Re-writing punishment? Songs and narrative problem-solving

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Abstract
This article analyses findings from the Economic and Social Research Council/Arts and Humanities Research Council (ESRC/AHRC)-funded 'Distant Voices – Coming Home' project (ES/POO2536/1), which uses creative methods to explore crime, punishment and reintegration. Focusing on songs co-written in Scottish prisons, we argue that the songs serve to complicate and substantiate our grasp of what state punishment does to people, as well as perhaps affording their prison-based co-writers both moments and modalities of resistance to dominant narratives within criminal justice. In doing so, they creatively express and explore affective and perhaps even unconscious aspects of the self. We argue that our work contributes to a more expansive and considered treatment of narrative in criminology; one that admits and engages with a more diverse and creative range of expressions of experience and selfhood, all of them partial and some of them contradictory. By attending to diverse kinds of narratives embodied in these songs, we learn more about what criminalisation, penalisation and incarceration do to people and to their stories.

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Introduction

In a recent article (Crockett Thomas et al., 2020), we began to explore what songs co-written in prison had to tell us about punishment and re/integration. Arguing that songs are foremost works of art and creative expression, and that they have inherent value irrespective of their social uses, we nonetheless noted that problem-solving is an important affordance of some of the songs. In that article, we showed how songs addressed relational problems that imprisonment creates – problems of separation and alienation. In this article, we take our analysis further, focusing on how songs problem-solved in a different but complementary way, by exploring and reworking personal experience through the use of narrative structures and tropes.

The songs in question were co-written as part of the 'Distant Voices – Coming Home'[1] project, a partnership between the Universities of Glasgow, Edinburgh, and the West of Scotland and the Glasgow-based arts charity Vox Liminis. Distant Voices aims to explore and to practice re/integration[2] after punishment, blurring boundaries between creative practices, community-building, research, knowledge exchange and public engagement. This article cannot offer a synthesis of our findings overall; instead, it explores some of the original songs created within the project, exploring what these songs *do* in narrative terms and considering how they might act in the world.

In the next section, we explore the relationships between music, lyrics and narratives, particularly in criminal justice contexts. We then provide a brief account of the project and outline relevant aspects of our methodology. We go on to discuss three contrasting songs, drawing mainly on theories of narrative and selfhood, but also using concepts from musicology and the sociology of music. In sum, we argue that the songs serve to complicate and substantiate our grasp of what punishment does to people, as well as perhaps affording their prison-based co-writers both moments and modalities of resistance to dominant narratives within criminal justice. Crucially, they also compel us to look beyond the 'reflexive self', creatively expressing and exploring affective and perhaps even unconscious aspects of the self (cf. Laws, 2020). We conclude by arguing that our methods and our approach can contribute to a more expansive treatment of narrative within criminology; one that admits and engages with a much more diverse and creative range of expressions of experience and selfhood, all of them partial and some of them contradictory. We suggest that this sort of development is a necessary part of helping narrative criminology to 'do good work', further developing its critical, normative edge (cf. Fleetwood et al., 2019: 17).

Music, lyrics and narratives in criminal justice

Recent scholarship on criminal cases involving the use of rap and drill music demonstrates that there is a heightened potential for injustice when treating the stories we tell as evidence of criminal acts or intentions (Fatsis, 2019; Kubrin and Nielson, 2014; Stoia et al., 2018: 331). Racism and classism have large parts to play in influencing which musical genres are criminalised (see Peters, 2019). In trials featuring Black artists in the United States and United Kingdom, rather than being understood as artistic expression, lyrics have been taken as authentic confessions of past activity or credible threats of future action – rendering the literary as literal. Doing so misunderstands both genre traditions within rap, such as the use of first-person narration, braggadocio, bravura or 'battling' and artists' use of creative personas in their work (Hook, 2018; Ilan, 2020; Stoia et al., 2018).

As Auslander (2006: 101) argues, 'to be a musician is to perform an identity in a social realm'. Many rap artists, particularly men working in the genre of gangsta rap, are under pressure to

perform a persona of hard-won masculinity, criminality and violence that sells to hip-hop's primary consumers: White, suburban males (Stoia et al., 2018: 335). Unfortunately, as the outcomes of related criminal cases attest, a convincing performance can have dire effects for the performer. Drawing on Goffman's sociology of quotidian performance, Auslander (2006: 102) claims that 'when we see a musician perform, we are not simply seeing the "real person" playing; as with actors, there is an entity that mediates between musicians and the act of performance'. Auslander terms this version of self the 'musical persona' (Auslander, 2006).

Our project has focused more on song-writing rather on performance, but here too a distinction can be made between the 'real' person/s writing the song and the song's 'protagonist' as imagined in the mind of the listener (Moore, 2012). Even amateur musicians and performers, like most of our participants, also enter into the work of co-creating protagonists within their songs. Crucially however, neither 'personas' nor 'protagonists' should be mistaken for or identified directly with the person or persons co-writing the song.

The misuse of rap lyrics in criminal trials should also alert us to the dangers of allowing context (i.e. a criminal trial) to over-determine narrative meaning (i.e. as providing evidence of criminal wrongdoing). This problem also arises when narratives – whether within works of fiction or the stories we tell about ourselves in conversation and interview – are interpreted within a criminological context. In comparison to the other social sciences and humanities, *explicit* attention to the functions and forms of narrative within social life has come comparatively late to criminology (Carrabine, 2016; Presser, 2016). Recent years have seen a welcome explosion of activity on the topic, most prominently under the umbrella of 'narrative criminology'. Presser, Sandberg and other collaborators have significantly advanced it as a theoretical and methodological approach (e.g. Fleetwood et al., 2019; Presser, 2008, 2009, 2012a, 2013, 2016; Presser and Sandberg, 2015; Sandberg, 2012, 2013; Sandberg and Fleetwood, 2017; Sandberg and Ugelvik, 2016). In characterising their intervention, Presser claims that 'just as most criminologists are inclined towards positivism, most criminologists treat narrative either as record or as interpretation', thus paying more attention to what narrative *says* than to what it *does* (Presser, 2009, 2012: 47). Against this, most 'narrative criminologists' work with a social constructivist approach that sees the stories we tell as shaping our sense of self and helping to produce the world (Presser, 2016: 146; Sandberg, 2016: 156).

There is much to be commended in this approach, particularly its awareness of the dangers of 'distorting into clarity' (Law, 2010: 2) complex realities in the search for single stories or narrative coherence (Presser, 2008; Sandberg et al., 2015). However, this sensitivity to the complexity of narrative sometimes sits at odds with the aetiological orientation of some narrative criminologies. Presser and Sandberg define narrative criminology as 'the study of how stories motivate, maintain or restrain harmful action' (Sandberg, 2016: 156). Rather than being treated as 'records' of what happened, narratives become 'antecedents' (Sandberg, 2012: 65) of crime and of its control. Yet, as Sandberg (2012) and others have recognised, human narratives are also shaped by fantasy, by social convention and by the contexts and audiences of their performance; sometimes they involve fabrication and falsehood. It follows that understanding whether, when and how narratives relate to actions is far from straightforward.

In a recent article, Laws (2020) argues that notions of selfhood in narrative criminology are under-developed, focusing too narrowly on the 'reflexive self' (meaning, the person we think we are) over 'the unconscious self' and 'the experiencing self' (Laws, 2020: 1). Laws cautions that there is increasing evidence within psychological studies that a person's unconscious self might not closely correspond to their reflexive self. As such, 'the danger of making "too much" of storied

selfhood is that it skews our understanding of past and future behaviour' (Laws, 2020: 7). This critique perhaps applies best to forms of narrative criminology shaped by narrative psychology. Certainly, some narrative criminologists have been more attentive to the affective aspects of crime and, more generally, to its phenomenology (e.g. Presser, 2012b), not least where they have drawn upon cultural criminology for inspiration (e.g. Mills and Fleetwood, 2020). Nonetheless, understanding 'life stories' remains a central concern of narrative criminology, and we agree with Laws that much more work needs to be done to develop narrative analyses that look beyond the reflexive.

When analysing narratives produced by people who are currently experiencing or have experienced state sanction and punishment, it is imperative to recognise that progression through the criminal justice system often depends on the production of a particular sort of story. Warr's (2019: 20) study of life sentence prisoners highlights how their 'narrative labour . . . coalesces around the performance of a flagellant self' (Warr, 2019: 30), demonstrating contrition, amenability to 'correction' and sincere hopes for redemption and reintegration (see also Cox, 2011, 2017; Crewe, 2009, 2011; Lacombe, 2008; Miller, 2014, 2021; Werth, 2011, 2016). Ironically, 'this reifying of identity to the carceral both reinforces the institutional perspective and discourse whilst cementing the very stain that they [i.e. people in prison] are expected to rid themselves of' (Warr, 2019: 36).

Warr's (2019) work recalls Steedman's (2000) concept of 'enforced narratives'; these being the clichéd narratives demanded from poor and marginalised people since the development of the administrative state in the 17th century in exchange for aid or clemency (Crockett Thomas, Forthcoming; Steedman, 2000; Thomas, 2018). Steedman argues that we should interpret these stories as evidencing a 'history of expectations, orders and instructions rather than one of urges and desires' (Steedman, 2000: 28). In other words, they tell us more about the institutionalised contexts of their production than they do about their narrators' lives or selves. Fleetwood (2015) has drawn on Steedman's work in illustrating how the narratives of imprisoned women in Ecuador respond not just to misrecognition within the prison environment but also to broader gender-related demands and pressures. Of course, none of this is to suggest that producing and performing such accounts is devoid of gratification, comfort or utility for the narrator. Articulating your story in a recognised form can also provide the basis of resistance and political action, as much as it might act to tether oneself to a particular narrative (Steedman, 2000: 28).

Whatever the subject matter of our participants' songs, we come to our exploration of them with an understanding that, like these historical antecedents, they were made by people subject to the institutionalised power of the criminal justice system. This is not to imply that people outside of this system are free to craft their narratives of self without social pressures, nor that people within the system are devoid of narrative agency. But it is to argue that the stakes and rewards of doing so are different and that we need to remember this (Crockett Thomas, Forthcoming). As such, when we come to explore the narrative content of these songs, we must be mindful both of the influence of the penal context and of the mutability and performativity of presentations and understandings of selfhood.

Drawing on Foucault's conceptualisation of practices or 'technologies of the self' (Foucault, 1988), DeNora describes music as 'a cultural resource that actors may mobilize for their on-going work of self-construction and the emotional, memory and biographical work such a project entails' (DeNora, 1999: 32). Similarly, in this and our previous article (Crockett Thomas et al., 2020), we focus on developing an understanding of what the songs might *do* more than what they might *mean*. Other recent work within criminology has applied DeNora's conceptualisation to music and sound in carceral settings (Herrity, 2018; Waller, 2018). In her ethnographic research on the significance of music in prison and on prison soundscapes, Herrity argues 'music

sustained the self – a necessary component of psychological survival in prison' (Herrity, 2018: 41). Correcting DeNora's overemphasis on the enabling and empowering aspects of music as a technology of self (Hesmondhalgh, 2013: 40; Waller, 2018: 285), Waller demonstrates that the uses of music in prison exemplify how empowering 'technologies of the self' can work alongside the technologies of punishment, discipline and control. For us, songwriting with people in criminal justice has been conceived as a dialogic activity, rather than an individualising therapeutic or 'civilising' process that is part of people's punishment or rehabilitation (Crockett Thomas et al., 2020; Urie et al., 2019).

Distant voices: Origins and methods

The origins of the current project lie in precursor projects which revealed both the importance of social re/integration after punishment and the profound difficulties associated with seeking and securing it, particularly within hostile environments (McNeill and Urie, 2020; Urie et al., 2019). At its inception, Distant Voices sought to explore whether and how creative processes might enable a more constructive, affective engagement with questions of crime, punishment and reintegration (cf. McNeill, 2019: 148). Songwriting and song-sharing seemed a potentially powerful approach, perhaps even a means of challenging and changing simplistic punitive narratives.

Project songs were created and recorded in demo form[3] during 21 two- or three-day workshops which took place between July 2017 and July 2019.[4] Thirteen of these took place in Scottish prisons (one open and three closed institutions which, between them, hold both men and women and both adults and young people) and eight in community settings in Glasgow and in Inverness. In these workshops (called 'Vox Sessions'), we used collaborative songwriting to support a range of differently situated people (all with experience of the criminal justice system) to creatively explore questions of punishment and re/integration together. In total, we worked with 153 people to produce 150 original songs.

This article focuses on songs created during the prison-based workshops. In discussing them, we draw on a range of data; for example, song demo recordings, song lyrics and song introductions developed with the co-writers, as well as interviews with participants, records of 'debrief' meetings involving the session facilitators and musicians and the researchers' ethnographic field notes. Our analysis builds on a systematic 'coding' of the songs undertaken by the first author.

Ethical approval for the research was sought and obtained both from the College of Social Sciences Ethics Committee at the University of Glasgow and from the Research Ethics Committee of the Scottish Prison Service.

Understanding songs

Many of the project songs explore and rework memories into narrative structures and using tropes. They are very rarely created by one individual and, even in these cases, the songs are a product of collaborative workshopping. As we have explained in detail elsewhere (Crockett Thomas et al., 2020), the songs are co-created through the interactions of an 'assemblage' (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004) of actors both human (e.g. named co-writers, the wider workshop group, team, cell-mates, loved ones) and non-human (e.g. workshop creative exercises, current affairs, popular culture, the physical environment, facilitation artefacts and the available musical instruments). Narrative criminologists have long noted that narratives are co-produced, including through research interviews, and have argued for greater attention to the power dynamics inherent in these processes

(Presser, 2005), as well as to the contexts in which narratives are produced (as noted above). They have also argued that all narratives are partial, both in the sense of being incomplete and in the sense of taking positions or 'sides'. In this project, the co-creation of the songs has been both accepted and valued from the outset and the challenges of partiality have also been acknowledged and embraced.

Songs afford different things in and for different contexts, performances and audiences. Mediators, human or otherwise, have an active role in producing every unique musical assemblage (Born, 2011; Crockett Thomas et al., 2020). Accordingly, the work of narrative structuring in co-writing each song represents a *collaborative* rather than individual sense-making activity and also reflects the co-writers' ideas about communicating experiences to others. Thus, while songs often end up being narrated from the perspective of a single protagonist, the ongoing work of self-construction which DeNora describes always involves others. Yet there is a social value placed on being able to produce a coherent narrative of oneself that is sometimes divorced from the sociality and collaboration inherent in such an act.

We draw on a rich culture of narrative forms in crafting our narratives, for example, quest narratives, redemption narratives, fables, parables, cautionary tales, love stories and the picaresque (stories of lovable rascals). Within these stories, there is a difference between narrative (contents) and plot (sequence). Plot sequencing strongly affects how the narrative is understood by the listener (cf. Forster, 1990). For example, the decision *not* to plot a future life outside the criminal justice system in one's story changes the way that the narrative is understood.

Lyrically, project songs often employed popular tropes. Metaphors and similes connected to light and dark are common (e.g. rising 'like the sun', hiding 'in the shadows'; the 'song coding' exercise noted 27/150 songs using such devices). This is not surprising as they are also very common in popular culture and speech. However, their prevalence may also be because many people wanted to articulate painful ('dark') memories and contrast these with hopeful ('bright') futures. Other popular types of metaphor in these songs relate to the natural world – for example, weather and animals (69/150), spirituality and struggle (22/150) and, predictably, the physical features of prison (27/150).

The songs explore a wide variety of narrative themes. Most include reflections on time – past, present or future, human relationships, and most contain some contrasting element, conflict or change. There are themes of common human experience that run throughout this material: time, truth, home, chaos, faith, love, loss, regret, nostalgia, memory, struggle, parenthood, gender, relationships and so on.

As with many other creative works, project songwriters often drew on personal experience as part of the creative process. Sometimes this is explicitly foregrounded in interviews where co-writers talked about the process having helped them express themselves. Most of these songs *explicitly* involve an element of the participant co-writer's biography if not a crafted auto-biographical plot (i.e. with a beginning, a middle and an end). Most participants (consciously or not) chose a first-person singular narrative perspective, with the song's protagonist constructed as a representation of themselves. That said, as we shall discuss below, there are songs with fictional protagonists or using a third-person perspective.

Whichever narrative perspective is employed, in this article, we will treat the songs' protagonists as co-constructed by their co-writers (musician, participant, group) rather than as a direct representation of the prison-based co-writers. We are not in the business of judging the truthfulness of the accounts offered in these songs and, in any case, we go into sessions knowing little or nothing about the participants in the group. We spend an intense creative time with participants

during workshops and, unless they disclose information, what we know of them is drawn from interactions within that session.

For many participants, the distinctions between self, persona and protagonist are blurred. In many cases, having one's narrative believed by the session team, and to be perceived as truthful or authentic, seems to be very important, particularly when the participant feels like they are socially forgotten or unheard. One of us has written elsewhere about the tension inherent in wanting to work with people in a way that doesn't do 'epistemological violence' (Spivak, 1988) to their knowledge, while upholding a post-structuralist sense of the self as mutable and performative (Crockett Thomas, Forthcoming). This means that 'we cannot accept that criminalised people are simply or intrinsically criminal. Instead, we recognise that all people are in process, and are produced from their material and affective relations with the rest of the world' (Crockett Thomas, 2020: 75). As such, when we discuss the three songs below, we do not aim to provide fixed, final or authoritative accounts of them, far less of their prison-based co-writers. Instead, our focus is on the different narrative forms explored in the songs and how they might do the work of problem-solving.

In his constructive critique of narrative criminology, Laws (2020) challenges the primacy of verbal narratives over non-verbal and affective experiences. Of course, there is a long-standing debate within philosophy and social theory about 'logocentrism' (cf. Derrida, 1976). Certainly, in making sense of the songs discussed below, we have tried to listen as much to the music as to the words and to what is *not* said or sung (see Crockett Thomas et al., 2020). We intend to focus more on the musical and sonic aspects of project songs in subsequent articles. That said, lyrics are particularly important within certain musical genres that featured prominently within the project, for example, in the folk tradition, in rap music and in the work of singer-songwriters (cf. Eckstein, 2010). Also, in the sessions, lyrics were often drafted first, even though their final form was shaped in dialogue with their evolving music settings (cf. Negus and Astor, 2015).

Within narrative criminology, Sandberg (2016) had distinguished three narrative forms – life stories, event stories and tropes – which interconnect and overlap. All three offer accounts of temporality and causality; two features that he considers definitive of narratives. But whereas life stories make sense of identity and event stories account for particularly significant moments or episodes, tropes do the important and revealing work of connecting the storyteller and the audience via the familiar, often invoking and reinforcing dominant discourses.

In a somewhat similar taxonomy within music, Davis (1988) helpfully identifies three common plot forms that feature in many songs: attitudinal, situational and narrative. In 'attitudinal' songs, the songwriter 'expresses an attitude about someone or something'. In 'situational' songs, the songwriter is 'reacting to a particular set of circumstances'. Finally, 'narrative' or 'story' songs have plots with a beginning, middle and end and bear the closest resemblance to a story (Davis, 2001: 11–12). We will refer to Davis's typology below, but it is worth also noting here that music as well as lyrics can convey attitude (e.g. the pride and patriotism intended to be conveyed by military bands), situation (e.g. the suspense communicated at key moments in the soundtracks of thrillers or horror films) and narrative (e.g. the part that music plays in telling the story in ballet and opera).

The three songs that we discuss below have been chosen as exemplars that embody key features of many others. Specifically, they illustrate three axes of engagement with the problems of narrative simplification, flattening and distortion that attend punishment in general and incarceration in particular. Crucially, these songs have reflective, affective and transcendental aspects and qualities. The first axis problem-solves via narrative transformation of a discredited and stigmatised identity. But, as we will argue, it does so in ways which may entail a degree of co-optation

into certain forms of 'judged selfhood'. This becomes obvious if we accept that such songs insist upon a *new* judgment; that is, that the protagonist is redeemed and should be restored. The second axis problem-solves by side-stepping the condition of punishment itself, instead exploring the protagonist's thoughts and emotions about some other aspect of life experience. For the prison-based co-writer, this might help them to imaginatively transcend their immediate experience and to reconnect with other experiences. The third axis problem-solves through fictionalisation and fantasy. Although this might be read primarily as a form of avoidance, it involves oblique engagement with a range of penal problems and difficulties. In all three cases, as the title of our article suggests, we show how the prison-based songwriters thus engaged in re-writing their punishment or, perhaps more accurately, in exploring and sometimes challenging the relationships between their selves and their punishments. Just as the prison context and the project's focus on exploring crime, punishment and re/integration inevitably framed the songwriting sessions in particular ways, so this article's analytical framing as a contribution to debates about narrative criminology also shapes how we make sense of the songs; prompting us to examine how these songs (and their protagonists) engage with certain problems faced by punished selves.

We invite readers to listen to demo versions of the songs (which were recorded as part of the prison-based workshops) before reading about them. A playlist containing all three songs can be found via this link: https://soundcloud.com/voxliminis/sets/rewriting-punishment/s-SaZeYQSrSGq.

Listening to the songs is important because songs are more than their lyrics; experiencing them sonically is crucial not least to appreciating their affective aspects.

Resolved plots: *The Man I Used to Be*

> I never want my children to live a life like mine
> So I faced my inner demons, one small step at a time . . .
> I'm not the man, I'm not the man I used to be
> Gone are the days when all I could see
> Was myself in the mirror, trying to break free . . .

One of the plot forms identified by Davis (2001), common in folk music, is the 'narrative or story song' which has a lyrical sequence with a beginning, middle and end. Many of the songs created in the project contain clear (usually autobiographical) narratives with temporal progression and an implied causality. Such songs often entail the plotting of life and the periodisation of experience; for example, a glorious past is followed by a fall which is followed by recovery and redemption. In other examples of this type, the progression is from a traumatic past, through present suffering and boredom in prison, towards a hoped-for future life. The structure of these songs echoes the common narrative structures of life stories told in other ways (see Sandberg, 2016). The plots of these songs are resolved, or at least promise resolution, ending with strong statements of presence and purpose.[5]

A particularly powerful example of this type of song is *The Man I Used to Be.* This song was co-written by Steven[6] with Kris (a Scottish folk musician) early in the life of the project in a Vox session in a closed prison. Steven was serving a short-term sentence (less than 4 years) and he was due for release about a week after the session.

Structurally, the narrative of the song takes place in a moment of firm resolution and recovery, with the protagonist looking back at the struggles he has faced (personified as his 'inner demons').

Strikingly, the motivation for facing his problems is given in the first line of the song – so that his children can have a better chance in life. Although desistance research reveals that significant life changes are often prompted by a complex mix of factors (Farrall et al., 2014), it is common to name one primary 'hook for change' (Giordano et al., 2002) or 'turning point' (Laub and Sampson, 2003). Hence, for example, in other project songs, music, love, religious experiences or rehabilitative organisations are credited for their protagonists' transformations. Such transformations are treated differently in different songs, but the struggle against undesirable elements of one's self is often personified as facing and fighting 'demons' (cf. Maruna, 2001). Angels and demons are staples of religious symbolism; importantly, they are external forces that take possession of humans, and as such can be bested and 'cast out'. They also evoke a world with clear lines between good and evil.

Involvement in the creation of songs can be emotionally affecting for all of those involved. Here, one of us (the second author), who was involved in participant observation of the session, describes a pivotal moment in the creation of *The Man I Used to Be*:

> Kris had worked up some musical ideas the night before, but Steven had also been thinking about tempo and melody. Haltingly, he suggested a tempo and sang [a wordless melody for] the opening line or two, as he imagined them. The next few moments were magical. Kris (setting aside what he had prepared) immediately played back Steven's tune fragment, embellished with an instantly beautiful guitar arrangement. Steven's face was a mixture of child-like wonder, or even transfiguration; he was literally radiant with delight to hear this gorgeous echo of something from his mind (or heart).

> They worked on for a bit, before Kris went off – maybe to capture a recording, or maybe to work with [another participant] – and Steven hung around, stupefied with wonder, asking if I had heard what Kris and he had just done, though he knew from my face that I had felt it too.

Indirectly, these field notes invoke the biblical story of Jesus's transfiguration (Mat. 17: 1–13) in which, also before witnesses, 'his face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light'. The biblical story, the field note and the song itself testify to moments rich in meaning and redolent with transformative power and prefigure a kind of resurrection, from the prison as a tomb. Steven had lobbied hard with prison management to secure a place on the session, despite his imminent release, and – unlike many session participants – he had come with a clear and urgent agenda; to write a song that would help to reinforce and sustain the transformation he had embarked upon in prison.

Indeed, since his release, Steven has subsequently explained how the song has come to act upon him precisely as he had desired – buttressing his resolve through the challenges of re-entry and reintegration. He has also played it to others (see below). These practices perhaps resemble the manner in which a religious person might read and re-read a favourite scripture, or clutch a rosary, or repeat a whispered prayer.[7] The song endures and acts upon Steven in ways that extend beyond the reflexive narration of a reformed self; in doing so, it also offers an affective narrative which perhaps, for him, has a transcendental quality (cf. Laws, 2020).

In thinking further about how this song's affordances were produced, we note the congruence between the protagonist's claim – 'I've broken free' – and the timbre of Kris's voice which imparts a sense of dignity and sincerity to the words and their sentiment. On the track, Kris's voice sounds clear and close to the mic, and the acoustic guitar arrangement sounds simple and unadorned. As (Walser, 2003: 28) remarks of this kind of vocal performance, '[t]he singer's voice is one that has been cultivated and presented so as to seem uncultivated and unmediated . . . it's power lies in its

projection of sincerity, honesty, directness'. This is, of course, commonplace in folk music as a genre and is linked to its focus on narratives of identity, history and remembrance.

The Man I Used to Be then represents a particularly powerful and rich example of those songs which address the first problem-solving axis alluded to above: It engages with the problem of an unwanted, discredited and stigmatised self. In so doing, it re-writes punishment by claiming redemption (Maruna, 2001) and, crucially for Steven, by providing a resource for sustaining change. But, in contrast to the lifers in Warr's (2019) study, the narrative labours of this song are not systemically generated – at least not in a simple way. As a determinate sentence prisoner, not subject to parole decision-making or post-release supervision, Steven does not have to persuade the penal authorities of his transformation. That said, the need that he did admit – to persuade *himself* and *his family* of his transformation – may suggest a different kind of 'enforced narrative'. While he does not need to appeal for state aid or clemency, perhaps he does need to invest in his redemption script to secure and sustain *self*-acceptance and to underpin his plea for belonging within his family and his community:

> For me I can do this song, and the people who know me – when they listen to it – they'll understand a little bit about where I am in my life right now and that I have faced a lot of problems, and that I've been strong, I've just never known how to express that . . . I don't think that I can be anybody different unless I understand the man I used to be, and that's where the title came from, 'The Man I Used to Be', not 'The Man I Am Now' because that man will always develop but, the man I used to be, I'll never go back there. (Steven, end-of-session interview)

Songs with attitude: Leap from the noise

Many of the project's songs fit the plot forms identified by Davis (2001) as 'attitudinal'; 'expressing an attitude or emotion about someone or something'. Sometimes these lyrics take a single concept, feeling or experience and creatively explore it as an image, perhaps via extending a metaphor. Within our project, this type of lyric builds up an image of something or someone (usually but not always outside the prison) which can problem-solve by bringing attention to phenomena *beyond* those associated with punishment. For the prison-based co-writer, this might work by helping them imaginatively transcend their immediate experience, reconnecting them to experiences that are not criminalised or penalised. For some listeners, if the song were introduced as one written in prison, it might narratively problem-solve by encouraging them to imagine the protagonist (and the prison-based co-writer) as more than or other than an 'offender' or 'prisoner'.

Leap from the Noise was created in an open prison in a collaboration between David, a prisoner nearing the end of his sentence, and Scottish indie artist Ross. In his description of the song during an end-of-session interview, David explained that the song was originally inspired by 'a memory of happy times with my brother, it then became about what it means to find tranquillity and question why we need tranquillity in our lives'. As such, there is ambiguity rather than simple positivity in his conceptualisation of tranquillity. In a discussion of the song occasioned by David reviewing an earlier draft of this article, he clarified further; noting that silence and tranquillity are not the same thing; if we experience silence in the context of personal or relational tension or distress, then we often need to escape the silence, filling it with noise.

David was a confident writer and his musician co-writer Ross was struck by David's poetic phrase 'leap from the noise'; they agreed to make it the central metaphor for a struggle for tranquillity. Significantly, in the project's songwriting sessions, we often found that extending and

playing with metaphors allowed writers space to explore their experiences and struggles without exposing them to unwelcome scrutiny or judgement or stigma.

> Crying out for more, like a hungry child,
> Full of life and mishandled smiles
> Blown away like the flame of candle out again,
> Deafened by silence
> Fragile and lonesome again.
>
> A break from the sadness,
> Disconnection from madness
> I leap from the noise,
> Relief in the shadows
> There's a hush to destroy,
> I leap from the noise.

The lyrics of *Leap From the Noise* are in the form of poetic phrases that rework a central contrasting image of silence and noise. David explained that he was not reflecting consciously or directly on noise or silence *in prison*, but nonetheless, knowing the context of the song's production, the choice of a sonic metaphor is interesting, considering how many staff and prisoners' relate powerfully affective experiences of the noisy environment within prisons as overwhelming, intrusive and psychically damaging. As Herrity argues in her work on prison soundscapes (Herrity, 2020a, 2020b), this experience of noise is a point of commonality between staff and prisoners. Importantly, for both, affective encounters with sound and music are not necessarily positive. Indeed, numerous scholars (Grant, 2013; Herrity, 2018; Hjørnevik and Waage, 2018; Mangaoang, 2013; Rice, 2016; Waller, 2018) note the inherent tension between music in carceral settings as an emancipatory practice and as technology of control, amelioration or torture. Nonetheless, music and sound can remake spaces and allow prisoners a sense of (limited) control over their environment, 'facilitat[ing] a sense of privacy and rehabilitation of life before incarceration in the form of musical sanctuary' (Harbert, 2010; quoted in Herrity, 2018: 42).[8]

Within *Leap From the Noise*, the fragmentary lyrical phrases, and the driving strumming rhythm that Ross created, mutually sustain a sense of chaos, ambivalence and change. While explicit details of the song's inspiration are disguised by metaphor, the song expresses emotional turmoil both sonically and lyrically. The sonic aspects of the song do as much affective work as the lyrics. Recalling Laws's (2020) discussion of both the 'unconscious' and 'experiencing' selves, music and sound moved David in ways he couldn't easily verbally articulate, 'the saxophone just does it for me, I don't know why! I even wrote a poem about it! . . . I don't know how to describe it, it just speaks to me'.

'Attitudinal' songs from the project tend not to express the same sense of narrative closure as we discussed above in relation to *The Man I Used to Be*. Rather, they offer suspended resolutions. Instead of presenting a final, resolved change, if *Leap From the Noise* depicts transformation at all, it depicts it as an ongoing struggle. Thus, this song illustrates the second axis of narrative problem-solving referenced above. It resists and transcends limiting narratives of crime and punishment through its construction of a contrasting image to one of punishment, in this instance of the struggle for tranquillity. Hence, David was able, within the privacy that metaphor provides, to explore difficult experiences on his own terms and to reflect and express both ambivalence and complexity;

qualities that are largely absent from the dominant discourses within prison-based rehabilitation programmes and risk management processes.

Fiction and fantasy: Going coastal

A much smaller number of the project songs weave narratives or describe situations that are explicitly fictional or fantastic. Here, songwriters imaginatively move from real experience to invented scenarios and have fun in devising a story. It is important to remember that some people's motivation for participating in our workshops is primarily to create or to learn about the *craft* of songwriting and not necessarily to work through issues or express something deeply personal.

The American 'wild west' is a popular setting for this kind of song, which is perhaps unsurprising considering the macho image of the cowboy, this setting's ability to convey nostalgia for a time gone by. However, participants tended to invoke the wild west with a light-hearted attitude and with a clear enjoyment of the romantic excesses of the associated literary and film genres. Tapping into our collective memories of westerns, and creating fictional characters we could all enjoy, often forged a sense of connection within the sessions.

What we could call 'picaresque' songs are an interesting subsection of these fictional or fantasy songs in which, while not avowedly fictional, the co-writer creates a protagonist that has considerable prowess (sometimes of a transgressive sort) and social power. Because of the tendency of audiences to treat the protagonist in a song as the writer's authentic identity (discussed above), such songs might offer the prison-based co-writer an opportunity to bolster their social status via mediating relations with others (cf. Crockett Thomas et al., 2020).

The productive or liberating aspects of fiction and fantasy – to mask or rework experience in a way that is manageable or less exposing – are important to recognise. Although it deploys a nautical rather than a 'wild west' setting, the song *Going Coastal*, co-written by Cacofonix with Louis (another Scottish indie musician and our project's creative lead), provides an interesting and playful example of this.

> I'm feeling like a sailor on a ship in a bottle,
> Suspended in space with no drive and no throttle
> Time stands still, as if I'm cocooned
> Even as other colours fade, I'm stuck here, marooned.

Cacofonix was completing his sentence in an open prison, where long-term prisoners are, in theory, prepared for release on parole. *Going Coastal* is a whimsical, witty, self-pitying song about isolation and abandonment. Sonically, its style invokes the theatricality of songs from musical or cabaret-style music, inviting the listener to imagine it sung on stage, perhaps by a tragi-comic duo. Its abrupt ending leaves the listener, perhaps like the protagonist(s), somehow in limbo.

Importantly, the song relates a *fantasy* of romantic heartbreak; here, 'heartbreak' is a metaphor for the despair and isolation experienced on entering prison. Cacofonix explained:

> I went into psychosomatic shock when I first came into the jail because of the stress. Seeing people from different walks of life but feeling that I'm sort of out of place with the people that are around me. Being cast adrift . . . so it's kind of about that as well.

He later commented: 'It's been interesting for me writing about heartbreak because I've never been far enough along in a relationship to ever have experienced it . . . a lot of rejection but . . . !' Cacofonix had been serving a prison sentence for about a decade – a large portion of his young adulthood. As 'Sammy', another participant on the session with comparable experience articulated it:

> I came into the jail as a child . . . so I'm now 31 years old and a couple of years from getting out. It's going to be strange walking out into the world as an adult and learning how to live as an adult. For me that's the difficult thing.

Returning to the relationship between fantasy and communality, if one has been denied relatable experiences such as romantic relationships, creating a fantasy romance might be interpreted as an attempt to gain membership of the wider group through creating a song about relatable experience. Indeed, for people in this position, fantasy and fiction may serve as essential forms of narrative through which to seek to escape or avoid the deprivation of routine adult experiences that they have endured.

Cacofonix was an avid reader of fantasy novels, and so the literary genre of fantasy was important to him. The title of his song is a homage to the Terry Pratchett novel *Going Postal* which is about the adventures of a confidence trickster, and the song has something of Pratchett's playful literary style. Cacofonix was himself musical, with ambitions to be a professional recording artist, and sang with Louis on the track. When Louis told him about a 'three big questions' exercise in which writers are encouraged to consider who speaks in the song, to what audience and with what message, Cacofonix responded: 'Hmm . . . three big questions, 1) how do I get on the cd? 2) why wouldn't I get on the CD?! . . . ' This helpfully reminds us that participants create work with different audiences in mind. Here, for example, shaped by Cacofonix's musical ambitions, the imagined audience is those judging the song's suitability for the album (see Crockett Thomas et al., 2020).

Despite the playful way he engaged with the session, when we visited the open prison a month or two later, to return the CD of session songs to participants, Cacofonix commented:

> I've been on a high for the last month because of it, [Sammy] came into my room and I was in tears after it. It was like . . . [laughs] something I've wanted to do for so long. When I was younger I wanted to be a singer. It's . . . just acknowledgement that I can do this kind of thing, and it sounded semi-decent. I really, really enjoyed it. I wouldn't be lying if I said it was the best three days of my life, so yeah [laughs].

Cacofonix's experience in writing *Going Coastal* illustrates that while it would be easy to see songs that work through fiction and fantasy merely as being means of avoidance or escape from the isolation and experiential deprivation that imprisonment entails, by reaching for affinity with the experiences of others (in this case, heartbreak), they can also represent a form of oblique engagement with these prison-created problems. Sometimes, that engagement may be as much a product of unconscious need as of narrative reflexivity. If we commonly connect through stories, and prison denies people the raw materials with which to reflexively construct them, then fiction and fantasy may offer a partial solution, a creative means of rewriting punishment and its effects.

Conclusion

There is nothing particularly novel in the claim that processes of criminalisation and penalisation flatten and distort their subjects and that these symbolic mis/representations can have profound and

damaging effects, far beyond those intended. Indeed, Ievins (2019) has recently reminded us how, long before the advent of narrative criminology, Christie (1986) argued that:

> real experiences of harm and damage get flattened as they are retold for criminal justice purposes. They become a sort of formula story, a rigid yet pervasive way of thinking and talking about stereotyped characters and their actions. (Ievins, 2019: 283)

In her work exploring the narratives of men convicted of sex offences, Ievins argues that these narratives are not just mechanisms for 'constructing an ethical self in the shaming context of the prison; they are also outputs of that context, and as such they take us closer to or further from justice' (2019: 298).

We hope that the analysis above reveals how these three songs – and the much wider body of creative work from which they are drawn – might also contribute to exploring the relationships between narratives, the contexts and conditions of production and the pursuit of justice. Firstly, the songs help us to think about narratives, and indeed selfhood, in more expansive and creative ways that move beyond biographical (or what songwriters might call 'confessional') projects to include other kinds of story-making and self-making, including more playful forms. Secondly, though our focus here has been on lyrics more than sounds, the analysis confirms the need to further engage with the auditory and affective atmospheres of stories, especially when constructed in and mediated through song. Thirdly, they help us think about narratives in ways that encompass but move beyond the reflective (Laws, 2020), admitting and appreciating both affective aspects of how we produce and represent different versions of our selves.

In attending to these aspects of selves and reflecting on their representations in these songs, we are not making claims about their prison-based co-writers' identities. As we have argued here and in our prior article on songs as problem-solving devices (Crockett Thomas et al., 2020), we conceptualise both selves and songs as mutable, and as such, the interpretations of the songs offered here are not intended as definitive, authoritative or 'correct'. Rather, they reflect the event of the songs coming into an assemblage with a group of researchers from differing disciplines and with differing interpretations. As the songs travel into the world, they will form parts of new and different assemblages, mediating different relations with different audiences who are not only listening for different reasons but also 'listening out' for different things.

For us at least, it seems that the methodological and analytical moves we have discussed in this article are also a necessary part of narrative criminology further developing its critical, normative edge, in pursuit of justice. By attending to more diverse kinds of narratives like these songs, we learn more about the conditions and contexts of their production, and the practices that sustain or disrupt social and penal orderings. In particular, we learn more about what criminalisation, penalisation and incarceration do to people and to their stories. By thinking of these songs' affordances as problem-solving devices, we come to hear not just the pains and problems that punishment and incarceration create but also the imagination and creativity that people can discover, even in bleak contexts, when collaboration is enabled, when people craft new stories together and when they find some solidarity – even fleetingly – in doing so.

Authors' note

This article is based substantively on analytical and conceptual work undertaken by Phil Crockett Thomas who also wrote the first draft of this article and the working paper from which it was developed. Fergus McNeill developed the article further, before the other authors read and commented

on the draft. Fergus then completed pre- and post-submission revisions. More broadly, the learning generated in the Distant Voices project is the product of a much wider collaborative effort that includes our core group and the community of enquiry from which it is drawn. Although the responsibility for this article rests with the named authors, we wish to acknowledge our indebtedness to the core group and the community of enquiry.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Distant Voices began in 2017 with 3 years of funding from the UK Economic and Social Research Council [ES/P002536/1].
2. We use the form re/integration as a way of acknowledging that not all of those that criminal justice may seek to reintegrate have been meaningfully integrated before punishment (Carlen, 2012; Graham and McNeill, 2017: 433).
3. We use the term 'demo' here and throughout not to imply that all of these songs were intended to be further developed, for example, via studio production, but rather to signal that these recordings sometimes reflect the imperfect circumstances of their production; with little rehearsal, under pressure of time; with a limited range of instruments available; in environments that sometimes intruded via noise bleeds and so on.
4. For more extensive discussions of these workshop and the project design, see Crockett Thomas et al. (2020); McNeill and Urie (2020); and Urie et al. (2019).
5. Experienced session musicians are sensitive to the role they sometimes play in shaping their co-writer's material into a form of resolved narrative that ends on a 'high', a hopeful or otherwise positive note. This structure perhaps reflects the time constraints during a Vox session, which mean that usually only one song is produced per participant. As such, for many participants, there is perhaps more onus on that one song to contain all the structural elements of a coherent, pleasing or well-rounded narrative. Given an album's worth of songs to work with, leaving one song unresolved or entirely negatively focused might seem more possible, knowing there would be another to sit aside it. Creative-lead Louis Abbott suggests that this phenomenon might result from a combination of factors: the desire for musical variations in songs, the need to produce a finished product in a tight time frame and the desire not to 'leave' participants in a negative or chaotic state at the end of the session. This foregrounds firstly the role that care plays in co-writing these

songs, and secondly how the implicit understanding that a Vox Session should not be a re-traumatising experience may in some cases structure not just the session but also the songs.

6. During Vox sessions, we discussed with participants how they wished to be credited as co-writers, and how they wished to be referred to in research outputs, thus seeking informed consent as to how to balance the desire to assert authorship of the songs against risks of exposure (and labelling). We try to revisit this question, wherever possible, where songs are being shared in public, if we identify any significant risks for co-writers. Some choose to use versions of their own names; some choose to use pseudonyms. Here, we prefer not to identify which choices the co-writers made.

7. We're grateful to Sarah Kennedy whose PhD research first stimulated our thinking about the properties of sacred objects in sustaining hope during processes of desistance and reintegration.

8. See also our project podcast Castaway (2018) in which project participant 'S Code' explores similar ideas. https://www.voxliminis.co.uk/media/castaway/ on October 28, 2020, at 14:25:00.

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