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Abstract

This thesis examines the political intervention of the Transport Workers Union Local 100 into the issue of funding for the New York City subway system to investigate the communicative effects of labor union rhetoric. By focusing on a crisis in NYC mass transit popularly described as the Summer of Hell, I demonstrate the ability of labor union leaders to mediate the experience of the transit crisis with a political system that preserves the role of decision-making elites. I use the methodological tools of rhetorical criticism and qualitative inquiry into organizational discourse to trace the construction of common-sense ideas about the political role of workers to the sensemaking practices that rank-and-file union members use to understand the crisis. Drawing on an advertisement campaign used by the transit union and field interviews with union members, I argue that the strategy of union leaders acted to promote passivity within their membership and depoliticize the role of transit labor. This work intervenes in the study of social movements, organizational communication, and Marxist theories of consciousness by emphasizing the persuasive capacities of control that organizational leaders have over their membership. Finally, this thesis argues for a detailed analysis of the process by which workers come to a sense of their own agency and the obstacles that work to prevent the transformation of consciousness.

Communication and Crisis in NYC Transit Labor

by

Brandon M. Daniels

B. A. University of Texas at Austin, 2016

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in
Communication and Rhetorical Studies

Syracuse University
May 2018

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Acknowledgements

Thanks y'all.

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This thesis is dedicated to St. Clair Richards-Stephens; an MTA employee killed in 2018 by the unsafe working conditions within the subway system. We shared the same year of birth, 23 years ago. And while I was writing this thesis, he died fixing the subway.

Introduction

New York City's mass public transit system experienced a crisis in 2017. The miles of tunnels, railways, and stations beneath the city have surpassed their life span. While most of the subway has been replaced and remade since its birth in 1904, a significant portion of the subway's infrastructure dates to the 1930s. Malfunctioning signals, rotting rails, and rust-ridden trains are causing persistent problems for the smooth-functioning of the city's necessary transportation medium. Funding for maintenance and a system overhaul is needed to stop the decline into dysfunction, but decades of debt and austerity budgets have starved the subway. To overcome the crisis facing public transit in NYC, there must be a political force that can fight for the proper levels of investment in the subway. I am interested in using my research to understand the political role played by transportation workers in the struggle for another world. The workers who drive buses, operate the subways, and perform maintenance hold a tremendous amount of power. Individually, each worker only operates the machinery owned by the public to perform a task in the public's interest. Collectively, transit workers have the capacity to respond to the pressing needs of a precarious planet. If our future is one that requires the existence of publicly owned mass transit, then the already-existing organized labor force should play a central role in the further development of transportation systems. Transportation labor unions have a unique capacity for transforming the conditions of human mobility, and I seek to understand the relationship between transit labor and social change.

This project examines the communicative role played by labor union organizations in responding to crises in the workplace and investigating the persuasive role played by organizations in transforming the consciousness of workers embroiled in an on-going crisis. I use the concepts of rhetorical mediation, common-sense, and collective sensemaking to investigate

the communicative practices utilized by organizational leaders in the Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100. At the heart of this thesis project is a concern for social movement strategy. What type of strategy is necessary to stop the attack on public services and to reverse the trend of neoliberal austerity for the reconstruction of a safe, efficient, and just mass transit system? Who will be the agents of this strategy? How will these people be persuaded to take action? This thesis project directly examines the role of consciousness in either enabling or constraining the construction of a belief in the agency of ordinary people. Rhetorical mediation is a persuasive tool that can be used by social movement organizations to transform common-sense notions of political possibility. The goal of this thesis is to develop a theoretical account of the communicative processes that workers use to collectively make sense of a social and political crisis, and the potential for a crisis to lead to social change. I argue that the strategies utilized by labor unions interested in social change have consequences for the consciousness of organizational members.

This introduction will lay the foundation for the historical, political, and theoretical systems within which my project participates. After providing background on my object of study, the crisis in New York City's mass transit, I explore the historical context that precipitated the current situation. Next, I explain the methodological needs that the object of my research requires. My selection of organized labor in the public sector transit industry is motivated by an interest in the social reproduction of urban workforces. By attending to the organizational discourse of a labor union through multiple methods of community inquiry, I develop a theoretical account of the process of mediation for transit worker consciousness. Finally, I review the relevant literatures that provide my research project with disciplinary coherence and gesture towards the political implications for this study. My project demonstrates the potential

for communication research to select strategic sites of resistance and contribute to an understanding of how labor movement activism can politically alter the terrain of struggle. I argue that the union's response to the crisis in New York City transit relied on an elite theory of power that actively worked to constrain rank-and-file members ability to make sense of their own agency. The transformation in consciousness was not one that led to mass participation, recruitment, and political engagement; but instead, the mediation of the transit crisis by TWU Local 100 resulted in a depoliticization of transit labor and a promotion of passivity.

The Summer of Hell

The New York City subway system, operated by the Metro Transit Authority (MTA), is the largest mass transit system in the world. In 2017, the annual subway ridership reached a record volume of 1.76 billion customers, which is about 6 million people every day ("NYC Subway Action," 2017). In the densely populated city, mass transit is a necessary lifeline that allows for the millions of city inhabitants to move long distances throughout the city without owning an automobile. For the city's working-class inhabitants, the subways system is a fundamental requirement for their livelihood. Without a mass transit system, the businesses throughout the city would be without a work force. Furthermore, without a mass transit system, the customers who spend their money at stores would be unable to contribute to the economic commerce. The city of New York could not function without its subway system, for its streets already experience overcrowding and congestion.

Nothing demonstrates the economic value that mass transit systems add to urban environments more than instances where transit workers participate in collective strike action. On December 20, 2005, the buses and trains of New York City stood still. During the busiest shopping week of the year, the transit workers democratically decided to fight for better working

conditions by refusing to perform their necessary labor. Millions of commuters were forced to find alternative methods of transportation. City officials had planned some contingency plans, but the city was heavily reliant upon the trains and bus systems for the flow of labor. The coercive power of the transit strike massively disrupted the normal commerce of the city. New York City officials estimated the strike caused over \$400 million in economic damages on the first day (Pesca, 2005). Not only was the MTA impacted by the lack of transit fare revenues, but the entire city's economic activities were disrupted by the inability of commuters to reach their workplaces. New York City, the symbolic heart of global capitalism, was incapacitated by an organized effort of low-wage-earning public sector workers.

While the short-lived disruption of the city's activities for workers fighting for higher wages and better benefits enrages the city's elites, the major culprit in the long-term disruption of transit services occurs due to a lack of investment into the maintenance and improvement of the subway's infrastructure. In 2017, the decaying infrastructure culminated in a state of emergency for the subway system that caused a series of delays and train derailments. This crisis came to be colloquially known as the Summer of Hell (Rose, 2017). While the occasional train derailing from the tracks causes physical harm to the commuters on board, the delays are a quotidian problem that fuels a city-wide anger towards the MTA. The millions of people who rely on the subway for work have been forced to add additional time to their commute. A survey of 1,200 commuters released by the New York City Comptroller Office stated that 74 percent of employed riders experienced being late for work as a result of the delays. For the most vulnerable of these working-class riders, 18 percent experienced a disciplinary backlash from their employer and 13 percent experienced a loss of wages (Stringer, 2017). Furthermore, the anticipation of delays by commuters has resulted in an overcrowding of subway cars and

terminals. People began cramming themselves in the small corridors which often inhibits the doors from closing, resulting in even more delays.

The Summer of Hell term references the bubbling outrage of commuters aggravated with the management of the transit system, but these problems are in no way new. Decades of declining investment in infrastructure precipitated the current situation. Many of the systems used to monitor train activity and communicate signals are reliant upon World War II-era technologies, which the MTA has estimated it will take over 50 years to replace. As early as 2005 the neglect in public investment was criticized by an author writing for *New York* magazine,

Money for basic maintenance has been drying up: For the past four years, the funds for keeping the subway in what is quaintly called a “state of good repair” have been 29 percent lower than the MTA’s own needs assessments, according to an analysis by the Regional Plan Association. This translated into \$483 million less for the relay-and-stoplight system; \$685 million less for repairing and modernizing the power substations that deliver electricity to the trains; and \$668 million less for line equipment, which includes ventilation, lighting, and pumps for the tunnels. The stations themselves got \$639 million less. What makes these shortfalls so ominous is that the New York subway is always inherently falling apart—rigorous maintenance is the only defense against the natural pull of entropy. A constant infusion of money is necessary just to ward off the forces of decline, and yet the system is continually cheaped out by the state (Thompson, 2005).

Since the publication of this article, there has been a nominal increase in funding allocated towards the MTA with a \$64 million dollar increase in annual funding in 2016 compared to the

2014-2015 budget. Unfortunately, this increase has been virtually invalidated by the \$25.5 billion debt that the MTA has accrued in an attempt to rehabilitate the one-hundred-year-old subway system, and payments on this debt take the toll of \$2 billion per year (Rosenthal et al., 2017). With a growing ridership, the complex maintenance of the intricate subway system is insufficient to meet the needs of the city. On top of the costly repair of decaying infrastructure, massive investment needs to be made to expand the capacity for intra-city mobility.

After New York Governor Andrew Cuomo officially declared a state of emergency for the city subway system, an advisory board comprised of MTA leadership, transit experts, community representatives, and labor union leadership developed a comprehensive “NYC Subway Action Plan.” In this report that was released to the public on July 25, 2017, the advisory board has created a two-phase plan to stabilize the current system and begin the process of modernizing the antiquated subway. Phase one addresses the short term needs of an active commuting population by increasing track and signal maintenance, increasing car reliability, and bettering communications with customers. According to the analysis of this report, 79 percent of the causes of delay will be addressed by the operations of phase one. Meanwhile, phase two contains the plans for modernizing the infrastructure and technology used by the subway system. This will include the production of new subway cars, the replacement of the World War II signaling system. The advisory board has determined that an immediate investment of \$456 million for operating costs and \$380 million is needed to cover capital investment for phase one. In the long term, \$8 billion is needed to fund the phase two plans to bring the subway into the modern age. These recommendations and requests for funding are by no means guaranteed.

Advisory boards with every transit expert on Earth could be assembled and tasked to solve the current crisis, but unless a political force exists to demand funding is allocated to

investments in infrastructure, every action plan will be action-less. The characteristics of this political force may contain a diverse set of elements; from legislative compromises and back room deals made by the city's elite, to social movement protests from the millions of subway riders. While every contribution towards achieving the necessary financial resources is worthy of analysis, I am interested in the unique role played by the workers that currently operate and repair the mass transit system.

Prior to understanding the formation of a political consciousness that can drive these workers to militantly demand greater investments, I am guided by questions of how these workers make sense of and communicate the contours of this crisis. More specifically, how does the already organized workforce relate to the Summer of Hell? How do these workers talk about and discuss the historical problems with declining investment? How have the general public's language choices found their way into the vernacular of transit work? Do these workers agree with the conclusions of the NYC Subway Action Plan? These basic questions about the communication decisions made by transit workers can provide a great deal of insight into the necessary preconditions for organized labor to politically cohere around the battle for public transit services.

Object of Study

In this project, I engage in a criticism of an advocacy campaign conducted by New York City's Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100, and focus specifically on the historical moment described as the Summer of Hell. As example of organizational discourse, I examine advertisements produced and circulated by the union in conjunction with interviews that I conducted with rank-and-file workers. TWU Local 100 is the labor union that represents the members that work for the MTA, and its primary *raison d'être* is to engage in collective

bargaining for its members. While labor unions are traditionally conceptualized as limited to the economic realm of fighting for workplace protections, higher wages, better benefits, the TWU has historically intervened in the political realm of transit advocacy. By treating the TWU as an organizational entity on the terrain of this crisis, I examine the communicative methods by which the labor union is constituted as an organization that represents the interests of its members and the NYC transit system. The Summer of Hell could be understood as a crisis within the MTA, and by tending to the MTA employees' discussion of this crisis, I will investigate the opportunities and constraints created by the current historical situation. While discussions of the crisis could be viewed as organizationally internal to the MTA, giving attention to the TWU provides a method to study the role of organized labor in the constitution of this crisis. For the purpose of this study, MTA employees and TWU members are essentially synonymous. This labor union will take the spotlight within my research, because as a focal object, unions provide a means to study the intersection of working class consciousness and the historical construction of neoliberal capitalism.

Two sub-disciplines of communication studies inform and structure the methods I will use in my study: organizational communication and rhetorical criticism. As I will later explore in my review of relevant academic literatures, organizational communication has a long history of investigating the patterns of discourse in workplace environments. It has developed a litany of methods, theories, and empirical standards that attend to the micro and macro ways of speaking that give any organization a sense of coherence and purpose. From the textual studies of corporate press releases to ethnographic accounts of workroom chatter, organizational communication has methodologically studied the wide variety of factors that produce the organizations that structure the livelihoods of its members. By attending to the communicative

processes that constitute organizational life, this field of scholarship is essential for understanding the relationship between the transit workers and the TWU. While organizational communication provides tools for documenting and analyzing discussions of the transit crisis, rhetoric's disciplinary boundaries venture into the transformative possibilities of persuasion. Fundamentally, organizing requires persuasion. Union organizers must persuade employees, usually through symbolic action, to join and participate in a union. For my study, however, rhetoric lends itself useful through its capacity for critique. This project does not intend to merely interpret the communication of transit workers, but to approach an understanding of the rhetorical process of how political consciousness is changed. Persuasion is the means by which transit workers may come to understand their union as an avenue for overcoming the transit crisis.

To critically examine the advocacy campaign waged by the union, I examine a series of advertisements produced by the TWU. The political conflict between the Mayor, the Governor, and organizer labor was waged within the NYC public sphere in the form of advertisements, press conferences, rallies, and photo-ops. As the MTA Subway Action plan expressed, the TWU and MTA believe that the best solution is for fifty percent share of the funds comes from the state of New York and the other fifty percent to come from the city of New York. However, the Mayor has not agreed to these terms. As a response, the TWU leadership initiated a series of advertisements to pressure the Mayor to increase public investment. These documents give a sense of how the TWU has created organizational cohesion and a political direction for its members to follow. By studying these texts in conjunction with information garnered from the workers themselves, I approach the process by which organizational communication shapes the contours of the political battle for funding of the transit system. Comparison between the texts

produced by the leadership of the union and the knowledge generated from conversation with the rank-and-file members will demonstrate how messages contained in texts reflect or alienate the perspective of its members.

Another purpose of this research project is to document and analyze the language used by workers within the TWU to describe the problems they face in their work within the transit systems of New York City. In December of 2017, I conducted fieldwork research in NYC through formal interviews with subway operators, maintenance workers, station agents, and union staffers. Through an established connection with union leadership, I reached out to rank-and-file members prior to a local meeting at the TWU Local 100 office in downtown Brooklyn. After approaching a worker with details of my research project, I escorted them into a private office to conduct a recorded semi-structured interview. Using a list of pre-prepared questions, I weaved in-and-out of building rapport with the worker and asking questions about the crisis in a standardized manner. Each interview started with the question, “Have you heard the term Summer of Hell before?” From this point, I would ask the worker to detail where they came across the phrase, and how the transit crisis concretely affected their workplace activity. Eventually, I handed each worker participant color copies of the four advertisements produced by their union, and I asked about their opinion of the campaign’s effectiveness. Finally, I ended each interview with the question, “Do you think your union has represented your interests?”

These interviews serve as immanent oral histories that recall the Summer of Hell and the years of transit neglect that produced the current situation. I am specifically focusing on how the workers that operate the transit systems within NYC communicate the problems associated with decrepit infrastructure, and if they have a vision for potential solutions. The communication processes that are used to represent the transit crisis are essential for conceptualizing political

possibilities of the transit workforce. I will analyze the language used in interviews with transit workers to understand what role communication plays in constituting the possibility of change within the consciousness of transit workers. Searching for the discursive representations of agency in the interview responses will provide empirical evidence for levels of political consciousness. Through interview methods that foreground the participant's relationship to their union, the goal will be to examine the interview data for communicative expressions of agency through the TWU.

The perspective of the workers whose wage depends on the regular function of the subway is situated within an epistemological vantage point for grasping the totality of the crisis. If a transformation does occur in the NYC subway system, these are the people that will perform the labor necessary for an overhaul. Their experience of the effects of the transit crisis in terms of the pressure it places on their work, the increased demands made by customers and management, and the stress created by the delays reveals a contradiction in their position. In a single instance, they are a subject that actively works to overcome the problems associated with the transit crisis and a commodified object defined by their wage-relation to the MTA. As such, prioritizing the worker's voice on the matter places their subjectivity at the center of consideration.

Hungarian Marxist Georg Lukács (1968) argues that the experience of the proletariat, or working class, has a unique capacity to recognize the system of exploitation that undergirds all labor, "Historical materialism grows out of the 'immediate, natural' life-principle of the proletariat; it means the acquisition of total knowledge of reality from this one point of view." (Lukacs, 1968, p. 21). Workers are alienated from their labor as commodities that are bought and sold on the market of labor, and this results in an objectification of their personhood. Such a position is instrumental in recognizing the contradiction that exists between the lived experience

of exploitation and consciousness about the system that produces exploitation. This contradiction generates a potentially agentive position for conversations and education on the capitalist totality. For this reason, inquiry into the consciousness of workers is a valuable tool for evaluating and transforming the balance of forces within the class struggle. Interviews serve as opportunities to examine levels of consciousness within participants, for the conversation provides a chance for workers to express what they believe is possible to change about their workplace.

There are two main reasons as to why this project contains significance for the current historical moment: neoliberalism and social reproduction. Each of these issues are both attached to the project and products that further engagement with the political arena surrounding transit systems can create. Each justificatory pillar intersects with issues of social justice, and the critical orientation of this project is intended to provoke methods of rectifying the current injustices. While this project does not claim to be a type of political activism that is immanently producing a better world, this research can give insight into sites of resistance with strategic value. The study of transit workers has value for the epistemological reasons specified before, but I will argue as a type of criticism that is both social and rhetorical, the analysis of transit worker organization carries significant political weight.

First, neoliberal austerity policies have produced massive inequalities in wealth. During the 1970s, Marxist authors coined the term neoliberalism to describe a new pattern emerging in the intersection of civil society and powerful corporate interests (Harvey, 2005). Governments across the globe began a historic shift towards the privatization of social services and the deregulation of the finance industry and other corporate activity. This stage of capitalist development was in part accomplished by the economic crises that are a fundamental

requirement of capitalism (Mirowski, 2014). Capitalist firms are competitively incentivized by the market relations to maximize labor efficiency, and a race to the bottom of paying as little for as much work as possible reduces the consumption of commodities. As the relations of production continually drive corporations to continually produce for the market without concern for the usefulness of goods, an overproduction of commodities inevitably triggers an economic recession. The growth of the finance industry has magnified the far-ranging impacts of these periodical crises. In the 2008 housing crisis, for example, the mass production of homes and the overzealous facilitation of mortgages created a situation with massive amounts of debt that could not be repaid due to declining real wages. The circuits of debt stretch beyond the single housing industry, and the economic fallout of the debt's collapse triggered a wave of austerity measures in all aspects of society. Neoliberalism began as a historical trend whereby the capitalist class used these moments of crisis to justify slashing the provision of social goods. In the ideological representation of this change in economic relations, the mandate of individual responsibility reigned supreme. Capitalist firms were capable of maximizing profit by reshaping governance to require that individual people bear the costs of formally public services. Slowly but consistently the nation-states with advanced capitalist economies have transitioned the provision of public needs to the privatization of the most basic requirements of human life.

Public transit is one such service that working-class people rely on because they often cannot live in a short distance to where they are employed. As capital concentrates itself spatially within cities, so too are sites of production or workplaces are organized in dense manners (Smith, 1982). The more value an area holds in terms of economic opportunity, the higher cost of living in close proximity. In the largest of U.S. cities, the low-wage workers that perform most of the service industry labor in cities must commute great distances in order to survive. Costs of

transportation from the site of reproduction (housing) to the site of production (work) is another instance of appropriated wages and exploitation (de la Haye, 1980). While this transportation is required to perform the labor, it is the responsibility of the individual worker and detracts from their wage. In the era of the individual automobile, the costs associated with ownership, maintenance, and fuel are often out of reach for working-class people. Transit systems make transportation possible for those without cars, and they decrease the time spent and cost of travel for workers going from home to work and back. While efficient transit systems maximize the availability and reproductive capacity of labor, the forces of neoliberalism have nonetheless fought to dismantle public funding for transit (Grengs, 2005). In most public transit systems, fares paid by individual riders provides some of the revenue and taxes fund the rest. Fare hikes are responses to the pressures of neoliberalism to completely off-load responsibility for a public good onto the individual (Chronopoulos, 2012).

The crisis of New York City transit must be examined historically with consideration of the material and social relations that have influenced state management of the transit system. As a service that is provided for the public, the costs associated with the transit system are covered by a variety of tax-based revenue sources and the ticket fares. Workers for the MTA are not employed by a capitalist but are instead employed by the state. James O'Connor (1973) argues that within capitalist economies the state appropriates surplus value from the productive economic sectors to fund social investments that encourage the accumulation process. Mass transit is the *sin qua non* of social investment, for it allows private employers to reduce labor costs in the reproduction of its workforce. In accordance with the contradictions of capitalist accumulation outlined by Marx (1867), O'Connor describes the fiscal crisis of the state as a structural gap that exists between state revenues and expenses. Neoliberalism is the historical

period when the state's ability to appropriate surplus value was limited by the political power of the productive economic sectors. Attempts to restrict state revenues have always existed under capitalism, neoliberalism is the successful manifestation of those efforts.

During the 1990s, the city and state of New York began slashing the budget for the MTA (Rosenthal et al., 2017). Mayor Rudy Giuliani, the first Republican mayor in two decades, justified slashing the budget of the MTA by \$400 million due to the fiscal crisis faced by the government's inability to raise revenues. Since there were few immediate effects of draining the MTA's ability to fund repair efforts, over the next two decades Governor George Pataki, Mayor Michael Bloomberg, Governor Spitzer, Governor Patterson, Governor Cuomo, and Mayor de Blasio all diverted funds away from the MTA operating budget. In the place of state revenue, the MTA was forced to issue bonds and take on large sums of debt. Financing debt serves to create new avenues of accumulation for interest payments and decrease the burden of increase state revenues (Henwood, 1996). Recently, the search for new sources of revenue to fund maintenance and modernization of the subway system has consistently used the expansion of debt instead of additional state funds. In 2016, Governor Cuomo expanded the MTA's borrowing capacity to an additional \$55 billion to a total of \$123 billion (Fink, 2016). Currently, debt service payments account for 19% of the MTA's budget. Continued reliance on debt functions to offset the fiscal crisis away from tax revenue and onto transit riders through fare hikes. Neoliberalism's incessant quest for the individualization of all things public has placed the MTA in an impossible situation. As the payments on interest continually starve the funding for maintenance, the goal of modernizing the aging system requires additional issuances of bonds. Situating the transit crisis requires not only a view of the political entities controlling state and city budgets, but also an analysis of the historical trend towards austerity under neoliberalism.

MTA employees are not workers whose position in capitalism is directly connected to the generation of profit for a private employer, but their position within the social reproduction of New York City makes these employees a key arena of class struggle. The analytical object of surplus value serves as the centerpiece for the revolutionary thrust of Marx's (1867) critique of the capitalist political economy, but transit workers in a state-managed agency do not cleanly fit into Marx's notion of productive labor. Surplus value explains the tendency for capitalist accumulation to strive for maximized labor productivity and minimized labor costs, so that the surplus generated in the production and realization of commodities can be reinvested for greater levels of accumulation.

While mass transit systems are critical for workers to reach their workplace and consumers to purchase commodities, the workers who operate public transit systems are not generating surplus value. Their wages come from surplus value that has previously appropriated by the state, and as such, this industry is not subjected to the same market-driven forces of the profit imperative. Furthermore, these workers do not create value because their labor is not used to produce commodities, but instead their 'unproductive' labor is used for a range of other economic activities to occur. Harry Braverman (1995) argues that the distinction between productive and unproductive labor holds little political importance in contemporary capitalist relations of production for, "[T]he existence of a working class as such does not depend upon the various concrete forms of labor which it is called upon to exercise; but rather its social form" (p. 284).

Differentiations between the productive creation of goods and the unproductive provision of services do little to advance the shared characteristic of wage-labor defining the experience of both workforces. What unites private and public-sector workers as a class is not the variety of

their determinate forms of labor, but the shared condition of being forced to sell one's labor for a wage. Even if transit workers are not productive in a traditional Marxist sense, their interests in overcoming the system of wage-labor still positions them within the revolutionary subject of the working class.

Social reproduction theory lies at the intersection of Marxism and feminism (Vogel, 1983; Benzanson & Luxton, 2006), for it expands the classical Marxist focus on the site of production to the entire array of social processes that make production possible. As Tithi Bhattacharya (2017) explains in the intro to an edited collection on social reproduction theory, “It is an approach that is not content to accept what seems like a visible finish entity— in this case, our worker at the gates of her workplace— but interrogates the complex networks of social processes and human relations that produces the conditions of existence for that entity” (p. 2). While in the eyes of capital, the labor process begins and ends during a worker's shift, social reproduction theory attends to the informal familial, communitarian, and individual work that reproduces the worker's capacity to perform labor. The feeding of workers, the cleaning of clothes, the education that makes workers employable, and most importantly for this project, the transportation of workers from their household to their workplace are all integral to the social totality that gives labor power its life. To narrow the scope of the working class to productive labor would ignore the myriad of social relations that provide strategically valuable terrains of struggle, for “[T]his link between production and reproduction, and the extension of the class relationship into the latter, means that the very acts where the working class strives to attend to its own needs can be the grounds for struggle” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 77). Social reproduction theory emphasizes what is at stake in consideration of who constitutes ‘the working class;’ and through the analysis of social reproduction, this framework for analyzing exploitation and

oppression preserves the revolutionary subject of the working class as a category made up of more than just private-industry factory workers.

Neoliberalism's pressure to starve the state of its resources demands concessions in the livelihoods of public sector employees so that labor expenditure costs can be cut from the budget. Union strength, however, can effectively bargain with the government agencies to insulate union members from the state's fiscal crisis. Austerity economics creates a situation where the fair pay of public sector workers can be leveraged against investments into infrastructure and the interests of tax-paying citizens. An article published in *The New York Times* argued that the above average wages and benefits of MTA employees has contributed to the inability of the transit agency to properly fund investments in infrastructure, comparing TWU member's pay increases to the city's underfunded school teachers (Rosenthal et al., 2017). The pitting of public sector workers against one another demonstrates the importance of the social reproduction framework, for their shared role in the realm of social reproduction unites their interests with the entirety of working class people. The fiscal crisis of the state and the individualist ideology of neoliberalism necessitates that the publicly funded labor expenditures be treated with the same market-oriented logic that an owner of a business would use to justify the cutting of wages. If transit workers, as well as teachers, are seen as vital components in the process of social reproduction, the question asked by *The Times* shifts from, "Why are these workers being paid so much?" towards, "Why are the livelihoods workers used as an excuse to underfund public services?" Social reproduction theory offers a framework for recognizing the inherent alliance between the transit riders and workers, for they are both entwined within the same process of exploitation and the privatization of social reproduction. The connection

between the pressure to increase transit fares and the devaluing of transit labor are both attacks on the capacity for the city's inhabitants to reproduce themselves.

Organized transit labor, as a revolutionary subject in the realm of social reproduction, has the capacity to bring circulation of commodities and labor power needed by employers to a halt through collective job action. Urban capitalist economies are heavily reliant upon public transit, connecting workers to employers and consumers to products, and enabling urban development, from which the real estate, construction, and financial industries profit. When the workers that operate this cog in the machine of labor circulation refuse to work through a strike, the economic damage is tremendous. As previously demonstrated through the history of the 2005 NYC Transit Strike, the strategic chokepoint contained by the political economy of public transit makes the knowledge produced in this project valuable for radical political action. Strikes are the most important tactic for the working class because they give organized workers the capacity to wage war against the employer in a non-violent manner. While strikes are usually for marginal increases in wages or benefits, they can also be used to make political demands, for example, a massive investment in public transit.

Methods of Study

To study the ongoing transit crisis within the New York City from the perspective of the workers who perform the labor, I utilize the vocabularies, theories, and methods of a diverse range of citation networks. *Critical organizational communication* provides a repertoire of analytical tools for approaching the process by which the entity of a labor union is constituted within the minds of the workers. *Rhetorical field methods* gestures towards the use of qualitative methods for studying the world through the researcher's presence, but it maintains the humanistic component of criticism within the study of solutions proposed to the transit system

crisis. Furthermore, *social movement studies* in rhetorical criticism has searched for the function of persuasion in generating political power. Organized labor's capacity for economic coercion deserves the same level of consideration for the persuasive mechanisms that give unions strength. The vast landscape of scholarship on *labor relations* gives the necessary context of the labor movement in the United States, and this history informs the current strategies and constraints faced by contemporary unions. Finally, academic writings on the *Marxist theories of consciousness* transformation will complement the rhetorical study of the union's ability to communicate agency and persuade workers to participate in collective action.

Communication studies is a unique discipline that houses scholars of both humanistic and social scientific positions and places them in proximity to one another. At times, this can produce an epistemic divide between the diverse community of scholars, and this results in a lack of academic engagement between colleagues within the same department. This project is decidedly Marxist; and as such, this scientific investigation into the empirical reality is one that corresponds to the social abstractions that structure the movement of forces under capitalism. The description of transit worker experiences alone does not adequately approach the concrete totality of capitalism, but the analysis of transit worker consciousness in relation to other social forces captures the larger processes that structure the current crisis. Furthermore, the humanities provide a method of conducting research and performing criticism with the intention of transforming the human condition. My intention is to situate this research within specific class interests; and with a vision for the possibilities of a transit-oriented world, intervene into a historical and political moment through rhetorical criticism.

In the disciplinary debates that have attempted to compare rhetoric to the methodological standards set by discourses of the social sciences, systematicity, and rigorous empirical data, the

humanist core of rhetorical studies has continually troubled the attempts to transform rhetoric into something it is not. The task of rhetorical criticism is what differentiates the discipline of rhetoric from the aspects of communication studies that rely on social scientific epistemologies, for the conceptually oriented criticism of contemporary critical rhetorical scholarship proceeds through conceptual reflection rather than producing generalizations and predictions. Angela Ray (2016) offered a personal reflection on her attraction to the study of rhetoric in communication, and through the principle of pluralism, she articulates what I identify as a strength in this discipline's approach to knowledge production. Her argument is based in the method debates that emerged at the turn of the century (Jasinski, 2001; Blair, 2001) and the explosion of criticism with wildly diverse sets of objects, methods, and goals, "[R]hetoric in communication was riotously profligate in its object focus, a feature that appealed to me a great deal. Even science was present at this humanistic table" (Ray, 2016, p. 44). It is the presence of science at the humanistic table that sparks my interest of the communication studies version of rhetorical scholarship.

Critical organizational communication

Organizational communication is a discipline that is interested in the stories that people tell and are told about organizations, and within this field of research certain scholars are interested in pushing these stories to their political conclusions. Critical organizational communication studies encompass the scholarship that attempts to challenge the ideologically dominant perspectives within organizational discourse. These scholars embrace the 'critical' keyword as an attempt to separate themselves from the normative research that serves the interests of pre-existing social, political, and economic relations. Peter Frost (1980) argues that these weaknesses in the social scientific study of organizations have served to buttress the

injustices perpetuated by organizational hierarchy. He argues instead that a new radical framework is needed, for, “Critical organization science should attempt a combination of theory and revolutionary action aimed at making individuals fully aware of the contradictions and injustices in their organizational existence and at assisting them to find a path out of these contradictions” (p. 503). Stanley Deetz (1982; 1985) and Dennis Mumby (1993) helped pioneer the critical turn in American journals of organizational communication with a focus on the interpretative paradigm for explorations into the role of meaning making and meaning structures in organizations. Such a perspective heavily relies on the post-structuralist (Foucault, 1979) theories of power, discourse formations, and resistance within the culture of organizations (Deetz, 1998). Under this paradigm, the research into the communication processes of organizational life should serve to examine the “momentary, daily, and commonplace decisions” (Deetz, 1992, p. 10) that hold possibility for discursively remaking the conditions of oppression. For these scholars, the communication practices that form meaning within organizational life hold a dualistic possibility for both oppression and liberation.

While the recognition that corporate organizations hold a tremendous amount of material and symbolic power over individuals is commonplace in critical organizational studies, not all critical scholars have agreed with the conclusions derived from the interpretative paradigm. Dana Cloud (2005) argued that the field has prioritized the assumed power of discourse and failed to attend to the economic conditions of exploitation that create inequality. Post-structuralist theories of power have the habit of attributing the constitution of organizations as structures that are discursively formed and are “[A]menable to symbolic shaping and intervention by management and labor alike” (Cloud, 2005, p. 515). The ways in which the theoretical underpinnings for critical organizational study flatten the degree of separation of worker agency and management

agency ignores the class realities that define organizational life. These scholars often use the qualitative research methods of organizational communication to emphasize worker's voice and identity (Deetz, 1992; Smith & Keyton, 2001), while sidestepping the class antagonism that places fundamental constraints on the agential capacity of voice and identity for workers. Cloud's call for a class analysis asserts the material primacy of certain aspects of organizational structures, such as the non-socially constructed wage relation, that exceed the discursive possibilities espoused by post-structuralist theorists. Workers that rely on a wage for survival are unable to wield the discursive tools of resistance to individually challenge the conditions of their employment. Rather, we should examine the capacity for organized labor to use economic coercion (walkouts, slowdowns, and strikes) and the communicative processes that make such action possible.

At the heart of the disagreement between various critical organizational communication scholars is the role of power, resistance, and agency within the theoretical paradigms used for research. As Cloud's criticism of critical organizational scholarship demonstrates, the debate over symbolic versus material agency determines the theoretical assumptions for research into either micro and macro forms of resistance. For the post-structuralist scholars, the construction of identity in symbolic patterns of an organization offer promise for resisting the gendered, racialized, or otherwise oppressive situations. The debates concerning materiality, however, raise the concern of whether or not, "[R]esearch on identity politics addresses class conflicts and material forms of inequality" (Zoller, 2014, p. 602). Gangesh, Zoller, and Ganesh (2005) offer a solution to this impasse by researching the complex view of material-symbolic relationships in a process that overcomes the dichotomy. For these scholars, macro forms of collective resistance to oppressive material circumstances are made possible by the symbolic constitution of collective

identities. Dialectical perspectives (Mumby, 2005; Ashcraft 2005) on the relationship between material and symbolic forms of resistance is thus critical for an understanding of the communicative process by which power is exercised by those resisting oppression. Labor unions, for example, are enabled by the economic structures that give individuals in the workplace the power to challenge material inequality, but the symbolic constitution of labor organizations in the consciousness of individual workers is a prerequisite for engaging in the collective forms of resistance.

Organizational communication studies is a discipline that has historically maintained a focus on workplaces within the United States, but it has also been plagued by a research agenda that privileges the perspectives and values of management over labor. In the discipline's early stages, research was conducted in search for effective outcomes determined by maximizing the productive capacities of organizations. As the discipline's lead journal title, *Management Communication Quarterly*, reflects, the Neo-Taylorist purpose for organizational communication research was aimed at enhancing productivity and organizational effectiveness. The limited research into labor unions as a site of inquiry for this discipline further demonstrates the class affinity for management perspectives. Fortunately, researchers have challenged the managerial bias that participates in generating practical recommendations for exerting greater amounts of control over the workplace, and even a few scholars ventured into the hidden abode of labor organization production (Real & Putnam, 2005; Cloud, 2005; Cloud 2011). My project serves to contribute to this small body of organizational communication labor union research, but in this will be accomplished in the research area of organizational crisis. This subset of communicative research is replete with managerial bias, for most of the scholarship serves to understand the process by which corporate organizations regain legitimacy after a crisis has shattered their

relationship with the public. As Timothy Sellnow and Jeffrey Brand (2010) exemplify in their study of Nike's response to the public revelation of their participation in exploitative sweatshop labor. Organizational crisis research has primarily served to further the interests of corporate power, and provide avenues for the practical application of communication theory for the regeneration of productive enterprise.

Rhetorical Field Methods

Recent developments in rhetorical theory have initiated a growth of research projects adopting methodologies that place the researchers at the site of rhetorical action. Rhetorical field methods, as an intersection of social scientific epistemology and critical practice, demonstrate the pluralistic possibilities for rhetoric in communication. There are undoubtedly distinct differences between the qualitative methods of studying communication and the discussions of rhetorical field methods that have exploded within the last decade, so I hope to trace the boundaries with which my project may share.

Dwight Conquergood (1991) in his landmark essay, "Rethinking Ethnography: Towards a Critical Cultural Politics," arguably introduced the utility of participant observation field-work to the discipline of rhetoric. In this essay, he argues that the exclusive focus on analyzing texts severely limits the ability of rhetoricians to understand and interpret cultural modes of being. Rather, ethnography presents an opportunity to expand rhetorical inquiry into the performative elements of the body, "Ethnography's distinctive research method, participant-observation field-work, privileges the body as a site of knowing" (Conquergood, 1991, p. 180). Drawing from the long history of scholarship on qualitative research methods, Conquergood establishes the desirability for researchers to prefer the 'open air' rather than the 'arm chair.' One aspect of this argument occurs on an epistemological level, for the methods of communication that extend

beyond verbal or textual enunciative modes are lost with traditional conceptions of rhetorical inquiry. Attending to the gestures, dances, and interactions of bodies provides new areas of research for understanding the performance of communication. Without a research method in the field, these cultural ways of speaking are forever excluded by the analysis of texts. Opening rhetorical inquiry to the study of performance broadens the scope for what counts as the symbolic exchange of rhetoric, and performance studies provides a deeply empirical rendering of the cultural communicative acts.

Phaedra Pezzullo (2003a; 2003b) embraces the insight offered by Conquergood's vision of ethnography in her study of cultural performances. These deployments of participant observation research methods in prominent rhetorical studies journals marks one of the numberless beginnings of rhetorical fieldmethods. Continuing the line of reasoning proposed by Conquergood in the study of extra-verbal/textual encounters, Pezzullo studies social movement activity with the qualitative aspects of rhetorical fieldwork. By locating the importance of presence of rhetorical inquiry, Pezzullo discovers performative encounters that would traditionally be left out of textual criticism, "By conducting participant observation, public sphere scholars may affirm the importance of cultural performances unrecognized by mainstream culture, and in the process of interpretation, offer a record of them" (2003a, p. 350). Pezzullo extends performance studies into rhetoric by opening avenues for the study of the body, affect, and desire as data for inquiry.

Each of these examples of rhetorical field methods, which is by no means an exhaustive list, serves to demonstrate the differences between qualitative communication research and the distinct characteristics of rhetorical criticism. Conquergood and Pezzullo offer methodological appraisal for new types of data to be utilized by rhetorical scholars, for the limits of textual

analysis foreclose the vernacular rhetorics (Ono & Sloop, 1995) that lack the privilege of historical transcription. While my project will not utilize the ethnographic modes of qualitative inquiry, it is worth noting these as starting points for recent rhetorical scholarship that branches beyond the text. From the analysis of ordinary talk (McCormick, 2003) to the use of focus groups (Gent, 2017) to the conducting of personal interviews (Thatcher, 2016), rhetorical scholars have explored the function of persuasion with methods that are non-traditional for the discipline of rhetoric. While these share methodological similarities with qualitative communication research, rhetorical criticism's propensity for judgement and critique differentiate this research from its social scientific counterparts. These scholars rely on the traditional modes of doing rhetorical scholarship by exploring how context, focal objects, and rhetorical theory are implicated in the qualitatively generated data. James Jasinski (2001) explains this difference through the distinction between methodologically driven inquiry and conceptually oriented criticism. Social science epistemologies seek to build generalizations and prediction through the cultivation of data, and rhetorical criticism seeks to deepen the concepts that inform understandings of persuasion. While social scientific methods may stop short after the, "observations of regularities that lead to prediction" (Jasinski, 2001, p. 257), the blend of humanism into rhetorical field methods provides possibilities of political judgement.

Rhetorical Criticism of Social Movements

The application of rhetorical criticism to social movements has troubled both the discipline's narrow limitation of focal objects and the theoretical assumptions that guide critical inquiry into politics. Rhetorical criticism's origin in the study of presidential oratory produced boundaries on acceptable objects of criticism. Previously, students of rhetoric were expected to closely examine texts of speeches and develop critiques through both rhetorical and political

means. The scope of the political field, however, did not stretch beyond the areas of government. Surges in protest activity, social movement organizations, and mass unrest in the United States during the 20th century motivated rhetorical critics to attend to the role of persuasion in this process. Leland Griffin (1952) argued that analysis of social movements entailed a move in rhetorical methodology that required scholars to, “[U]ndertake research into such selected acts and atmospheres of public address as would permit the study of a multiplicity of speakers, speeches, audiences, and occasions” (p. 1). This inclusion of non-traditional focal objects was a big step for rhetorical criticism. It was not only a departure from the mandated study of official discourse, but it also forced a reconsideration of the difference between politics and persuasion.

One of the methodological changes in rhetoric required Griffin to develop the phrase ‘body rhetoric,’ for the instrumental ability for social movements to create change did not abide by the traditional boundaries of persuasion. Body rhetoric, he argued, used protest tactics in a confrontational and antagonistic manner that achieved change through physical coercion. Franklyn Haiman (1967) did not dispute the description of social movements as coercive, but embraced the scholarly and political value of body rhetoric as persuasion. Herbert Simons (1970) sought to trace the differing functions of persuasion within social movements utilizing this form. He argued body rhetoric is, “[D]esigned to dramatize issues, enlist additional sympathizers, and delegitimize the established order” (Simons, 1970, p. 8). Rhetorical scholars have further explored the different avenues of rhetorical agency for body rhetoric and emphasized the role of bodies as resources for advocacy (DeLuca, 1999; Enck-Wanzer, 2006).

Body rhetoric is a useful concept for understanding the role that persuasion can play in generating political consciousness, but it also serves to highlight the importance of recognizing antagonism and conflict in rhetorical criticism. Coercion may stem from “the barrel of a gun”

(Griffin, 1952, p. 127), from a verbal threat, or from the organized refusal to perform labor. Collective job action is a tactic of economic coercion that in certain contexts can cause damage to the flow of capital to corporations and bosses. The strike is a type of body rhetoric that requires the withdrawal of bodies. Strikes are only effective if a significant number of the workforce commits their bodies to not entering the workplace and resuming normal operations. By traditional definitions of persuasion, the strike does not fall within the boundaries of rhetoric. Strikes are intended to psychologically threaten or cause material damage to an enterprise. Even if striking workers are not attempting to persuade their boss into giving higher wages, the persuasive process of convincing other workers to threaten their livelihoods deserves the attention of rhetoric. Dana Cloud (2011) urges scholars interested in social movement rhetoric to investigate both communication and clout. Labor unions have the capacity to collectively bargain for materially better livelihoods of its members, but this requires the confidence of rank-and-file members to challenge the antagonistic enemies. The process by which confidence is achieved requires persuasion, but the instrumental effectiveness of economic coercion requires clout.

Labor Studies

Context is a critical tool in the repertoire of rhetorical criticism, and my research into the communicative activities of labor unions is backed by a historical placement of the contemporary labor movement in the United States. Ted Brimeyer, Andrea Eaker, and Robin Clair (2004) examine the rhetorical strategies in union organizing starting with the historical situation of a labor movement in decline. They argue that multiple factors contribute to the decline of union membership, which currently hovers around 10.7% for the combined public and private sector industries (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). Many of these factors are outside of labor union control, such as: government interference, negative portrayal of unions by media, divisions

among workers, and the intense employer offensive against unionization campaigns. Each of these factors have historical connections to the international rearrangement of production during the period of globalization and neoliberalism, but the failure of union organization leadership to respond to changing circumstances and the strategy of business unionism have played a significant role in the series of labor defeats witnessed over the past four decades. Paul Buhle (1999) argues that the problems of the modern labor movement extend back to the merger of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in 1955, where by a period of conservatism began in the bureaucratic union leadership. The leaders that were employed with the dues of rank-and-file members were more interested in securing their privileges through worker-employer partnerships that avoid class struggle. As Dana Cloud (2011) summarizes, “Union leaders, rather than urge militancy, have formed partnerships with employers and politicians to avoid strikes” (p. 12). The undemocratic separation of rank-and-file members from union leadership has produced a situation for organized labor to flounder in attempts to stay relevant amidst growing economic inequality.

Jane McAlevey (2016) argues that a unifying characteristic for the period of business unionism is the reliance on, “an elite, top-down theory of power” (p. 9), that most modern labor unions rely on for organizing campaigns. In her work as a dedicated union organizer and social movement activist, she has witnessed how an elite theory of power informs the strategy and focus of supposedly-progressive campaigns for transforming the world. McAlevey argues that there are three approaches used by social movement organizations: advocacy, mobilizing, and organizing. Depending on the theory of power that operates within the organization, each approach uses differing tactics and differing locations of agency. For business unionism, the back-room contract negotiations locate agency within the professional union staff’s ability to

advocate on behalf of the bargaining unit. Advocacy fails to utilize the numerical strength of union membership. Mobilizing relies on the involvement of large numbers of people, but it is the direction, and manipulation, and control of these people by an elite few. In this approach, ordinary people are used as objects to achieve a goal, rather than as subjects that agentively demand and achieve a goal for themselves. Finally, organizing relies on the active involvement of participants in the analysis of power, designing of the strategy, and recruitment of other people. In the context of labor unions, organizing is the approach with the greatest track record of success, for it prioritizes the transfer of power from the elite to the majority. In the 1930s, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) relied on a strategy of organizing workplace militancy led by rank-and-file workers, and during this period some of the greatest achievements in the advancement of working conditions was achieved. The failure of modern unions and social movement organizations to achieve lasting transformation can be attributed to the theory of power that informs their work.

While labor unions have floundered due to the gravitation of power in unions to union leadership elites, the centrality of labor in the economic processes of capitalism remains true regardless of levels of organization, and labor scholarship that analyzes the strategic chokepoints in the commerce of capitalism has flourished. Kim Moody (1997; 2007, 2017) and Joe Allen (2016) have argued that the development of ‘just-in-time’ production has created a situation whereby the production line is dispersed over a great deal of geographical distance and requires increasingly high levels of reliability and coordination, but this requirement also creates the possibility for fewer amounts of workers to disrupt the supply chain management. Logistical workers in the transportation industry, truck drivers and longshore workers for example, can disable the production and circulation of raw materials and incomplete commodities without

authorization of a strike from every worker on the assembly line. Jane McAlevey also argues that the heightened importance of service industry jobs (teacher and nurses, in her case studies) in the modern information economy gives the workers responsible for the social reproduction of labor power strategic value. The workers that are responsible for healthy and educated labor force are critical for the smooth function of capitalist enterprise. Public transit industries operate at the strategic intersection of social reproduction and logistics.

Marxist Theories of Consciousness

Rhetorical criticism's potential for political judgement gives my project the potential to go beyond a thick description of transportation worker experiences; and through the work of Lukács (1968), I will argue for a rhetorical understanding of the process by which consciousness is transformed. Consciousness, or the ideas of people, is an instrumental object of study in understanding the formation of collective power. Similarly, the term ideology has drawn significant scholarly interest from rhetorical scholars (Biesecker, 2011; Cloud & Gunn, 2011), for it signifies the potential for ideas to support oppression or assist in liberation. Ideology and consciousness are not identical terms, but they both reference the phenomenon of ideas influencing the actions of people. Whereas Marxists are often accused of privileging the objective factors of economic structures as the ultimate determining factor, the subjective force of consciousness in forming oppositional movements can overcome the constraints of capitalist domination. As Deepa Kumar (2006) argues, "[T]hought can become an objective force when material reality is shaped subjectively...through practice, human beings not only act upon the world and shape it, but in the process, are themselves shaped by the material world" (p. 79). After briefly accounting for Lukács's dialectical theory of consciousness, I will briefly review the reception of these theories in the field of rhetorical studies.

In his famous book *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács develops a framework for understanding the dialectical relationship between experience and consciousness. Drawing on Marx's (1867) notion of commodity fetishism, Lukács argues that the mystical form of the commodity extends beyond the objects produced by capitalism and into all social relations. Reification is the expression of social relations as the relation between traded objects, so that workers themselves are transformed into commodities and their consciousness of this experience is naturalized. As Terry Eagleton (2007) summarizes, "Reification fragments and dislocates our social experience, so that under its influence we forget that society is a collective process and come see it instead merely as this or that isolated object or institution" (p. 95). Transportation workers, for example, are structurally encouraged by the market forces of capitalism to understand the problems faced by the MTA as simply a matter of discretionary budget cuts rather than the subjection of public services to the profit imperative of the capitalist totality. Furthermore, the workers that personally experience the brunt of austerity measures in the form of a wage cut may come to understand it as an individual problem. The dialectical relationship between the experience of life within capitalism and consciousness determined by reification impairs one from grasping the full system that creates these problems. Reification is not a totalizing process without escape, for Lukács humanist version of Marxism recognizes the possibility for encounter with the contradictions of capitalism to result in a transformation of consciousness.

The contradiction of workers being both an object of the system and a subject in the forces of production is an opportunity for rhetorical intervention. As Dana Cloud (2015) argues in her review of Lukács's book *History and Class Consciousness*, "The conceptualization of the worker as "subject-object" identifies how the very process of reification generates a potentially

agentive working class standpoint... That contradiction produces openings for conversation and education about the character of the capitalist system itself” (p. 285). Class consciousness, or the held idea that the working class has a shared set of interests in overcoming capitalism, is achieved through the wide-spread recognition of these interests. The cultivation of class consciousness is not a process that occurs naturally through the encounters with contradictions, but it is a process that involves the rhetorical mediation of the lived experiences of the proletarian standpoint with consciousness of the capitalist totality. Mediating working class experience with class consciousness requires education, organizing, and struggle. Transformation of consciousness beyond the atomized conception of individual problems towards a revolutionary belief in overcoming capitalism necessitates the rhetorical mediation of how capitalism makes us feel like objects and how we can be collective subjects.

Antonio Gramsci’s (1992) theories of hegemony and common-sense will also contribute to my study of consciousness. Gramsci was an Italian Marxist that developed a philosophy of praxis to conceptualize the necessary preconditions for the revolutionary seizure of power by the working-class. One of his concepts is the idea of an ideologically determined common-sense. Common-sense is a popular form of knowledge that is widely held by a group of people, and common-sense contains frameworks of meaning that allow for the simplistic interpretations of the world. These ideas present themselves as natural and ahistorical but are the products of previous periods of class struggle. For the study of consciousness, common-sense serves as both a starting point for political education and an obstacle for the revolutionary perspectives of Marxism. Since common-sense is a product of ruling class hegemony, it often is a widely held set of beliefs that tend towards conservatism. For my research project, I use common-sense to

understand the constraints that are placed on the ability of ordinary people to make sense of their own agency.

Marxist theories of consciousness will inform and guide the qualitative inquiry for this project. The formation of sample questions for participants, for example, were developed to uncover containers of consciousness in organizational discourse. In the interview responses, I hope to examine the vernacular expressions of agency. Workers may feel disconnected from their ability to control the crisis in their daily lives, and the effects of the crisis may severely impact the quality of their work life.. These feelings may be internalized as individual misfortunate, or they may be articulated and discussed amongst workers. I asked workers about the consequences the subway crisis has had on their experiences, and I analyze the responses for evidence of an agentive starting point in contradiction. Lukács and Gramsci's theorizations of consciousness provides a theoretical apparatus to view the participant responses in search for empirical evidence of class consciousness. Questions concerning the role of the TWU in the resolution of this crisis will give workers an opportunity to discuss their prospects for agential capacity through the union avenue of support. While unions are limited representation of an atomized industry's interests, participant responses that include references to the strength in collective action will provide data for understanding the role of consciousness in transit labor and the subway crisis. In the documents and participant responses, I will search for the availability of agentive discourse that signals the transit worker's capacity to create change through collective means. Theories of consciousness and organizational communication will be instrumental in documenting and understanding the transformation of transit worker consciousness.

Mediation provides a theoretical account for the dialectical transmission of ideas from an organization to individual consciousness, and it provokes a search for the origin of critical

consciousness—an orientation that actively questions the nature of social relations within the capitalist totality. Interviews provide a mechanism for differentiating and connecting different levels of class consciousness among workers. However, mediation is a two-way street; the formation of critical consciousness can be mediated by an organization that pursues a revolutionary agenda or mediation can further entrench the effects of reification. Labor unions, especially during the era of business unionism, can play a role in cementing the felt powerlessness of an alienated labor force. Through capitalist strategies of mediation, union organizations can combat critical consciousness among workers and promote a dependence on the capitalist class. For example, when unions reproduce the rhetoric of austerity and encourage members to accept attacks on their wages and benefits, these organizations are mediating the reification of consciousness. Accounting for the uneven distribution of consciousness requires questioning where the ideas of critical consciousness emerge and determining whether the interview participants have critical consciousness. Close readings of the statements made by transit workers in interviews will provide insight into the effects of mediation on their consciousness, and evidence of critical consciousness could potentially be articulated as a desire to change the conditions of transit work in New York City.

Conclusion

This study will contribute to a body of knowledge about how communication within labor unions can make sense of crises within the workplace. Not only will this further the knowledge of labor union activity in general, but it will specifically address the role that labor unions can play in confronting a crisis in the workplace. Furthermore, the public transit industry is a necessary resource for urban populations. Studies of public transit will contribute to a greater actionable knowledge concerning the expansion and equitable functioning of these systems. This

work adds to the knowledge on the research topic of organizational communication because it will provide insight into how the labor union as an organization is conceptualized by their membership. This value is both practical and theoretical. I hope that the insights from this project will give greater attention to the ways in which workers communicate and discuss crises in the workplace. Greater knowledge production in organizational communication about labor unions will give members of these organizations a greater awareness of how to confront a crisis in context of a labor union. Conceptually developing the rhetorical notions of consciousness contributes to an understanding of the persuasive role that labor union organizations can play in combatting the inequality, oppression, and violence of capitalism. The historical exigency of neoliberal attacks on public services and the revolutionary possibility of transit worker class consciousness demands research into the labor of transit.

Chapter 1: Labor Unions as Mediators of Transit Labor

The difficulty in properly funding and maintaining New York City's massive publicly owned and operated transit system has not been a problem that politicians, administrators, or bureaucrats have been able to solve. Social movements have been heralded by organizational communication scholars dissatisfied with the political institutions of the past and interested in social change (Ganesh, Zoller, & Cheney, 2005), but according to Jane McAlevey (2016), "There's an informal gestalt in much of academia that unions are not social movements at all" (p. 1). Contrary to the zeitgeist of new social movements, labor unions are social movement organizations with a radical history of providing ordinary people with agency through collective power. Although the labor union organizations of today are bound within the suffocating web of status quo politics, the potential economic clout of an organized workplace determined for change is a relatively unexamined avenue. Escaping the web of politics as usual, however, requires a change in social movement and labor union strategy. I argue that the strategic choices made by social movement organizations have effects on the communicative process of collective sensemaking for organizational members. By relying on tactics of advocacy, campaigns led by a small professional staff, rather than the strategy of organizing through mass participation for the agentive expression of ordinary people, social movement organizations restrict the common-sense notions of what options for change are possible.

This study examines the rhetorical mediation of the NYC transit crisis by the labor union organization that represents the workers that operate the subway. I argue that a media campaign waged by the Transport Worker Union (TWU) Local 100 served to mediate the experience of the crisis for individual transit riders and transit employees, consistent delays and occasional derailments, with a political system that assigns blame on NYC Mayor Bill de Blasio for refusing

to fund an emergency investment plan. As an example of organizational rhetoric, the TWU uses external messages to persuade audiences with the authority of their organizational voice and expertise. I argue that rhetorical mediation articulates the dialectical connection between experience and consciousness, and that labor union organizations are entities that facilitate the mediation of interests to TWU members and the transit riding public. This mediation established a common-sense understanding of the transit crisis that justified depending on elites to solve the problem. After reviewing the body of literature that address rhetorical criticism and organizational communication, I will utilize the context of public sector labor unions and the historical connection to the trend of “business unionism” to deepen an understanding of the situation for this case of organizational rhetoric. Through a close textual analysis of the transit funding campaign, I argue that the transit labor organization attempted to mediate the interests of TWU members and transit riders as aligned in an attempt to preserve the status quo arrangement of concentrated power and elitist decision making. The leadership of the TWU utilized organizational rhetoric to scapegoat transit woes onto Mayor de Blasio, while strengthening political connections with the Democratic Party through an alliance with Governor Andrew Cuomo.

Criticism and Organization

Scholars of the sub-field of organizational communication have taken great lengths to incorporate the insights of rhetorical theory into their analytical repertoire (Cralle, 1990; Cheney & McMillan, 1990; Sillince & Suddaby, 2008), but rhetorical critics have failed to follow through with their end of the interdisciplinary bargain. Organizational communication has fruitfully benefited from the tools of rhetorical analysis, for it provides a framework for the study of persuasion in the context of organizations and organizational activity. Organizations are social

entities that require the individual members to cohere around a set of identities, interests, and goals. Furthermore, organizations are often involved in sociopolitical issues that use the collective expression of their membership for persuasive ends. While the keyword 'organizational rhetoric' has occasionally graced the proceedings of the communication rhetoric journals, such as *Quarterly Journal of Speech* (Taylor, 2010) and *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* (Conrad, 2004), few rhetorical critics have methodologically engaged and developed the theoretical insights offered by an explicit focus on organizational discourse. Dana Cloud (2005; 2011) is one of few rhetoricians to venture into the boundaries of organizational communication, and there has been virtually no reception of her organizational work within rhetorical studies. Organizational communication is situated within an intellectual lineage that borrows from social scientific epistemologies, but the concepts this sub-field has developed are nonetheless useful for rhetorical critics.

This is not a case study of the transit crisis using the methodology of organizational rhetoric, but a critique of the rhetorical decisions made by a labor union organization. The task of rhetorical criticism is what differentiates the discipline of rhetoric from the aspects of communication studies that rely on social scientific epistemologies, for the conceptually oriented criticism of contemporary critical rhetorical scholarship proceeds through analytical reflection and judgement rather than using methods to produce generalizations and predictions. Rhetorical criticism uses theory to develop concepts that assist in investigating persuasion, but its focus on judgement opens the field to arguments that extend beyond individual rhetorical phenomenon, to commentary on issues of social and political significance. Organizational rhetoric offers a unique perspective for, "Theory and criticism are needed which fully account for the complexities of our

fully 'organizational society,' grappling both with specific organizational 'texts' and their larger context, the society itself" (Cheney & McMillan, 1990, p. 106-7).

Dana Cloud (2015), in her review of Hungarian Communist Georg Lukács's (1968) *History and Class Consciousness*, calls for rhetoricians to examine the concept of rhetorical mediation in context of an organization's process of bringing immediate experience into a shared system of meaning. Lukács studied the role of social movement leadership during the Russian Revolution, and through an analysis of the Bolshevik organizational entity, developed a theoretical understanding of the role of mediation in organizational persuasion. Consciousness, or shared systems of meaning rhetorically developed out of experience, is an important object of study in understanding the formation of collective power. Whereas Marxists are often accused of privileging the objective factors of economic structures as the ultimate determining factor, the subjective force of consciousness in forming oppositional movements are necessary for posing a challenge to the structure of class society. Lukács developed a framework for understanding the role of mediation in the dialectical relationship between experience and consciousness.

Organizations use rhetorical mediation to situate the practical activity of the organizational members within a conceptual system that provides clarity and coherence to the immediacy of individual experience. Organizational consciousness is intended to articulate explanations for the conditions of organizational life; and through the practice of mediation, organizations attempt to connect the experience of individuals with a general set of ideas that support the interests of the organization. Rhetorical mediation deserves greater attention for both scholars of organizational communication and rhetorical criticism for it strikes at the role that organizations, such as labor unions, political parties, or corporations play in the shared construction of a common-sense.

As communication studies scholars Josh Boyd and Damion Waymer (2011) argue, the subject of organizational rhetoric is a matter of interests. Lukács' theory of mediation bases itself on a foundation of the historically and materially situated interests and their connection to the economic processes of capitalism. The pervasive logic of Reagan-era trickle-down economics, for example, states that the unregulated market economy is in the best interest of all people, workers and bosses alike. This perspective, one that has been constructed by a multiplicity of mediations, justifies the current social arrangements and conditions of exploitation. One in which there are winners and losers, and that is common-sense. Successful mediation is intended to collapse the dialectical separation between experience and consciousness into the creation of a common-sense. As an instrument of ideology, this mediation has undergone a successful process that transforms this perspectival object of reality into a common-sense for all class positions, for, "[T]he objective reality of social existence *is in its immediacy* 'the same' for both proletariat and bourgeoisie" (Lukács, 1971, p. 150). In the United States, the large-scale acceptance of capitalism by people within the working class, whose objective interests can be directly counterpoised to the corporate ruling class, demonstrates mediation's effect on the immediacy of individual experience. Within any representation of interests, the process of mediation can be studied in its attempt to raise the immediacy of a particular standpoint to the level of general consciousness.

Mediation is a neutral concept. Lukács developed the concept through an analysis of the class consciousness that emerged out of the Russian Revolution, but its use is not limited to the positive constructions of countervailing ideological currents. While mediation always begins from experience, this experience can be taken in many directions. Instead, mediation should be conceptualized as a process that can occur to insulate the acceptance of ruling class interests or

act to build support for an anti-capitalist social movement. There is no guarantee that the experience of being a worker will inevitably lead to class consciousness.

Rather than putting forward a relativistic vision of a socially constructed reality, Lukacs' concept of mediation offers rhetorical and communication scholars a resource for understanding how shared systems of meanings can be generated by organizational discourse within the context of objective economic conditions. The question of interests is central to the criticism of mediation, for attending to the 'fidelity' (Cloud & Feyh, 2015) of the mediating process to the standpoint of working-class people provides an avenue for the critic to normatively judge the alignment of organizational discourse and the standpoint addressed by it.

For example, the production of anti-union media by a corporate organization, such as a forty-two-episode podcast produced by Uber on the dangers of unionization for drivers (Yakowicz, 2017), could be analyzed as an attempt to mediate a generalized corporate consciousness to the organizational members. Anti-union media attempts to construct a shared system of meaning that understands collective bargaining as dangerous for workers. Lukács's theory of mediation, and his related writings on standpoint epistemology, does not posit that these objects of reality are ultimately always relative and contingent in nature, but that the standpoint of class subjects in relation to the economic processes of capitalism can be objectively determined. Employers use the process of mediation to connect the experience of workers with a representation of interests that support the current system of exploitation.

In instances where the interests of workers are mediated as identical with the employer the task of criticism in the context of mediation must be to determine and judge the alignment of interests. What is needed from critics is a framework described by Dana Cloud (2018) as "[R]hetorical realism, or the idea that communicators can bring knowledge from particular

perspectives and experiences into the domain of common-sense, and that we can evaluate truth claim in public culture on the basis of whether they exhibit fidelity to the experience and interests of the people they claim to describe and represent” (p. 15). Organizational communication and rhetorical studies must interrogate the representations of interest present in organizational discourse, but the theoretical tools utilized must have a capacity for normative judgement.

Context of Business Unionism

Organizational communication literature has given the concept of workplace democracy a great deal of investigation and theorization (Cheney, 1995), but the inclusion of democratically operated labor unions as objects of analysis for organizational democracy has garnered sparse consideration (Real & Putnam, 2005; Cloud, 2005; Cloud, 2010). Critical organizational communication scholars have used the concept of workplace democracy to address the structural inequalities of organizational life in the United States. Most Americans will give the majority of the time in their lives to corporate organizations that are operated in a hierarchical and top-down manner. In office places, retail shops, factories, and in transit systems, workers will toil for hours on end to complete the tasks that they played no part in deciding to do. Workers usually have no capacity to determine what is produced, how much is made, who it is sold to, or how much workers should be paid for their labor. The tyranny of the workplace has led organization communication scholars to seek the goal of workplace democracy as, “[A] system of governance which truly values individual goals and feelings, as well as typically organizational objectives, which actively fosters the connection between those two sets of concerns by encouraging individual contributions to important organizational choices” (Cheney, 1995). As Dana Cloud (2005) argued, however, greater levels of participation in workplace decisions is not the same as

shared ownership, and the economic consequences of inequality will not be resolved without a recognition of the antagonism between the boss and the workers, capital and labor. Labor unions are organizational tools for workers to assert their control of the workplace, and they operate by explicitly organizing around the workplace antagonism and the structural position of the worker.

Labor unions, in the abstract, are democratically operated entities for defense against the encroachment of employers on the livelihoods of workers. Through the process of collective bargaining, employees gain an opportunity to issue demands for the conditions of their employment. While this most often manifests as bargaining for increases in wages, healthcare, and pensions, virtually any issue can be placed on the list of demands. Historically, workers have fought and won for shorter work days, the creation of public parks and preservation of green spaces for recreation (Uzzell & Rätzzel, 2013), and for grievance mechanisms that combat sexual violence, among other violations (Press, 2017). The goal of collective bargaining is to produce a contract agreed upon by both the labor union and the employer, and this contract would require the workplace be changed in order to fulfill the agreement. Prior to the reaching of an agreement, however, the members of the labor union must be organized. They must be organized to participate in democracy, organized to collectivize their demands, and organized to fight for them. Union membership is often determined by employment in a specific industry and the regular payment of dues to finance union activity. These rank-and-file members regularly vote in organizational elections to select leaders, to approve contracts crafted in the bargaining process, and perhaps most importantly, to authorize the use of a strike. In the period leading up to the agreement on a contract, union members express the workplace issues that need to be urgently changed. The elected union leaders take these issues into consideration and meet with representatives of the employer. Depending on the strength of the labor union, in terms of

membership numbers and degree of organization, workers can make demands that radically alter the unequal distribution of the wealth generated in the workplace. If the employer recognizes the power within the union and agrees to the terms set by workers, then the union membership must decide by majority to ratify the contract. When the employer refuses the demands, however, the workers can take collective action to economically coerce the employer into agreement. Strikes are coordinated efforts to disrupt the generation of profit and the smooth-functioning of a workplace through the refusal to work. Through the democratic organization of workers, unions attempt to equalize the antagonistic relationship of power between labor and capital.

During the 1930s period of American labor organizing, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) pioneered methods for recruiting large-swaths of nonunion workers through mass participation, racial inclusion, and frequent uses of the strike. Compared to the American Federation of Labor (AFL), which actively excluded unskilled and non-white workers from union membership, the CIO's success during this period demonstrated the strategic value in involving the largest number of people possible in organizing. Organizers, or the employees of the union that recruit workers, worked during this period to identify and empower leaders in a workplace to take action, rather than simply signing workers up to paying union dues. Jane McAlevey (2016) argued that the CIO-era of labor organizing, propelled by socialist and communist organizers "resulted in high-quality contracts that cemented a high level of participation, active membership, and a strong relationship between the rank and file and union leaders" (p. 33). It was in this period that democracy and unions were synonymous, for the organizing efforts were fueled by the agency of the workers themselves. Union leaders acted in accordance with the interests of their members because it was the rank-and-file's active participation in internal organizational democracy and class struggle that gave the union life.

Rather than the consolidation of power and decision making at the top of labor union organizations, the CIO provided a vehicle for bottom-up expressions of worker agency and the practice of democracy in the day-to-day lives of workers.

Unfortunately, the abstract image of labor unions as a beacon of hope for workplace democracy has not always lived up to the concrete counterpart, for the history of the labor movement in the United States has been marred by the strategy of business unionism. As Julius Getman (1998) argues, “Unions are by their very nature egalitarian institutions. Yet the union movement has its own continuing battle with elitism...At the simplest level it is manifested when union leaders become seduced by privileges, wealth, and honors, by large offices, secretaries, staffs, limousines, and regular meetings with important management and political figures” (p. 223). The success of CIO organizing in redistributing wealth away from the blossoming class of corporate elites threatened the profitability of business and the effectiveness of US empire. While no single cause could be pinpointed as the determinate reason for the abandonment of this effective organizing strategy, the combination of state repression of socialists and communists, bans on strikes during World War II, and the formation of an undemocratic union bureaucracy all contributed to the demise of CIO democracy. With the fall of a strategy of mass participation after World War II, arose the strategy of what Paul Buhle (1999) describes as, “*business unionism*, running unions like a business or corporation, with dues payments as the bottom line and assorted perks normal to executives of the business world” (p. 17). When the AFL and CIO merged in 1955, little difference remained in the goals of the unions.

The labor leaders of this period prioritized stable relationships between unions and employers, ideological support for militarism, alliances with Democratic Party politicians, and an internal offensive aimed at purging radicals from unions. Collective bargaining in business

unionism was marked by the promotion of passivity in rank-and-file members and concessions to the demands of employers wanting to increase profit margins. Organizationally, unions were transformed into entities that were led by a professional staff of negotiators and executives funded by dues. Fear of disciplinary retaliation by leaders and expulsion from the union constrains the capacity for democratic reform within business unionism. While battles were still waged for contracts that benefited the members, unions became more reliant upon challenging employers through the court system or other systems of government bureaucracy, which as Robert Zeiger (1995) stated, “made rank and file workers spectators in their own drama” (p. 304). For the leaders of business unionism, rank-and-file militarism was something to be feared, for the bureaucratic distortion of union democracy was intended to suppress the recognition of worker agency.

Jane McAlevy (2016) categorizes labor union strategy, and social movement organization more broadly, into three approaches to change: advocacy, mobilization, and organizing. Her perspective places the greatest emphasis on organizing as a method for resurrecting CIO-era labor union strategy, for it is the involvement of ordinary people in the realization of their collective agency that generates expressions of power and long-term change. Business unionism is characterized by an advocacy approach, whereby elite union officials seek to use litigation or back-room deals with employers to win nominal victories or limited policy reform. As she argues, “Advocacy doesn’t involve ordinary people in any real way; lawyers, pollsters, researchers, and communications firms are engaged to wage the battle...this strategy severely limits serious challenges to elite power” (McAlevy, 2016, p. 9). Within each approach to change operates a different theory of power, and the theorization of power informs the practical activity of social movement organizations using one of these approaches. The mass,

inclusive, and collective theory of power in people-focused organizing stands in contrast to the elitist theorization of power of the advocacy model.

With a few notable exceptions, the strategies for organizing operating within today's labor movement has remained unchanged since business unionism, and the movement away from the strategies that emphasize the economic power of workers has been exacerbated by a focus on politicians and electoral politics. Since the reforms of the New Deal were handed down by Franklin Roosevelt to quell class conflict, the aristocracy of American labor leaders have consistently placed faith in Democratic Party politicians to pass reforms favorable to labor unions. As labor historian Kim Moody (2017) explains in *On New Terrain*,

For organized labor, in particular, attempts to influence the policies and practices of elected Democratic officials are reduced to financial donations, endorsements, get-out-the-vote efforts on behalf of favored individual candidates. This is followed by lobbying in hopes of getting them to actually support labor's goals—most directed from the top of unions. This process is, in practice, analogous to the collective bargaining with which these leaders are familiar (Moody, 2017, p. 120).

When John Sweeney was elected to the President of the AFL-CIO in 1995, one of his goals was to reestablish political clout within the Democratic Party to achieve pro-labor reforms (Buhle, 1999). The main legislative goal following this period was the hopeful passage of the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA), a bill that would remove the regulations that favor employers for workers trying to form a union. Years of lobbying, endorsements, and \$300 million in campaign contributions helped propel Democrat Barack Obama to the White House in 2008 with a Democratic supermajority in Congress (Sustar, 2010). Unfortunately for labor, once in power the Democrats did nothing to pass the EFCA, but it is initiatives such as this that reveal the weakness

in an electoral labor strategy. Even if this bill was passed, it would have only served to create a new legal mechanism for union recognition. The substitution of organizing workers based on the inherent agency in their economic position in favor of legal shortcuts for quickly gaining new dues paying members would not represent a victory for democratic unionism. Decades after the formation of business unionism, ones marked by the persistent defeat of labor unions, and the elitist theories of power that prioritize the agency of politicians and bureaucrats over ordinary people have remained uncontested.

The historical narrative I have presented in this section is one that begins from a form of workplace democracy briefly manifested in the CIO-era of rank-and-file militancy that was tragically destroyed by a constellation of historical forces. The TWU local 100 is situated squarely in this narrative. In the early stages of the New York City transit system, union representatives attempted to organize the workforce along lines of specialized and skilled labor. These attempts were generally unsuccessful and were often met with violent opposition from the then privately-owned transit companies. During the 1930s, the Communist Party USA provided experienced organizers, financial resources, and a radical strategy of an open union with mass participation. With help from the communists, the fledgling union was able to gain a reputation for workplace militancy and effective power. The abusive conditions of employment in the transit system, with workers being routinely fired and mistreated, led to a sit-down strike of 500 workers fighting for union recognition in 1937. Led by Irish immigrant Michael Quill, the TWU joined the CIO and worked quickly to gain members. By June of 1937, the union had grown to 43,000 members. Quill would go onto lead multiple disruptions of the transit system to effectively bargain for wage increases, and the TWU played a significant role in unionizing non-white workers ignored by the segregationist AFL unions. The TWU's origin resembles the

historical model of the CIO, but so too did the union's response to the McCarthyist repression of leftist union organizers. Eventually, Quill broke with the Communist Party, purged all communist sympathizers from the union, and consolidated control in the bureaucratic leadership of the TWU. This movement towards business unionism did not occur without resistance, for as labor historian Joshua Freeman (1989) wrote in his book, *In Transit: The Transport Workers Union in New York City, 1933-1966*, "[F]rom the mid-1950s through the mid-1960s, a generalized revolt against the TWU leadership took place in the form of dissident movements, dual unions, and wildcat strikes. The TWU hierarchy was able to maintain control only by enlisting the powers of the state on its behalf" (p. 320). Freeman continues to argue that the CIO-model for explaining the history of labor unions in this time period is inappropriate for the TWU, for although many rank-and-file members were repressed by union and government forces, their militancy would persist until 1966 when the first general transit strike would shut down all of New York City.

Unlike the national course of labor movement defeats over the past half century, TWU Local 100 is a union that has maintained a consistent membership level with adequate wages and benefits for the thousands of workers employed by the city. TWU Local 100 today remains one of the strongest public-sector unions in New York City, consisting of around 40,000 members over the past 10 years (Department of Labor, 2018). The geographical presence of the union in the labor stronghold of New York City has no doubt insulated the local from the worst effects of a deteriorating labor movement, such as an offensive maneuver by government officials to attack public sector collective bargaining rights like Governor Walker's attack on Wisconsin public sector unions (Sustar, 2011). Even in a union state such as New York, where 70% of the public sector is unionized, attacks on the livelihoods of public employees has been justified on the

austerity-based logic of neoliberalism (Brenner, 2014). Andrew Cuomo ran for New York Governor in the Democratic Party on a campaign built around challenging the power of labor unions (Confessore, 2010). Immediately after taking office in 2011, Cuomo slashed the state budget and refused to renew a tax on the wealthy. In order to fund this tax cut and offset the spending deficit, Cuomo demanded that public sector union workers take a “shared sacrifice” for the state in the form of furloughs, pay freezes, and layoffs. In one example, Cuomo threatened to fire 9,800 members of the Public Employees Federation union if they refused to ratify a contract that conceded \$450 million in overdue raises (Coates, 2011). When the TWU Local 100 contract with the MTA expired in January 2012, the TWU leader were committed to avoiding the same pattern of austerity-imposed attacks on worker livelihoods. Miraculously, Cuomo agreed to offer raises to transit workers in exchange for concessions on health insurance. TWU Local 100 was one of the only public-sector unions to gain a raise during Cuomo’s offensive against public sector unions (Downs, 2014).

The narrow escape of the TWU from the onslaught of Democratic-Party-led neoliberal attacks on labor unions raises significant questions for the political battle necessary to invest funds in public transit. Business unionism’s legacy in the organizational strategies of public-sector unions, and as I argue in the organizational life of the TWU, challenges the capacity for rank-and-file members to organize themselves for the power necessary to challenge neoliberal austerity. The CIO-era of workplace organizing serves as a resource for imagining beyond the current immediate experience of labor movement strategy. I argue that union members and leaders must move beyond shallow advocacy option for change and instead prioritize the agency of ordinary people through organizing.

Mediating the Crisis

The NYC Action Plan, authored by the former Chair of the Metro Transit Authority (MTA), recommends that the costs of investment for maintenance and modernization be split evenly between the State of New York and the City of New York, but this demand initiated a public conflict between Governor Andrew Cuomo and Mayor Bill de Blasio. The MTA board members, responsible for governance of the transit system, are appointed by both the Governor and Mayor, but the State government has jurisdiction over a majority of these appointments (Barone, 2017). The bias towards the State was reflected in this battle, for Governor Cuomo quickly committed the funds to paying for fifty percent of the necessary infrastructural investments. Unfortunately for this plan, de Blasio has refused to allocate the necessary funds for subway maintenance, for he believes it is the sole responsibility of New York State to manage the affairs of the MTA. As he argued, “There’s lots to be done but the resources are there. It’s about the MTA and the state of New York stepping up, taking responsibility, coming up with a real plan and fixing things” (de Blasio, 2017). As a response, the TWU initiated a public advocacy campaign to pressure the Mayor into agreement with the action plan. Under the slogan “#FiftyFiftyIsFair,” the TWU funded the design and circulation of four full-page print advertisements and two 30-second commercials. These messages were circulated in the *Daily News* newspaper and on a local television station *NY 1 News*. The total cost of this campaign was estimated as six million dollars, and it was funded by the labor union (Durkin & Rivoli, 2017). While the union also utilized mobilizing members for protest tactics, like the crashing of a Mayoral press conference, the advertisements as organizational documents provide insight into the process of organizational rhetoric used by the TWU.

Voicing Over de Blasio

Organizational messages that are intended for an audience external to the organization's membership often use the collective voice of the organization to speak on behalf of its members. While rhetoricians have persistently labored to investigate the conceptual implications of audience, the characteristics of the rhetor-as-social-entity deserves greater attention. In the case of the TWU advertisements, the audience is NYC residents who rely on public transportation. Considering the political context of the feud between the Mayor and the Governor, these advertisements attempt to persuade



Figure 1: Postcard

residents that the blame for the subway system's woes should fall on Mayor de Blasio. For example, one advertisement is an imitation of a postcard signed by "Mayor Bill," and it is addressed to "Subway Riders" (Fig. 1). Understanding the intended and actual audience of rhetorical activity is necessary for criticism but locating the rhetor in the context of organizational discourse reveals the mediatory process of representing interests for both TWU members and NYC residents. External organizational rhetoric, "[E]ncourages us to consider "who" is really speaking when the organization makes a public announcement or participates in a social debate as well as whose interests are being served as it does so" (Meisenbach & Mcmillan, 2006, p. 105-6). The collective voice of the TWU should not be understood as a representation of a homogenous political perspective of rank-and-file members nor as the singular expression of elected union leadership; instead, organizational voice should serve as a place of inquiry for

understanding the role of rhetorical mediation. The voice of the TWU in this advertisement is used to express a message that de Blasio is the source of the transit crisis, and that his inaction should be understood as a betrayal of working-class New Yorkers and transit riders.

The advertisement texts contain multiple signifiers of authorship. Each advertisement includes the logos of both TWU Local 100 and TWU's national affiliation with the largest trade union federation, the AFL-CIO. As is common for external messages that use the medium of paid advertisements, most of the messages also include a disclosure of financial support for the advertisement's design and circulation as,

Paid for by the Transport Workers Union

John Samuelson, International President.

The designation of payment is not identical to a signature. Press releases from corporation executives, for example, may end with a signature of a figure with authority. Individuals can draw on the collective voice of an organization while still claiming authorship of a document. Considering organizational communication's focus on corporations in the United States, the individual pronouncement of an organization's collective voice has been problematized by scholars noting the hierarchical structures of corporations (Cheney & McMillan, 1990). Labor union organizations, however, are democratically organized entities, and the degree of separation between the relationship of leadership with the rank-and-file is smaller than its corporate counterparts. Union leaders are elected to represent the membership, and that process contributes to the significance of organizational voice. The TWU messages use the logos and name of the democratically elected president, John Samuelson, to imply the collective voice of both rank-and-file members and union leadership.

Organizational voice offers the TWU authority in their claims to represent the interests of both transit workers and transit riders. As the people that operate the subway system, the collective voice of transit workers boosts the legitimacy of their mediation. Furthermore, the advertisements work to align the interests of transit riders with the TWU by using alternative deployments of sentence subjects. The written copy of the printed ads uses sentence subject structures that oscillates between collective pronouns and the term transit/subway riders. In the advertisement with the mayor in a graffiti covered train (Fig. 2), the large text states, “Where are you taking us?” The use of the collective pronoun ‘us’ demonstrates an alignment of interests between TWU members and transit riders, and the statement that, “Our transit system...” demonstrates the shared interests that both parties have in funding investments in the subway’s infrastructure. Any reference to the phrase, “Summer of Hell,” is always accompanied by the subject of transit/subway riders (Fig. 3; Fig. 4). This distinction preserves the externality of these messages and works to position the TWU as a mediator that is distinct but aligned with the interests of commuters.

For the practice of mediation, the organizational rhetor’s role is to bridge the experience of the transit crisis with a political system that can assign blame and develop solutions. The caricatures of Mayor de Blasio rhetorically work to promote what George Cheney (1983), using the work of Kenneth Burke, described as “identification by antithesis.” These external messages are intended to promote a view of the lack of resolution for the transit crisis as the fault of de Blasio, and they serve to construct a conflict between the interests of the city residents and the Mayor. In promoting the construction of de Blasio as the enemy of public transit, the organizational voice of the TWU implies through enthymeme that the labor union is in close alignment with the transit consumer public. The explicit reference to the Subway Action Plan in

the advertisement that presents de Blasio as Pinocchio (Fig. 4) demonstrates the political consciousness that the TWU is attempting to rhetorically mediate with transit rider experiences. While it is clear that the TWU is promoting consciousness of their conceptualization of the crisis, rhetorical mediations effectiveness stems from its ability to relate to the experiences of the audience. Throughout each message, the description of the crisis heavily relies upon a contextual literacy of the subway system within the intended audiences lacks an articulation of the quotidian problems this crisis has created. Summer of Hell is frequently mentioned in the advertisements, but this term is given no description outside of its connotative meaning. The delays caused by infrastructural decay is the largest issue affecting transit riders, and there is no mention of delay in any of the messages. While the graffiti advertisement (Fig. 2) does briefly mention that “Buses and subways will continue to be packed like sardines,” these advertisements presume the audience will connect their experiences of the crisis with the TWU’s articulated set of political ideas.

In many cases, the interests of transit riders and transit workers may be aligned, for they are both frequent users of the system and have an interest in its smooth functioning, but in the case of funding for the MTA there is a disconnect of interests determined by the economic position of public employees in the realm of social reproduction. If the needs of a smooth functioning transit system are proper levels of investment in tracks, subway cars, signals, etc., then the wages of transit workers directly cut into the capital budget that would otherwise be used on infrastructure. Since TWU members enjoy the benefits of collective bargaining and a history of successful contract negotiations, their wages and benefits do have an effect on the high operating costs of the MTA. As a press release from a conservative think-tank for New York State policy exemplifies, “The MTA has generally done a lousy job at the negotiating table,

where management is supposed to be representing the system’s riders and the taxpayers” (“MTA needs to hit the brakes”, 2017). It is not impossible to argue that transit workers deserve every cent they earn because of the high cost of living in NYC, the dangerous workplace conditions, and the importance of their work for the city’s economy, but the attempt at mediating an alignment in interests between workers and riders seeks to preserve the role of labor union executives as the legitimate agent in the resolution of the transit crisis. The operating assumption relies on the authority of organizational voice to place the elected leadership of the TWU as representative of interests all transit riders.

“Playing Politics”

While these messages are undoubtedly political in both form and content, the TWU collectively expressed that the Mayor’s refusal to support the action plan stems from his participation in “political games” (Fig. 3). This rhetorical decision in the crafting of the crisis messages obfuscates the interests of the TWU in its support for the action plan and critique of de Blasio. The notion of ‘playing politics’ is a rhetorical trope that has persisted in American political discourse to attack politicians for

avoiding substantive issues, and it closely resembles the classic critique of rhetoric originally initiated by Plato in 380 BC. Plato argued that rhetoric was an impure area of study for it relied on tactics of manipulation and flattery to distract from the pure knowledge of philosophy. As



Figure 2: Graffiti

Robert Hariman (1986) rebuked many years later, the concerns of status for genres of discourse or scholarly enterprises is a device for establishing power and avoiding substance. For the TWU, there is a performative contradiction within the accusation that the Mayor is playing politics occurring within a series of advertisements that mock and degrade the Mayor. One of the printed advertisements directly attacks the Mayor for lying about an event where he held up a train to reach a press conference on time (Fig. 4). The substance of this criticism has little to do with the actuality of infrastructure investments; but according to the TWU, it is the Mayor who is wrongfully playing political games.

The process of mediation within the accusation of playing politics is intended to capture an experience of dissatisfaction with career politicians that many New Yorkers may harbor. For these residents, the connection of a general apathy towards establishment politics is connected to an articulation of the blame falling on de Blasio. Playing politics may be a persuasive effort at mediation for those that feel they have experienced little change emanating from the offices of elected officials, for these politicians are perpetually caught up within the games of governance.

The weakness of this rhetorical device is more than just a contradiction in the TWU's organizational rhetoric; but as Hariman argued, for rhetoric, the criticism of 'playing politics' is a rhetorical trope that depoliticizes the issue of funding for public services and transforms the transit crisis into a showdown of elite public officials. In the 30-second commercial produced for the #FiftyFiftyIsFair campaign, testimonies are presented from unnamed individuals that are visually implied to be riders of the transit system. One testimony stated, "It's time for the mayor to put politics aside and pay his fair share" ("TWU Local 100" 2017). Putting politics aside, however, is opposite of what needs to occur. Considering the historical context of the assault on public services, there is a pressing need for a deeply political challenge to the austerity budgets

and regimes of debt. TWU's use of the term politics refers to the public feud between Cuomo and de Blasio, but their participation in this conflict has recreated the conditions that allow for an avoidance of the substantive issue of fiscal policy. Politics is necessary for a long-term resistance to the erosion of public funding for transit services, but the ethos of the #FiftyFiftyIsFair campaign rhetorically works to preserve the current trajectory of transit funding with a one-time addition of the immediate funds needed for the action plan. This is more than a missed opportunity for the labor union organization to politicize the reluctance of public officials to invest in services that are critical for the city's populace, but it also demonstrates an obfuscation of interests on behalf of the TWU. Accusations of playing politics blurs the boundaries of interests for transit riders, city officials, and labor union members, for it centers the debate on essential public services around a battle of personalities.

The focus on the apparently wrong type of politics of Mayor de Blasio in the #FiftyFiftyIsFair campaign stands in stark contrast to the politics of scapegoating contained within this media campaign. It should go without saying that if "playing politics" is a reason to distrust a position, the TWU would be guilty of just that. This rhetorical tactic is the *sine qua non* of the elitist advocacy model for social change. The inclusion of the signature by John Samuelson, President of the TWU, further demonstrates the commitment the organizational leaders have in making sense of this crisis through an elitist theorization of power. Scapegoating privileges the role of elite decision makers in both the creation of a crisis, but also limits the scope of solutions towards the involvement of other elites that have a better plan for resolving the crisis. Advocacy, as a political form for social movement activity, is a strategy that not only mediates a generalizable set of ideas to a public, but also is involved in a communicative process with organizational members that shapes organizational life. The effects of mediation extend

beyond the expression of an argument about politics. External organizational rhetoric can mediate an understanding of common-sense that either compels organizational members to have greater levels of involvement and activity, or the mediation can serve to limit and constrain the possibility of action. The TWU's use of advocacy through scapegoating attempts to situate the experience of transit workers working within a crisis as explained by the failings of an individual politician. Within this shared system of meaning, or the common-sense notion of issues with transit being resolved by powerful elite decision makers, the agency of rank-and-file transit workers is subordinated to the decisions of leaders in the TWU.



Figure 3: Cash



Figure 4: Liar, Liar

Democratic Elitism

While never explicitly stated in the campaign, the organizational rhetoric of the TWU has placed the members of the labor union in an alliance with Governor Cuomo and the State of New York. The repeated use of the term Summer of Hell participates in the circulation of a soundbite

that originated from Governor Cuomo (Rose, 2017). While its popular circulation has certainly minimized the importance of the source, the positive messages concerning the State government's willingness to commit funds for the action plan demonstrates the direct connection between this campaign and Cuomo. The commercial video clip uses a narrated voice over to dramatically state, "Governor Cuomo has stepped up, committing to fund 50% of this plan. But where is Mayor de Blasio? Playing politics with our commute" ("TWU Local 100", 2017). This statement presents the positive attributes of the Governor's willingness to solve this issue, and it also implies that Cuomo is above the petty political squabbles that the TWU accuses the Mayor of peddling. Again, the prioritization of public personalities mediates a common-sense paradigm for political activity that is limited to the elite few. Through this mediation, the complexities of the transit crisis, and the experiences that riders and workers have with decaying infrastructure, are reduced into the generalized understanding of two powerful politicians having a feud in public. The narrative presented by the TWU situates Cuomo as the competent and caring politician as opposed de Blasio as the greedy and untrustworthy public official.

The image of Mayor de Blasio sitting upon a pile of cash and Metro Cards (Fig. 3) references the \$4 billion surplus of city finances, but this image fails to draw a historical connection to the accumulation by dispossession that generated this surplus in the first place. This image is useful for the identification by antithesis that positions de Blasio as a class enemy of working class New Yorkers experiencing financial hardships. Not only does the obscene display of wealth demonstrate the alignment of interests that de Blasio may have with wealth campaign donors, a fact also referenced in the postcard advertisement (Fig. 1), but the inclusion of Metro Cards within the image contextualizes this wealth as the product of NYC residents. Every instance in which the MTA has raised the fares for transit services has met the bitter scorn

of working-class transit riders, and the connection of the anger over fare hikes with the pile of cash serves to cement de Blasio as the antithesis of working class people. Unfortunately, however, this image does not mediate the experiences of wealth inequality with consciousness of an explanatory theory for accounting for the \$4 billion surplus. As such, this image participates in an ahistorical account of city finances and mediates the failing of an individual politician, rather than a trend of neoliberal policy that systematically underfunds public services. The construction of a common-sense that is framed by an elitist theory of power is inherently limited to explanations shallow in historical scope.

The historical placement of the NYC transit crisis within the context of neoliberalism demonstrates the strategic dead end of crafting an alliance with Andrew Cuomo. Governor Cuomo was elected to office on a campaign that embodied the ideals of neoliberalism, and through a campaign that embraced austerity measures and combatted the power of unions, Cuomo's time in office has wreaked havoc on working class New Yorkers. As the history of public sector unionism in New York State demonstrates, the TWU alliance with Cuomo comes at the cost of solidarity with the unions he has forced into concessionary contracts. Furthermore, the most cut and dry legal analysis of the transit funding situation should place the blame on Cuomo, for New York State has majority control and responsibility of the MTA. The TWU's organizational rhetoric intervenes into a political situation that benefits one politician over another, but the intervention does nothing to advance an understanding of the necessary political solutions for an adequately funded transit system. Cuomo's provision of fifty percent of the plan to fix the NYC subway system is a short-term solution that should be expected from the government agency that operates the system, but the rhetoric of the TWU frames the investment as an act of good will that is worthy of praise. Any attempt at promoting a more critical

consciousness of the funding for public services under neoliberalism, such as the visual depiction of hoarded money, is undercut by the funneling of faith back into an understanding of politics as a battle between good and bad politicians.

Mediating Labor, Social Movements, and Rhetoric

The implications of this chapter are three-fold. First, the organizational documents I critiqued give a sense of how the TWU summoned organizational voice to use the rank-and-file membership as a source of authority for its practice of rhetorical mediation. By studying these texts, I approach the process by which the TWU's rhetoric shapes the contours of the political battle for funding of mass transit systems and intervenes into the historical context of neoliberal attacks on public services. The distinct organizational structure of labor unions differentiates this analysis from the typical organizational communication pattern of studying corporate organizations, and this works to deepen the historically unexplored organizational terrain of labor unions. This study demonstrates the importance of organizational rhetoric as an object suitable for criticism, for the unique implications of the organization-as-rhetor are best explored through a mixture of organizational communication scholarship and rhetorical theory. The TWU's ability to both channel the collective weight of its membership and situate itself clearly on the side of the State of New York in this political battle is significant for understanding the full terrain of actors. Organizations, and their persuasive efforts, have unique capacities to create collectivities, craft alliances, and construct enemies in ways demonstrated by the TWU's #FiftyFiftyIsFair campaign.

However, the theorization of organizational voice is more complicated and deserves greater attention. As I will argue in chapter two, there is a need for qualitative inquiry into the consciousness of organizational membership. The comparison between the texts produced by the

leadership of the union and data culled from conversations with the rank-and-file members could demonstrate the ways in which the messages contained in texts reflect or alienate the perspective of its members. While the TWU is a democratically operated entity, the union's rhetorical decisions for this campaign do not align with the interests of a majority of its rank-and-file members. There is a chance that the union has acted outside of its representational capacity. Not only would this research give insight into the communicative processes that contribute to the expression of collective rhetoric; but in the specific case of the TWU, examining the dialectical relationship between organizational texts and member consciousness will reflect the democratic authenticity of the organization. In the examples I identify in my analysis, the rhetorical enunciation of an alliance with Governor Cuomo may not be a decision that accurately reflects the consciousness of membership. Textual analysis of the attempt to depoliticize the imminently political situation could potentially be significant for understanding the union's attempt to avoid this criticism, and qualitative inquiry could provide the method for confirming this hypothesis through interview data.

Second, organizational rhetoric provides theoretical clarity to the study of social movements within rhetorical criticism. This chapter should be understood as a beginning of a disruption of the narrative that excludes labor unions from social movement studies within rhetorical studies and organizational communication. Dana Cloud (2011) urges scholars interested in social movement rhetoric to investigate both communication and clout. Labor unions have the capacity to collectively bargain for materially better livelihoods of its members, but this requires the confidence of rank-and-file members to challenge the conditions of exploitation. The process by which confidence is achieved requires persuasion, but the instrumental effectiveness of economic coercion requires clout. Social movement scholars interested in concerns of

instrumentality should dedicate greater attention to both organizational rhetoric and labor union organizations.

Finally, the concept of rhetorical mediation demonstrates the persuasive capacities of organizations in social and political struggles. The #FiftyFiftyIsFair campaign demonstrates the rhetorical mechanisms that endow organizations with an ability to connect experiences of injustice, alienation, exploitation, or crisis with the consciousness of a political system that explains the problem and provides a solution. For both organizational communication and rhetorical criticism, Lukács's theorization of mediation emphasizes the dialectical relationship between experience and consciousness. This relationship allows scholars to examine the alignment of interests that occurs within the process of rhetorical mediation, and through the analysis of interests, critics can develop socio-political criticism of organizational rhetoric. The TWU's use of organizational voice to align the interests of its members with the transit riding public was undercut by the subsequent alignment with Governor Cuomo. Mediation is a neutral concept that does not guarantee a direct correspondence between the political ideas of an organization and the categorical interests of its members, but the concept enables critics to distinguish between faithful representations of interest with opportunistic attempts at gaining political capital.

Labor unions as social movement organizations deserves a theorization of strategy that is attuned to the unique advantages of workplace democracy, and the criticism of strategies that defer the agentic expressions of organizational members should assist in that goal. In this study, I have argued that organizational rhetorical criticism and the concept of mediation can assist scholars in theorizing the effects of advocacy models of change on organizational life. The TWU's attempt to mediate the experiences of the transit crisis within an elitist paradigm for

social change actively suppresses the possibilities for political engagement that fall outside of a business unionism style of politics. The brokerage of contracts between union leaders and corporate employers resembles the same style of leadership that the TWU has used during the transit crisis. Governor Cuomo has provided a temporary influx of capital for funding repairs, and the TWU has funded a series of advertisements that target an enemy to Cuomo. In both business unionism and the case study of the NYC subway system, the inherent agency of organized workers does not have a place in the common-sense understanding of political change. While the intervention of a labor union into the realm of social movement activity is a welcomed change to the decades of apolitical defeat in the labor movement, unions have a capacity for change that extends further beyond battles between politicians. The CIO-era of workplace organizing present not only a model for advancing the livelihood of working class people, but it demonstrates the collective agency that is provided by the explicit recognition of labor as a source of power. Transit workers could be the leaders of a movement against austerity for public services; and by organizing in their workplace, transit workers could force the provision of funding for the revitalization of the subway system. Instead, the leaders of the TWU mediate a shared system of meaning that removes workers from the terrain of politics.

Chapter 2: Making Sense of the Common Crisis

Three years before his death, Karl Marx (1880) published a questionnaire on working conditions in a French socialist magazine, *La Revue Socialiste*, intended to be distributed to French workers. One hundred questions were prefaced by an uncharacteristically brief reflection on the need for investigating “the facts and crimes of capitalist exploitation.” The questions begin from an inquiry into the dry details of industrial production and progress towards explicitly political questions about wage theft, government repression, and the use of strikes. Marx intended to perform an empirical study of workers, and through a systematic investigation of exploitation from the perspective of workers, develop precise knowledge of working conditions for the use of socialist movements. The questionnaire, entitled “A Workers’ Inquiry,” opens with a statement, marked by Marx’s typical sardonic tone:

Not a single government, whether monarchy or bourgeois republic, has yet ventured to undertake a serious inquiry into the position of the French working class. But what a number of investigations have been undertaken into crises — agricultural, financial, industrial, commercial, political! (Marx, 1997[1880])

In the following study, I intend to fulfill both a serious inquiry into the position of the working class in New York City transit work and an investigation into the political crisis of infrastructural decay in the subway system. While I avoid the use of a questionnaire, I utilize qualitative research methods to undertake an inquiry into the perspective of transit workers on the period of time known as the Summer of Hell. This study is guided by the belief that the perspective of the working class deserves an epistemological priority in investigations into matters of labor and progressive change. The NYC subway system relies on the labor of thousands of public sector

workers, and the various attempts to diagnose and solve the transit crisis have neglected their perspective.

Scholars from various disciplines, anthropology, geography, and history, have worked to incorporate the ethos of “A Workers’ Inquiry” into their pursuits of investigating the world, but scholars of communication studies have lagged behind. Each of these disciplines ask questions that are vital for assessing contemporary conditions of the working class, but communication is a discipline that can uniquely attend to the persuasive mechanisms that are needed to change the present conditions. I open with a brief review of a concept used frequently by organizational communication scholars, collective sensemaking, to lay the groundwork for the analytical devices that assist in the interpretation of my fieldwork. Sensemaking offers a vantage point of inquiry for the empirical description of the micro-communicative practices that enable collective action. Next, I develop Antonio Gramsci’s theorization of ‘common-sense’ as a concept for situating sensemaking within social, political, and ideological contexts. For both sensemaking and common-sense, my version of worker inquiry focuses on the communicative practices that enable or constrain the sense of agency held by individual workers. I use interviews with transit workers to document and analyze the social construction of the transit crisis, giving special consideration to the phrase Summer of Hell. The perspective of workers on the state of the subway system, the source of the crisis, and the steps needed to improve mass transit surmount to an analysis of the connection between the messages offered by the leadership of the TWU and a limited sense of agency on behalf of transit workers.

This thesis overall provides an empirical analysis of the effects of the communicative practices that labor union organizations use to solidify bureaucratic control and to promote passivity within rank-and-file members. In the last chapter, I argued that the union’s

#FiftyFiftyIsFair advertisements rhetorically mediated an experience of problems with the subway system with a set of beliefs that assign blame on Mayor Bill de Blasio and align union membership with Governor Andrew Cuomo. The advocacy model of social change utilized by the labor union organization during this crisis is premised upon an elite theory of power, one that locates agency exclusively within the decisions of powerful individuals. Rhetorical criticism as a methodology for studying persuasion can investigate the ability of texts to shape meaning and facilitate action but some form of qualitative inquiry is necessary to study the reception of these texts. I argue that the individuals I interviewed for this study mostly accepted the union leadership's mediation of the crisis. In doing so, these workers embraced a common-sense belief that the workplace is an economic sphere that is disconnected from political struggle. Increasing funding for the public good of mass transit requires battling the political forces of austerity under neoliberal capitalism, but the elite theory of power operating within the TWU's strategy for social change seeks to preserve a role for the union bureaucracy at the expense of an active and engaged rank-and-file membership.

Organizational Sensemaking

For organizational communication scholars, sensemaking is a social process of constructing a shared system of meaning in response to issues or events that disrupt conventional expectations (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Sensemaking is an activity that individuals undergo to understand moments of ambiguity or uncertainty in organizational life. Firmly rooted in a social constructionist perspective on organizational communication, "The basic idea of sensemaking is that reality is an ongoing accomplishment that emerges from efforts to create order and make retrospective sense of what occurs" (Weick, 1993, p. 635). In moments that defy preexisting frameworks of understanding, individuals seek to make sense of a situation by

interpreting cues from the environment and interactions with others. For example, if a worker finds themselves being verbally abused by a manager for a disciplinary violation that did not occur; this worker might come to make sense of the event through conversation with coworkers about the typically irate mood of that particular manager. In order to comprehend this event, the worker must go beyond an interpretation of the scolding and begin the process of retrospectively developing a framework for understanding the relationships between organizational members.

Organizational members must have a shared sense of their roles, their environment, and their goals in order to act collectively. Sally Maitlis (2005) argues that sensemaking creates, “rational accounts of the world that enable action” (p. 21), for a shared system of expectations provides organizational members with a capacity to anticipate the actions of others, collaborate without redundancy, and respond to events in a predictable fashion. Sensemaking is a process that must precede decision-making, so that organizational members can understand how decisions are made, who gets to make them, and how to respond to them. Furthermore, decision-making can often serve as an occasion for further sensemaking. Sensemaking is not a singular event that establishes meaning and leads to action, but instead, “These action-meaning cycles occur repeatedly as people construct provisional understandings that they continuously enact and modify” (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014, p. 67). Collective action requires unity, and organizational members must utilize the social process of sensemaking to establish intersubjective meaning for effective collective action.

In organizational communication literature, organizational crises serve as a frequent object of study for approaching a theory of sensemaking. A crisis, defined as a low probability and high consequence event that threaten fundamental organizational goals (Weick, 1988), are occasions that defy interpretation and demand sensemaking. Crisis situations in organizational

contexts can be either disastrous scenarios that are compounded by poor sensemaking practices and/or serve as opportunities for initiating organizational or social change. Depending on the severity of the crisis, organizational members may lack any frame of reference to interpret new stimuli. For example, on April 3, 2017 a subway car derailed at Penn Station in New York City. It took MTA employees and public safety officials over two hours to get all passengers off the train and back to a station (Honan, 2017). While there are trainings and procedures, preemptive sensemaking practices, for train conductors to respond in the event of a derailment, the physical damage to the subway car doors violated expectations for the conductor to make sense of the situation. Fire officials and MTA employees had to quickly evaluate and construct a shared reality, so that they could cooperate and act effectively to resolve the crisis.

Crises can be momentary interruptions of organizational life, or they can be prolonged disruptions of organizational activity lasting for extended periods of time. In the latter form, or structural crises, organizational leaders tend to engage in practices of sensegiving. Sensegiving can be described as the, “process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward the preferred redefinition of organizational reality” (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). When an organizational crisis is disrupting the ability of members to make sense of their environments, it is common for executives and managers to engage in practices that make sense of the situation and offer guidance for how to react in the future. As Friederike Schultz Juliana Raupp (2010) describe, “Crises that result from and require structural change provoke the revival of common discussions on values and institutional orders between media, corporations, and political actors such as governments” (p. 12). Sensegiving can manifest as any number of communicative practices within an organization, such as internal emails, public postings, conversations between managers and workers, and public statements on behalf of the

organization. Attempts to redefine organizational reality for members is not a guaranteed process, for other practices of sensemaking can interfere or contradict the sensegiving messages offered by organizational leadership. There is a capacity for organizational members to resist the frames of interpretation offered by leaders, and in that resistance the crisis may become an opportunity for organizational change.

In order to enact organizational change, however, members must have a capacity to act. Critical organizational communication scholars have continually interrogated the dichotomy of agency and structure, arguing instead that people have agency in contexts of constraints on action (Mumby, 2005). From this point of view, there is a need to theorize possibilities for resistance to the managerial techniques of control that limit the autonomy of workers. Within the postmodern and poststructuralist approaches to communication, resistance exists within the individual worker's ability to navigate power relations and utilize micro-political practices of self-expression (Seibold & Shea, 2001). While there is certainly a need to attend to the communicative practices that enable workers to take control of their own identity, creating organizational change in context of organizations managed in a top-down manner is not simply accomplished with symbolic action. Dana Cloud (2011) argues, "Communication studies privilege the role of talk in creating and sustaining social reality to the extent that material exploitation and antagonism between employers and employees recede into the background" (p. 176). She says this not to argue that there is no potential for communication to enable change, but rather that agency requires both communication and clout. Specifically, economic clout. The sensemaking practices that allow workers to socially construct a reality that recognizes the exploitative workplace conditions can enable these workers to act collectively for organizational change.

In one case-study that connects sensemaking and agency, Karl Weick (1999) argues that the Polish Workers Defense Committee (KOR, in Polish) utilized an organizational model that strengthens the resources for sensemaking in an example of a social movement for democratic reform. In 1976, a series of protests in response to the raising of prices for basic commodities was brutally repressed by government forces, controlled by the Stalinist Polish United Worker's Party (Schell, 1987). In context of intense government surveillance and repression, many Polish people interested in democracy found little hope for challenging the military dictatorship, Soviet army occupation, and the threat of nuclear weapons. For these people, the impossibility of defeating the Stalinist government was common-sense. KOR was founded explicitly to reject the hopelessness of resistance, and the members of this organization directly acted to restore civic life and social bonds outside of the ruling government. Through the circulation of independent newsletters, the mutual provision of aid, or the facilitation of underground lecture opportunities, KOR encouraged people to immediately create the change they desired in their local communities. Where the prevailing interpretations of history produced a sense of powerlessness, KOR changed the words, actions, sensitivities, and images with which the Polish people had to work. KOR changed what people saw when they looked back at the indeterminate flow of events that was the Poland of the 1970s. KOR did not change the realities of indeterminacy, flow, and thrownness. Instead, what KOR did change were actions and words that were added to that flow. They changed the interpretations that were imposed retrospectively on those flows. (Weick, 1999, p. 52)

This case study is demonstrative of the utility of collective sensemaking for analyzing organizational discourse in social movement settings, for it emphasizes the socially constructed notion of what is possible without paving over the objective circumstances of reality. According

to Weick's analysis, the organizational design of KOR provided sensemaking resources for the members to create an identity for themselves imbued with agency. When members traded accounts of their on-going projects in civic life, they collectively engaged in the construction of a new sense of possibility.

Gramsci's Common sense

Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci's (1968; 1992) writings have enjoyed a welcomed reception across all academic disciplines for their ability to describe the ideological terrain upon which class struggle is waged. During his fight against the rise of fascism in Italy and his role as a leader within the Italian Communist Party, Gramsci theorized concepts for understanding the methods of anti-capitalist politics that were necessary before the revolutionary seizure of state power. For Gramsci, culture was a site of struggle for whose ideas and interests could establish dominance and lead to change. His most popular concept, hegemony, has endured countless variants of interpretation. Hegemony refers to the ways that a class of people wins ideological consent to rule over other classes. Critical organizational scholar Dennis Mumby (1997) argues that this concept has been frequently misused as merely a form of domination that manufactures consent from a population, but instead, "The concept of hegemony does not operate in Gramsci's philosophy in a pejorative fashion. Rather, it is a descriptive term (or, when speaking of the hegemony of the working class, a positive term) that functions as a means to explain how a particular group comes to exercise intellectual and moral leadership over other groups." (p. 348). While still recognizing the ability of the ruling class to manipulate the values, morals, and beliefs of a group of people, Mumby puts forward a dialectical understanding of hegemony that emphasizes the possibility for resistance to challenge the prevailing ideas.

The popularity of hegemony for academic scholarship has resulted in countless studies of the methods for ideological manipulation working in service of ruling class interests, but Gramsci's theorization of common-sense is as a concept for understanding the experiential effects of hegemonic domination. Common sense, for Gramsci, describes the naturalized sets of beliefs during times of economic, political, and social stability. In the last academic publication before Stuart Hall's death, Alan O'Shea and Hall (2014) argue that common-sense is, "[A] form of 'everyday thinking' which offers us frameworks of meaning with which to make sense of the world. It is a form of popular, easily-available knowledge which contains no complicated ideas, requires no sophisticated argument and does not depend on deep thought or wide reading" (p. 8). It is common sense that hard-working people deserve to live a good life, that evil-doers deserve to be brought to justice, and that all people deserve freedom. While these ideas seem to be universal and ahistorical, common sense is a product of the arrangement of social forces at any given point in history. The ideological victory of neoliberalism has resulted in a framework of meaning that makes sense of social ills, such as homelessness or poverty, as the failure of individuals. Common sense is not separate from hegemony but is the product of a collective sensemaking process that occurs within a context of ideological warfare. As Marxist historian Walter Adamson (2014) argues,

Individuals are born into world already shaped by previous class struggle. Out of that struggle some class or alliance of classes has emerged in a dominant and very often a 'hegemonic' position... such a class will always attempt to secure a hegemonic position, i.e., to gain political legitimacy by weaving its own cultural outlook deeply into the social fabric... Over the long run, the world view articulated by its philosophers in the realm of

high culture will trickle down and solidify into ‘common-sense’ (Adamson, 2014, p. 149).

Most cultural, political, and social institutions under capitalism participate in the dissemination of a common-sense that supports ruling class interests. Just as Mumby reminded scholars of communication about the potential for resistance within hegemony, common-sense is never exactly identical with ruling class ideology. Common sense for most people is disjointed and complex, and there in even periods of relative stability there are potentials for the contradictions inherent within its logic to be utilized for a political purpose. For this reason, Gramsci viewed common-sense as the starting point for political education and the spreading of class consciousness.

Marxists of the twenty-century placed a great deal of emphasis on the potential of the periodic economic crises of the capitalist mode of production to spur a mass realization of the need for socialism, but Gramsci rejected these economistic views of social change in favor of recognizing the deliberate political initiatives that construct alternative hegemonies in the interests of the working-class (Adamson, 2014). Nonetheless, Gramsci recognized the potential for the experience of a crisis to threaten ruling class hegemony and produce a “crisis of authority” (Gramsci, 1992). During periods of mass unemployment, unending poverty, and food insecurity, there is a favorable terrain for the spreading of ideas that reject the common-sense understanding of the ability for market economies to provide for human need. Crises and moments of instability are exigencies that can be acted upon to alter the terms of common-sense. These opportunities are not limited to economic crises, for any event that exceeds rationalization from preexisting frames of meaning present a chance to shift the direction of popular thinking. For example, the election of Donald Trump as the President of the United States was a political

crisis that threatened common-sense notions of the typical characteristics of elected officials. On November 9, 2016, millions of Americans were forced to make sense of the newly changed terms of political culture. The combination of his nontraditional demeanor and his defeat in the popular vote produced a crisis of authority for United States civil society. For activists working outside of traditional electoral politics, this period of volatility was an opportunity to introduce new ways of making sense of American politics. Nothing is guaranteed to change during a crisis; and many cases, hegemony and its connection to common-sense can adapt to rationalize the previous threats to stability.

Gramsci's political project for the overthrow of capitalism is one rooted in education and organization, and the emphasis on common sense as the starting point for this process closely resembles the dialectical theory of consciousness developed by Georg Lukács (1968). Lukács's theorization of mediation posits that there is a capacity for individuals, organizations, or events to make sense of an experience in more general terms. As rhetorician Dana Cloud (2018) explains, "[M]ediation helps us to understand our local immediate experience, which is disconnected from others and from explanation, in terms of a broader explanation that connects us to other people" (p. 31). Explanations that connect and are shared by people are forms of consciousness, and there is a dialectical connection that tethers the persuasive capacity of mediation to the immediate experience of individuals. Successful mediation, then, occurs when a coherent set of ideas can generalize the experiences of an individual. The goal for both Gramsci and Lukács is changing consciousness of a majority of people for a shared set of working-class interests. Raising class consciousness is a project that requires mediating the experience of being an exploited worker under capitalism with a set of beliefs that places all workers in alignment against the capitalist ruling class. Attempts to mediate the need for a revolutionary overthrow of

capitalism with middle class workers that have enjoy temporary financial security would likely fail to connect experience with class consciousness. Common sense was viewed as the starting point for Gramsci's program of political education because as a concept it emphasizes the sensemaking frameworks of ordinary people. As Adamson expresses, "From the point of view of political education, then, common-sense is not only its necessary starting point but also its most formidable obstacle" (2014, p. 151). Experience is the common denominator in both theoretical systems, for they both demand an attentiveness in persuasive efforts to meeting people where the limits of their experience are currently situated.

Thus far, I have explored how organizational communication scholars study the social process of sensemaking, and how Marxists view common sense as an inventional resource to mediate political conclusions that far surpass the limits of acceptable political discourse. Sensemaking and common-sense should be understood as parallel concepts. As an attempt to introduce a critical current into literature on organizational sensemaking, this study places the process of sensemaking into a contextual understanding of common-sense as ideology. The social scientists of communication studies have used the concept of sensemaking to describe the micro-communicative practices of organizational life, and common-sense adds a critical valence to this method of study. Sensemaking does not occur with a vacuum, nor does the social construction of a shared reality occur without the backdrop of material circumstances. Workers construct shared systems of meaning within organizational life after already being socialized to the common-sense expectations and norms of working-class life. Studying an organizational crisis is useful for both understanding the mechanisms of sensemaking that facilitate collection action and presents an opportunity for political transformations of consciousness. I further

demonstrate the utility of considering sensemaking and common-sense during an organizational crisis through my qualitative study of the NYC transit crisis and the TWU organization.

Entering the Union Hall

Fortunately for the qualitative researcher interested in the New York subway system, the payment system for riding the subway only requires the swiping of a MetroCard at the entry into any station. From that point, a rider is capable of taking an infinite number of train rides to any point in the city for the same cost of two dollars and seventy-five cents. I took advantage of this flat-rate payment system in December of 2017 to explore, observe, and investigate one of the largest mass transit systems in the world. Each morning I would swipe into the Church Avenue station and begin a daylong journey into the belly of the transportation beast. I would ride the Q train into Manhattan, all the while grumbling about delays in true New Yorker fashion, and I would make use of the numerous transfer stations to continually board new trains in search of new sites of inquiry. While gaining a deep understanding of the physical, geographical, and social dynamics of subway operations was on my to-do list, the main purpose of my research was to speak with transit workers about their experiences during the so-called transit crisis. In pursuit of this research agenda, I was on a search for workers willing to chat. Boarding and exiting trains again and again, wandering platforms, waiting for shift rotations, and finding opportunities to be minimally disruptive to an individual's work duties.

During the 2017 winter break, six months after the Summer of Hell began, I spent one week in New York City conducting fieldwork. As a researcher new to field methods, I had an optimistic perspective on my ability to recruit participants to the study. I had three possible routes of recruitment that I hoped could snowball into a pool of participants. First, I intended to recruit TWU members through connections to a network of labor activists in the New York City

area. Dana Cloud's (2010) study of a dissident union group at Boeing began from a connection made at an activist conference, and that connection enabled Cloud to closely examine the struggle for democratic reforms within a labor union organization. Her study began with the rank-and-file activists that were critical of union leadership, and I had hoped that I could come into contact with similar TWU dissidents. Unfortunately, each lead I had for local labor activists had limited contact with the transit union, and I was unable to schedule an interview with anyone employed by the MTA. Second, I attempted to recruit participants through conversations I had within the subway system. Looking back, I am not sure how successful I imagined this route would be, but I had hoped to have small conversations with idle transit workers and invite them for coffee after or before their next shift. While every request for a recorded interview was refused by the workers, I was able to converse with most of these people and gain a simplistic understanding of job duties, brief descriptions of the difficulties faced by workers, and a finer tuned personal appreciation for their labor. Third and finally, I had contact with an executive board member of the TWU. I asked this person for an interview, and since they were sympathetic to a student at Syracuse, they invited me to the TWU office for access to other potential participants.

I was able to visit the TWU Local 100 union hall, located in downtown Brooklyn, and there I witnessed the daily operations of union staff and member business. Immediately upon stepping out of the elevator, visitors are greeted by a statue of Michael J. Quill, the Irish socialist who helped found the union and led its first successful strike. The walls of the union hall are papered with black and white images of picket lines and protest.

Union halls, first and foremost, are locations for hosting membership meetings. Local meetings are for rank-and-file members to communicate with elected union leaders, express

grievances about workplace incidents, ask questions about changing protocol, and socialize with other workers over a meal provided by the union. Local 100 is divided into seven divisions determined by the roles within the workplace: Car equipment, MTA bus, Manhattan and Bronx Surface Transportation Operating Authority (MaBSTOA), Maintenance of Way, Rapid Transit Operations, Stations, and Transit Authority Surface. Each division has regularly scheduled membership meetings that occur during the morning and at night, so that workers with varied shift times are able to attend. Furthermore, the union hall serves as an office building for the administrative tasks of union management. Elected leaders and union staff members work at these offices so that they can be in contact with MTA employees and management, and if there is an issue in the workplace, the union can respond accordingly. The TWU employs an in-house communication team that develop advertisements, such as the #FiftyFiftyIsFair campaign, and internal communication literature.

During my day at the union hall, I roamed the office in search of conversation. I obtained seven recorded interviews. Three of these interviews were with MTA employees and four were with union staff. In this study I mostly focus on the interviews with transit workers, but the conversations with union staff contributed to my understanding of the crisis. Prior to the division meeting scheduled at 5PM, I approached individuals in the office and asked them to sit down for an interview, and the executive board member that granted me access to the office would periodically introduce me to participants for my research study. In a private room within the office building, I sat down with these individuals and performed the ritual of informed consent. I would attempt to build rapport with these individuals during the pre-interview period, sharing my appreciation for their work and my personal alignment with the labor movement. As I explained the purpose of my research project, I would interject with anecdotes about my experience

attempting to organize my workplace. I wanted to establish a shared connection with the workers on the dignity of working-class people, and the importance of organizing ourselves for better working conditions. As per my research design, these interviews were not attempts to extract objective data from their recorded words, but opportunities for the workers and me to co-contemplate their role within the on-going transit crisis. After the participants had sufficient time to read the written consent forms I prepared for IRB approval, I answered any questions they had about the research project and began the interview.

I utilized a semi-structured model of interview protocol, and I used a prepared set of interview questions to guide my inquiry into the transit crisis. The goal of each interview was to create an understanding of how each participant made sense of the transit crisis's contours, how the problems within the subway system affected their work life, if the participant was satisfied with the union's political engagement in the #FiftyFiftyIsFair campaign, and if there is any further action that can be taken to alleviate these problems. The first question for every participant was always an inquiry into their familiarity with the phrase "Summer of Hell." Since the New York media ecosystem heavily utilized this phrase to describe the transit crisis, it served as a terminological resource to study the social process of sensemaking within the TWU organization. The interview data, which I analyze in the next section, serves as evidence for examining the result of sensemaking after a crisis within organizational life, and the common-sense beliefs of the role that TWU rank-and-file members can play during the crisis. I organize the interview data I obtained into two interrelated sections: crisis and agency. First, I analyze the worker's articulations of the "Summer of Hell" in order to account for the interruptions of expectations for organizational members that occurred as a result of train delays, derailments, and transit rider outrage. I specifically ask about the impact of the subway woes on their work,

for I am interested in the process of coming to consciousness about the organizational crisis. Second, I analyze the perspectives expressed by the workers in regard to the union's intervention into the political battle for funding public transit. In these responses, I searched for evidence that connected the participant, as an active agent of change, to their role as an organizational member of the union. This research project examines how the sensemaking process during the transit crisis was translated into a common-sense belief in the apolitical nature of union membership. The mediation practices stemming from the union leadership to MTA employees was premised on an elite theory of power that divorces union members from a sense of agency in the workplace.

Worker Inquiry: Crisis

In the previous chapter and introduction, I established the structural characteristics of this crisis as emerging from an historical attack on public sector funding for the subway system's maintenance budget. The subway system is a complex assemblage of infrastructure and technology that has been unevenly modernized over the century long tenure of NYC mass transit. According to the MTA, there are 6,418 subway cars, 665 miles of subway track, 472 stations, and annually provides rides to 1.757 billion passengers. Some tracks and stations have been fully renovated in recent years and other parts have been neglected for decades. While the period of crisis described by Governor Andrew Cuomo as the 2017 Summer of Hell witnessed catastrophic incidents such as subway car derailments, the quotidian crisis of delays and overcrowding have plagued the system for much longer. Within the framework of qualitative inquiry into sensemaking practices, attending to the social construction of the crisis requires investigating both the workplace effects of the subway problems and the conceptual framing of the Summer of Hell phrase for organizational members.

Encountering issues in the workplace can violate the expectations workers have for the individual duties that they are instructed to perform, for the technological errors that occur in different spheres of subway operations are not immediately known to all workers. Train delays that result from signal problems, rail conditions, and passenger incidents places demands for sensemaking on MTA employees. Station agents, the workers that are responsible for personally assisting passengers at each station, face the brunt of customer dissatisfaction. As one worker expressed,

Interviewer: How have the problems that the MTA has been facing, in terms of delay and crowding, how is that effected your work or your coworkers?

Worker 2: It affects us all, um, cause when there are delays, people get upset and they take it out on us, 'cause we are the people they see. They don't take it out on the MTA because they don't see the MTA, so you know, they take it out on us. Like we are on the ones raising the fare. So you hear: OH you raised the fare and this is what we get. You know and it's like, I got that kinda power? Oh damn, I'm boss.

In this example, the limited control that station agents have over their working conditions is articulated as a source of uncertainty for passenger interactions. Workers who are forced to explain to passengers the reason for transit delays must continually engage in sensemaking practices. While the commonplace presence of train delays gives workers plenty of practice for responding to disgruntled passengers, workers must be able to process environmental information about current train issues and response to queries about resolving the crisis. As Worker 2 articulated in the interview, the full organizational complexity of the MTA is reduced to the singular worker. These workers must be able to make sense of the problems faced by the MTA in order to communicate with passengers about their individual ability to resolve the crisis.

Fare hikes, a topic of great concern for passengers, are projected onto individual workers, in the same way that the transit crisis is communicated to station agents as their fault.

The Summer of Hell phrase should be understood as a framework of meaning that structures the sensemaking practices of workers in an uneven but shared process. Across all recorded interviews and informal conversations I had with MTA employees, the familiarity with the phrase Summer of Hell was attributed to encounters with different sources of NYC specific media outlets. I explored in the previous chapter an example of the sensegiving or mediatory practices deployed by the TWU, and the confluence of discussions about the Summer of Hell contributed to the MTA employees shared construction of a crisis reality. The accuracy of the Summer of Hell phrase was disputed in some conversations, but there was a general consensus on the growing scale of problems associated with the subway. When I asked an MTA employee directly about the accuracy of the term crisis for describing the subway they responded,

Interviewer: With the current state of the MTA and the way the subways are running, do you think it could be described as, like, a crisis, that there are these serious problems?

Worker 1: I wouldn't say that it's a crisis. It's like with any type of organization, you're gonna have to have massive scale of projects that have to be rebuilding of some sort from within. Unfortunately, being that it is the mass transit, you are gonna hear it, as a CRISIS, so to speak.

This response demonstrates the importance for approaching structural crises through a sensemaking framework, for the construction of a social reality is not homogenous and uniform. There is not set criteria for what qualifies as a crisis, and the effects of the infrastructure decay are unevenly distributed across the MTA workforce. Contracts between the union and the MTA codify sharp distinctions in organizational roles and divisions of labor. Station agents, for

example, cannot legally be forced to perform duties associated with other division roles. Isolated workers with differing experiences of organizational life encounter and construct the crisis in disparate ways. Nonetheless, the sensemaking practices that create a cohesive social reality for organizational members will inevitably lead to a shared acknowledgement that the transit riding public believes the subway system is in a state of crisis. The workers I spoke with indicated their knowledge of the Summer of Hell originates from encounters with the media, but the conversations that occur in break rooms, union halls, and on the job also contribute to the collective sensemaking of a crisis.

The language of crisis cannot be separated from the sensemaking practices that occur within a situation of organizational difficulty, for the term crisis or Summer of Hell introduces of framework of meaning for interpreting information about the state of the subway. Worker 1's reflection on why the public 'hears' about a crisis indicates that the term can serve a strategic function for some parties. One commonly suggested justification for the popularity of the Summer of Hell phrase was the interests that media outlets had in constructing a newsworthy crisis situation. Every crisis has to have a source, and expressions of interest can be discovered in the articulation of the causes for the subway problems. In an interview with a maintenance and repair worker, the Summer of Hell phrase's accuracy was partially discredited and then later used to describe frustrations with the mismanagement of the MTA:

Worker 3: Okay the Summer of Hell, wow, I saw it in the papers, they were calling that. I think they overdid it with the Summer of Hell. But that has nothing to do with what's going on.

Interviewer: What's going on?

Worker 3: What's going on is this. Nobody is doing their effing job. The labor is work. The TWU work is work. But we don't do anything until we get the work orders. So if the managers don't get their act together, or the people who put it out there, the tracks aren't going to be taken up. Amtrak tracks aren't going to be repaired, signals aren't going to be repaired. Nothing is going to be repaired, if they kick back. If they hold back on the overtime monies, or the capital monies. Nothing is going to get done. They waste and waste. That's what you have the Summer of Hell. That's why you have that. Because of that. We knew this was coming all along. Years and Years and years of wasted money not going to the right, uh, right part of the agency, which is the fix and repair of the subway system. The Pennsylvania, the long island, the whole thing. That's all it is. In 10 words or less, that might have been 11, but that's it. And they had to repair it, they had to shut it down, that's what they got to do. BUT, it's all about the management, it's all about mismanagement. You're telling me that you have got to shut down for 3 months, the Pennsylvania station, 8-10 tracks to fix it. Where was the maintenance on that? In the years prior, where was the maintenance?

While this articulation of the crisis differs from the union leadership's scapegoating of Mayor de Blasio, Worker 3's attribution of blame for the crisis to the managers of the MTA is indicative of a typical unionist's perspective. Labor union organizations often emphasize the antagonism that exists between workers and managers as a source for collective identification. Worker 3 articulated a historical account of the neglect of necessary maintenance funding, and they attributed those decisions to the people that are in control of employment. Mismanagement of funds as a source for the crisis, rather than the reduction of public funding, shifts the blame away from the government agencies and public officials that control the budget onto the managers of

the MTA. Later in the interview, I asked Worker 3 about his opinion of the political battle for additional funding,

Interviewer: So, the NYC Subway action plan was to just give more money but making sure it was for maintenance. Is that something that would have helped solve this problem? That was the MTA and TWU sponsored plan to investment, like, 800 million.

Worker 3: Oh yeah that we were getting from Cuomo. That's good. You take that money right away. That's a good thing. We never get it. When the state offers you 400 million and we're matching it. You take that, and you put it in there for jobs and for work.

While Worker 3 articulated the historical neglect of subway maintenance as a contributing factor to the transit crisis, their frame for interpreting the crisis is connected to the interests that labor union leaders have in preserving a relationship with Andrew Cuomo. The strategic construction of the transit crisis offers a persuasive appeal for the provision of additional funding but articulating the source of the crisis as the mistakes of bureaucrats works to depoliticize the concern of public funding. Rather than the persistent effort of public officials to impose austerity on state budgets, that creates a situation where transit workers can say in regard to money, "We never get it," faulting white-collar managers avoids considerations of politically determined budgets.

The union leadership's acceptance and promotion of the crisis framework works to position the organizational leaders as agents in creating change. Andrew Cuomo and the TWU's popularization of the Summer of Hell and the construction of a crisis were not only a response to the derailments in Spring of 2017, but also a politically convenient justification to magnify the claim that Mayor de Blasio should allocate greater portions of the city's budget to operating

costs. As I established in the previous chapter, TWU leaders and Andrew Cuomo crafted an alliance in an attempt to publicly pressure Mayor de Blasio. Considering the strategic function of crisis communication offers a justification for the uneven appreciation of the term Summer of Hell by transit workers. While there are certainly non-socially constructed effects of the transit crisis, the use of crisis rhetoric by public officials and union leaders is a practice of sensegiving that influences the social reality of organizational life for transit workers. Even if workers personally reject the crisis framework of meaning for their experiences in the workplace, it nonetheless impacts their perception of organizational life. While more research is needed to study the precise mechanisms of sensegiving utilized by the union, such as speeches given at meetings or internal emails, the mediation of a crisis introduces a framework of understanding for workers to view their role within the union. The process of mediating the union's messages effects the sensemaking practices and positions workers as passive recipients in the resolution of this crisis. The sense given by the union leaders and politicians has hegemony in this context, for it structures workers' common-sense. As I explore next, the effects of sensegiving practices from union leaders disseminates a common-sense belief in an elite theory of power.

Worker Inquiry: Agency

Documenting the social construction of a structural crisis is a necessary first step for inquiry into the agentic capacity of workers to use the crisis as an opportunity for social and political change. In this section, I utilize the interviews to examine the common-sense beliefs of transit workers. My interview protocol was structured through the first half concerning questions regarding employment by the MTA; and in the second half, asking questions about the potential for the TWU to intervene into the political battle for public funding. Agency and common-sense deserve mutual consideration, for the social content of common sense can enable or constrain

collective action. Within the common-sense of neoliberal ideology, individuals are taught that their ability to enact change within the world emerges from their decisions as private consumers within a marketplace. Ruling class interests promote a common sense that imposes boundaries on the imagination of what is possible for people, as individuals or collectives, to accomplish. Dana Cloud (2018) argues, “Much of what passes for common-sense in mainstream political culture is dominated by powerful interests and shaped by oppressive frames of meaning,” but within domination there is space for resistance, for “experience-based education, timely interventions in public controversy, and political organization may serve as sites of consciousness-raising and the production of liberatory thought” (p. 159). Countering the hegemonic common sense can enable for an expansion of a belief in agential capacity held by people. The frameworks of meaning contained within the socio-politically determined common-sense are not only convenient mechanisms for ordinary people to easily interpret information, but these frameworks also work to shape the sense of agency people have for themselves.

Common-sense beliefs about the nature of politics, as something that is conducted by powerful individuals on behalf of others, structures the sensemaking process of understanding agency. One of the most common refrains I encountered in my conversations with rank-and-file transit workers was the use of the term “politics” to refer to issues that were out of their control. Questions of funding, changes in job duties, or new scheduling practices were all frequently explained away with the simple statement, “That’s politics.” For organizations in the public sector, whose operations are controlled by elected officials or appointed bureaucrats, the political affairs of the state do govern the organizational life of workers. It is no surprise that the workers I spoke with chose to articulate a sphere of politics as something that is distant from themselves, for the top-down managerial style of the MTA gives workers little decision-making ability in the

minutia of the workplace. Collective bargaining, in an idealized form, is supposed to be a process for equalizing the decision-making power of management and workers for all aspects of organizational life, but the massive size and complexity of the MTA makes the process of collectivizing demands for small changes in the workplace difficult. Nonetheless, the distinction that is articulated between the sphere of “politics” and the economic sphere of the workplace is a product of a hegemonically determined common sense. Under this popular logic, politics is reduced to the affairs of legislators voting on new laws or regulations. Marxist Historian Ellen Meiksins Wood (1981) argues in her essay, “The Separation of the Economic and the Political in Capitalism,” that the aggregate social forces of production and consumption has been ideologically abstracted into the false category of the economy, and, “[A] spatially separate political sphere may intervene in the economy, but the economy itself is evacuated of social content and is, as it were, depoliticized” (p. 68). For the transit workers that are concerned above all else with the wage that enables their livelihood, the workplace is not a site of politics.

The common-sense conceptualization of politics as a distinct sphere of civic life, one that most working-class people do not have the ability to affect, enables a framework of meaning that makes the accusation of “playing politics” a persuasive appeal for workers. In the #FiftyFiftyIsFair advertisements I analyzed in the previous chapter, Mayor de Blasio was accused of playing political games with transit rider commutes. I provided printed copies of these advertisements to each of the participants in my study, so that I could investigate the reception of these messages for organizational members. As one worker responded,

Interviewer: So, over the summer there was this subway action plan, that I saw, that was released, that was supported by the MTA and by the TWU and Governor Cuomo stepped

up to help support it, and the TWU had these advertisements. Did you ever come across any of these?

[I handed over printed versions of the advertisements]

Worker 1: I saw them in the paper. [chuckles]

Interviewer: It seems like the strategy is to get the Mayor on board.

Worker 1: this was uh uh uh, I would... how can I say this as best to say, there was so much politics in to play here. That the union said you know what, enough is enough, and they said, each of you have to start doing your part.

Interviewer: Each of you being?

Worker 1: The mayor, the governor maybe, whoever it may been at the point at whatever advertisement was out.

Before Worker 1 even had time to read the words on the pieces of paper, they responded with a line that closely resembles the TWU's mediation of the crisis. For this worker in particular, the sensegiving practices of union leadership were effective in offering a framework for making sense of the transit crisis. They were able to articulate one of the central arguments expressed in the #FiftyFiftyIsFair campaign: the problem is politics, defined narrowly as electoral manipulation. Worker 1's uncertainty over the exact target of the advertisement campaign, as expressed in the last line, is indicative of the commonsensical distance that workers may feel from the sphere of politics. It does not matter if in this instance the fault should lie with the Governor or the Mayor, for the playing of politics is occurring within a sphere that is foreign to this worker. The feelings of disaffection harbored by working-class people towards the political sphere, that allow for accusations of playing politics to be persuasive, could potentially be mobilized in favor of a wholesale rejection of the New York political establishment, but instead

the TWU's campaign acted to preserve the common-sense separation of the political sphere by supporting one politician over another.

When politics is pushed outside of the grasp of working class people, the ability for people to come to a sense of their own agency is hampered. The depoliticization of the economic sphere, or the conditions of employment, constrains the possibility for individuals to recognize the economic clout they possess as workers. After asking workers about their perception of the #FiftyFiftyIsFair campaign's effectiveness, I followed up with an opened ended question about other potential strategies that the union could undertake to secure funding. In the back of my mind each time I asked this question, I was hoping that the participant would respond with a radical program of collective job action that would coerce the government to allocate additional funds. Of course, such a response never occurred. In a conversation with Worker 2, however, the exact opposite was stated,

Interviewer: So it's a problem of getting that money, and how we get it, is there anything you think that the union could do for that?

Worker 2: We can't even get our money when we need it.

Interviewer: Right

Worker 2: Or our raise, so I don't know. Can we get for ridership, in the system, hmm.

Interviewer: Or can the TWU play a role, as a union, to pressure local government.

Worker 2: The only thing that we can do is to say, well hey, you get the money to build this system to where it should be, we can guarantee that we will have the best system in the world, once again. Cause I don't think we have it right now. But yeah, you know, as the members that work here, we will guarantee that we will have the best system in the

world. I will guarantee that our members, I'll be on them to make sure they provide that service.

Interviewer: If we get that money?

Worker 2: Right, so that's what we could do. You know, the track workers will build the best track, and you won't have all those derailments. Because we don't have to skim and try to piece together half a track. We could just do the whole track and boom. So and then you know customer service and the clerks, RTO, everyone could just be at the highest of the high, as far as providing service for the riders. So yeah I think that we could promise that.

Rather than any disruption in the normal operations of the transit system, Worker 2's response was a promise to work harder. It would be inaccurate to say that this worker has no belief in their own agency, for offering a guarantee for better service to transit riders and elected officials is a strategy for creating change and reflects a genuine commitment to the quality of one's work. I viewed this response as rank-and-file articulation of the same political view offered by union leadership. Specifically, Worker 1's statement that, "[T]he only thing that we can do," should be understood as a discursive token of agency, but it is an articulated view of agency that constrains action within the workplace. For labor leaders the goal is to ensure economic stability for the managers of the MTA. This response serves as evidence for the effectiveness of the mediation practices used by the union, for Worker 2's commitment to performing the duties of labor serves the interests of economic stability. As long as common-sense dictates that the workplace is a depoliticized site of economic activity, and nothing else, the ability of the working class to use their agentic position in the circuits of capital is impossible.

Transit workers have an enormous capacity to generate wealth for the businesses of NYC, they have constant contact with passengers, and they have an extensive collective knowledge of the subway system. Within these different facets of transit labor, there is a multitude of resources for transit workers to make sense of their own agency. I have argued that the mediation practices of TWU leadership has worked to constrain the sense of agency held by rank-and-file members. Worker 3, who was by far the biggest supporter of union leadership, responded to the question on strategy in a manner that reflects that,

Interviewer: So what can the TWU do to demand that funding, and solve this crisis?

Worker 3: More ads. More ads, like that. [Points to ad] Put it out to the paper, put it out to the public.

Interviewer: Pressure.

Worker 3: All the time. They're not blind, the public is not stupid. See but they public sees us, they don't see the managers. They don't see the white shirts. They see the bus drivers, they see the laborers, they see the track workers, the train operators, the station agents.

This worker's investment in the current arrangement of power within the union makes their suggestion for additional advertisements unsurprising, but their articulation of the resource that transit workers have in their visibility to the public was unexpected. While in this particular conversation, that line of inquiry did not lead to any other expressions of agency, a later conversation with an elected official of the TWU touched upon a similar note:

Interviewer: Do you think there is like, an alliance between transit riders and transit workers, in terms of getting that funding?

TWU Staffer 1: Totally. Totally. It's a natural alliance, whether it comes grows into something, the alliance is there naturally. Whether you organize it into a force, is something a little different. That takes a little more work and a different type of strategy.

But yeah, of course. Their interests and our interests are just about the same.

As powerful as it may be, MTA employees going on strike to demand greater funding for the subway system is not the only option for these workers to utilize their agency. There are other options, and the union leadership is aware of this, but they would rather preserve the current arrangement of power rather than threaten the political order. The decision of union leadership to pursue an advocacy strategy for social change that is rooted within an elite theory of power limited the ability of the union to transform the Summer of Hell crisis into an opportunity for change. Furthermore, the union chose to pursue a strategy that maintained a strict separation between the workplace and politics, so that its membership remains in a passive state that is reliant upon the bureaucratic leadership.

Conclusion

In this study, I have examined the perception of unionized transit workers to the public discussions of a crisis in their workplace and their response to the efforts at political engagement from union leadership. Crises, especially in context of a prolonged structural crisis, are not objective events that are perceived in a homogenous fashion but are instead products of a collective sensemaking process that results in a shared social reality. My investigation into the process of organizational sensemaking demonstrates the strategic function of crisis communication for certain actors to achieve desired organizational or political effects. Furthermore, the mediation practices that organizational leaders to introduce a preferred redefinition of social reality can be utilized to solidify perceptions of agency within the

organization. Crisis communication is an opportunity for organizational leaders to solidify their position as the appropriate agents for resolving a crisis, and it can be used to promote passivity within membership. The TWU's decision to support Andrew Cuomo in a political battle with Bill de Blasio resulted in the labor union's participation in the mediation of the subway as in a state of crisis. Even though many rank-and-file workers rejected the notion of the Summer of Hell, TWU leadership had strategic interests in criticizing the same system that the TWU's membership maintains. Taking sides in the political conflict between the Mayor and Governor allowed the union to gain an advantage in a model of politics that emphasizes the brokerage of power between different elites.

The primary focus of this study, however, pertains to investigating the sensemaking effects of the #FiftyFiftyIsFair campaign on rank-and-file members of the TWU. Gramsci's notion of common-sense provides theoretical vocabulary for approaching the frameworks of meaning that preexist the social construction of a shared reality between organizational members. As a Marxist invested in the labor movement, Gramsci wrote frequently on the role of labor union organizations, and as Ralph Darlington (2013) argues that, "Gramsci drew attention to the exercise of control *over* workers by union officials through the very process by which unions seek to win improvements *for* them" (p. 192). This study should be understood as an empirical investigation into the communicative mechanisms that the TWU leadership used to reinforce a disempowering common sense to control its membership. The mobilization of the Summer of Hell crisis served to further demarcate the ideological boundary between political and economic spheres. Separating politics from the workplace works to constrain the agency of unionized transit workers, for it limits their ability to participate in creating change to providing support for the decisions made by labor leaders.

As I stated in the introduction, the justification for this empirical study was to prioritize the perspective of working-class people, but the epistemological commitment to worker inquiry does not necessitate an uncritical acceptance of the worker's views. I have a deep appreciation for the men and women who spoke with me during my fieldwork in New York City, and I recognize the deeply experiential knowledge that these individuals have with transit labor and union membership. Such knowledge will always surpass my interpretation of the union based on a single day spent at their office. I felt conflicted about the use of interview data I obtained from volunteer participants as evidence for the claim that they were being manipulated by the union, for as performance studies scholar Dwight Conquergood (1985) famously stated, "Opening and interpreting lives is very different from opening and closing books" (p. 2). However, the organizational entity that is the labor union can influence, manipulate, and control its membership through the same ideological tactics used by a corporate employer.

The small data set for this research study is also a concern. Although I rely on an interpretive paradigm that seeks thick description rather than generalizable claims, I feel that this study would be substantially stronger with greater amounts of qualitative data. Every interview included in this study comes from the perspective of people who are aligned with existing union leadership. This is a fault of relying on recruitment through the conversations at union hall and prior to local meetings, for local meetings often have a self-selecting population of union supporters. Since this study was focused on the communicative mechanisms that the union used to disseminate perspectives to members, mostly interviewing union supporters is an acceptable data set.

However, as I indicated in the introduction, I study communication because I am interested in the mechanisms that facilitate social change and collective action. Future versions

of this research project would attend to the various union dissidents who seek to disturb the brokerage model of union politics and the elite theory of power. Unions are still fundamentally democratic organs of working-class power, and a program of mass participation could effectively transform the condition of transit labor in NYC. As Gramsci (1968) argued, “The trade union is not a predetermined phenomenon: it becomes a determinate institution, that is, it assumes a definite historical form to the extent that the strength and will of the workers who are its members impress a policy and propose an aim that define it.”

Conclusion

This project began from a Marxist conviction that labor unions are social movement organizations with a history of and ever-present capacity to initiate progressive transformative changes that challenge the power of corporate interests. There is no question that many modern labor unions are symptomatic of the undemocratic and conservative currents within the labor movement. For millions of union members across the United States, the payment of their dues is the extent of their interaction with the union. Some unions function almost exclusively as lobbying groups that speak on behalf of their members but do nothing to organize workers. Nonetheless, unions are vehicles for class struggle. Unions explicitly organize around the antagonism of labor and capital, worker and boss, employee and management. They are premised upon a recognition that the working-class hold a tremendous amount of power—if organized strategically. The questions of strategy, which strategy and for whom, is what will define the future of labor and social movements in the United States. In this project, I have emphasized the selection of transit labor as a strategic site of resistance. The workers who facilitate the movement of six million New Yorkers a day are working within a system that is rotting to the point of crisis. Corporate greed has resulted in the starvation of the New York Metro Transit Authority, and there is a pressing need for a political force to challenge the regimes of austerity budgets. Transit workers contain the potential for that force, but the question of public sector union strategy forestalls that potential.

I could not have picked a better time to write a thesis on public sector unionism in the United States. When I started researching the unique characteristics of public sector unions, the Supreme Court case *Janus v. AFSCME* haunted every article on the topic. In the high likelihood that this case is decided in favor of the plaintiff, Mark Janus, public sector unions will lose their

ability to automatically collect dues from people who benefit from collective bargaining. Prior to February 2018, many labor activists believed that this impending decision would threaten the future viability of public sector unions. Everything changed, however, when 34,000 public sector educators in West Virginia led a historically victorious nine-day strike to demand a raise for all state employees. While the striking teachers had the bread and butter demands of a typical strike, better wages and cheaper healthcare, the educators struck at the heart of the neoliberal austerity budgets that were attempting to starve public schools and services. Their demands were more than economic, for their victory halted the expansion of privatized charter schools and stopped anti-union legislation (McAlevy, 2018). And it didn't end in West Virginia. Soon after underpaid teachers in other states learned of what type of strategy was needed to win, and strikes and collective job action began in Oklahoma, Kentucky, Colorado, and Arizona. In every instance, workers whose wages are funded by tax revenue and determined by public officials utilized their agentic capacity as workers to coerce the government into the provision of additional funding.

The outstanding display of solidarity and working-class power in the 2018 teacher uprisings stands in stark contrast to the public-sector unions marked by bureaucratic control and low member participation. I have used a case study of the Transport Workers Union Local 100 to examine the communicative mechanisms that public-sector labor union organizations can use to preserve a social and political order between its membership and the state. The response of TWU Local 100 to the political crisis of funding for public transit demonstrates the ability for labor leaders to shape the organizational reality shared by its members. I have utilized the concepts of mediation and common-sense to provide a theoretical account of the rhetorical practices that work to shape a passive organizational membership. Furthermore, the methodologies of

qualitative inquiry into working-class perspectives approach an understanding of the sensemaking practices that result in the acceptance of the frameworks of meaning by rank-and-file workers offered in the process of rhetorical mediation from labor leaders. I have argued that decision of TWU leadership to rely on strategies of advocacy, rooted in an elite theory of power, has organizational consequences for promoting passivity in rank-and-file workers. Ultimately, the strategy of public sector unionism offered by the TWU is inseparable from the legacy of business unionism that has decimated the gains made by the labor movement in decades past. Limiting the terms of political engagement in times of a political crisis to the actions of powerful elites, like Mayor de Blasio or Governor Andrew Cuomo, solidifies the rank-and-file's reliance on the class of union bureaucrats to act on the worker's behalf.

Even though my case study of TWU Local 100 does not present an example of the transformation of working-class experience into critical class consciousness, this union's unique position within the political economy of transportation makes it a valuable site of inquiry for communication and social movement studies. My justification for the selection of this labor union organization, and the selection of this particular campaign for transit funding, is guided by a Marxist informed understanding of social movement strategy. There is nothing about the knowledge generated in the course of this research that entails a potential for liberation, for this exercise in the study of social movements is primarily intended for scholarly conversations in rhetoric and communication. However, scholars interested in research social movements should make decisions about objects of study that reflect not only a desire for a better world, but a strategic orientation that can assist in the construction of that world.

Human mobility is currently trapped within structures of consumption that require a dependency on fossil fuels and carbon emissions, and investments into the strengthening and

expansion of mass transit systems can help make sustainability possible. The ability for humans to move throughout the world is critical not only for the economic engines of production; but also, public means of mobility enable a greater affordance of freedom for people to socialize with others, participate in civic life, and enjoy the world. There are countless reasons as to why mass transit is a necessary component of human-made environments; but in the recognition of this fact, we must study, theorize, and participate in the politics of achieving mass transit excellence. Transportation workers occupy a strategic location in the political economy of mobility, for it is their labor that enables the current systems of mass transit to operate. Perhaps more importantly, it is their capacity to refuse to perform the labor of transit that can politically enable opportunities for change. Transit labor is my object of research because the power of the working-class, especially the power of workers in the realm of social reproduction, can confront the one-sided class war that is neoliberal capitalism.

When considering the economic, social, and ecological benefits of publicly funded mass transit, it is difficult to comprehend why the cities of the United States are still fundamentally designed for the use of individually owned and operated automobiles. Neoliberalism, as a historical period of capitalism focused on the individualization, privatization, and marketization of all aspects of human interaction, presents a formidable challenge to the political battle for public goods and services. Practically every reform gained by the labor movement in the 20th century for the social services that enabled ordinary people to live more secure and fulfilling lives has been eviscerated by corporate funded political forces. In New York City, every economic downturn since the 1970s was used by proponents of neoliberalism as an opportunity to impose austerity on budgets for social services. Within the logic of neoliberalism, there should

be no spending on public services, for the individual should be solely responsible for their wellbeing.

In the battle against neoliberalism's mandate for hyper-individualism, the labor practices that are responsible for the preserving and enabling the wellbeing of other workers plays a heightened political role. Social reproduction theory offers a theoretical account of the mechanisms that preconfigure the conditions of production. Even under the reign of neoliberalism, no individual is disconnected from the care provided by workers in the realm of social reproduction. Teachers, nurses, drivers, conductors, cleaners, and people responsible for childcare all provide services that make it possible for workers to produce profit at their workplace one day and subsequently reproduce their ability to work for the next day. The realm of social reproduction is a strategic site of resistance against neoliberalism, for these workers are capable of disrupting the process of reproduction and revealing the invariable condition of social being. Individualism is a fantasy presented by neoliberalism, and workers in the realm of social reproduction have the capacity to force greater levels of investment, as the West Virginia teachers have shown.

Whether or not the Summer of Hell should be characterized as a crisis is less important than the opportunity for political and social change that this period in history presented. However, the fact of the problems faced by the NYC subway system are undeniable. In the beginning of 2018, the average on-time performance of the subway was worse than any other metropolitan transit system in the country (Hu, 2018). Overcrowding, a result of the continually rising transit ridership, has compounded the problem of train delays and made the experience of riding the subway worse. Even if the transit workers were capable of jury rigging the ancient system to function at full capacity, the decline of state funding and increase in debt holdings

makes the project of modernizing the trains, tracks, and signals impossible. The state of emergency declared by Andrew Cuomo on June 29th, 2017 for NYC subways was simply a response to the growing public frustration with the decaying system. While it makes sense to describe the problems as a transit crisis, it is more accurate to examine this historical situation as one localized expression of the fiscal crisis of the state. The social crisis of austerity and neoliberalism is responsible for not only the self-destructing subway system, but the worsening experiences of poverty, inequality, and the disappearing social safety net. In the face of such a social crisis, the media spectacle generated by the Summer of Hell period could have been mobilized for greater investment in all public services and affordances.

Instead of using the transit crisis as an opportunity to criticize the ensemble of forces working to widen the gap between the rich and poor, the public debate surround transit was narrowly focused on a political feud between two Democratic Party elites. A *New York Times* article on the longstanding conflict between Andrew Cuomo and Bill de Blasio argues that these two men have fought over, “[P]ublic housing and private workout routines, homelessness and topless women in Times Square, taxing millionaires and euthanizing a deer, a Legionnaires’ disease outbreak and state troop deployments, schools, snowstorms and the subway” (Goldmacher & Goodman, 2018). Both of these men are prideful politicians who use their ease of access to media outlets to publically attack one another. The NYC Subway Action Plan was no exception to this rule of rivalry, for its development by the state-controlled MTA directly called for de Blasio to alter the city budget on the state’s behalf. There is no doubt that the governor and State of New York are ultimately responsible for funding and operating the MTA, but this campaign was used as a chess piece in a continuation of Cuomo and de Blasio conflict. Throughout all of the efforts to pressure the Mayor to fund half of the Subway Action Plan, de

Blasio resisted every effort to increase the city's investment in the subway. Ultimately, all of the Cuomo alliances and strategies to move the mayor were made irrelevant by an executive action from the Governor's office. On March 30, 2018, one month before this thesis was submitted, Governor Cuomo unveiled a state budget that requires the city to pay the second half of the one-billion-dollar Subway Action Plan, or state funding will be withheld for public housing within the city (Wang & McKinley, 2018). If the #FiftyFiftyIsFair campaign was a chess piece, then the governor's state budget secured a checkmate.

All the while Cuomo was preparing for his victory over the mayor, TWU Local 100 positioned themselves on the side of the governor with a history of attacking public sector unions and ironically attacked de Blasio for playing political games. The main subject of this thesis was a criticism of the strategy used by the transit union in their political engagement with the issue of transit funding. I have argued that their advocacy strategy is premised upon an elite theory of power that locates agency within the decisions of leaders made behind closed doors. In a public bulletin written by a small group of revolutionary socialists within the TWU, these workers (who refused my request for an interview) argued that the former president of the union, John Samuelson, missed a vital opportunity for organizing around working-class power:

In presenting his program as a list of helpful hints to the MTA, Samuelson avoided appealing to the working-class public to push for what needs to be done – by enlisting other unions and organizations of the communities endangered by the crisis, or even by mobilizing his own union membership to raise their demands publicly, loudly and massively... TWU Local 100 has the power to make demands on the politicians and bosses at all levels. It could, with reasonable preparation, bring a sizable fraction of its members into the streets to demand an emergency program of subway rebuilding and

expansion that creates tens of thousands of good and needed jobs. (Revolutionary Transit Worker, 2018)

Instead, the leadership of the union opted to preserve the current social and political order of labor leaders working with politicians in a conciliatory fashion. In the search for a political strategy to increase the quality of public transit, TWU Local 100 looked past the vast knowledge and experience of its transit worker membership, glossed over the bountiful resource of transit worker public visibility, and outright ignored the agential capacity for workers to use collective action to force governmental change.

In my analysis of the transit crisis and the labor union, I have participated and intervened in academic conversations on the study of rhetoric and organization. While I have made contributions to the theories and concepts unique to both communication sub-disciplines, this thesis demonstrates a mutual need for greater intra-disciplinary collaboration. That is to say, rhetoricians should strive to incorporate the concept of organization into their inquiries in the functions of persuasion. And conversely, organizational communication could benefit from the incorporation of insights on the rhetorical processes that assist or hamper collective action. Especially considering the number of critical rhetoricians interested in the study of social movements, the concept of organization allows scholars to venture outside of the model of studying individual rhetors. Organizations are social entities that facilitate, manage, and govern the actions of people cooperating to achieve a common goal. Under capitalism, people will spend a majority of their life interacting with organizational structures either in their workplace or in their community. As I have demonstrated across this thesis, there is a persistent lack of engagement with the possibility and consequences of organizational rhetoric. Even considering the social scientific paradigm that dominates organizational communication research, there are

opportunities for the concepts of rhetoric to contribute to a grounded theorization of persuasion within or by organizations. For example, I utilized qualitative fieldwork in conjunction with textual criticism to empirically trace the dissemination of common-sense by organizational leaders to rank-and-file members. Furthermore, the humanistic qualities of rhetorical studies can bolster efforts to use organizational communication in service of social and political criticism.

In chapter one, I examined the organizational rhetoric of the #FiftyFiftyIsFair media campaign developed and paid for by TWU Local 100. Building on the work of Gyorg Lukács (1968) and Dana Cloud (2018), I use the concept of mediation to contribute to a theorization of persuasion in context of oppressive conditions and potentials for transforming consciousness. Mediation is the ability for organizations, individual rhetors, or events to generalize a particular experience into a shared system of meaning. While Lukács's original theorization of mediation was intended as a strategy for transforming the experience of working-class exploitation into critical class consciousness, I have demonstrated the ability for mediation to transform consciousness in service of the interests of labor union bureaucrats. The full utility of this concept requires considering its use as an ideological mechanism of control over people whose interests lack fidelity with the systems of meaning that the mediation attempts to generalize. In line with Cloud's description of a rhetorical realism, mediation as a concept for rhetoric preserves the capacity for a critic to make normative judgements about the faithfulness of attempts at connecting experience and consciousness to the interests of the people being addressed. I argue that the TWU's organizational rhetoric and advocacy strategy mediated a political system that is fundamentally elitist and constrains agency.

I used the methods of textual rhetorical criticism to approach the representations of interests within the TWU advertisements. The labor union utilized its organizational voice to

conflate the interests of transit riders and workers, so that the appeals to supporting the governor could be linked to the expertise and authority of organizational members. While there is certainly an intimate connection between transit riders and workers, their interests are not identical. I argue that the union strategically mediated de Blasio as the enemy of both groups, so that the support for Cuomo's side in the feud could be enthymetically presented as the natural result of people experiencing the transit crisis. Furthermore, the accusation that the mayor was playing political games works to mediate an experience of dissatisfaction with elected officials with an endorsement of a different elected official. The politics of scapegoating present within the visual caricature of de Blasio demonstrate the elitist theory of power operating at the center of this advertisement campaign. Rather than present an articulation of the historical attack on public sector services, the union made the decision to focus on the personality battle of Cuomo and de Blasio.

Additionally, chapter one places the practices of mediation of TWU Local 100 in context of the strategy of business unionism that has plagued the labor movement for decades. The elite theory of power that informed the actions of union leadership during this crisis was not an original invention, but a continuation of the same methods of labor union control that have shifted the focus of unions away from organized working-class power. For private sector unions, business unionism has resulted in a collapse in union membership and a consistent trend of defeat in collective bargaining. As I argued, public sector unions adopted the orientation of favoring conciliatory relationships with management and Democratic Party politicians over the promotion of militancy within organizational membership. The advocacy campaign waged by TWU Local 100 provides textual evidence of the manifestation of business unionism within the organizational discourse of a public-sector union.

In chapter two, I drew on the brief fieldwork I conducted in New York City to investigate the perspectives of rank-and-file union members on the transit crisis. The justification for using an interview methodology emerged not only from the ability to measure the effects of the union's rhetorical practices of mediation, but also from a Marxist commitment to working-class inquiry. As Lukács argued, the working-class has an epistemological vantage point for witnessing the totality of capitalist exploitation. As both subjects and objects in the system of wage labor, workers face the alienating effects of being forced to sell one's labor and actively participating in the processes of production and consumption that enable economic activity. Transit workers are typically ignored by mainstream investigations into the problems of the subway system, but their expertise in its technical operations and in the experience of exploitation makes their perspective invaluable for the search for political solutions to the crisis.

I proposed that Antonio Gramsci's (1992) theorization of common sense should be utilized by organization scholars who investigate the communicative practices of collective sensemaking. Gramsci argued that humans are born into a world that is already saturated by the residue of previous class struggles, and the hegemonic domination of one class over others shape the popularly accessible frameworks of meaning. Common sense is an ideological effect of hegemony, and it is a resource for ordinary people to quickly make sense of the social relations that engulf them. Common sense appears as a naturalized way of understanding the world based on the illusion of experience. For organizational communication, sensemaking is a concept for approaching the practices of constructing a shared reality between organizational members. Sensemaking enables workers to establish a shared set of expectations, roles, and environmental stimuli. For both common sense and collective sensemaking, crises are events that threaten the preexisting systems of meaning and expectations. Organizational members that encounter a crisis

are forced to engage in the practice of sensemaking so that they can retroactively make sense of what has occurred and effectively act on the new information in the future. Gramscian theories of common-sense add a critical valence to the study of sensemaking practices, for the struggles over hegemony have ideological effects that determine the possibilities for sensemaking.

Based on my conversations with the transit worker union members, I argue that the common-sense notions of politics as separate from the workplace structurally constrains the possibilities of agency within the consciousness of workers. The crisis communication embraced within the union's mediation practices demonstrates the construction of a crisis reality serves the strategic interests of union leaders. My fieldwork provided evidence for a wide literacy of the Summer of Hell phrase, but it also demonstrated the reality of the crisis as uneven and heterogeneously constructed. Some workers encountered daily impacts on their workplace conditions due to the problems of the subway, and others rejected the Summer of Hell framing as a sensationalist attempt to sell newspapers. Within the Summer of Hell, the frameworks of meaning that are offered as a resource for workers to make sense of the crisis position the labor leaders as the only agents that are capable of acting to resolve the crisis. When the articulation of crisis's source stems from a description of politics as an activity that only certain people participate within, the sensemaking practices of ordinary workers are constrained to accepting a shared reality that positions elites as the agents of change. Common-sense notions of politics as a distinct sphere of the society that is incompatible with the economic spheres of the workplace influence the ability of transit workers to come to a sense of their own agency. My fieldwork establishes a connection between the rhetorical mediation experience of the crisis and the solutions offered by TWU advertisements, and the worker's own description of their agency

demonstrates a consequence of the mediation process for limiting the possibility of social change.

The spectacular victory of West Virginia teachers against the forces of neoliberalism demonstrate an untapped potential for labor union organizations in the public sector to actively participate in the construction of a better world with strong social services. Unions and other social movement organizations must move past the shallow models of advocacy that rely on professional staffers and union bureaucrats. Instead, these groups should move the social of social movements towards the embrace of a strategy that centers organizing the mass participation of working-class people in the realization of their own agency, and the transformation of their consciousness. As Jane McAlevey (2016) writes, “The craft of organizing helps people connect the dots between the critical, solidarity-affirming moment and the larger system it challenges, giving the workers in crisis a new way of seeing themselves and a newly formed sense of the society’s political economy” (p. 201).

There are a countless number of strategies that the leadership of TWU Local 100 could have selected to politically intervene into the issue of transit funding from the perspective of working-class power. Rather than an alliance with Andrew Cuomo, TWU members could have crafted an alliance with transit riders against austerity. Rather than scapegoating source of the transit crisis onto the most recent mayor, TWU members could have built networks of solidarity with other unions facing attacks on their standards of living. Rather than paying for advertisements, the TWU members could have disrupted the economic activity of one of the richest cities in the world until the funds for a fully renovated system were secured. These alternative strategies for transit labor organizing may potentially be seen by union leaders and disaffected members as idealistic dreams that ignore the objective circumstances of political

power; but this study has demonstrated that the common-sense notions of what is considered possible is not inexorable but is instead crafted through the process of struggle.

In the quest to understand how ordinary people come to make sense of their agency, the concepts of mediation and common-sense are indispensable for scholars invested in the process of social change. From the outset, I had hoped to use these concepts to study the transformation of transit worker consciousness towards a critical awareness of neoliberalism's attack on public services and capitalist exploitation. Instead, I have partially uncovered some of the communicative mechanisms utilized by labor union organizations to prohibit a realization of class consciousness. Class struggle is not a phenomenon that disappears when the period of crisis has passed. The political forces of neoliberalism will continue well after Cuomo's Subway Action Plan runs out of money, and the neglect of social services like mass transit will persist. As such, the recurrent social and political crises of capitalism will provide future opportunities for workers to construct a new common sense. One that not only imposes frameworks of meaning with well-funded mass transit as a necessary historical achievement of human civilization, but a common-sense that recognizes that working-class power is the only way to achieve that goal. The project of constructing a new common sense will not occur automatically but must be crafted by leaders that mediate the immediate experience of neoliberal capitalism with a revolutionary program to transform the conditions of human mobility. Another world of mass transit is not only possible; another world is necessary.

Appendix

Interviews. December 21, 2018, New York City, New York

Worker 1

Worker 2

Worker 3

TWU Staffer 1

TWU Staffer 2

TWU Staffer 3

TWU Staffer 4

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Vita

Brandon M. Daniels – A Texas boy, born and raised. Brandon attended the University of Texas at Austin where he received a Bachelor of Science in Communication Studies in 2016. He then immediately left his home in the humidity for the weary winters of upstate New York to complete a Master of Arts in Communication and Rhetorical Studies at Syracuse University.

After he graduates in May of 2018, he will then move to yet another snowy location, to begin a Philosophy of Doctorate program in Communication at the University of Colorado Boulder. His research interests focus on social movements, labor activism, Marxism, and mass transit.