



ORAL TRADITION

Festschrift for John Miles Foley

This article is one of a series of short essays, collectively titled “Further Explorations,” published as part of a special issue of *Oral Tradition* in honor of John Miles Foley’s 65th birthday and 2011 retirement. The surprise Festschrift, guest-edited by Lori and Scott Garner entirely without his knowledge, celebrates John’s tremendous impact on studies in oral tradition through a series of essays contributed by his students from the University of Missouri-Columbia (1979-present) and from NEH Summer Seminars that he has directed (1987-1996).

<http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/26ii>

Volume 26, Number 2

October, 2011

This page is intentionally left blank.

Prisons, Performance Arena, and Occupational Humor

Claire Schmidt

Q: What are the first three things you get when you become a correctional officer?

A: A car, a gun, and a divorce (Conover 2001:89)

As the preceding joke suggests, prisons are stressful, exhausting, low-paying, and dangerous places to work, and correctional officers must find ways to negotiate their multiple occupational stressors. Humor thus becomes an essential multi-tool for correctional officers and, as such, merits serious study. Not only do correctional officers use joking behavior to disavow and mask such seriousness under the cover of frivolity and laughter, but they also employ occupational humor to communicate nuanced meanings that may not be effectively expressed in any other mode. Correctional officer (CO) occupational humor is therefore traditional, specialized, and highly dependent on context and insider status. Though rarely, if ever, studied in detail, the messages communicated through occupational humor are often essential to occupational and institutional well-being. This note focuses ultimately on a single joke that illustrates the broader range of CO humor, which also includes practical jokes, formal jokes, observational humor, conversational humor (as proposed by Neil Norrick [1993]), mimicry, and parody. As opposed to the many studies of prison life that focus on inmates, my own ethnographic research is with largely white, generally Midwestern, correctional officers, social workers, and medical and administrative staff working within a space that can usefully be understood through what Richard Bauman (1977) calls an “interpretive frame” or John Miles Foley describes as the “performance arena” (1995:47). To illustrate the insights that can be gained from this particular approach, I offer first a general discussion of the CO performance arena based on my own research and fieldwork and conclude with a more focused analysis of a specific example of CO humor taken from literary journalist Ted Conover’s ethnographic book, *New Jack: Guarding Sing Sing*.

In my ethnographic research, my collaborators¹ emphasize the importance of humor; they assert that a successful CO must have a sense of humor in order to tolerate the job. The ability to speak the occupational language, to “speak the job,” as Tim Tangherlini describes it in *Talking Trauma* (1998), is necessary for occupational success. This success encompasses the worker’s

¹ I use the term “collaborator” to refer to the corrections workers and social workers who spoke with me, granted me interviews, and provided essential feedback on my research. I use this term for its implications of equality and cooperation, as well as shared goals and ownership of the research.

ability to perform the job while maintaining sufficient job satisfaction (including self-respect and manageable stress levels) to ensure they can remain in the job without burnout, and even advance within the institution. Successful long-term employees must be able to interpret the verbal register of the community, and part of this occupational literacy involves being fluent in occupational humor.

CO humor takes place within a physical and social space I refer to here as the “performance arena.” The performance arena, according to Foley, is “the locus where the event of performance takes place, where words are invested with their special power” (1995:47). The performance arena may be located in a correctional facility, or it may just as easily be in a bar, on the telephone, or in a state van while transporting prisoners. Therefore, when one CO mimics a supervisor for the amusement of another officer, the performance and its reception take place within a specialized context that endows the mimicry with heightened communicative power. As Foley notes (1995:28), “to be situated within the performance arena is to be alive to the metonymic referentiality that the given register institutionally encodes.” Thus, the mimicry is performed in a traditional register and carries the gravitas of tradition. The audience understands mimicry as part of their shared occupational life, and the performance communicates complicated issues of power differentials, institutional health, and moral ambiguity; at the same time, the mimic demonstrates individual skill and comedic talent. Since this “richly contexted array of meanings . . . can be communicated only through the special, ‘dedicated’ set of channels that constitute the multivalent experience of performance” (Foley 1995:28), the audience and the performer collectively construct an occupational arena that makes the multiple meanings possible.

CO humor is a form of immanent art. Immanence, as Foley defines it, is the “set of metonymic, associative meanings institutionally delivered and received through a dedicated idiom or register either during or on the authority of traditional oral performance” (1995:7). When a CO jokes about the quality of prison food, the audience understands that the laughable qualities of institutional food are emblematic of the laughable qualities of the Department of Corrections. Joking about institutional food is not unique to prison life (school cafeterias and hospital food are certainly loci of American humor traditions) but within the specialized register of CO occupational humor, the performer and the audience have access to a specific set of shared meanings and implications about their shared working life. The traditional discourse of food humor provides an opportunity for correctional officers to address anxieties about the interiors of bodies, contamination, mental health, and a lack of meaning and rational order within the setting of their job. While the surface level of a joke about mystery meat allows for the pleasure of recognizing the familiar and appreciating a successful comedic delivery—and that surface level should not be undervalued—the traditional nature of the joke and its immanent meanings within the performance arena allow for specialized communication that may not take place through any other means.

CO humor is often offensive to outsiders (and even to some insiders). The register of CO humor is so specialized and dependent on a shared identity and shared context that those who are not “literate” in that register are sometimes unable to receive the multiplicity of its encoded messages, and accordingly they tend to focus on the surface of a joke, and the often ethically ambiguous and ambivalent issues it raises. I do not wish to downplay the seriousness of

inappropriate humor about homosexuality, violence against inmates, women, and children, but it is worth emphasizing that these are real and relevant topics to those employing the CO joking register. A joke may simultaneously be funny to an insider because it feels “true” and morally reprehensible to an outsider because it feels hateful.

I would like to conclude with an exploration of a single joke told by a CO to a group of correctional officers. This joke was told to Ted Conover during his stint as a CO at New York’s famed Sing Sing prison. Conover worked as a CO for nine months in order to write *New Jack*; he was barely able to stand the prison work for that long, though he had originally planned on holding the job for a full year. This is the joke (Conover 2001:100):

How do you know when an inmate is lying?
When you see him open his mouth.

The joke can be understood as a discrete unit, a “word,” as proposed by Foley (2002). Although it is not from an oral epic or performed by a poet, the joke functions as a piece of oral art and as a speech act. The audience and the speaker recognize the joke *as a joke*—it is not everyday speech, but spoken within a joking register. Thus, as “a unit of utterance, an irreducible atom of performance” (Foley 2002:13), this joke or “word” carries meanings “larger and more complex than the literal sum of [its] parts, meanings that enrich the story being performed by reference to the implied . . . tradition” (18). The audience members receive this joke within the performance arena and the meanings that are transmitted and understood consequently range well beyond the literal level of the words, even if not every audience member understands the joke in the same way.

The officers who laugh at this joke signal much by their laughter. First, the laughter indicates appreciation of successfully delivered verbal humor. The laughter of the hearers is the measure of the joke’s success. Additionally, the performance arena—the performer, the audience, the institutional setting, and the joke-telling register—allows for a set of meanings to be created and conveyed through humor. For instance, the joke asks its audience to identify themselves with officers and against inmates, reinforcing occupational identity. Those who laugh likely understand the joke as a statement about shared identity. The performance arena also establishes CO’s as moral arbiters—those who are responsible for decoding and judging lies. This responsibility resonates with the responsibility for the safety of their fellow officers as well as the well-being of the inmates in the correctional facility and indeed of the general public, whom incarceration of inmates ostensibly protects. The joke also highlights the function of speech and its reception more broadly. By discounting everything that comes out of an inmate’s mouth as “lies,” the joke minimizes the inmate’s access to communicative strategies.

In contrast, Conover’s implied hostile silence, rather than laughter, sets him apart from the teller and the laughing audience, marking him as rejecting this attempt at communication of shared meaning. In this joke, all inmates are homogenized as untrustworthy verbal con artists. Conover resists the homogenization of inmates by means of CO humor throughout *New Jack* while simultaneously emphasizing (though unanalytically) the importance of humor in corrections work (2001:87).

It is important to note that this joke has been removed from its original context; Conover's journalistic style omits much of the performance context that a scholar of oral tradition looks for and documents. Similarly, in my own ethnographic fieldwork, I encounter context second-hand: my collaborators tell me about jokes and joking behavior that happen at work, but due to the controlled environment of correctional facilities, I will never see the inside of their offices or witness an on-the-job joke telling session. However, equipped with an awareness of the metonymic and highly communicative power of these specialized traditional registers, I can ask questions about the original performance arena and draw informed preliminary conclusions. While ultimately my ethnographic research relies on a second-hand understanding of the original performance arena, what emerges is a first-hand understanding of a new performance arena—one that includes me as ethnographer, and my collaborators as performers.

University of Missouri-Columbia

References

- Bauman 1977 Richard Bauman. *Verbal Art as Performance*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House Publishers.
- Conover 2001 Ted Conover. *New Jack: Guarding Sing Sing*. New York: Vintage.
- Foley 1995 John Miles Foley. *The Singer of Tales in Performance*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Foley 2002 _____. *How to Read an Oral Poem*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Norrick 1993 Neal Norrick. *Conversational Joking: Humor in Everyday Talk*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Tangherlini 1998 Timothy Tangherlini. *Talking Trauma*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.