

# Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

---

## Reading a Baker's Cap

### Negotiating Changing Commercial Baking Processes and Technology through Occupational Material Culture

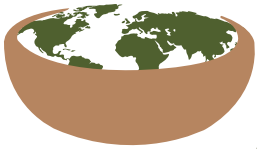
By: Noah Morritt

---

Material culture is an important part of workplace expressive culture. Items such as tools and uniforms do not simply serve a utilitarian function; they shape and are shaped by values and beliefs that are central to people's experiences and ideas about work. This was the case when I worked as a baker in a doughnut shop while I was an undergraduate student. Like other employees I was required to wear a standard uniform that consisted of a pair of white pants, a white shirt, white non-slip shoes, a belt, and a white cap with a visor. However, after protesting that the hats were neither functional nor comfortable, my co-worker and I were given permission to wear a white baker's cap with a mesh top similar to those worn by cooks in other commercial and industrial kitchens. In the reflexive autoethnographic research note that follows, I examine our decision to wear this baker's cap as an intersection of occupational material culture, foodways, and global political/economic regimes. I explore how an item of occupational material culture, like a baker's cap, can become a site of debate and resistance, confronting changing conceptions of labour and occupational identity.

While domestic baking has been a topic of interest for folklorists working in foodways (Tye 2010), baking as it is practiced in commercial and industrial establishments has received little scholarly attention. Earlier studies of other industrial work cultures can provide usable models, but they are not well equipped for dealing with the kinds of changes that are occurring in franchise commercial bakeries where the trend has been to pre-bake products at a central facility, flash freeze them, and ship them to store locations where they are re-baked and presented for sale. By examining a single piece of occupational material culture - the baker's cap - I explore the expression of occupational identity amidst changing notions of what it means to be a baker in a commercial doughnut shop. Using a Marxist political economy approach I argue that our white caps enacted particular conceptions of what it meant "to bake" in response to significant changes in the methods, processes, and technology used in food preparation.

### The Bakers' Cap and the Occupational Culture of Commercial



# Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

---

## Baking

The doughnut shop where I worked as a baker is located in a busy tourist area of a small Ontario city. To meet the demands of the summer season it hired an extra day shift baker who was usually a student looking for a part-time job. For several summers during my undergraduate studies, I was employed to help the regular full-time baker who had worked there for over 18 years. As a high school student I had taken courses in commercial baking so I was shocked to discover that we did not prepare any of the baked goods on site. Instead, all of the products we sold were pre-baked at a centralized facility, flash frozen, and shipped to local stores to be re-baked, decorated or finished, and sold. Rather than a bakery full of industrial stand-mixers, large bags of ingredients, and an enormous oven for baking large quantities of baked goods, I found two computerized ovens pre-programmed with designated time, temperature, and fan settings for each individual product and a large walk-in freezer where all of the pre-prepared baked goods were stored. I remember the regular baker laughing at my initial shock and he assured me that the job was easier now than it had been in the past when the doughnuts were baked on site.

When the regular baker was first hired, he was trained in what he called the “old bake” where bakers were required to make doughnut dough from scratch before setting it aside to rise. Following this they had to measure, weigh and cut out the doughnuts before allowing them to rise a second time (proofing) before frying. He frequently commented on how time consuming the process was and explained that there were different techniques and steps required when mixing and baking various different kinds of doughnut dough, or mixes, depending on whether they were yeast, cake, or small batch types. Yeast and cake dough were used to make dipped (iced), filled, and glazed doughnuts, whereas special recipes had to be followed to make other kinds of doughnuts such as orange twists and crullers. It was common to bake yeast doughnuts first to allow them time to cool before being filled and iced. Glazed yeast and cake doughnuts were often baked later because they required less time to dry and cool after being glazed. He often complained that the old bake required a lot of training and hard work, but explained that it was a rewarding and enjoyable job.

The regular baker frequently made comparisons between the “old” and “new” bakes, commenting that the old bake was predictable, consistent, and always followed a well organized schedule. Individual tasks were completed in a consistent pattern that ensured that different kinds of doughnuts were given the proper amount of time to proof, cool, or dry. This was similar to how we tried to organize our daily routine using



# Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

---

the new system, however, the constant preparation of small batches was difficult to organize in a consistent manner because there was no way to predict what would need to be baked at what time. Before he began baking at the store where I worked, my co-worker had started as a baker at a different location. When he changed stores he began working the midnight shift running the front counter, serving beverages, and filling orders. When the “old bake” was replaced by the new system of re-baking flash frozen doughnuts made at a central production plant, he was retrained and began working the dayshift. Every summer I worked the same hours as he did; we baked, cleaned, and kept the front display cases stocked with product as the store prepared for each daily rush of local regulars and tourists. Upon reflection I realize now that we shared a rich occupational culture that not only helped pass the time but make the job easier.

The study of occupational folklore or folklife through material culture has been shaped by a number of theoretical approaches. While much of this work has focused on workers in industrial factories and primary industries (Nickerson 1982, Mitchell 1982), folklorists have examined how occupational culture intersects with issues of class and ethnicity in a broad range of work sites (McCarl 1984, Santino 1983). This body of research demonstrates that the daily interactions of workers, their expressive forms, repertoires of work technique, and membership within an occupational group link them to wider economic processes determining the purpose and *organizing principles* of the occupational group (Abrahams 1978). Identification and analysis of the *organizing principles* of an occupation and their associated expressive forms has been a primary method of analysis within occupational folklore scholarship (Byington 1978, Green 1978, McCarl 1978).

Robert McCarl (1978) has been one of the strongest advocates for a contextual approach to occupational folklife, arguing that the expressive culture of workers needs to be understood in relationship to its “occupational environment.” He states that “context here is not viewed as a variable background which influences the nature of interaction; occupational contexts are a part of the interaction itself” (McCarl 1978: 4). Interactions with equipment, mandated procedures, routines, and fellow workers are therefore symbolic and communicative. McCarl also outlines how cultural expression in occupational settings can be shaped by work processes. Fundamental to his approach is the concept of *technique*, which he also calls the *canon of work technique*. Technique is the informal body of knowledge that forms the basis of worker’s own interactions with the occupational environment, including the technology workers use, other employees, and the *organizing principles* of their occupation (McCarl 1978, McCarl 1986). The performance of technique is expressive, reinforcing the behaviours and beliefs that structure the experience and



# Digest

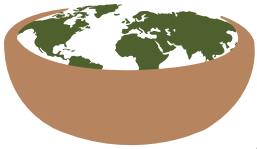
a journal of foodways & culture

---

pattern of work on a daily basis. At the doughnut shop where I worked our organizing principle was known as the “rhythm of the bake.” It was an important strategy for coping with repetition, fast-pace, and unpredictability of small-batch baking. In McCarl’s terms the “rhythm of the bake” played an important role in structuring our *canon of work technique*.

Our caps were both part of that *canon of work technique* and a reflection of its central importance in our occupational culture. They emphasized the importance of the rhythm of the bake in our occupational culture. A typical day began at five o’clock in the morning when we arrived at the store to relieve the midnight shift baker who was usually just finishing the morning bake. The midnight shift baker also worked with another employee at the front counter serving coffee and food until about 4 am when both of them began throwing out the last day’s baked goods, replacing them with fresh products. This process of discarding the previous day’s products and replacing them with the fresh “morning bake” was a fast-paced and busy job. For this to go smoothly the afternoon shift needed to clean the kitchen, restock the fondant pots, clean and refill the doughnut glazer, and correctly prepare the evening “pull” by sorting out all of the doughnuts, bagels, muffins, and pastries that needed to be baked in the morning and placing them onto pans in the walk-in freezer. It was not uncommon for the midnight baker to routinely criticize and condemn the mistakes made by the afternoon shift, which slowed down and complicated an already busy schedule.

As the hour from five to six o’clock immediately followed the first morning bake, we used this time to prepare for our own bake, completing tedious tasks that we preferred to finish before the store got busy. While the full-time baker made the soups, I prepared the tarts, dessert squares, and yogurt parfaits. After this we both began “pulling” frozen product and storing it in a shelving rack in the freezer that is only supposed to be used for the evening pull. We did this in order to ensure we had the most popular products ready to be baked as soon as the morning rush of customers began. Before this, we expected to be left alone. The first part of the day was our time to get ready, and we expected management and our fellow workers to respect and acknowledge this. Because we were doing something that was not sanctioned by company policy most of this work was done in the freezer out of management’s view. Once this was complete we began the day’s bake by putting on our aprons and baker’s caps and walking out-front behind the counter to see what needed to be baked first. By waiting until after the morning preparations were completed to assemble our full uniform we explicitly separated the morning bake from our own. This demarcation made it clear to other bakers, counter staff, and management that our bake, *canon of work technique*, and occupational



# Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

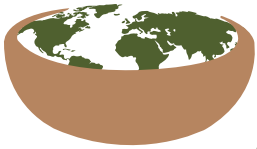
---

culture was similar, but yet markedly distinct from the morning and afternoon bakers.

For the remaining eight hours of our shift, the full-time baker prepared the breakfast products and baked the bagels, buns, and pastries while I baked and decorated the doughnuts. We were expected to keep our designated display cases stocked with a specifically allocated amount of each type of product. According to company policy we were expected to bake small batches of each product as they were required. This policy was strictly enforced and we were required to record the amount of each product baked in our log book. Ideally this data was supposed to help bakers predict how much of each product needed to be baked at any time in the future. In actuality, it was very difficult to precisely predict demand, and bakers were often so busy trying to keep up that they ignored their logs, using them only to record what they had baked rather than as a tool for organizing their future baking schedules.

Much of the informal knowledge and technique developed by bakers at the shop focused on their organization of the daily bake. For us, the “rhythm of the bake” was the central organizing principle of our occupational folklore. Knowing the most efficient way to balance production with other tasks such as cleaning the ovens and doughnut filling hoppers, recording the refrigerator and freezer temperatures, and cleaning dishes and equipment were fundamental to our success. Bakers at the shop generally developed techniques to combine jobs or get them done faster. For example, knowing which products can be baked together at a similar temperature and fan setting allowed us to bake more than one kind of product at a time, which officially was a violation of corporate policy. This technique of combining similar products during baking demonstrates the vitality of vernacular canons of work technique alongside, or in direct violation of, officially mandated procedure and policy.

Our baker’s caps were an important part of our *canon of work technique*. On a functional level, they helped us maintain our work rhythm: the mesh top prevented sweating and itching, the absence of a beak prevented the hat from hitting the shelves in the freezer as we retrieved product, and the fitting adjustment on the back allowed for a tighter fit. Our caps were also specifically designed for cooks and were therefore are a distinct marker of occupational identity separating us from other bakers, and more importantly, from the front counter staff. In response to changing processes of food preparation and production at the shop, we chose to wear caps that were commonly worn by cooks and bakers who participated in a more “traditional” form of baking. At one point the regular day shift baker suggested that we each start wearing a chef’s jacket as well. During



# Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

---

the early morning when we completed our initial preparations the walk-in freezer was often the coldest. He argued that the jackets would help keep us warm in the freezer and look more professional than our standard uniforms. Management did not support this additional change and as a result the only unofficial alteration to our uniforms was the substitution of a baker's cap for the standard hats issued by the company. Changes to our uniforms were thus part of a larger debate about occupational identity that was linked to our perceptions of traditionality and professionalism. Thus, our ideas about which methods, techniques, and processes of baking were more traditional than others were consciously expressed through the alterations we made to our official uniform.

Our unsanctioned *canon of work technique* and wider occupational culture helped us negotiate changes in food preparation and production and cope with the challenges of the new bake. As an important component of our *canon of work technique*, our caps helped us accommodate changes in the methods, technology, and processes of baking at the shop. Additionally, our caps were also integral to the process of occupational identity construction. Amidst the transformation of baking occurring at our shop, and others across the country, we conceptualized the significance of our caps through notions of tradition and professionalism; we wanted to make it clear to management and other employees that we were bakers by visually expressing our perceptions of what a baker should look like. As expressed through our baker's caps, our occupational culture provided a way of negotiating changes in the baking processes and technologies of our shop.

## From the “Old Bake” to the “New Bake”: Occupational Material Culture and the Political Economy of Commercial Baking

Responding to critiques of classical Marxism, Marxist political economy reaffirms the central importance of ownership of the means and modes of production, but reconceptualises base-superstructural relations arguing that political and economic power exist together, reinforcing one another and reproducing oppressive socioeconomic regimes. The joining of structural Marxism and political economy to examine the impact of capitalism on the local has had an important impact on anthropology, sometimes referred to as the historical cultural approach. As the theoretical basis of world systems theory this approach asserts that the disparities between local and global systems are produced by interrelated processes of imperialism, state formation and capitalist economic expansion (Roseberry 1988). Although Marxist political economy has had less theoretical impact in folkloristics (Limón 1983), analysis within the Gramscian tradition has recognized that folklore can be counter-hegemonic,



# Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

---

producing opposition and political philosophies that transform the folk into agents of resistance in opposition to the global economic order (Limón 1983). Through Marxist analysis, folklorists have an interesting opportunity to highlight how the expressive traditions of workers can expose and resist global economic regimes, demonstrating how the integration of global and local economic processes can produce serious consequences for those who are politically weak and economically vulnerable.

The bakery where my co-worker and I worked was a site of economic intervention where the neoliberalization of labour practices and management models met with local resistance. As already indicated, before I started working at the doughnut shop, many of the products sold were produced on site by bakers who drew upon a much larger *canon of work technique*, elements of which was shared by many workers in other commercial bakeries. Bakers' intimate knowledge of recipes, proofing techniques, and proper baking procedures were integral to the success of the store, and their skills were recognized by a higher pay rate than that of other workers at the shop. Some commercial bakeries, such as the one I worked at, were never fully industrial in the sense that deskilling workers was not a viable option. As a result, the model of production that existed under the old bake fundamentally lacked flexibility, both in the range of products that could be produced without significant retraining of bakeshop staff and in the degree of control management had over production.

What was known in our shop as the “new bake,” - doughnuts that were now baked and frozen at a central factory and shipped to local stores where they are re-baked in specially designed ovens that have built in time and temperature settings for individual products - is part of a larger response to global trends. In introducing a new model of product preparation that decentralized production while fully standardizing product availability and quality in all of its stores across North America, corporate management joined a global movement known as *flexible accumulation*, a management strategy that promotes expanded capital gains through a production model designed to accommodate constantly changing consumer tastes (Patterson 1998). This is achieved through the use of automated technology, the production of small quantities, or batches of goods, and the Just-in-Time system of delivery that ensures that supplies arrive just as they are needed (Oberhauser 1990). These strategies free up capital for other uses, however they also covertly restrict shop floor consciousness that is replaced by a system that seemingly encourages worker's participation in management. This system represents a complete transformation of the older Fordist model of production, which according to Oberhauser (1990) “entails long-run, mass production in which workers are stationed at separate posts along as assembly line” (215), resulting in the deskilling of workers, downward pressure



# Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

---

on wages, and labour unrest. Under *flexible accumulation* workers are given jobs with multiple components that are supervised and controlled by automated technologies.

Folklorists have not yet paid enough attention to changes in the organization and structure of contemporary industrial production models and their impact on occupational folklore. The growing influence of Marxist analysis within occupational folklore scholarship does suggest that a critical re-evaluation of worker's experiences and confrontations with changing economic regimes and management models is possible. Using a Marxist political economy as an analytical framework it is possible to examine how management strategies such as *flexible accumulation* transform food preparation and production processes, and in turn, how occupational culture provides strategies for negotiating or resisting its adverse effects. As bakers we were expected to comply with the corporate small-batch policy, making small batches of baked goods only as they were required. This became harder to do as the day progressed, sales increased, and the store became busier. We were also required to record the exact amount of each product baked in our daily computerized production log. According to upper management these procedures were designed to help us regulate production and reduce the amount money lost from discarded goods at the end of the day. As I have shown, however, we often relied on our own techniques. In order to cope with the demands of the new bake and the fragmented, and seemingly disorganized fast pace of small batch baking, we developed our own techniques to maintain the rhythm of the bake.

As a management strategy, *flexible accumulation* strives to break shop floor consciousness, and thus standardized uniforms were used at the shop to reinforce a corporate team ethos meant to subvert and suppress shop floor consciousness and obliterating any risk posed by unionization or collective action by workers. Our caps, however, emphasized the importance of solidarity and were a marker of our occupational identity inscribed with alternative definitions and models of labour. The corporate team ethos and the new style of production frequently produced tension as management at the corporate level attempted to tightly regulate the production process by demanding that we work autonomously while completing a range of interrelated tasks. Notices posted to remind bakers of corporate policy and workshops held by upper management to teach and reinforce official policy were partially accepted or outright ignored. At the store level, however, we maintained a relatively positive working relationship with the managers who supported our decision to wear a baker's cap instead of the hats issued as according to the corporate uniform policy. Overall, this was a minor concession by management and an act of goodwill, and for the most part we generally followed other corporate policies.



# Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

---

From our perspective our caps explicitly expressed solidarity and occupational identity, which Eric Wolf (2001) argues is a consequence of people's incorporation into economic systems and relations of production. He explains that "the processes of incorporation arrange and rearrange people in terms of the governing social relations of production; the processes of identity-making and -unmaking represent responses on the part of particular populations to such arrangements" (Wolf 2001: 354). Our baker's cap therefore unmade the identity ascribed to us through *flexible accumulation* and replaced it with one of our own making. This identity was performed and enacted through costume, and our bakers' caps can be analysed as both a cultural text and an assemblage. This reading of cultural texts through the framework of Marxist political economy seems deterministic and far too narrowly focused on structural relationships inherent in the exercise of political and economic power, however, as I have shown, there is room for agency.

## Conclusion

Cultural texts such as a baker's cap have the capacity to become sites of resistance through which economic regimes can be contested and opposed. Occupational culture ultimately provides rhetorical strategies and expressive practices through which identities, ideologies, and relations of power can be unmade and reconfigured - it is the process through which occupational identity is enacted. During the summers I worked as a baker, the seemingly inconsequential baker's cap became a point of intersection where material culture, foodways, and occupational culture met. Through the cap and its relationship to the rest of our uniform my fellow baker and I expressed our occupational identity and demonstrated how work techniques were inseparably linked to changing processes of food preparation and models of corporate management.



## References Cited

Abrahams, Roger D. 1978. Towards a Sociological Theory of Folklore: Performing Services. In *Working Americans: Contemporary Approaches to Occupational Folklife*, ed. Robert H. Byington, 19-42. Los Angeles: California Folklore Society.

Byington, Robert H. 1978. Strategies for Collecting Occupational Folklife in Contemporary Urban/Industrial Contexts. In *Working Americans: Contemporary Approaches to Occupational Folklife*, ed. Robert H. Byington, 43-56. Los Angeles: California Folklore Society.

Green, Archie. 1978. Industrial Lore: A Bibliographic-Semantic Query. In *Working Americans: Contemporary Approaches to Occupational Folklife*, ed. Robert H. Byington, 71-102. Los Angeles: California Folklore Society.

Limón, José E. 1983. Western Marxism and Folklore: A Critical Introduction. *The Journal of American Folklore* 96 (379): 34-52

McCarl, Robert S. 1978. Occupational Folklife: A Theoretical Hypothesis. In *Working Americans: Contemporary Approaches to Occupational Folklife*, ed. Robert H. Byington, 3-18. Los Angeles: California Folklore Society.

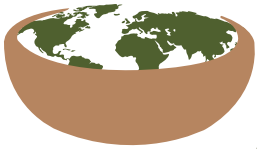
---. 1984. "You've Come a Long Way. And Now This is Your Retirement": An Analysis of Performance in Fire Fighting Culture. *The Journal of American Folklore* 97 (386): 393-422.

---. 1986. Occupational Folklore. In *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres: An Introduction*, ed. Elliot Oring, 71-90. Logan: Utah State University Press.

Mitchell, Roger. 1982. Occupational Folklore: The Outdoor Industries. In *Handbook of American Folklore*, ed. Richard M. Dorson, 128-35. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Nickerson, Bruce E. 1982. Factory Folklore. In *Handbook of American Folklore*, ed. Richard M. Dorson, 121-27. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Oberhauser, Ann M. 1990. Social and Spatial Patterns Under Fordism and *Flexible accumulation*. *Antipode* 22 (3): 211-232.



# Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

---

Patterson, Thomas C. 1998. *Flexible accumulation, Flexible Labor and Their Consequences*. *Critique of Anthropology* 18 (3): 317-319.

Roseberry, William. 1988. Political Economy. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 17: 161-185.

Santino, Jack. 1983. Miles of Smiles, Years of Struggle: The Negotiation of Black-Occupational Identity Through Personal Experience Narratives. *The Journal of American Folklore* 96 (382): 393-412.

Tye, Diane. 2010. *Baking as Biography: A Life Story in Recipes*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Wolf, Eric. 2001. *Pathways of Power: Building an Anthropology of the Modern World*. Berkeley: University of California Press.