environment, this robotic in their actions, this patted down to go on lunch break. It truly is a dystopia when you are out there, and it's intentional right? (O2, w/M)

The worker fear described by this white union organizer— and the intensified surveillance and policing detailed by Amazon workers—are consistent with Rosenthal's concept of plantation-style management, in which exhaustive labor control and surveillance are central to employment relationships (2018). In fact, it was common for Black Amazon workers to explicitly use the word “plantation” in describing conditions that evoked feelings of dehumanization, infantilization, racialized favoritism, and tokenism, with an emphasis on how certain workplace practices violated basic principles of dignified treatment and standards of decent work.

The conditions there are absolutely horrific. I likened it to slavery, because they care more about quotas and meeting production rates than actually caring about us as human beings inside there. I feel more like a number. I feel as if I'm replaceable and that they actually do not care about my well-being and the well-being of my co-workers. (W3, biracial/M)

[H]aving that ambiance of feeling like someone's property or someone, you know, is making me do things out of my will and I have no choice, a slave you know? (W17, BI/W)

[T]hey try to basically work you like modern slaves during peak season... I think of it definitely like a slave mentality work environment... where you're very limited, on how many bathroom breaks they ding you, if you go to the bathroom too long, if you take [too long] bathroom breaks. (W19, BI/F)

I'm not a machine and neither are my coworkers, and we are not cattle, which is a whole other conversation in the South. (W17, BI/W)

Such conditions and experiences are traditional to a region in which white owners historically had extreme control over Black labor. These expressions of lack of dignity and humanity fall in line with recent labor studies on enslavement and labor controls, in which workers feel they were treated as machines as management extracts the maximum output from them (see also Shahadat & Uddin, 2022).

Additionally, Black workers expressed feelings of bodily control via infantilization and racialized tone policing, which were often accompanied by feelings of regret, exhaustion and resentment, for example:

I regret even going to work at Amazon...and now I feel like I've taken a 15-year step back as far as working, because it's almost like I'm in elementary school with the way some things go and the way things are, the way they run things, the pay, the way you're watched. I'm 59 years old. I don't need nobody telling me how long it's going to take me to go to the bathroom and get back, or if I can go to the bathroom. It's totally different than what people think Amazon is and what it is to work at Amazon. (W1, BI/M)

In a recounting of an instance of tone policing, a Black, male worker described similar frustration with a young, white, female who held authority over his work:

I had an incident with a PA [Process Assistant], and I felt like it was racist... My machine was down, and it was broken, and they needed to fix it, and so by the time someone came over there and fixed it, she told me to log off my machine, and she told me to go to stand up, and she put me on another machine, so by the time she told me that, the guy fixed the machine. I asked her, can I just stay at my machine now since they already fixed it? She said, no, just go do what I told you to do.

Researcher: In that tone?

In that tone. That made me feel... I'm going to tell you exactly the way it made me feel... Like 'negro, get back to that machine like I told you.' Oh, my God... I looked back at her, and I kept walking, and something told me, 'No'... and I said, 'what you just told me, how you just came at me, I took that racist, and I didn't like that'. She said, 'well, if you took it like that, I didn't mean to say it like that'. I said, 'how you meant it, because the way you told me', and I told her exactly how I felt, I said, 'I felt like you just told me, n*gger, get back at that station. Do what I told you to do.' (W6, BI/M)

Black women also expressed frustration with infantilization and tone policing by white supervisors:

So, this was the side that got into people's heads, and they would become like Napoleon or something, like Napoleon the ruler you know, in France, or like Hitler in a sense, like so domineering and so in charge and authoritative, like 'I told you to do this.

...

[A supervisor] said, 'Don't you hear me talking to you?' and I said 'Listen, I don't know who you are, I've never seen you in my life. You are not going to speak to me that way. If you want to talk to me, talk to me like a person.' That's it. And then I turned away and kept talking to the other guy.

...

I'm almost 70 years old and someone who is 20 years old is talking to you like they're your mother, telling you what to do, reprimanding you in ways that you probably don't talk to you own kids like that. Why are you talking to this woman you don't know like that, over a job that pays you shit? (W17, BI/W)

In addition to tone policing and infantilization which "prioritized the comfort of the privileged person in the situation over the oppression of the disadvantaged person" (Oluo, 2019, p. 205), Black workers also reported suspicions of racial preferences and favoritism in hiring and promotions.¹⁵ In fact, such testimonies were frequent amongst Black workers:

You've got all whites in management. That plant is 90% African American... When a white new hire comes in, I give them two to three months...They're moving up. I'm still a picker... Every time I put in for a transfer, they put a write-up on me, and I can't transfer out of there, every single time. (W6, BI/M).

I see black PAs training white men who are brought in from the outside to be in leadership positions...I tell them, especially for the PAs, you're fighting against us, but do you even see what's happening around you? This place is predominately Black and brown people. Why are there so many white men in leadership? They use their weight and power to try to control or intimidate the employees. (W2, BI/W)

Hence, similar to plantations or historically indentured labor systems, Black workers felt they were barred or prohibited from promotions no matter how hard they worked. Some were even required to train their white colleagues who then moved up in rank. But, even when Black workers were hired as supervisors or placed into PA roles, it was frequently believed

that Amazon was weaponizing Black leaders against subordinate Black workers.

We see more Black men walking around. Now we feel like you put them in place to control us, to convince us that we don't need a union. It's ridiculous, and it really makes you angry, because if you're someone who really studies, you see what you're doing. (W2, BI/W)

They do [now] have a lot of Black managers and PAs, but they are—how can I put it nicely—yes people. They have the position. They want to keep that position, so they are yes ... They're calling [Black management] “Uncle Toms.”¹⁶ I know you understand what I'm saying... That's exactly what they call them, but some of them are actually pro-union, but they cannot be vocal about it. (W1, BI/M)

I had a conversation with [a Black supervisor]. I said, ‘they just used you as a scapegoat,’ because I just felt like he was a young Black man, so they put you over it, at that time. I felt like he was the token Black... [Amazon] think they can [get] somebody that looks like you...that it's relatable. (W5, BI/W)

Moreover, it was common to hear Black workers express feelings that Amazon was disingenuous and performative about race, and that it exploited their Black identity in mocking ways to try to extract maximum productivity out of them.

[On] Juneteenth, I know they gave out fried chicken. That is the most racist thing on the planet, and then they gave out a T-shirt that says Black Employee Network [BEN]. (W3, Biracial/M)

When asked to clarify Black worker opinions about BEN, the Black affinity group that Amazon started, another worker stated:

“I didn't feel it like they were doing it to be more inclusive, to basically be sensitive to everyone's ethnicity and racial background. I felt it more like a mockery. During the Black week, the music is like they only play the hip-hop, the rap, so is this what you all perceive all African Americans to be like?” (W19, BI/F).

Given the racial connotations of “Uncle Ben,”¹⁷ another worker noted having “had so much trouble trying to explain this to ...non-Black people at work, about Uncle Ben. They said it was just an acronym. I said, no. There's a hidden message”. (W1, BI/M). Indeed, we observed racial

differences in interviews about the offensiveness of the affinity group. For example, a white worker we talked to testified to the following with regards to BEN:

“I don’t have a problem with it. Just my opinion, I just think it was during February. It was celebrating Black employees, but I have heard one guy in here, and I’ll quote what he called them. He called them negro shirts, and I said, what do you mean, and he said, these are negro shirts, and I said, well, I have one. He said, this is what this is. I said, no, it’s to celebrate. Well, that’s the way you take it. I said, but they were given out in February, and they were a Black employee. He said, well, how come they don’t have white employee [network]? I said, well, I don’t know. I don’t know.” (W9, w/F).

In sum, Amazon’s well-documented surveillance and labor control practices and policies, combined with its private/public policing of workers and its near-carceral work environment created a work environment that Black workers found so dehumanizing as to routinely refer to the workplace as a “plantation,” and a “prison” where they feel like “slaves.”

Discussion

Our usage of the term militarization brings focus to the merging of state and employer labor control. It is through the lens of Black Amazon workers, that we illuminate the impact of the blurring of the power of the state and employer with respect to bodily control. Specifically, Amazon’s policing practices at its Bessemer facility reflect a form of labor control that consists of three main features: the use of intensive surveillance, the engagement of public and private police, and the employment of plantation-style management. We assert that it is especially through their cumulative effect that Amazon has “militarized” its employment relations, which results in heightened, regimented control over workers that demands near-carceral obedience. Importantly, such conditions, particularly given the historical (over) policing of Black labor, has led to keen experiences of bodily control within this majority Black southern workforce. We employ the concept of militarization also to refer to Amazon’s integration of military-style dimensions into its organizational practices that mimic equipment, language and patterns of control commonly and historically utilized by the state.

The cumulative effect of the scale and scope of surveillance technology and practices, the integration of private security and uniformed off-duty police officers for routine employment relations, and other assertions of control present in its “plantation-style” management equate to a

contemporary organizational “frontlash” in policing and repression. What results is a form of regimented worker control over all Amazon warehouse workers, with deeper experiences of control in Black workers. By grounding our analysis in storytelling, we have illuminated the racialized impact of Amazon’s practices, which have left Black workers feeling intimidated, violated, fearful, criminalized, infantilized and even enslaved. In the workers’ own words, the Bessemer fulfillment center is a modern plantation, located just miles away from former plantations¹⁸ in the deep, anti-labor South. Given the demographics and regional context of the facility, this is a critical case for understanding the impact of racialized surveillance and labor control on a supermajority Black workforce, particularly in the U.S south.

Implications and Conclusion

[Amazon’s behavior] is the same behavior as a slave master. Beating his slaves, knowing they have no way around it, even if there are so many slaves on that plantation. And they don’t know this one piece of knowledge, is that if we all get up and stop doing what they say to do and turn on them, because out of this entire plantation there’s 800 slaves and there’s only three masters. If we got up and banded together and use our strength in numbers, we can make a difference and that’s the information that Amazon doesn’t want their workers to have. (W17, BI/W)

Our study contributes to surveillance and worker control literature by focusing on the organizational integration of military-style practices by one of the U.S.’s top employers, highlighting the importance of placing surveillance and public/private policing practices in specific historical, geographic, and demographic contexts. As the influence of employers such as Amazon grows on businesses worldwide that emulate “the Amazon Way” of managing supply chains and workforces, it is critical that we understand the potentially heightened impact of such practices on society’s vulnerable, and exploitable, identity groups. Engaging the storytelling of Black workers in an important industry in a predominantly Black workplace located in a Black suburb of Birmingham, Alabama—one of the most important historical sites of U.S. racial history—we employ CIRT as a framework through which to understand the depths of contemporary labor control on an identity group with a long history of control by private employers (and the state), routinely enforced by the U.S. military at key historical junctures.

More specifically, we offer a deeper understanding of the racialized impact of intense surveillance technology and equipment; the use of carceral and martial structures, values and language; the engagement of control centers

and squads (i.e., private security and public police); and other “patterns of activity modeled after the military such as in the areas of intelligence [and] supervision” (Kraska, 2007, p. 503). Such practices are employed to recreate a carceral-level of control normally associated with the state (Gamal, 2016), which are even more coercive when understood within the larger context of historically racialized labor and policing (see also, Browne, 2015).

We highlight two important implications, one for theory and one for practice, and point towards potential directions for future research: First, had we not engaged CIRT to re-center the narrative and theoretical framework from Black workers’ perspective, we would have missed the specific—arguably more coercive—ways in which Black workers experience labor control. That is to say that if we had not (1) challenged the presumed race-neutrality of the structures, materials, management and operations, (2) explicitly focused on the racial demographics of the facility and (3) intentionally grounded worker experiences in their regional and historical contexts, we would lack a complete understanding of the full danger of such practices. Analyzing the data through a CIRT framework thus provided a deeper, socio-structural understanding of the ways in which centuries of state policing and militarization work with organizational worker control to oppress Black workers inside and outside of the workplace. It is when we centered storytelling in this southern, Black workforce that we could understand the effect of combining the well-studied panopticon with private, public and racial tone policing on what workers describe as a modern plantation. This is certainly not a claim that Black workforces in the south are the only group subject to military-style worker control. Rather, we believe that intra- and inter-categorical research design (Lee & Tapia, 2021) is necessary whenever a subordinate identity group is overrepresented.¹⁹

Second, and relatedly, the strong regional identity held by workers suggests that future research should focus on whether there are regional, national or global differences in employer practices (including variances in its integration of military-style technology, language and means of commanding control), as well as the nature of the relationships between the employer and state enforcement institutions (such as public police departments). In the case of Amazon in Bessemer, there was a perception that the employer’s control extended outside the enterprise. Thus, this perceived intimate relationship between the state and the employer blurred the line between state and employer control, with consequences for worker feelings of bodily control.

As a final note, while we didn’t specifically focus on the effect of unionization on worker experiences, we acknowledge it as an important point for future research. In fact, this case study took place in the context of a long-litigated union campaign during which public police cars were on site,

allegedly as part of an anti-union effort. Thus, notwithstanding our primary data establishing that public police are more likely to be engaged in the region known as “the Black belt,” the scale and scope of their presence might be heightened during active unionization efforts. Building on Kraska (2007), future research therefore might interrogate more deeply whether an organization’s use of military-style control tactics intensifies worker control in such cases.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests


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Notes

1. Here we use the word Black to describe workers who are descendants of enslaved Africans in the United States. We note this with importance in order to acknowledge and preserve sub-group variances between Black workers in this empirical

case and Black workers who are recent immigrants from outside of the U.S. In particular, though not included in this particular study, there are Amazon fulfillment centers in Minnesota for which the Black population is almost exclusively comprised of East African workers across a spectrum of migrant statuses.

2. The concepts of surveillance and policing are closely linked to each other. As critical race scholars have stated, surveillance goes beyond a mere monitoring of worker performance and behavior and is closely linked to policing, or a historically and racially rooted, coercive-based process of exerting power and control over human bodies (e.g., Browne, 2015).
3. The authors report through records of the Amazon warehouse in Staten Island (JFK8) that Black Amazon workers are 50 per cent more likely to be fired than their white co-workers.
4. Browne illustrates this by providing an example of discriminatory treatment at airport security in which Black women's hair is searched for explosives, thereby reproducing racist, historical classifications of how black hair is 'dangerous' or "capable of being employed to smuggle contraband weapons or for hiding prohibited objects" (Browne: 138).
5. While our concept of 'militarization' is meant to describe more broadly the intensification of surveillance and policing, others have used this concept to show how police integrated military equipment and strategies to violently suppress crime (e.g., Go, 2020 shows the deep racialized history of police militarization in the US through its imperial and colonial origins).
6. While some scholars have to a certain extent centered class in explaining the history of policing in the US (Gourevitch, 2015; Harring & Ray, 1999; Mitrani, 2013), we consider the emergence of policing in the US deeply steeped in racial hierarchies, transcending a class analysis, and resulting in a form of racialized control (see also, Allen-Bell, 1997; Browne, 2015).
7. This is a reference to contemporary forms of Black experience in a time of mass incarceration set forth by Michelle Alexander in her book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*.
8. We do not have space here, nor do we intend to enter debates on racial capitalism and/or abolition democracy. However, we note here that McCoy (2022) points to the key influence of W.E.B. Du Bois' Reconstruction-era conceptualization of "abolition-democracy" as a useful frame for understanding the links between militarization and racial capitalism as a form of public and private control over Black workers against which Black worker organizations fought. For more discussion of the debates over past and present constructions of abolition democracy, see e.g. Lester (2021). For more on racial capitalism see (Robinson, 1983) or for more recent accounts (Pinto, 2022).
9. "Precisely that which is advantageous to those corporations, elected officials, and government agents who have obvious stakes in the expansion of these systems

- begets grief and devastation for poor and racially dominated communities in the United States and throughout the world.” (Gamal, 2016, p. 1001, citing Angela Davis).
10. Public record requests under relevant freedom of information laws in all 291 jurisdictions where Amazon fulfillment centers were located nationwide yield records from 198 facilities.
 11. With ‘Black belt’ we refer to the region in the US South from Virginia to Texas that historically consisted of a majority African American population working as enslaved people on cotton plantations.
 12. For example, we found evidence of off-duty relationships in 50% of facilities in the deep South (AL, GA, KY, NC, SC, and Jacksonville, Florida) and 23% of facilities in the rest of the country (Authors report 2022).
 13. At the time of writing this paper, that election remains in dispute.
 14. “Black and brown people are incarcerated at much higher rates than white people. America has approximately 2.3 million people in federal, state, and local prisons and jails, according to a 2020 report from the nonprofit the Prison Policy Initiative. According to a 2018 report from the Sentencing Project, Black men are 5.9 times as likely to be incarcerated as white men and Hispanic men are 3.1 times as likely.” *The Harvard Gazette* (accessible at <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2021/02/solving-racial-disparities-in-policing/>).
 15. It is not surprising that racial stratifications are reproduced at the workplace (Ray, 2019) so that even when white workers are numerically in the minority, they still reap instrumental benefits given their status and advantageous position in society (Williams, 1992; Wingfield & Chavez, 2020).
 16. Referring to someone as an "Uncle Tom" is regarded as an insult, typically used to describe a Black person seen as excessively obedient or deferential to white people.
 17. For some workers we interviewed, the acronym BEN invoked the racial stereotyping of ‘Uncle Ben’ as it was long visible on rice packages, invoking racist myths of submissive and cheerful enslaved people.
 18. The location of Amazon’s BHM1 fulfillment center in Bessemer is located less than 5 miles from at least two former plantations, the McAdory Plantation House (<https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=215904>) and the Owen House (<https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=215730>), now referred to as West Jefferson County “pioneer homes,” which are both historical landmarks maintained by the West Jefferson County Historical Society.
 19. Here, the Bessemer workforce is reported to be over 80 percent African-American. However, in other fulfillment centers such as outside of Minneapolis, MN, the workforce is supermajority East African, with very heavy representation of Muslim women. In those cases, the necessary historical, regional and migratory context would lead to deeper socio-structural understandings of the impact of otherwise facially-neutral policies and practices.

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