

Putting Words to Work: The Politics of Labor's Vernacular

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This paper explores what happens to the narrative tradition and agency of vernacular communities when institutions intentionally provoke and deploy those communities' vernacular styles as a means to achieve political ends. An examination of how the AFL-CIO and ACORN collaborated to create an online video series using workers' stories in service of the Living Wage campaign illustrates this dynamic. By placing this text in its historical, cultural, and mediated contexts, the analysis demonstrates how the orchestrated representation of workers' voices subverts the authority of the vernacular as well as its power to engender community.

In 1932, the radio show *Vox Pop* took its name from its mission to put the voices of the people on the radio. Its emphasis on the everyday citizen took many forms, including quiz shows, interviews, and human interest stories – all of which variably represented and defined the notion of “the people” in a democratic republic. Perhaps the most dramatic attempt to authentically capture the average citizen's perspective on the pressing issues of the day came in the form of surprise “person on the street” interviews. While on air, broadcast personalities dropped microphones out of windows

and asked people questions that ranged from the political to the personal to the absurd (Loviglio 2005). The impromptu nature of these interviews, however, belied the extent to which the interviewer and the institution still control the socio-political perspective through which the interviewee's words are interpreted. By prompting the people to answer certain questions while employing the ability to frame those answers with commentary from the broadcasters, radio executives recognized that they could construct narratives in support of business interests from the unscripted voices of everyday Americans.

As shows like *Vox Pop* illustrate, institutions sometimes intentionally engage the vernacular in pursuit of a political agenda. Be it the rise of audience participation shows on the radio in the 1930s or the proliferation of participatory media on the Internet, institutions' efforts to present or perform speech by everyday people suggests that the vernacular has commercial and political appeal. In presenting audience participation shows, radio stations often sought to advance a faith in democracy and capitalism through the performance of democratic access to the airwaves. Similarly, digital participatory media find value in the presentation of amateur media content produced by individuals and groups with no necessary connection to a specific organization. As the online video website YouTube states: “The community is truly in control on YouTube and they determine what is popular on the site” (YouTube, “Fact Sheet”). The website explicitly asks its consumers to see themselves as the producers of the content, untainted by institutional influ-

ence.

The media practice of valuing the vernacular as primary to shaping public culture and political perspectives has created opportunities for marginalized communities to effectively publicize and circulate their dissenting voices in pursuit of change (Howard 2008). The resistive power of the vernacular, however, must be reconsidered when institutions seek to deliberately invoke a vernacular performance—such as “person on the street” interviews—in order to advance a particular political agenda. In this paper, I explore the implications of this strategic vernacular engagement for the transgressive potential of the vernacular voice. More specifically, I seek to determine what happens to the narrative tradition and agency of communities when their vernacular expressions are intentionally provoked and deployed by institutions as a means to achieve political ends.

This dynamic is illustrated through an examination of how institutions use an online setting to frame the voices of workers as they recount their life and work experiences. The emergent relationship between the sovereign and the resistant vernacular presents interesting challenges for the communicative traditions of workers. The analysis in this paper examines how low-wage workers are represented in YouTube videos as a part of the Living Wage campaign and discusses the implications of that representation. Unlike past moments in labor history when American culture reflected a celebration of the worker as an agent of change and the foundation of production, the YouTube videos point to a diminishment of the workers’ voices and participation in the labor movement. I argue

that the AFL-CIO and ACORN’s choice to circulate the voices of workers on the Internet in service of the Living Wage campaign demonstrates how the strategic deployment of the vernacular can undermine the very tradition it attempts to engage. In other words, the provoked performance of workers’ voices subverts the authority of the vernacular as well as its power to engender community.

This paper begins with a summary of the entwined relationship between vernacular and institutional discourses and the ensuing struggle over authority, power, and agency. I then review the cultural salience of labor’s vernacular voices in the United States to situate an analysis of worker testimonials posted online during the 2006 midterm elections. The AFL-CIO and ACORN’s Living Wage video series on YouTube offers a rich text for illustrating the symbolic interplay between a labor vernacular and a labor organization in a contemporary online context. The analysis then examines the particular constraints of YouTube and the other institutional frames through which the vernacular actors are interpreted.¹ Finally, I conclude with an exploration of the rhetorical nature of the workers’ appeals and the way in which those appeals create a pitiable image of both the individuals appearing in the videos as well as the broader community the AFL-CIO and ACORN suggest they represent.

Vernacular (Re)presentations

Scholars across disciplines have explored the cultural significance and social power of the vernacular voice. Folklorists have aimed to celebrate and examine the narrative traditions of non-institutionalized discourses—the voices and spirit of

groups of people that solidify communities and express identities. Similarly, communication scholars have called for critical attention to the cultural and political implications of the vernacular's circulation in the public sphere. The vernacular, paradoxically, can be both liberated and oppressed through its confrontation with institutionalized, and often dominant, discourses. Scholars have considered how the mediation of vernacular has both enabled and challenged its circulation and transgressive power. These studies offer important insights into the way in which identities and communities are shaped through vernacular culture—a culture that is inevitably intertwined with its institutional foil.²

The vernacular, much like folklore, reflects the shared rhetorical and cultural practices of discourse communities that maintain consistencies and continuities across time and space (Georges and Jones 1995). The vernacular exists, not in and of itself, but rather is recognizable through its difference from institutional discursive practices. While a distinction between vernacular and institutions provides a useful vocabulary for characterizing different spheres of cultural performance, most scholars recognize their inability—particularly in a thoroughly mediated age—to isolate one from the influence of the other. As John Dorst observed on the cusp of the digital age, in a very practical sense, folklore cannot be interpreted separately from the apparatuses that enable its circulation (1990).³ The vernacular must be understood as hybrid—its emergence stems from the distinctive authority it attains from being noticeably alternative to the institutional expression (Howard 2005).

Through vernacular discourse, individuals consciously or unconsciously align themselves with culturally specific groups organized around common experiences. A shared linguistic style or a recurring narrative pattern often serves as a marker of membership in a vernacular community. Folklorist Archie Green identified one such community through discourse about work, which he characterized as laborlore (1993; 2001). Studies of laborlore point to the ways in which this occupational vernacular builds solidarity among those who relate to one another through their expression at work and about work (Korson 1960; Green 2001). Green's examination of work culture illustrates how workers' self-expressions ensured connections in the workplace and beyond it. The circulation of laborlore also instills in "individuals a sense of dignity on the job and within their movement (Green 2001; 50)." Moreover, workers' stories and songs often function to help workers make sense of the relationship between their labor, capitalism, and society (Gillespie 1980). Thus, laborlore may construct social bonds among workers as well as engender particular perspectives about the cultural and political structures that make the conditions of their work.

Even though scholars of laborlore have often focused on particular industries' vernacular practices, the examination of a working vernacular need not be occupationally specific. The folkloric nature of these expressions lies in the extent to which they build upon shared experiences that resonate with others within but also across industries. Whether through songs, jokes, theatre performances, traditions, or social ac-

tion, workers developed cultural connections with one another through their symbolic interaction. Evolving over time and across physical and discursive spaces, lore draws upon its historically and contextually constructed meaning to ensure some consistency in its style and/or content while simultaneously resonating with different individuals who adopt and adapt the vernacular to fit their specific cultural and social situation. In this way, folklore—and particularly laborlore—is consistently relatable and identifiable insofar as it reflects shared experience even though it is essentially fluid in nature.

This dynamism ensures that the meaning, interpretation, authority, and power of vernacular expression shift depending on the context of its emergence. Particularly in a mass-mediated age, the interaction between the vernacular and its institutional forms within which it circulates and against which it becomes recognizable affects how audiences perceive the vernacular agents as well as the broader community with whom they may be associated. Studies have pointed to the impossibility of examining vernacular apart from institutionalized forms and forums (Burns 1969; Hauser 1999; Ono and Sloop 1995).

Vernacular hybridity has prompted scholars to investigate the power dynamic between the often oppositional, but inevitably intertwined discursive realms. Just as the media exploit “the commercial potential of folksiness,” vernacular actors can exploit the media (Clements 1974, 318). While institutional presence might frame the interpretation of vernacular voices in such a way that perhaps silences or negates a folk community, the power of the institution is

not entirely hegemonic (Berger and Del Negro 2004). The vernacular can co-opt the institutional authority, drawing its power in part from the institutional framework from which it expresses its difference. With “the institutional [as] an agency for the performance of vernacular discourse”, the vernacular can disrupt or challenge normative behaviors and practices to invite social transformation (Howard 2008, 508). This transformative and democratizing potential of the vernacular has been the focus of numerous studies that suggest that the interplay between institutions and the vernacular can be liberating, not merely constraining (Rheingold 2000; McKinley and Jensen 2003; Howard 2005; Jenkins 2006). In addition, mediated forms that offer a visual as well as an aural component can enhance the vernacular’s ability to inspire and motivate collective social action (White 2003).

The perception that everyday voices resonate with audiences in these ways makes the invocation of the vernacular an appealing strategy for political action, but the presentation of marginalized voices does not necessarily instigate social change or empower the disempowered. In addition to determining ways in which participatory media and vernacular expression might challenge oppressive situations, scholars must also attend to situations in which they might not. The potential for the vernacular to rearticulate dominant discourses or deconstruct institutional structures often goes unrealized (Ono and Sloop 1995). Thus, celebration of the possibility that the vernacular may triumphantly resist institutional power should not distract attention from the ways in which vernac-

ular culture might also be undermined or co-opted in service of institutional aims. The emergence and proliferation of participatory media does not in and of itself ensure a democratization of mediation (Spinelli 2000). For example, in his study of audience participation on the radio in the 1930s, historian Jason Loviglio shows that the impulse to broadcast the voices and narratives of ordinary Americans on the radio was primarily a business decision; radio executives sought to frame the discourse of the everyday person to characterize the public interest in a way that would ultimately serve the financial interests of business. While purporting to be engaging the voice on the street as a symbol of the participatory and democratic nature of radio, broadcasters invoked the vernacular as a means for framing the consumptive desires of the American public. With ultimate control over who spoke and which of their words were broadcast, radio producers could manage the representation of the average American in a way that comported with a market and consumptive ideology (Loviglio 2005).

Contemporary participatory media must likewise be examined to uncover implicit and explicit power shifts. Any given situation that engages vernacularity raises questions about what might be appropriated, who reserves or acquires agency, and how individual and collective identity is negotiated. The contexts of vernacular emergence contribute to its reception by different audiences. Mediation of vernacular online enacts a representation of the way in which groups self-identify; further, its discursive circulation contributes to how others identify those groups. Studying the mediation of

the vernacular illustrates the complexity of the relationship between the medium and its subject, the message and its interpretation, and context and meaning.

The following analysis of the AFL-CIO and ACORN Living Wage campaign videos examines three primary constraints that shape how audiences interpret the workers' voices and perceive their identities. First, the videos must be read in light of the cultural and political milieu in which they emerge. Any narrative consciously and unconsciously prompts consideration of how the words and voices of the storytellers engage in a dialogue with discourses and events that precede them. Establishing the historical context that informs both the creation of the messages and the audience's reception of them acknowledges that lore does not simply construct a new way of seeing, but rather makes meaning for audiences in conversation with previously existing symbols, beliefs, and perceptions. Second, I examine the specific institutional framework through which audiences see and hear the workers' narratives. In addition to the macro context, these stories interact with immediate situational components that shape how audiences interpret them. Third, I analyze the words of the workers to show how the narratives themselves create an image of wage work and the workers. Together these contextual and textual components function to diminish the potential of the labor vernacular to challenge cultural norms and expectations. Instead, the videos invoke a vernacular performance that subjugates the workers' own participation in the labor movement.

The Cultural Capital of Labor's Voices

Historically, workers' voices have functioned to stimulate both political and social recognition of labor. Depictions and self-expressions of workers in the labor movement during the New Deal era affirm the extent to which a labor vernacular can invite agency and solidarity among those who seek social change. In addition to the circulation of vernacular expressions of laborers about their work in local communities, more mediated representations of labor and industry reached audiences across the country through the radio, which often broadcast worker testimonies about their everyday experiences. This "laboring of popular culture"—as historian Michael Denning (Denning, 1996) calls it—has often been overlooked because no particular political party or any one institution captured its expansiveness and omnipresence. Rather, the discourse of labor transcended institutions, regions, and individual identity through its reproduction and representation in American culture; books, radio shows, music, and theatre productions found working class life to be a marketable commodity (Denning 1996). A powerful and pervasive work vernacular helped to articulate the laborer as the essential point of production and as essentially American (Buhle 1997).

The culture of the late 1930s reinforced the political recognition and reification of labor and a working class. In particular, iconic images of workers, songs, and cultural performances served as a defiant counter to the popular press's depictions of the working class as comprised of "good-for-nothings" and "suspicious-looking foreigners (Buhle

1997, 161)." Pictorial representations of workers were often connected to union membership. Union papers and buttons carried cartoons and "labor action photographs" that projected images of workers unifying around the CIO or other labor organization. Through these images, Paul Buhle explains, artists intentionally strove to capture the "ordinariness" of the Americans who fought against the oppression of their employers in order to respond to negative press about unionism. These vernacular discursive traditions promoted working class solidarity and produced an image of the worker as citizen. With radio available as a frequent medium for circulation, the ubiquitous vernacular voice expressed their agency in challenging oppressive structures and subjugating discourses through song, performance, and stories. The messages of the workers were an essential force in union organization. Their voices constituted the labor movement.⁴

The social and political milieu of the thirties illustrates the ways in which labor culture – the source of production – was acknowledged, consumed, and even celebrated. The image of a once-present working class solidarity may be marked in part by the vernacular appeals for collective action and the extent to which that on-the-ground community was fostered and promoted by the institutions of organized labor.⁵ This history points to the ability of the vernacular to transcend the restrictive and potentially coercive power of mediation and institutional constraints and engender a strong working class identity that legitimized the agency of wage laborers.

Cultural and political shifts in the labor movement since the 1930s, however,

resituates the nature of the working class vernacular voice as it functions to challenge normative and institutionalized practices. The centrality of the working class in public consciousness declined in the post-war era. Legislative and rhetorical transformations during the 1950s led to deterioration in the unions' political-economic influence. The changes in discourse about and from the working class stand out clearly. For example, in the years following World War II, under George Meany's leadership, the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) not only narrowed whom it served, but it also scoffed at workers' discursive and political representations of themselves and their work.⁶ Meany publicly denounced striking and argued against reaching out to unorganized workers, people of color, and women. Moreover, he derided folk singing as foolish and useless, despite other labor advocates' claims that it helped promote solidarity (Lichtenstein 2002).⁷ In 1951, C. Wright Mills argued that the unions work against the best interests of workers and only suppress the aspirations of the working class. His indictment of labor unions reflected what would come to be the prevailing public image of unions, the AFL-CIO in particular. The AFL-CIO's disinterest in organizing the unorganized, reluctance to act in the interests of a broader constituency of workers, and its distance from the civil rights struggles of the 1960s contributed to its depiction as merely a job agency and special interest group. The increasing bureaucracy of unions and suspicions of corruption discredited them in the eyes of the public. As Georgetown University student and future U. S. president

William Jefferson Clinton proclaimed in 1967, unions were publicly perceived as one more thing "against which man must assert himself." (Quoted in Lichtenstein 2002, 168)

The rhetorical trajectory of a working class vernacular reflected this political fragmentation of labor culture and organization. During World War II, the proliferation and circulation of working class iconic imagery subsided. Nostalgic characterizations of the working class emerged primarily through mass media representations, such as films, cartoons, comics, murals, that intimated that the working class was a thing of the past (Buhle 1997). The devaluation of laborlore and vernacular expression coincided with a rise in a post-war consumerist culture. Lizabeth Cohen identifies the post-war era as a consumer movement in which the American people were championed as "purchaser citizens" because their very act of personal consumption was deemed a civic contribution (Cohen 2003, 118). Whereas laborlore and working class culture had previously connected citizenship with both production and consumption, the second half of the twentieth century provoked a shift in emphasis to consumption. Patriotism was best expressed through purchasing, not producing. The cohesive identity of a working class culture diminished with the prevalence of a consumerist ideology.

The political impact of this paradigm had consequences for the public perception and treatment of wage workers. The late 1950s saw management asserting more power over workers, with little protection provided by unions and the state. More and more, industries that had

once been restrained through labor organizing found ways to break strikes and bust unions (Davis 1986; Cohen 2003). The 1960s exacerbated differences among interest groups, with a state that legislatively supported the logic of free enterprise, the absence of strong unionization, and the segmented articulation of class (Edsall 1991). Thus, identifying common interests on which to build challenges to economic and political structures became more difficult. The sixties and seventies witnessed the blurring of the autonomy of the working class. By the 1980s, unions were demonized in public discourse and their political engagement became a liability for those issues they sought to endorse. These shifts in working class consciousness, culture, and unionism illustrate the challenges that confront the contemporary labor movement.

Labor Online

The voices examined in the following case study confront a cultural milieu much different than the one in which a labor vernacular thrived. While unions and trade organizations seek to rehabilitate their public image, their political and social standing in 2006 had not fully recovered from the fall from grace in the second half of the twentieth century. Wage workers, too, have fewer rights in the workplace and fewer protections against exploitation. As the trend toward Americans measuring an individual's value to the nation primarily in terms of an ability to consume has waxed, championing the sources of production—the workers—has significantly waned.

It is within this cultural and political climate that the AFL-CIO teamed up with Association of Community Orga-

nizations for Reform Now (ACORN) to present itself and to represent workers. Aware of the subordinated status of labor and labor solidarity in the United States, the AFL-CIO made strides in the 1990s to redefine their mission, policies, and approach to the labor question. In an effort to rebuild the public image of unionism and increase public awareness about the challenges of low-income work, the AFL-CIO expanded its strategy for social and political action to include the life and livelihood of workers beyond the day-to-day negotiations on the shop floor. (Lichtenstein 2002)

Self-identified in their website's tagline as "America's Labor Movement," the AFL-CIO has made an explicit attempt to move beyond the confines of union membership in order to help the unorganized organize, "provide a new voice for workers," and rebuild a broad national labor movement (AFL-CIO 2007). The union has sought to expand its reach through alliances with other social and economic justice organizations on the national and local levels. Although officially it acts as the national center for trade unions, the AFL-CIO now participates in campaigns for labor policies that specifically affect non-unionized workers.

One strategy they have employed involves placing the images and voices at the forefront, calling on workers themselves to explain the personal impact of particular government policies. In collaboration with ACORN, they developed and posted online a series of video testimonials as a part of the 2006 effort to increase the minimum wage, also known as the Living Wage campaign.⁸ That year, six states had ballot referenda that pro-

posed a roughly one-dollar increase in the states' respective minimum wages.⁹ Entitled "7 Days @ Minimum Wage," the videos purport to present "7 real people with 7 real stories of living on the minimum wage."¹⁰ Each video features either a person or a couple describing the challenges of paying for their basic necessities despite consistent hard work. The short five to ten minute films appeared one day at a time on the well-known website YouTube whose tag, "Broadcast Yourself," encourages the posting of individual and amateur video content.¹¹ Only a few thousand people viewed each of the minimum wage testimonials. One of the videos specifically promoted in a special feature section of YouTube's web page received just over 23,000 hits prior to the election, the largest hit count of any of the seven videos.

Of concern in this analysis is not the efficacy of the videos in terms of their immediate impact on voters' choices.¹² The value of examining these videos lies in recognizing of how the representation of the video testimonials may shape public perception about wage work and workers and what they suggest about how the institutions view the workers. The "7 days @ Minimum Wage" online series creates an image of the workers and has indirect and potentially long-term implications for how low-income Americans are publicly recognized. These videos demonstrate an effort to circulate the vernacular expressions of workers among a wider public. How these videos are distributed and the messages they promote offers insight into the way the AFL-CIO and ACORN imagines the collective identities of low-workers and their role in the labor movement. Examination of this

video series explores the implications of and for the workers' vernacular as it is engaged by organizations that work to advance a progressive labor agenda.

Framing Workers' Voices

In addition to the broader cultural milieu for these videos, each video emerges in the context of several interpretative media that influence their meaning and reception. The institutions that produced the videos, defined their purpose, and circulated them on the Internet frame how workers' words are heard and seen. These institutional actors—AFL-CIO, ACORN, Roseanne Barr, and YouTube— instruct the viewers about how they should interpret the videos, how they should recognize the workers, and how they should respond. In addition, adopting an amateur production style, the videos subordinate the laborers' vernacular to the institutional structures that provoke its articulation, craft its production, and explain its meaning.

The structure of YouTube ensures that not everyone experiences each page in the same way.¹³ New advertisements, different "related video" suggestions, and new viewer comments continually to update the video pages and change what the viewers see and experience. However, the basic elements of the pages remain consistent and these elements guide how the viewer sees and interprets what they hear. From the description that appears to the right of the video to the "Related videos" that provides suggestions about what to watch next to the comments submitted by viewers just below the video, the viewer is told what to think about what the video means. The structure of YouTube's website places the videos in

proximity to viewer “comments” and indicates that the “7 Days @ Minimum Wage” series is sponsored by the AFL-CIO and ACORN.

Alongside each video as it appears on YouTube, the AFL-CIO and ACORN announce to the viewer that “7 Days @ Minimum Wage brings you 7 real people with 7 real stories of living on the minimum wage, hosted by Roseanne Barr and sponsored by the AFL-CIO and ACORN.” Describing themselves as sponsors performs their distance from the creation of the videos, attesting to their desire only to relate the “real” sentiments expressed by the “real people” without interference. Ironically, the effort to make the videos seem uncontrived through the pronouncement of the videos’ realism only further calls attention to the machinations that surround the videos.

This written summary statement that accompanies each video does not advocate a particular action the audience should take or a sentiment they should feel. That kind of direction is reserved for the introductory and summary remarks provided by the person featured in all the videos: Roseanne Barr. An actor with working class roots known for her long-running sitcom about a working class family entitled “Roseanne,” Barr appears as the narrator for each video. She expresses her outrage over the workers’ condition and implores her audience to feel similarly appalled at the wage workers’ oppressive and unjust lifestyles—assuring her audience that “as an American, you will not be proud of what you hear and see.”¹⁴ At the conclusion of the videos, she offers a plan of action for viewers. For example, at the conclusion of Jessica’s video (day 4), she states:

Nobody can live on five dollars and fifteen cents an hour. Do you want to help? Well, if you live in Arizona, Colorado, Missouri, Montana, Nevada or Ohio, you can vote yes on November 7 to raise the minimum wage. Or visit our videoblog to post your comment and find other ways to raise hell and the minimum wage.

The videoblog to which she refers then appears as a URL on the screen following the words, “Roseanne, ACORN, and the AFL-CIO thank you. Please come back tomorrow.” The workers’ stories serve to support the outrage and the cause that the institutional actors define. While the short summaries imply that the institutions simply seek to support the workers by distributing their stories, the words articulated by Roseanne and in the closing credits affirm the degree to which the workers’ stories actually support the institutions’ message.

Isolating and interviewing these workers and then posting the edited video recordings to YouTube raises questions about how the workers are portrayed and what message is conveyed through the vidcasts’ production aesthetic. The videos of “7 days @ Minimum Wage” perform a vernacularity consistent with YouTube videos made by individuals who lack professional equipment or training. They display an amateurism that implies that the camera merely captures what the workers say rather than orchestrating their appearance. The videography suggests the use of handheld cameras that deny any purposeful stagecraft. The poor lighting and unremarkable spaces in which each tes-

testimonial is filmed intimates spontaneity of the workers' expressions independent of any institutional design. The recognizable vernacularity of these vidcasts exists in how they adopt a style that reflects a contrast to professional and institutional norms. Because the videos lack professional technique, they implicitly ask the viewer to recognize the speakers as innocent and sincere; they are not actors, but "real people." The simplicity and understatement of the visual elements in the videos invite audiences to accept the workers' expression as honest, forthright, and undisturbed by outside influence. Unpolished and unscripted, these videos perform anti-institutionalism, reflected in the apparent casual framing and amateur development of the final product. The styling of the videos pleads for a perception that the workers speak independent of institutional influence; they performatively claim their authority through the construction of vernacularity.

The vernacular posture lies within the institutional frames that it implicitly and explicitly denies. The voices of the workers become implicated in and secondary to the official structures that surround it. The videos can only be interpreted by viewers through this mediated lens. Before, during, and after each worker's narrative, the institutions speak for and on behalf of them. As Linda Alcoff notes, "speaking for" is inescapable, but these videos do not place the workers in conversation with the institution or the audience (1991-1992). The resulting representation of the workers identifies them as sad and helpless. Rather than being heralded as participants in a movement for political or economic change, the work-

ers are identified simply as evidence for the action advocated. The workers' voices function as pawns in service of the institutional narrative, rather than as voices summoning solidarity. The strategic documentation and dissemination of these non-institutional voices in service of a political agenda realigns the formation and reception of the vernacular actors' identity, agency, and voice from an act of self-presentation to one of institutional re-presentation. The question then remains, what narrative gets related through this framework in which the workers speak?

Interpreting Workers' Voices

In total, the "7 days @ Minimum Wage" series includes eight videos and eight workers. While only seven stories are presented, the AFL-CIO and ACORN explain that one worker's testimony was so compelling that it had to be presented in two parts "with only one cut, and that's just to preserve her privacy and keep her from getting fired from her job."¹⁵ That worker, Jessica, had the first part of her story included in YouTube's featured videos page and the total running time of both videos is fourteen minutes and fourteen seconds. In addition, while there are seven stories presented over seven days, a married couple—Paul and Susan—share time in their video. In sum, the videos featured eight workers¹⁶:

Day 1: Paul & Susan, "Denver couple Paul Valdez and Susan Windham tell their story of living on the minimum wage. Paul receives \$35 for a full day's labor in back-breaking construction work."

Day 2: Erin, "Erin talks about needing to work increasing hours at her minimum wage, grocery store job to make ends meet."

Day 3: Jeffrey, "Jeffrey shares his story of taking care of his newborn son with his minimum wage paycheck. After paying for rent, diapers, formula, and the electric bill, there is little left for groceries."

Day 4: Jessica (Parts 1 & 2), "Jessica, an educated mom of four, tells her life-story of struggle to get ahead and make a future for her family. Jessica does everything she can to break out of a daily cycle of pain inflicted by having to scrape by on the minimum wage."

Day 5: Chris, "Chris tells a shocking American tale of day to day existence on the edge of homelessness. Without a regular 9-to-5 job, Chris searches for work every day. If he can't make \$35 a day, he will lose his room and be forced onto the streets."

Day 6: Amanda, "Amanda talks about missing the opportunity to do 'normal' things with her family, like go to the movies or buy birthday presents for her siblings, because her minimum wage paycheck doesn't cover the things she needs."

Day 7: Mallory, "Mallory shares her story of dreaming of a better future of education and independence, but facing no opportunities on a minimum wage paycheck."

As with the stock descriptions of each video, these individual synopses define the primary problem the workers' face and prepares the audience to sympathize with each worker's plight.

Although each day represents workers who presumably have different occupations and do not know one another, their stories adopt common themes in their explanation of what they all definitely share: subsistence "close to the current federal minimum wage."¹⁷ The similarities in their rhetorical appeals and experiential assertions suggest that the video producer asked them all the same questions. And, of course, the producer made choices in the editing room about what to include and what to leave out of the final cut. Thus, while the workers speak without a script and describe their own personal experience and perspective, the overarching themes of the videos reflect the influence of the institutional voice. The worker's stories act as vignettes for the institutionally constructed narrative.

Two primary appeals cut across each worker's story: appeals to pity and to justice. While these neither of these kinds of appeals is inherently problematic, the context of their invocation shapes their reception. Particularly in light of the historical and immediate interpretive frames for the videos, the pleas for pity and just action diminish the agency of the workers themselves. The vernacular performance provoked and framed by institutions in the prevailing cultural milieu articulates the powerlessness of the workers, accentuates their difference from the audience members, and isolates them from the organizations acting on their behalf.

The appeals to pity develop through the workers' description of their inability to overcome the miserable living conditions caused by their low income. In the videos, each person testifies to the challenges of everyday subsistence on a low hourly wage. The oft-repeated expression "it's hard" is verified by the sad stories they each tell of living paycheck to paycheck, trying to provide for their children, and working just to ensure a place to sleep at night. Despite their consistently hard work, these laborers speak to their own inability to escape the circumstances that mark their condition because "I just look at my paycheck and I want to cry. 'Cuz it's just, you know, you just feel like you work so hard every day and it's like barely anything in return (Erin, Day 2)." The claims are amplified by the insistence that nothing changes despite how diligently they work. On day three, Jessica speaks to the lack of recognition and compensation for her time and commitment: "You would think that you would get paid what you're worth. And, I am not. My co-workers are not. But there's nothing else for us to do. It's nowhere else to go. Because at the next job you're starting at the bottom again." The workers stress their resilience against the odds: "It makes me feel disgusted sometimes, but I chunk it up and keep on goin', cuz that's the only way I can do. I do what I have to do to make a living for me and my family (Jeffrey, Day 3)." The agency that each worker claims in these statements is directed inward – they can act individually to perform well on the job. Beyond their individual competence, the workers imagine no political agency that would enable them to change the oppressive conditions. Their appeals invite intervention on their behalf, not in a shared commitment to collective action.

The workers also speak to their victimization, continually confronting seemingly insurmountable challenges. They emphasize the structural imbalances and institutionalized forces that make their economic hardships impossible for them to overcome. As Paul says on day one, "You get behind in bills and just, they start doing this and that to you. Adding more money for late charges. It's just a revolving door. It's just hard to get out of that cycle." Susan echoes this problem: "Electricity has gone up. Housing has gone up. Food, you know, there's a big difference in the food bill. Everything. You know, there's just no way a person making even \$10 an hour anymore can really make it." Victims of an oppressive system that continues to add more challenges, the workers' conditions are inescapable: "They're settin' so many standards to get, you know, help by the government now, like with food and housing, it's just so hard that if you're working minimum wage, you're more than likely need to be living with somebody where you don't need to pay rent (Amanda, Day 6)." These disturbing tales repeatedly call attention to the pitiable conditions of the workers and their own powerlessness.

The appeals that the workers make as they recount their experiences invite not solidarity in a struggle to change the system, but instead plea for personal and political empathy. *Argumenta ad Misericordiam*—or arguments that "appeal to pity"—invite attention to the misery of the speaker. Such appeals ask the audience to recognize the devastating material circumstances that constrain the choices and opportunities for the person or persons making the appeal. The limitation of this kind of argumentative appeal,

as explained by philosopher Douglas Walton, is that it draws attention primarily to short-term consequences (1997). Rather than raising awareness about the systemic cause and plausible solutions, appeals to pity focus attention solely on the problem itself. Audience members become spectators of horror, responding with sympathy, not action. As Stephen Browne shows in his analysis in Theodore Weld's *American Slavery*, in inviting the audience to react compassionately, the sentimental style distracts audiences from considering the underlying cause and the broader social and political implications of the misery (1994). Appeals to pity evoke reactions of voyeurism and possibly compassion, but not acts of revolution or reform. *Argumenta ad misericordium* invite audiences to pay attention to the identities and personal dramas of the victims which means that the videos function more as a characterization of the workers than as a call to action.

This is not to say that appeals to pity cannot create instrumental arguments for change. This possibility, however, is contextually contingent. Since the words of the low-wage workers in the YouTube videos are situated within the material and discursive frameworks of the institutions which already subjugate the workers' ethos, the appeals only enhance their marginalization and difference rather than serving as grounds for an alliance with the audience. The workers articulate their desire for an increase in the minimum wage advancing themes that emphasize their lack of agency in changing the pitiable conditions that comprise their life and work experiences. The stories distance the workers from the audience to whom they address their appeals.

In the collective narrative created by the individual testimonies, the workers' economic fate rests solely in the hands of others. Rather than inviting audiences to act with them, they ask the audience to act for them.

In addition to the pleas for help, the workers' appeal to a principle of fairness. They express a desire to experience the opportunities presumed to be fundamental to the American Dream and ask the audience to recognize the workers as victims of an injustice. Most of the workers express that it is "not fair" that despite working hard, they cannot afford to adequately support themselves and their families. The speakers attest to their value as workers and citizens deserving of access to what they lack. For example, Jessica dreams of political leaders that will say, "I care about human beings. I care that everybody should be able to have food on their table, have affordable healthcare, have things that they need, live on this earth and then be able to die respectfully." Susan also speaks to the inhumanity of denying fair treatment to all people: "Let's respect the backbone of America – the people that are working hard to keep it together. We need them as much as we need that computer wizard, you know? They are just as important to America." The appeals for recognition build on a claim to an inalienable right as American citizens to certain food, health care, and basic needs.

The video series' narrative argues that an increase in the minimum wage will function to correct the injustice that should be intolerable in American society. Pointing to their exclusion from the modest benefits and security of better wages, Susan, on Day One, explicitly la-

ments the loss of a middle class: “There has to be middle class in America. There always has been a middle class. Our society is based on it. Versus, you know, like Russia. The rich and the poor. The poor get poorer and the rich get richer. We’re not about that. This is America.” She associates security with an economic middle class and suggests that the stagnating minimum wage offends the American way. Similarly, others remark on the inability to save and purchase homes due to their low wage work. Mallory, on Day Seven, says, “It’s hard to live by, um, paying my rent and food and stuff. I have to put that first, of course, but I don’t have any spending money for myself to save for a car or college or housing.” On Day Three, Jeffrey claims that a minimum wage increase will “help me or anybody, you know, that’s rentin’, or anything like that, where they could put money back maybe to better theirself (sic), where they can get a home and stuff like that.” The wage laborers emphasize their desire to consume, save, and get an education. Inviting recognition of their plight as victims of an injustice—their lack of access to recognizably American values and opportunities—demonstrates an effort to bridge potential differences with their audience by summoning the valued American commitment to “justice for all.”

However, this claim that potentially aligns the worker with its unknown audience through a recognizable and shared value—fairness—is undermined by the fact that the appeal comes from a voice already framed and articulated as subordinate and powerless. Their appeal to fairness calls for the audience to act for the workers to undo an injustice and

the appeal to pity within the institutional frame has already focused the audience’s attention on merely witnessing and sympathizing with their plight. The image of the subjugated and helpless worker undercuts a call for collective redemption in the name of American justice. The workers request inclusion in the American Dream, which reinforces their lack of agency and recalls their own expressions of powerlessness to participate in the struggle to make a change.

The calls for sympathy and the appeals to justice function in service of a noble political goal—a living wage—but the two appeals together act to reinforce a pathetic image of the wage workers. The wage increase that the workers and the organizations advocate in the 2006 living wage campaign amounted to approximately one dollar. While such an increase marks progress toward relieving financial stress on low-wage working people, the new wage would not necessarily bring about the opportunities envisioned by the workers in the videos – saving for college, moving to a new apartment, buying a car or a home. Mallory, for one, says that “if I was to get a raise of a dollar, or a dollar six to \$6.85. It would help me a lot to save money in the bank for those things (Mallory, Day 7).” Articulating a belief in a vast improvement in their dire financial life through a one dollar increase suggests a particular naïveté on the part of the workers. The appeal to justice through a disproportionate solution to the problems they describe identify them as ignorant and/or as mere pawns in service of a narrative of benevolent reform enabled by the institutions and a movement driven by their work—not the laborers’.

Implications

Examination of these vernacular performances in the “7 days @ Minimum Wage” video series illustrates how the workers’ appeals function in an institutional and cultural framework that devalues the workers’ own role in seeking political and material change. The laborers serve as subjects to the movement, not participants in it. Their pleas for recognition, help, and access reinforce their marginalization. Whereas vernacular performances by laborers on the radio in the 1930s had functioned to celebrate the solidarity of the working class and promote the power of unity among them, the contemporary YouTube AFL-CIO and ACORN Minimum Wage videos instead emphasize the isolation, vulnerability, and helplessness of the waged workers.

By identifying workers as they do in these videos, the AFL-CIO enforces a particular image of them that denies their own political agency. In particular, the nature of the participatory media enhances the idea that the workers lack control over not only their circumstances, but also their circulation; they were not broadcasting themselves—as YouTube’s tagline suggests—but being broadcast. In this explicit effort to constitute a broader movement around labor and the working class, the unions rely specifically on the discursive othering of the workers themselves. Of course, these are not the only representations of wage workers circulating in the public. However, they demonstrate the way in which, even through benevolent intention, the orchestrated performance of vernacularity might do more to reinforce the othered status of oppressed groups, rather than empower their participation in public conversation.

When the relationship between vernacular and institutions unfolds in service of political ends, the result has significant ramifications for how marginalized voices achieve recognition and form their identity in the public sphere. To the extent that the vernacular is subject to provocation and manipulation, it loses its inherent value as a dialogic and ephemeral form of communication through which communities can be constituted. As the living wage videos illustrate, the vernacular voices may get co-opted into an institutional narrative. Framed contextually and structurally through the lenses of AFL-CIO and ACORN/YouTube, the workers’ vernacular isolates and disempowers the speakers, rather creating connections between them and discursively constructing their own agency in the labor movement. The AFL-CIO and ACORN locate the strength of their voice in the weakness of the worker.

Although other studies show how powerful vernacular expression can be in articulating human experience and shaping political culture, the co-optation of that expression by institutions in service of specific political goals can challenge the power of that discourse. The communal strength of vernacular discourse rests not only in its freedom of expression, but also in its freedom of circulation. The act of making vernacular voices tools of institutional action imagines the vernacular as subordinate and controllable. Thus, once the vernacular expression becomes politically purposeful, its political power diminishes. The institutions’ production and distribution of the videos suggests that the vernacular necessarily depends on the institutional, whereas the institution’s attention to the vernacular is purely voluntary.

The presentation of workers' voices on YouTube by the AFL-CIO and ACORN as a part of the living wage campaign illustrates how strategic and political deployment of the vernacular reconfigures the authority of the vernacular voice. While the history of the labor movement points to the agency of vernacular expression, the YouTube videos expose the extent to which power of the everyday can be withdrawn in the very moment in which it is recognized. This case affirms the need to consider how online participatory media can disable marginalized voices even as it actively creates a space meant to empower them. The isolation and control of the vernacular that the YouTube structure enables and the AFL-CIO employs denies the community that vernacular expressions typically invite. The shared identity of workers is erased by the individualized containment of these voices. Because each of the workers' voices is articulated individually, they do not function dialogically with one another. Rather, they are explicitly removed from the communal context, thereby empowering AFL-CIO and ACORN to define that community. The "sense of dignity" that Archie Green says a labor vernacular can engender is lost.

The analysis of the "7 days @ Minimum Wage" campaign two primary lessons in the study of the political and purposeful engagement of vernacular expression by institutions. One, examination of vernacular texts must begin with an awareness that the voices of everyday people can be manipulated, particularly since those voices do not surface independently of the media that circulates them. When and how vernacular voices emerge inevitably shapes their meaning

and their reception. Thus, particularly organizations that seek to intentionally engage a vernacular voice to advance the interests of the marginalized or oppressed must be conscious of the ethics of that action. Two, this paper thus suggests the need to further develop an ethics of representation with regard to vernacular. A provocation or performance of the vernacular functions as a marker and maker of cultural identity as much as a naturally occurring and spontaneous emergence of the vernacular.

Notes

1 The word "constraint" should not be read as necessarily connoting a negative influence. Rather, I use the term as suggested by Lloyd Bitzer in his seminal article, "The Rhetorical Situation." He notes that constraints might be "made up of persons, events, objects, and relations which are parts of the situation because they have the power to constrain decision and action. Standard sources of constraint include beliefs, attitudes, documents, facts, traditions, images, interests, motives and the like (8)." Thus a constraint is anything that shapes the construction of meaning, whether it be positive, negative, or neutral. Lloyd F. Bitzer, 1968. *The Rhetorical Situation*. *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1 (1): 1-14.

2 Lantis argues for the use of the term "vernacular culture" to characterize the everyday narrative and practices of discourse communities: "Vernacular culture...focuses attention on the overt—on acts and artifacts—and on its cultural meaning (213)." Lantis, Margaret. 1960. Vernacular Culture. *American Anthropologist* 60:202-16.

3 See also Linda Dégh who argues “that the media have become a part of folklore (25)” in *American Folklore and the Mass Media*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.

4 Certainly, the working class solidarity that thrived under the New Deal should not be overstated or idealized. As historians such as Alice Kessler-Harris have shown, the systematic exclusions of workers based on race, gender, and ethnicity subvert both the purported benevolence of the New Deal era and the existence of a centralized and recognized working class (Kessler-Harris 2001).

5 The CIO actively promoted the voices of workers on the radio. They used radio as a means of bridging ethnic, racial, and geographical divisions within the working class (Denning, 1996). In addition to speeches from national labor leaders, radio programs featured the voices of workers themselves, talking about their organizing experiences (Cohen 1990). For example, WCFL radio in Chicago provides a window into how mediated vernacular voice may not always and necessarily bow to the institutional perspective in which it is intimately and inevitably bound. With the goal of advancing the causes of workers steeped in labor struggles, this radio station even worked with the CIO to develop a speaker’s bureau that provided laborers with studies in public speaking as well as the economics and politics of labor, industry, and capitalism (Godfried 1997). Workers who successfully completed these courses frequently found themselves on the radio recounting their experiences in labor struggles, pointing to the ways in which they had resisted the power of their employers and sought out public support of boycotts and picket lines.

6 For an insightful analysis of the culture of the AFL, the CIO, and their subsequent union, see Clayton Sinyai, *Schools of Democracy: A Political History of the American Labor Movement* (Ithaca: ILR Press, 2006). Sinyai demonstrates how the AFL in particular dismissed craft workers and immigrants as lacking in civic virtue and incapable of organization.

7 For a more sympathetic biography of George Mean, see Robert H. Zeiger, “George Meany: Labor’s Organization Man,” in Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine, eds. *Labor Leaders in America* (Urbana: University of Chicago, 1987).

8 The United States federal government first enacted a minimum wage law as a part of the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act. Designed to help secure a living wage for workers, the federal government imagined the guaranteed minimum as a way to ensure and encourage the purchase power of the working class. However, over the years, increases in the minimum wage stagnated to such a degree that by the turn of the 21st century, the minimum wage was roughly 70 percent of what it was worth in 1968 (Lichtenstein, 2002). Living wage activists have since responded with campaigns across the country that target legislative and ballot action in cities, counties, and states (Luce 2004). Public debates over the minimum wage invite characterizations of the people who must subsist on the low hourly wage and the material inequities they experience. Making the argument for an increased minimum, advocates often point to the indignities of living on a low hourly wage and articulate the injustice of letting hard-working Americans suffer materially in spite of their

responsible commitment to their jobs. For examples of people demonstrating the challenges of minimum wage through personal experience, see Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America*, New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001 and *30 Days* [2005], dir. Morgan Spurlock, 288 min., Arts Alliance America, 2008, DVD.

9 In 2006, the federal minimum wage was \$5.15 an hour. States, counties, and cities may all adopt minimum wage rates that are higher or lower than the federal level. If the state minimum is lower than the federal rate, then the federal rate applies. Current and previous federal minimum wage rates can be found at on the United States Department of Labor website: <http://www.dol.gov/ESA/minwage/chart.htm>. Other state and local rates are available at <http://www.dol.gov/esa/minwage/america.htm>.

10 The link for the video blog on the AFL-CIO website uses the tag line “7 real people, 7 real stories (<http://www.aflcio.org/issues/jobseconomy/livingwages/index.cfm>).” The quote “7 real people with 7 real stories of living on the minimum wage” came from the campaign’s website, which is no longer accessible online (www.sevendaysatminimumwage.org/). See also the YouTube page dedicated to the campaign: <http://www.youtube.com/user/7daysatminimumwage>.

11 The “Seven Days @ Minimum Wage” videos are available on YouTube, www.youtube.com and the AFL-CIO website about the minimum wage, http://www.aflcio.org/issues/jobseconomy/livingwages/americanneedsaraise_7days.cfm.

12 Consistent with other living wage elections, all seven states approved increases in the minimum wage. Living wage campaigns have consistently received wide public support. See Luce, *Fighting for a Living Wage* and a Pew Research Center poll released in April 2006: Michael Dimock, “Maximum Support for Raising the Minimum.” Pew Research Center Publications”. <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/18/maximum-support-for-raising-the-minimum>.

13 It should be noted that in the roughly three and a half years since the videos were first posted on YouTube and the publication of this paper, YouTube has undergone a number of changes in its format and certainly its content has grown exponentially. For the purposes of this analysis, I will focus on the features that have remained consistent over that period of time.

14 Quoted from Roseanne Barr’s introduction to Paul and Susan’s video on Day 1.

15 Quoted from Roseanne Barr’s introduction to part one of Jessica’s video on Day 4.

16 The descriptions of each speaker is cited from the information box positioned the right of each video on the YouTube page.

17 Barr uses this phrasing in her introduction of all the videos.

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Responses

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Labor lore vernacular was spoken, sung, and otherwise performed and consumed in our home throughout my childhood. We listened to the records of Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Paul Robeson, and Marian Anderson. We learned and sang union songs at a pro-labor summer camp where each color war team was named after a union (my team was the International Ladies Garment Workers, and I can still sing the union anthem, honest!). The older kids at camp that summer performed Clifford Odets' "Waiting for Lefty", which climaxes when workers stop "waiting" and organize themselves. My parents read to me from story books in which joining the union solved the family's financial problems, making it possible to buy the otherwise unaffordable toy in the shop window. All of this left a deep impression on my consciousness.

My father even ran for State Assembly on the American Labor Party ticket in our Brooklyn assembly district when I was in second grade (1954-5). He lost, but the ALP was successful enough in NYC to repeatedly send Vito Marcantonio to congress as representative of the working class, speaking to and for the workers in labor movement vernacular.

As my tales of the 1960s entertained my son a generation later, the 1930s always loomed large in my father's consciousness, memories, and stories. Furthermore, all my parents' friends shared their values and spoke in the phrases of labor vernacular, as did

their children, who were my friends. Thus, when Pamela Conners writes of the culture of the late 1930s with its "iconic images of workers, songs, and cultural performances" that "reinforced the political recognition and reification of labor and a working class" and "promoted working class solidarity", my childhood experiences bear witness to the appropriateness of her characterization.

Furthermore, there is no doubt that "the discourse of labor transcended institutions, regions, and individual identity" largely through the vehicle of "books, radio shows, music, and theatre productions" in which working class life was portrayed with dignity, and power and prosperity were secured through worker solidarity. It is equally true, however, as Conners points out, that cultural and political shifts since the 1930s, especially the rise of post WWII consumerist culture, have resituated and devalued the working class and its vernacular expression (Harvey 1990; Turner 2003).

Thus, "by the 1980s, unions were demonized in public discourse" and, especially after Ronald Reagan's crushing of the air traffic controllers strike, they came to be seen as part of the problem rather than part of the solution, consistent with Regan's Republican vision. Also, in the increasingly global economy of the 1980s and 1990s, the shift of production to cheap non-unionized labor overseas further undermined the power of organized labor in the US. Conners' account of the imagery, positioning, and characterization of minimum wage workers in an AFL-CIO. YouTube video is, thus, a dramatic representation of how far we have come since the 1930s... on the slide down.

In today's media environment, the "workers' stories and songs [that] function to help workers make sense of the relationship between their labor, capitalism, and society" are almost completely absent; thus, "[t]he resulting representation of the workers identifies them as sad and helpless". Rather than being heralded as the vanguard in a movement of revolutionary change, the workers in the YouTube videos are objects rather than subjects. They are merely "evidence for the action advocated", the increase of the minimum wage. The appeals that the workers make as they recount their experiences invite not solidarity in a struggle to change the system, but instead a plea for personal and political empathy, for pity. In the collective narrative created by the individual testimonies in the videos, the workers' economic fate rests solely in the hands of others. Rather than inviting the audience to act with them, the workers ask the audience to act for them. Whereas vernacular performances by laborers on the radio in the 1930s had functioned to celebrate the solidarity of the working class and promote the power of their unity, the contemporary YouTube minimum wage videos emphasize, instead, the isolation, vulnerability, and helplessness of the wage workers.

While Conners doesn't address the issue directly, her article forces us to ask what the way forward might be for the working class in this era of globalized capital. It is difficult to say, although it is certainly worth thinking about. What will the labor lore vernacular of the future be like? Perhaps it will be composed in the form of a text message...TTFN.

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Problematizing the Vernacular

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Pamela Connors has written an excellent paper that will engender much fruitful dialogue. In beginning that conversation with this response, I mean in no way to denigrate a thoughtful, well-crafted study. I want to engage Connors' work by problematizing the idea of the vernacular. First, I will urge expansion of the vernacular beyond the spoken word. Second, I will question the extent to which there can be a true vernacular, in the usual sense, in an era of mass mediation and global capitalism.

Connors regards the vernacular as "speech by everyday people" (39). This is not wrong, but I think it is narrow. I suggest that we see the vernacular as a wide range of systematic signs consisting of speech but also gesture, posture, grooming, clothing, home decoration; in other words, the *style* that is a system of communication (Brummett 2008). A number of scholars such as Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood (1979), Marcel Danesi (2003), and Virginia Postrel (2003) have argued that when objects, good, clothing, grooming, and gestures become signs within a style, they become like a language in their systematicity. It seems reasonable, then, to think that a vernacular could be seen as a system of these elements of style. Let me also note that a vernacular is often a system of signs typical of, or bespeaking, particular social groups. Elements of style not only work like a language but are also often identified with social groups. If there is

a working class vernacular, as Connors correctly argues, then there is also a systematic working class vernacular of clothing, grooming, and the other elements of style.

If we accept a sense of the vernacular as *style*, incorporating elements beyond only the verbal, the importance of my second main point becomes clear. It is hard and hardly worthwhile to commodify a verbal style of expression alone. One can scarcely make a dollar off of accent and idiom. Ally accent and idiom with commodities and one attracts the interest of global capitalism, creating value in the act of mediating and mass-distributing signs of that vernacular. Amish pronunciation may be interesting; Amish furniture is big business.

When global capitalism develops a commercial interest in the marketing of a vernacular in this wider sense, it puts its considerable power to work *defining a vernacular and informing the global audience of that definition*. Corporate interests will tell the global audience, or perhaps I mean market, what a vernacular is and who it represents. They will do it in a way to make vernacular commodities more marketable. The power of global capitalism, and the tools of mediation at its command, problematizes the vernacular in this way: *Do signs represent or do they create commodified vernaculars?*

The question would not arise were local communities of all sorts insulated from the power of capitalism and mediation. One would visit a place and report back, through global media, on vernacular practices observed there. Suppose, however, in an increasingly integrated and commodified global market, media tell a group what their vernacular is and,

more important, suppose those groups in their various communities believe it? Is the vernacular of style that we see then a true vernacular or a commodified simulation produced so as to sell more Cajun stuff in New Orleans, more Navaho stuff in Arizona, all of it made and mass marketed by capitalism?

Conners's example of Roseanne Barr is, I think, more problematic than it might seem. Roseanne's vernacular is not, of course, only verbal. She has a style of grooming, clothing, gesture, and so forth. Her television show presented an even wider range of signs claiming to be working class vernacular. One can, and perhaps should, ask: How much did that show represent a real vernacular one could find somewhere, and how much did working class people take cues from her show as to which vernacular of style (or style of vernacular) they should perform?

A more poignant example could be hip-hop. Does what one may see in videos and movies reflect a vernacular of style that real people in some place express, or do people take cues from the latest Chamillionaire video as to which vernacular they should perform? I do not think there is one simple answer, but I do think it is useful to complicate and problematize the idea of the vernacular precisely because of the world in which we live.

Vernaculars can now be manufactured as much as discovered. These vernaculars might draw people to them in shifting and temporary communities, whereas in an earlier age a vernacular were more likely to have been the expression of a stable and longstanding community. Understanding how institutions use

vernaculars in an age of global capitalism and mass mediation of images, an age of nearly universal commodification, is an important next step in our understanding beyond the foundation that Conners has given us.

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Audiences and Vernacular Rhetoric

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Scholarly interest in the creation, circulation, and contestation of vernacular rhetoric has increased dramatically with the growth of new media. The opportunity for previously marginalized groups to disseminate their message has expanded because new media forms offer ways to gain access, albeit constrained and controlled, to the public sphere. Pamela Connors astutely notes in her article, however that any circulation of vernacular rhetoric must be viewed in concert with the institutional structures that inform its production and enable its consumption. Connors' article provides readers with a provocative example of the strategic deployment of vernacular communication in the service of institutional goals.

Specifically, Connors argues that the institutional appropriation of vernacular expression on the part of labor organizations ultimately functions to interrupt the potential of vernacular laborer discourse for coalition-building among not only low-wage workers, but the wider working public as well. Commenting on the use of low-wage workers as institutionally framed and narrated subjects in a series of seven short YouTube videos intended to highlight the plight of minimum wage laborers, she notes, "...the videos invoke a vernacular performance that subjugates the workers' own participation in the labor movement," thus demonstrating "...how

online participatory media can disable marginalized voices even as it actively creates a space meant to empower them" (43, 55).

In discussing the videos, Connors details the two primary frames constructed by the AFL-CIO and ACORN to shape and influence audience interpretation of the productions. First is the frame of "appeals to pity". Addressing examples pulled from visual and textual representations in which the subjects lament their precarious positions in society, Connors suggests the subjects are consequently rendered "sad and helpless." The workers' "... voices function as pawns in service of the institutional narrative, rather than as voices summoning solidarity." (49). Second, Connors illustrates the frame of "fairness" with references to the descriptions by the videos' subjects of their inability to achieve the American Dream. She offers the view that institutions' use of these frames in presentations of vernacular performances "articulates the powerlessness of the workers, accentuates their difference from the audience members, and isolates them from the organizations acting on their behalf" (50).

I would like to raise one point of contention with the discussion of these two frames. Though the author does acknowledge that appeals to pity can create arguments for change, I argue that more change-engendering potential in visual depictions of suffering exists than Connors allows. She suggests that individual experience is less transformative than embodied political action. The two, however, are not mutually exclusive; the longstanding importance

of personal narratives and the sharing of individual experience for mobilizing action and fostering social change must be acknowledged. In discussing visual representations of occupied Palestinians, Azoulay (2008) argues that an ethical relationship exists between the photographer, the person depicted, and the viewer, a relationship she calls the "civil contract of photography." Thus, images of injustice possess heightened persuasive power, as case studies of the Burning Monk, Kent State, and the 1963 Birmingham photographs (all depictions of individuals) illustrate (Skow and Dionisopoulos, 1997; Hariman and Lucaites 2001; Johnson, 2007). Though these studies focus on still photographs, the civil contract is equally applicable to moving images.

In the end, the essay offers a useful case study for examining the complex interplay between institutional entities that utilize vernacular discourse to advance their causes and the vernacular communities in which that discourse originates and acquires meaning. The appropriation of vernacular discourse by institutional entities raises important questions about power, control, and censorship. My work analyzing the United States Armed Forces' use of YouTube videos that resemble those produced by soldiers suggests the fluidity of boundaries between truly vernacular material and that which is intentionally marked as vernacular by powerful organizations. Considering the weight accorded such seemingly vernacular productions, the boundaries of authenticity are important to expose and challenge.

In light of these implications, I would like to discuss one aspect that is absent

from the author's current rendering, but that nevertheless should be addressed in studies of vernacular discourse on the Internet: the role of the audience. Conners' analysis of the videos leaves little room for resistance. Rather, the subjects in the videos appear as victims of the institutional framing imposed by the AFL-CIO and ACORN. Perhaps more importantly, the resistive role played by the audience remains unaddressed in the article. In fact, audiences are quite savvy in detecting and challenging inauthentic vernacular discourse. From the online "outing" of LonelyGirl15 to the outrage of constituents of a censored political blog, the collective intelligence of consumer audiences challenges a one-sided view of institutional power (Burgess and Green, 2010; Howard, 2008). Conners notes the low number of views received by the videos and suggests that this could be due to the fact that they were deemed by audiences as overly-institutional both aesthetically and rhetorically. Recent scholarship in media and cultural studies also highlights the growing capacity of fans to not only challenge media content, but also create and circulate their own material (Jenkins, 2006). The existence of content in response to the labor videos could also provide insight into the consumption of the institutional productions.

Additionally, it would be useful to explore the viewer commentary accompanying the videos to ascertain how audiences responded to the productions. Hess (2009) provides a thorough analysis of how audiences challenged institutional messages by the Office for National Drug Control Policy. Hess ends his study with larger questions

about the (in)ability of the YouTube medium to serve as a productive space for vernacular discourse. Thus, a further analysis of viewer interpretation of the videos could reveal the ways in which diverse audiences responded and might open up opportunities for resistance to the institutional hegemony advanced by the AFL-CIO and ACORN.

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