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Communication Techniques and Tactics in Criminal Activities and Occupations

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Article abstract

This paper analyzes two micro-case studies to expand our understanding of communication techniques in criminal practices. In the first instance the torture of a suspected drug thief by two street kid research participants is investigated as both an instrumental trial by ordeal and a communication strategy in a media poor community. In the second case study, excerpts from occupational folklore and lifestory interviews are presented to demonstrate the complex ways in which silence is used and resisted in the stories of illegal marijuana growers in a small village in British Columbia.

THE SPEAKING BODY AND THE SILENT MOUTH

Communication Techniques and Tactics in Criminal Activities and Occupations

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In ethnomimesis the body reflects, impersonates, and represents its relation to other bodies in relation to the social world.... While that relation is not necessarily a formal or informal “representation” in a fully motivated sense.... it is nevertheless a signification that rescues symbolic action out of the mire of merely somatic motions, bestowing upon the body a social legibility that is the very definition of the body in society. (Cantwell 1999: 223)

“Three may keep a secret, if two of them are dead.” Benjamin Franklin

This brief descriptive paper uses the parallel and oppositional pairing of the body/mouth and silence/speaking to join together two micro-case studies which utilize scholarship on the body and occupational narrative analysis to demonstrate how folkloristic approaches can enervate seemingly moribund projects within criminology and the sociology of crime¹. The first case study on an instance of instrumental torture perpetuated by two of my research participants in my 2009 study of street kids considers torture as a form of compelled speech, embedded in traditional folklaws and histories of the body. The second case study looks at how illegal marijuana labourers utilize and resist the primary occupational technique of silence. Thematically the speaking body is mirrored by the silent mouth to demonstrate the dynamic of expressive forms within criminological environments. The paper concludes with a brief reflective ethnography on the role and responsibilities that fieldworkers have when studying criminal occupations and regimes of silence.

The first case study is based on five months of fieldwork as a known participant observer with a group of street kids (sixteen primary and dozens

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1. Special thanks to Dr. Rie Croll for her insightful suggestions on an earlier version of this paper

of marginal participants) who panhandled, sold drugs, and lived in and around the Queen West neighbourhood of Toronto (Queen and John St.). The following analysis is based on audio recordings and fieldnotes. All participants are given a pseudonym and some key details are changed to avoid identification.

The theft of KE's weed and what came after

I sat, as I did most every morning, in the doorway of the closed shop on the north side of Queen West, waiting for the early morning sun to warm the concrete and me. I drank cheap coffee in a takeout cup and absentmindedly smoked a cigarette waiting for the various members of the loose-knit street kid community² I was studying to make their way from their sleeping places in the neighbouring parks, alleys, shanties, and rooftops back to this block: their panning, drug selling, hangout, hustling, and, (ephemerally) home. As I smoked I ran through the list of people I needed to check in with, the possible interviews to do and how to find more time to meet new street kids in the neighbourhood. Mostly though, I was growing tired of the heat and exhaust fumes, the endless hours of panhandling, and sharing snatches of talk only when the patter of “spare any change” would cease for ten seconds. As the summer dragged through an endless July heat wave, we were all tired weavers of a cloth of patter, the dropped change a shuttle cock upon the loom, and cigarette smoke, drugs, talk in the park and the threat of violence the only breaks from the patterned patter.

Chuck was usually the first on the street since it was the only way he could access the better panning spots before he had to relinquish them to the more experienced street kids. Today he shuffled up, tired looking, bummed a smoke and was the first of many that day to relate the story of how KE was robbed. It was not a very interesting story since the victim

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2. The community was highly fluid and ephemeral but nevertheless constituted a folk group insofar as my primary research participants shared similar geographies, traditional sleeping locations, followed common occupational norms in panhandling and drug selling and participated in various reciprocal practices like sharing cigarettes, loaning small amounts of money or fronting drugs. Tight social bonds were generally dyadic but small clusters of four or five individuals would form a more complex group that shared resources and worked cooperatively. The ephemeral nature of these groups does not preclude the fact that individuals perceive themselves as belonging to this folk group—even if, to the housed population, it appears a study in anomie.

was asleep at the time on a bench in sketch park,³ and there were no other witnesses; so the tale amounted to: “KE got robbed.” What was interesting to Chuck was what KE would do next.

KE was an experienced street kid from Vancouver who had been street involved for six years, living in squats, precarious housing or sleeping rough. Twenty-two years of age, he was also an experienced street-level drug dealer and panhandler and was large and imposing enough to intimidate almost anyone he met. Arriving in late June, KE had a regular panning spot and a bright yellow sign that said “need money for weed.” He was a mute panhandler who loved his dog and was a quick study of the dime bag marijuana trade in the neighbourhood.⁴ Within three weeks of his arrival he’d saved up over four hundred dollars in cash and pot and now it was all gone. News of the theft spread quickly and while there was not much detail, most of the storytelling by several individuals were glosses on who might have done it and what KE would do to them. There was also some concern expressed by everyone that they not become a suspect.

When I finally caught up with KE later that day for a recorded interview in sketch park, he seemed relatively relaxed for a man who had lost what, on the street, amounts to a fortune. At the time of the interview the park was unusually full of other street kids with one group sitting about ten feet away from us. During a long ranging conversation over a couple of hours, KE himself brought up the theft at two different times, and it became clear my impression that he had made his peace was a mistake.

Interrupting a detailed recounting of his street career, which was mainly full of displays of subcultural competency, and his wide range of survival skills, KE inserted the previous night’s theft as a self-critique, and as a way to admit he still has things to learn:

KE: But I just fucking fucked up. I didn’t even [unintelligible]. I did—I should have put it [drugs and money] in my bag,

John: Yea maybe.

KE: and tied my bag to the dog.

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3. The official name is St. Patrick’s Square, a small parkette just north of Queen St. frequented by my research participants.
 4. Street level selling in this area of Toronto is not controlled by gangs. Street kids purchased small quantities of marijuana from an independent dealer of middling weights (quarter ounce to an ounce) and then split it into dime bags. For street kids without capital they could receive three dime bags on credit from one or another local dealer for twenty dollars, sell them for ten dollars each and repay the dealer at the end of the panning day.

John: Yea you could have done that.

KE: Yea I could have but I don't like having my dogs tied up. They don't deserve to be tied to me. They always sleep within 5 feet of me.... I don't like to have them tied to me.

Just as quickly as he begins telling about the theft, KE abandons the story and returns to the earlier theme of his Vancouver street life. It is telling that in his comment on the theft he only blames himself—when both the thief and his dog lay open for blame—which is in keeping with a wider street ethic of “taking care of yourself” that several of my research participants place at the centre of their personal and social identity, and a theme KE returns to again and again during our discussion.⁵

Later in the interview, following a list of positive things about life on the street, I ask him about the negative aspects:

KE: Security. I got ripped off last night. Ahhhhhh. You meet a lot of idiots. No private space to just be alone.

John: That's true, that's true, always just parks and shit.

KE: Yea.

John: It seems like you met some decent people?

KE: Yea I met some good kids. [leaning in towards me and slightly lowering his voice]. See one of them isn't my friend though. One of them ripped me off. If it's not one of these kids [gesturing], it's one of the kids I've met.

John: That's the thing; it kind of wrecks everything?

KE: It does.

I attempted to follow up on the theme of trust and asked him if you “gotta trust the people you're hanging out with?” His reply, after a long interview in which he outlined several people who helped him and looked out for him when he was young and homeless, was not surprising given recent events: “There's no one. There's no one, period.”

However, it turns out there was one person KE trusted and he enlisted K—'s help a few days later. Following a tip from someone that the thief might be a male “crack head” who slept under an overpass south of Front Street.⁶ KE was going to question him and wanted K— as back-up. As both men later (and separately) narrated to me,⁷ K— was armed with a

5. For a fuller discussion of personal responsibility and control among my research participants please see Bodner (2009).

6. Brown-lands infill, with condominium and rapid gentrification of my research site has radically transformed the social geography of street kids, rendering much of my fieldwork geographic data historic.

7. These conversations were recorded later, as jot notes in my journal so little granular detail remains.

bicycle lock and both men spent a considerable amount of time torturing and questioning the unnamed person. In the end they concluded that he was not the thief, apologized and gave him some drugs. When I expressed some doubt about the equivalency of the exchange, K— reiterated the line, growling out, “we gave him some drugs!”

In their telling of the *trial by ordeal* both men employed a similar narrative style, common especially to male street kids and experienced female street kids whereby extraordinary events are presented without dramatic narrative devices: the narrative itself is often little more than a basic list of events, without commentary, asides or reflection, and it is delivered with a flattened paralinguistic delivery.⁸ The performance style⁹ is meant to display emotional control, competency, and experience. In crafting the narrative of torturing the unknown man both street kids are doing important identity work, shaping not only what I and others think of their actions but what we will think of them in the days and weeks to come. As I will explain below, the power to speak and its connection to agency prefigures my discussion on silence in the second case study; here it is enough to note that K— and KE get to speak and the unknown man is silent.

As noted, the use of violence in drug markets is not remarkable or novel. Richard Friman characterizes it “as a selective tool of market regulation” in a context in which normative mechanisms of justice are absent (2009: 286). Moving from Friman’s macro-criminologic perspective to an interpersonal street ethnography one, as Philippe Bourgois and others have long been concerned with: “Behavior that appears irrationally violent, ‘barbaric’ and ultimately self-destructive to the outsider, can be reinterpreted according to the logic of the underground economy as judicious public relations and long-term investment in one’s ‘human capital development’” (2003; see Sudhir Venkatesh 2008). While my work certainly supports Bourgois’ above perception (and the rest of his study of the underground economy in Spanish Harlem that closely investigates individual acts within the structural constraints of both the state and the black market), his further work and that of others in the re-emergent field of street ethnography remains

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8. The effect on the listener is that the narrator appears bored with their own tale as if extra-ordinary events are so commonplace that they hardly bear repeating.
 9. Following from Charles Briggs, the performance is a form of anti-performance that seeks to subsume the tale back into general discourse (1988: 17), obscuring the very category of performance and its negative connotations within street kid aesthetic and ethical systems.

partially wedded to criminology's contested rational choice theory (RCT).¹⁰ Strictly speaking, RCT is relatively uninterested in what folklorists would understand as traditional forms of violence, the transmission of cultural knowledge, and their expression through performance, or as my title suggests, the speaking body and the silent mouth. Nevertheless, following from Bourgois, KE and K—'s actions were eventually proven sub-culturally normative by their peers for two reasons, First, the unknown man they tortured was not part of the loose-knit folk group, marked as Other by both his geographic location outside the folk geography that my research participants considered their place; and marked as Other by his type of drug, crack cocaine. Second, about a month after this event K— and KE were called upon by a number of street kids in my study group to forcefully evict a group of unruly transient homeless youth who were disrupting the local scene. Luckily the group moved along before an encounter but the request and the acceptance of the request marked the two, not as unpredictably dangerous people, but as leaders in the community. In all, these observations are largely predicted within the basic sociology of violence in drug markets, but where folklorists may expand, the range of inquiry begins at the level of the body and contextually expands outward.

Folkloric inquiry into the social and cultural body has expanded widely since Young's influential 1993 monograph, *Bodylore* (Young and Babcock 1994; Whatley and Henken 2000; Bennett 2009; Milligan 2019). Here I am interested in a subset of bodylore that is part of a tradition and history of the body that underpins and is inscribed in historic jurisprudence and contemporary folklaw: the tortured body. The logic of KE and K—'s torture of the unknown man is not simply a response to the contextual demands of the contemporary drug trade but is embedded in traditional ways of seeing and understanding the body itself: the body as truth, and the body as sign (Foucault 1995: 3-32). The emergence of judicial torture in the fourteenth century is predicated upon the earlier "trial by ordeal" with its intercession of God to prove, through the survival of the body, the truth of a charge. The transformation from purely divine intervention to an increasingly mundane and secular application of techniques through the court is found even within the witchcraft tradition (Levack 2015: 141-153; Langbein 2006; De Certeau 2000: 122-151). Under constant pressure, even at its apogee, from critics, judicial torture would endure into the seventeenth century, disappearing fitfully in courts but retained as an extrajudicial practice across various military dictatorships, and reintroduced to America post 9/11 (with

10. For an overview see Trasler (2005: 1403-1407).

legal sanction) by the American military under the title of “enhanced interrogation techniques.” Outside of nation states and their bureaucracies, it is clear that torture also exists within a folkgroups’ overarching folklaw, which is relatively unchanged from its archaic configuration and, as Shuman and others have long noted, in constant dialogue with official and larger-than-local discourses on torture, the law, and justice (1993).

Foucault has outlined torture’s mechanism as “a physical challenge that must define the truth; if the patient is guilty, the pains that it imposes are not unjust; but it is also a mark of exculpation if he is innocent. In the practice of torture, pain, confrontation and truth were bound together; they worked together on the patient’s body” (41; see Scarry 1985). By their own accounts KE and K— stick very closely to the tradition of judicial evidentiary violence: they confront the unknown individual and place themselves at some risk (in the tradition it is the social power of the judges, here it is both social and physical); the application of violence is to compel the individual to speak the truth; the interlocutors must perceive the truth when spoken; and justice must depend on weighing true evidence.¹¹ The performance of this traditional violent act has a form and shape that, as we have seen, when competently performed, conforms to street kids’ folklaw and protects an individual’s social standing in the community.¹²

There is, furthermore, a second signifying product from the event wherein the techniques of torture produce various injuries that are inscribed on the body itself which then acts as both the object that suffered and the object that speaks its suffering. I will consider in the second half of this paper the imperative of silence in illegal marijuana work; here the imperative for both K—and KE has been to eliminate silence, at first by compelling speech through torture but afterward narrating their own actions as subculturally normative and, here, employing embodied techniques to

11. As Foucault noted, KE and K— arrive at the conclusion of innocence, not as a failure of torture itself, but because of it. So sure are they of the truth of it that, in compensation, they give the unknown man some drugs. The evidentiary efficacy of torture is assured as is a particular configuration of justice and balance and fairness which is symbolized in the giving of drugs.
12. The abiding limitation of this line of reasoning is my post-facto evidence wherein the narrative, like all codes, acts as both a description and rhetorical justification of the act. Likewise, I do not have a longitudinal study that would provide a context to how forms of violence are transmitted and negotiated across generations of street kid cohorts. Thus far there is no Henry Glassie of violence, its forms, structures and meaning (for an overview of Glassie, the individual, and tradition see: Cashmen et al. 2011). There is, however, some appreciation of violence-as-form and formal practice in the work on hazing (Bronner 2005; Mechling 2008, 2009).

force the continued speech of the tortured man. For, after K— and KE leave the place under the overpass, the unknown man's body moves forward in time, performing to the unknown man and other audiences both the act and the actors' power to punish and control.¹³ Moreover, the tortured body becomes a performance that demands a narrative (or, in the event of silence, expresses the existence of said narrative) account, thus transmitting the violent reputation of K— and KE. This technique of transmission is isomorphic with the wider place of the body in street kid subcultures. The centrality of the body and homelessness has been demonstrated by Susan Ruddick (2002: 63; 1996) arguing that homelessness is primarily an issue of bodies out of place (see Wright 1997). My own work has expanded on Ruddick's point to argue, following Marshal McLuhan (1964), that the total absence of all media limits street kids' ability to act in the world to techniques of the body (Bodner 2009).¹⁴ KE's ability to advertise his violent capacity in protecting his property and occupation is, therefore, inscribed on an innocent body, and one that is compelled to speak. Where these acts are expected and traditional within the occupational folklore of drug selling, a second set of questions about labouring, resistance and tradition emerge and are addressed in the silences of marijuana workers in the second half of this paper.

The marijuana occupational narrative and what was never said

For five research seasons which ended just before Canada legalized recreational marijuana (October 17, 2018), I was studying a village on Vancouver Island and the small scale independent¹⁵ pot growers that live in and around it. When I began my research in 2011 the community was

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13. This line of reasoning follows from Foucault's articulation of state power and the scaffold from the same work above.
 14. By way of illustration and to clarify the continued utility of McLuhan's theory of media: street kids have no media to secure property like a home or bank account. They have no communication technology and therefore cannot extend themselves across time or space. They have no modes of transportation and are therefore confined to small and discrete territories which constrain their economic and social opportunities. Their monetary poverty is reinforced by their media poverty in an endlessly reinforcing loop.
 15. I use the term "independent" to denote operations that are self-financed and independent of any criminal organization. Independent growers interact with organized crime only once, at the point of selling their harvest in the fall. The term "organized crime" technically refers to two or more people who conspire to commit a crime in Canada but is used here to denote more traditional organizational structures like biker gangs.

at the beginning of an economic upswing after nearly fifty years of decline and stagnation following the utter collapse of its resource extraction industry. Surrounded by forest, clear-cuts (accessible along logging roads), disused marginal farmland, and swamp—lightly policed and traditionally populated by people with a deep knowledge of the landscape—the area has had a thriving pot growing tradition for several decades. While dwarfed by pot producing geographies like the famous Kootenays, a municipal councillor noted in an interview that much of the local economy for many years has been underpinned by pot money, and it has been a vital resource to the survival of the village. As part of a larger study in the moral economy of the village and occupational folklife of those who labour in what pot workers call “the industry,” I interviewed thirteen pot labourers (growers and general labourers) several times over the years and conducted participant observation in the village. This brief investigation into silence in occupational narratives is drawn from my audio recorded interviews and supplemented by fieldnotes.

The scholarship on silence is vast and multidisciplinary. Folklorists, drawing from linguistics, communications studies and critical feminist theory, have tended to concentrate on negative silence (silencing), its presence in narrative, practice and our discipline itself, and the personal, social, cultural and political consequences thereof (Toelken 2003, Lawless 2001, Shuman 1993, Mills 1993). Positive silence can be found in performance and ethnographic studies inspired by the work of Keith Basso (1970; Bauman 1983).¹⁶ Occupational folklore scholarship has not approached the topic but, as one would expect, there is a large body of material on silence, organized crime and the mafia. The bulk of this scholarship, as Jason Pine has noted, is divorced from ethnographic specificity and misunderstands the complex and ambiguous nature of criminal ‘organizations’, the community, and individual tactics of negotiating this territory (2012: 10-15). To sidestep this problem in this case study I will treat crime within the occupational folklore perspective of Robert McCarl and his theory of technique as the central shaping principle of an occupation and its traditions (1978b; 1985). This perspective solves two potential problems. First, it places us within marijuana labourers’ esoteric and emic understanding of their jobs and the role of silence. Second, it more accurately reflects the ambiguity of silence in the occupation since it exists in both its positive and negative forms. These two strengths, as I will explain below, are tempered by occupational folklore’s theoretical

16. There is a third form within supernatural narrative theory where silence exists as a narrative crisis, neither positive nor negative (Bennett 1999).

limitation in relation to grey and black market labouring.

In its positive orientation silence is the first technique workers adopt, without which there is no industry to begin with. As Vina May (whom we will meet shortly) notes, “Yea, mmmm hmmm. And I’m on their list. Sort of their ‘safe list.’ You kind of have to—b—because you get paid as much for keeping your mouth shut as doing the work.” The demands of silence, like the demands of all occupations’ techniques are incorporated in complex vernacular practices, secured, negotiated and resisted within occupational folk groups (McCarl 1985: 28). As I will briefly outline, the central tension for pot labourers is to mitigate the corrosive social and psychological isolation the technique of silence imposes while protecting their jobs and personal safety. While provisional I have identified four kinds of silence in the occupational narratives of marijuana workers and the ethnographic encounters exposed in my fieldwork practices.

The first silence is absolute¹⁷

As Vina May pointed out, workers in the industry should remain silent about their occupational identity. I found this theoretically simple system to be maddeningly complex in practice. For example, I recruited research participants through convenience and snowball sampling. For obvious reasons, the names of potential recruits were not told to me by my interviewees; they simply reached out to people and gave them my name and information about my research. Because of this system, while I lived in the village for four months each year, I was surrounded by and interacted with an unknown number of people who had been asked by others to participate in my research but had refused. The silence of all concerned successfully obscured their identities from a determined researcher and, I assume, equally determined police force. In my final fieldwork season this situation came into sharp focus one evening while attending a bonfire party at a friend’s house. Most of the forty or so attendees were known to me, though some only as friends-of-friends whom I would see often but interact with only a few times each summer. Late in the evening, when the party was winding down, I was chatting with just such an individual, the

17. I use the term “absolute” metaphorically. The silence is absolute outside of a network of confidants be they partners in a grow show, fellow workers in the industry, family or close friends. Even within a community that generally supports marijuana growing and uses, those who laboured in the industry remained circumspect. The “absolute” in question also refers to its binary nature in basic communication: silence is or is not.

two of us sitting and drinking around the fire, when he said, “You know I’ve been watching you for a while and I think I might talk with you about what Ida told me to talk with you about. You seem ok.” I asked when Ida had told him about my research to which he replied “I don’t know. Five years ago?” Like all ethnographers I had been watched and weighed by members of the community and through my actions, in this case at least, I was judged trustworthy. That trustworthiness is critical to the breaking of absolute silence, since once the individual reveals themselves as a worker in the industry their identity is immediately and irrevocably altered. Outside of a small group of confidants, silence is either absolute or a crisis.

While the occupational technique of silence allows all other techniques of marijuana growing and labour in the industry to occur, it comes at a cost, one that my research participant Vina May has thought about a great deal.

During our first interview session Vina May sits on her back porch looking out at her garden and occasionally at me as we talk about her life growing pot. A small homemade wooden table separates a mismatched set of wooden chairs. The first time we talked it was early morning and we were on our second cups of coffee and the first cigarette of the day. Here, on her home turf she is relaxed, although one might not notice since, even when she’s sitting in a chair there is a kind of intensity to her bearing, or maybe it’s just the “to-do list” distractions that a busy life in the country brings. Despite some stints in the city for school, work or relationships she’s a rural person and it shows. She’s lightly tanned from working outside and her hands clearly show a scuffing and patina of work. She has a kind of thin “ropy” musculature that comes, she explained, from growing up with constant work on a farm in southern Ontario. Her clothes, light pants and a t-shirt under a worn-thin sweater, are no nonsense and nondescript, suited to work. When I first met her several years ago she was in her mid-thirties, with shoulder length dark hair with a touch of grey here and there. Like most I interview, she is initially hesitant, hampered by wanting to tell me the “right” things. But soon enough we’re just talking and she laughs easily at herself and some of the episodes in her life. At other times, especially when she talks about the gender politics in the industry, she is serious, passionate and smolderingly angry. Speaking about the isolation of the job she explains:

It’s the paranoia that I really hate. You can’t be honest about who you are; what you do. You can only trust a—it is an isolating, and isolating, work. I’d say—you’re circle gets very small. You, ummm—I think it’s hard for you to be free to go out into the world and meet new people.

Because you can't tell the truth [pause] about what you do. So your world stays small and safe with the other people doing what you're doing. But you're not getting a lot of other new, new influences. I would say, I know a lot of guys, guys in particular who stuck there. I call it "being lost in pot world"...

Robyn Fivush in her work "Speaking Silence" anticipates the isolation Vina May fears and works to avoid:

The individual must have a community of listeners able and willing to hear and validate their experiences in order to create a more coherent narrative, and when they do, the evolving narrative coherence is linked to higher levels of both physical and psychological well-being. (2009: 96)

A year after my first interview I returned to talk with Vina May and began by picking up the theme of isolation which dominated our initial discussion. I probe, "It is isolating. If you can't tell someone a story about... a part of your life. It would do something to you—"

Vina May: Diminish you. I would say it will totally diminish you. No, I think, in general pot growers are buried people. They are dimin—because that's exactly it: they can't tell their whole story. They can't say "this is what I do for a living and I'm really really good at it."

The phrase "buried people" and the suffocation (among other things) it implies is evocative in pointing to the way that silence erodes both the self and the social self in equal measure.

Adopting an occupational folklore perspective, work narratives, both between labourers and those outside the occupation, are resources for creating group solidarity and (re)creating occupational and individual identity. Denied the generative force of sharing occupational narratives is not only a challenge to pot workers but to occupational folklore scholarship. Occupational folklorists created the basic models for approaching work based on normative and often male workforces (McCarl 1978a; 1978b; Santino 1978; Green 1987; Jones 1991; Narváez 1990; for an exception see: Burns 1979). Within these environments narrative and traditional practices like retirement parties are tools to create social bonds within a context of antagonistic relationships with employers (Santino 1978). A general failure in approaching stigmatized, grey or black market labouring has left occupational folklore with little theory to account for occupational silence and its corrosive nature. To fill this gap I turn to traditional tactics of resistance and covert communication found in feminist folklore scholarship. Joan Radner and Susan Lanser's (1987) foundational work on coding,

especially the subcategory of coding through “indirection” where one can “tell all the truth ‘but tell it slant’” can augment occupational folklore studies to see how work narratives function in black market contexts (419). Briefly, coding is the traditional female strategy of obscuring the intended content of expressive acts to everyone outside the intended receivers. The technique that is most relevant here is Radner and Lanser’s second subcategory of indirection, “impersonation.” It occurs where a person in (for example) a narrative substitutes the “I” for a persona (420). In the following section I will expand this theory to show how indirection can be used to substitute knowable others (those who are being narrated about) through the technique of *slippery* pronouns, retaining the “I” but obscuring all the people around it

The second silence is effacement, a speaking silence

The most common use of silence that I have recorded in my interviews is the tactical use of pronouns as impersonation substitutions to obscure omitted information. Vina May provides a good example in the following narrative:

In the years that I’ve been doing it—I just heard from someone who lives in Nelson; he’s got a girlfriend who had a little show for years, thugs came in. Beat her up. Big guys. Stole her stuff. Lots of stories like that. I know there’s stories here even about ummm [pause] trying to move large amounts where [pause] things go wrong and suddenly someone’s got a gun and they’re going “we’re taking what you got. Too bad for you.” You have to sort of cut your losses. There’s nothing you can do. Yea, there’s [starts laughing], you’re fucked.... And that sucks because when you’ve got large amount you might have got something from somebody else and got together a bulk order and they, something went wrong with them. Their reputation—they’ll never be able to recover. Will they every [even] pay it [money for other’s pot] back? Probably not. So I’ve never been into dealing with—but I’ve known people moving it across the border. Like pounds and stuff. And I feel like I know the whole gambit because I’ve been, I’ve been in the circles, less and less.

If we think of impersonation here as substituting the narrated other, it’s clear that some of these pronouns—especially at the beginning—stand in for real people but then there is the subtle shift to “you” which initially substitutes for “she” but then shifts again to occupy an ambiguous position. First, the “general you” is the vernacular equivalent of the impersonal third person plural “one”—which suggests a kind of general epistle on the event; but the slipperiness of the “you” allows Vina-May to also shift the narration

into the second person and pull the listener into the story as a performative, and rhetorical device to increase empathy and understanding. It moreover has the effect of effacing the fact that the pronoun “she” ever referred to an actual person, one whom Vina-May knows and is, therefore, knowable to the listener. The tale becomes a kind of abstracted case rather than an actual lived reality. We, as listeners, are directed away from localized and personal inquiry and towards a more general knowledge. It is a form of narrative Wing Chun and it is beautiful to witness.¹⁸ As significantly, the tactical use of pronouns allows for speech in the first place and a breaking down of absolute silence. Thus, it also functions socially by bringing people who are normally isolated by their occupation into the shared space that narration creates (more on this point below).

The third silence is announced, the lacunae indicated

The third silence abandons coding altogether, making it much more socially risky to the teller since, without impersonation, the narrator is deeply implicated in the tale. This tactic has the advantage of highlighting authorial control and agency, both of which help lessen the powerlessness that silence can impose.

I interviewed Izzy in her backyard. A relaxed young woman with close-cropped blond hair, she had been working as a trimmer in the marijuana industry for several years to pay her way through school and support her artistic endeavors. Like Vina May, Izzy was wearing work clothes that were slightly dirty from labouring in the garden and sorting out the wood pile before I arrived. We sat close together on an overturned log as I unpacked my recording equipment and informed consent forms. Normally Izzy is expansive, almost performative in her interaction with people but as I was saying my informed consent spiel, she suddenly turned grave and indicated I should stop speaking after I said “I have a lot of obligations to protect the people I talk to.” I stopped, waited and with a tone I had never heard her use before she said: “I have obligations too. To others. There’s a lot of things I can’t tell you.” This was one of my first full interviews in my first fieldwork season, but it wouldn’t be the last time I heard the phrase “I have obligations” and “I can’t tell you things.” Of course, this proviso was to be anticipated when researching criminal practices but the repetition of

18. The ability of a narrator to shift their role, position, and proximity to a narrative has long been noted in legend scholarship as well as the personal experience narrative and its analysis via feminism and/or psychological analysis. The tactical use of pronouns has not been commented upon in occupational folklore narratives.

similar phrases, as well as the performative use of them, was not something I expected. For example, some research participants like Jack, over the course of a two-hour-long interview overtly noted places where he was omitting information with phrases like “I’m not going to tell you the next part” or “There are more people in this story but I’m not going to talk about them.” These types of omissions were, unremarkably, reserved for people, specific places and dates. The tactic of pointing out the silence itself changes the narrative from Vina May’s earlier tactic of indirection (through the use of pronouns which effaced silence) to a narrative like Swiss cheese. Curiously, by describing the place and shape of silence, Jack and Izzy produced narratives with clearer narrator agency, suggesting they may be closer to narratives that confidants share with each other.

Lastly, as the listener, I cannot mistake the narrative before me as the complete tale since I have been overtly told it is incomplete and shown precisely where the pieces were excised; as a researcher this is comforting since the most troubling data problem is to not know what one does not know. Izzy and Jack’s technique of resisting silence, like Vina May’s earlier one, at least allows narration to occur at all, and by pointing to silence they also name the occupational technique itself, an act that overtly demonstrates the (invisible) structural force shaping their stories and their lives.

The fourth silence is the one I keep

This silence, my silence as a researcher, is two pronged. First, I am a collaborator in their/my silence. In the field I obscured my identity to the village so that I would not implicate individuals as pot workers by merely talking with me. My silence was nearly absolute, going so far as to lie to villagers that I had never met person X. Like my research participants I spent years not telling people, friends, family, or even interested strangers about my job. Outside of my own silence I was actively helping create silence in other ways. For example, a research participant once got nervous days after our interview and wanted to listen to the recording. They ended up dictating edits where I was to erase some sections and I did it—literally creating silences where once there were words. As my ethnography is circumscribed by silence it has always been, in part, a reciprocal project. Second, I promised my research participants that I would protect them and to do so I have been forced to craft an essay full of the ethnographic writing tricks we use to silence facts which might identify people. I have silenced their names, their physical descriptions, dates, times, places and

replaced them with elements that attempt to efface the gaps that I have created. Paradoxically, if it appears that I am “speaking” now, it is only to obscure a series of greater silences.

The end of things

This brief impressionistic examination of two micro-case studies is united around silence and speech within the context of criminal environments, occupations, and acts. In the first I demonstrated the logic of torture, its traditional form and its place within the folklaw of a street kid community. The centrality of the body and the creation of a speaking body is the bridge to the second micro-case study wherein I introduced coding into the analysis of occupational narrative to demonstrate how various tactics are used to combat the strategic silence that is the first technique of workers in the industry. The body and the mouth, like speech and silence, have been presented here, not as oppositional metaphors but as “a continuum of indiscrete items” (Jaworski 1993: 66) which individuals, moving back and forth along this continuum, use to perform meaningful acts. This paper has also demonstrated that the folkloristic study of crime poses challenges to several fields, such as occupational folklore. In other cases, folklorists’ subtle attention to tradition, form and performance can provide new perspectives on violence outside the comforting formulas of criminology and sociologies of crime. Finally fieldwork and ethnography in criminological environments remains poorly understood and demands a fuller reckoning within our discipline.

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