Albur
Burns
Disses
Dozens
Heittää Herjaa
Janks
Rippins
Slaggings
Slams
Snaps
Stornelli
Uzbrauciens
Πείραγμα

janks \ˈjaŋkz\ n, pl, slang [Alabama]

definition:
jokes intended to directly insult the recipient by attacking personal attributes (such as physical appearance, intelligence, competency, socioeconomic status, familial and interpersonal relationships), often leading to verbal sparring

synonyms:
snaps, disses, slams, burns, jibes, digs, cut-downs, rippins, slaggings

examples:
<I'll cut you down so low, you'll have to hold a sign that says "don't spit, can't swim"> [Alabama]
<you're about as useful as a chocolate teapot> [Belfast]
<your face looks like the ass of a bird of prey> [Finland]

INTRODUCTION

Ben Kinsley + Jessica Langley + Jerstin Crosby

The **Janks Archive** project was born from confusion. One evening in October of 2012, the three of us were listening to filmmaker/archivist Harry Smith's audio recordings of poet Peter Orlovsky trying to remember songs from childhood. We started doing the same and ended up in a Yo-Mama joke battle. Jerstin was the clear winner of this exchange, and after mining his subconscious for every joke he could recall, we learned that he referred to these types of jokes as "janks." Jessica and Ben grew up in Ohio (northern Midwest) and had never heard this word. Jerstin, who is from Alabama (the "Deep South"), had assumed this was the universally accepted (English) term used to describe the act of trading insult jokes among friends.

Questions emerged from this exchange — Is this insult joke tradition a universal human behavior? Do the terms used to describe this ritual differ from place to place, even within the same country/language? Are the types of jokes/insults (i.e. format, theme, subject) site-specific to a place/region? What can be learned about a culture through what is considered insulting?

In the spirit of folk archivists like Alan Lomax or Harry Smith, who sought universality through collecting eccentric cultural artifacts and everyday ephemera, we decided to embark on a never-ending process of trying to answer these questions. Since 2012, we have travelled to 16 cities in 9 countries interviewing locals and documenting "janks." In each place we visit, we learn new terminology and new jokes.

To hone our research further we have established a rule about what we archive and what we don't. To be considered a "jank" the joke needs to be intended to directly insult another person in a face-to-face interaction. These jokes can attack personal attributes (such as physical appearance, intelligence, socioeconomic status, familial and interpersonal relationships, etc.), but they can't be directed at large groups of people or anyone who is not physically present at the time. We do not want to document or perpetuate racist/sexist/bigoted humor, however many good "janks" push the limits of acceptable topics, cultural taboos, and (importantly) our own comfort zones.

Race, class, gender, and the body can be spear points of contention but also provide rich mines for discussion of forbidden subjects in both art and humor. What Mikhail Bakhtin calls "unofficial elements of speech" — abuses, curses, profanities, and improprieties — allow proximity to discomfort and ideas that might be at odds with our values. The recent socio-political climate, particularly in the US and

Untitled (Forest Janks), 2016

[left to right] Translation from Romanian: Tall as a pine tree, stupid as a fence / collected: Vaasa, Finland (12-17-2015) / origin: common Romanian expression. | Translation from Latvian: Go pick boletes (mushrooms) / collected: Riga, Latvia (08-01-2016) / origin: traditional Latvian insult, equivalent of "get lost" or "buzz off" | Translation from Lithuanian: clung like a leaf to the ass / collected: Kaunas, Lithuania (01-10-2016) / origin: old and common Lithuanian joke – a way to call someone annoying | Translation from Finnish: Your hair is like a forest, not as thick but as full of life / collected: Vaasa, Finland (12-19-2015) / origin: told to him by his father when he was a child.

Europe, has given rise to political correctness and inclusivity in language while, at the same time, a surge of xenophobia and nationalism. What can be learned from vernacular humor (particularly insult humor) as a model for how to deal with conflict symbolically and across boundaries?

The Janks Archive project is driven by the desire to increase understanding of an oral tradition which on the surface seems antagonistic, but may ultimately be an invitation for exchange and mutual understanding.

This zine is a compilation of readings and research that we have collected over the course of this complex and complicated study. We've included selections from academic texts, reference material, images, and jokes that have influenced our thinking about verbal abuses and joking relationships. We have scanned these excerpts without permission, however we have included author/publisher credits in the hopes that this will lead the inquisitive to the complete texts for further reading.

"The man who first flung a word of abuse at his enemy instead of a spear was the founder of civilization."

-Sigmund Freud quoting an unknown source (1893)

Collected in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania / September 2014

THREE THEORIES OF HUMOUR

In an effort to approach this nicely impossible object, I have been filling much of my time lately reading books on humour and laughter. As a glance at my bibliography will reveal, it is a surprisingly vast field, and much of the empirical research is extremely pleasurable. The further one looks, the more there is to see, not so much in philosophy, but more in the areas of history, literary history, theology and history of religion, sociology and anthropology.

There are many explanations of laughter and humour, that John Morreall does well to distill into three theories: the superiority theory, the relief theory and the incongruity theory.[1]

1 In the first theory, represented by Plato, Aristotle, Quintillian and, at the dawn of the modern era, Hobbes, we laugh from feelings of superiority over other people, from 'suddaine Glory arising from suddaine Conception of some Eminency in our selves, by Comparison with the Infirmityes of others, or with our owne formerly'. Laughter is that 'passion, which hath no name', which would be forbidden to the virtuous guardians of Plato's imagined philosophical city. It is the superiority theory that dominates the philosophical tradition until the eighteenth century, and we shall have recourse to it in the discussion of ethnic humour.

2 The relief theory emerges in the nineteenth century in the work of Herbert Spencer, where laughter is explained as a release of pent-up nervous energy, but the theory is best known in the version given in Freud's 1905 book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, where the energy that is relieved and discharged in laughter provides pleasure because it allegedly economizes upon energy that would ordinarily be used to contain or repress psychic activity.

3 The incongruity theory can be traced to Francis Hutcheson's *Reflections Upon Laughter* from 1750, but is elaborated in related, but distinct, ways in Kant, as we shall see presently, Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard. As James Russell Lowell writes in 1870, 'Humour in its first analysis is a perception of the incongruous'. Humour is produced by the experience of a felt incongruity between what we know or expect to be the case, and what actually takes place in the joke, gag, jest or blague: 'Did you see me at Princess Diana's funeral? I was the one who started the Mexican wave'. Although I will discuss the other theories below, I would like to begin by exploring this idea of humour as incongruity.

Tiwi society is established on what a non-Tiwi might consider an absurdity. These north Australian Aborigines make no connection between intercourse and pregnancy. The mother is the sole biological source of the child. The mother's husband controls his wives and his children and of these he particularly values his daughters. Women, like money with us, are the main means of exchange. It is not necessary to detail the system. The result is that old men have young wives and young men marry crones.

Where there are old men with young wives and young men without sex mates there will be adultery. A Tiwi elder accuses a young man of adultery by coming to the center of the village, preferably on a feast day so he can be sure of a large crowd, and calling the offender out. The old man is painted from head to toe in white. In one hand he carries some ceremonial spears and in the other hunting spears. A crowd arranges itself in an ellipse with the old man at one elongated end and the young man at the other. Everyone in the village, and often outsiders too, are present – men, women, children, dogs. They sit, stand, move about, according to their excitement. The young man is naked, except for a few strokes of white coloring applied to his flanks. The more white he wears the more defiant he declares himself to be. Perhaps he carries a spear or two or only a throwing stick. The old man begins a harangue of about 20 minutes duration. He details the young man's worthlessness and ingratitude – talking not only of the offence at hand but the whole life of the young man. The old man stamps his feet and chews his beard: he puts on a good show. The young man shows his good form by taking in this verbal assault in silence. When the harangue is over the old man throws a hunting spear at the young man. The young man dodges – which is not hard to do because the old man is old and he is throwing from 40 to 50 feet away. But if the young man moves too far away at his end of the ellipse the crowd jeers at him. If the old man is wild in his throws, he is jeered. The trial/duel continues until the young man has dodged enough spears to prove his prowess, but not too many to appear insolent. Allowing himself to be hit takes great skill and the crowd enjoys a young man who takes a spear in the fleshy part of the thigh or the upper arm. There is much blood but no permanent harm. The young man's bravery and humility have been demonstrated while the old man's authority and dignity have been repaired. The crowd, entertained, happily applauds both parties to the dispute.

Such is the Tiwi ritual combat according to the rules. But sometimes a young man is extremely defiant. He dodges too many of the old man's spears, or he answers the harangue, or he returns the old man's fire. In such cases the old man is joined by more and more old men, while still others restrain the relatives of the young man. Spears are thrown in volleys and the young man is driven from the village permanently, seriously wounded, or killed.

The Tiwi trial does not determine "right" or "wrong." It doesn't matter whether in fact the young man is guilty of adultery, or if there are extenuating circumstances. The trial is a test of the young man's willingness to confirm the authority of the old man. Whenever that authority offers itself for confirmation, Tiwi custom demands submission. Tiwi society rests on the authority of the old, and the only capital offence is defiance of that authority. The crowd enjoys the spectacle which makes the law tangible. If the ceremony were a true trial with a doubtful outcome, Tiwi society would collapse.

Performance Theory / Richard Schechner / Routledge Classics, 2003

Appendix A

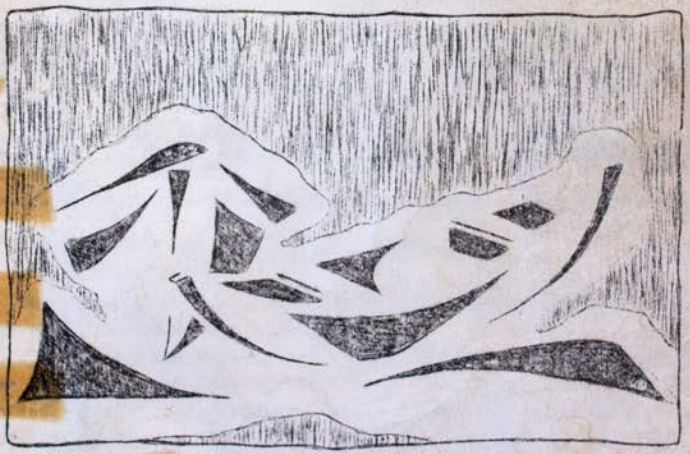
Some Well-Known Black Proverbs and Sayings

1. You never miss yo water till yo well run dry.
2. Grits ain't groceries, eggs ain't poultry, and Mona Lisa was a man. (I must be telling the truth since grits *are* groceries, eggs *are* poultry and Mona Lisa sure wasn't a man!)
3. You ain't got a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of. (you are in poor financial straits)
4. If I'm lying, I'm flying. (proving truth: I must not be lying, if I were, I'd be flying)
5. You so dumb you can't throw rain water out of a boot, and the directions say how.
6. The blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice. (he or she must be fine, he or she is so ripe and sweet; also suggestive of sexuality and sensual power)
7. What goes around comes around. (you reap what you sow)
8. If I tell you a hen dip snuff, look under its wing and find a whole box. (proving truth and claim of infallibility by speaker)
9. Study long, you study wrong. (listen to first impulses, because lengthy deliberations are liable to be inaccurate)
10. The eagle flies on Friday. (eagle, symbolizing money; statement commemorates payday)
11. Let the door hit you where the good Lord split you. (nasty command to leave, euphemism of "split you" avoiding profanity)
12. A hard head make a soft behind. (being stubborn, refusing to listen can make you pay a stiff price)
13. If you make yo bed hard, you gon have to lie in it.
14. It was so quiet you could hear a rat piss on cotton.
15. Pretty is as pretty does. (you are known by your actions)
16. Action speak louder than words. (same as above, this proverb is more common among younger blacks today)
17. You don't believe fat meat is greasy. (signifyin on fools who insist on adhering to certain beliefs or opinions in the face of logical evidence to the contrary)
18. Tight as Dick's hatband. (financially stingy, refusing to share or give)

For an outstanding collection and analysis of proverbs, see Jack L. Daniel, "Towards an Ethnography of Afro American Proverbial Usage," *Black Lines*, Winter 1972, pp. 3–12.

Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America / Geneva Smitherman / Wayne State University Press, 1977

MURMURSUNDS ALLEHANDA



Julnummer 1958

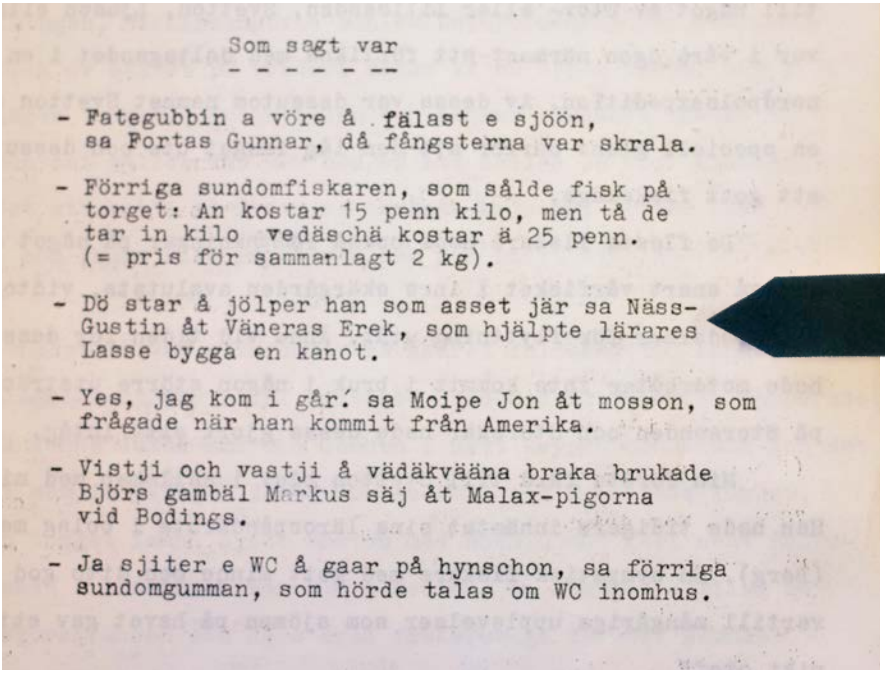
a

MURMURSUNDS

ALLEHANDA

ÅRGÅNG 14

JULNUMMER 1967



Som sagt var
- - - - - --

- Fategubbin a vöre å fälast e sjöön, sa Portas Gunnar, då fångsterna var skrala.

- Förriga sundomfiskaren, som sålde fisk på torget: An kostar 15 penn kilo, men tå de tar in kilo vedäschä kostar ä 25 penn. (= pris för sammanlagt 2 kg).

- Dö star å jölper han som asset järr sa Näss-Gustin åt Väneras Erek, som hjälpte lärares Lasse bygga en kanot.

- Yes, jag kom i går, sa Moipe Jon åt mosson, som frågade när han kommit från Amerika.

- Vistji och vastji å vädäkvääna braka brukade Björs gambäl Markus säj åt Malax-pigorna vid Bodings.

- Ja sjiter e WC å gaar på hynschon, sa förriga sundomgumman, som hörde talas om WC inomhus.

Murmursunds Allehanda was an annual Swedish language newsletter from a small village in Finland. These two pages are entries written by Johannes Sundin (1894-1982).

"Som sagt var" (above) is a list of colorful sayings. Third in the list is an insult that translates to "You are helping the one who stands and does nothing."

"Skällsorden än en gång" (right) is a list of insulting words, many of which are no longer in common use. For instance "Syltsock" is a way of calling someone lazy because they don't pull up their socks (saggy socks). "Syltbyx" has a similar meaning and tranlsates to "saggy trousers."

Skällsorden än en gång
nxnxnxnxnxnxnxnxnxnx

Här ännu en tilläggsförteckning:

Ambraling	håsjarin
kontknagarin	kalkenack
vindklöuv	plosomick
håsjon	sjyylon
kålnaggon	vorming
rivejäänä	låbbsäck
vingälkena	beendkålvin
manamärr	flatron
stölinjin	repelin
vriinarin	ampäbrack
lavsjooron	pjasabrack
flitron	mollon
syltbyx	triplon
knölhåppon	kaangälbytton
tjyvvitjarin	påämbälhovo
röitesäddjä	strömingsmjölkarin
klytbontjin	lyytfistjin
knärrvippon	rakodantin
frasspjaldrarin	syltsock
tomskov	fliinarin
klöuvnöt	kånelin
köttharvon	rallkankon
liingonpelerin	

J.S.

Fylleristraff i medlet av 1800-talet

En gubbe från Sundom pliktade en gång för fyllon och måste stå på knäna i kyrkan.

Detta var enligt hans åsikt alltför förnedrande, så han for till Vörå i smedlära.

En annan gubbe från samma grand råkade också plikta för sin fyllo. Men han klarade sig genom att betala böterna, eftersom han var självägande bonde.

(Enligt Aug. Sundbäcks uppteckningar).

at must have a deep familiarity with the institutions, lore, and values that lie behind them in order to get the jokes they are telling. A similarly deep familiarity with institutions, lore, and values is necessary in knowing an insult when we see one.

Let us explore this juxtaposition of jokes and insults a little. Earlier we explored Ted Cohen's observation that a joke is a successful transaction only when the teller and the listener implicitly acknowledge a shared background. This implicit acknowledgment is the foundation, he says, of a kind of intimacy that develops when one's joke succeeds. This is what we mean when we say that when a joke falls flat, the teller may assume that the listener doesn't share the teller's "sense of humor."

In order to get a better idea of what Cohen is talking about, let us look at a joke told to me once by a colleague:

> The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit planned, finally, to take a vacation, and were sitting around trying to decide where to go. "Mesopotamia," the Father volunteered. "It's a beautiful place, there between the Tigris and Euphrates. I haven't been there since I kicked Adam and Eve out of the Garden." "No, no," said the Son. "I think we should go to Bethlehem. I was too young to appreciate it when I left, and I'd like to see what it is like. After all, it is my place of birth."
>
> They both looked to the Holy Spirit.
>
> "What do you say?" they asked in unison.
>
> "Rome," the Holy Spirit replied. "I've never been there."

Clearly, in order to begin to get this joke, you need to be familiar with the doctrine of the Trinity in its conventional Father–Son–Holy Spirit form (which is in only one passage in scripture, Matthew 28:19) and with the stories told in Genesis and Matthew or Luke (none of which is mentioned in the telling). It also helps to know where the Tigris and Euphrates are. There may be some readers who don't know these things, and so don't laugh. Notice, too, the set up at the beginning. You know this will be a three-step joke with the Holy Spirit getting the punchline. This joke has what Kenneth Burke calls rhetorical form: the arousal of expectations and their fulfillment. The form and the content are inseparable, too, which you can see once you start playing around with the order or attribution of lines: it would not make sense to have the Son being nostalgic for Mesopotamia. The joke's premise, taken out of con-

text, is, however, far from being theologically correct, as it posits not only the three persons of the godhead being in need of a vacation but disagreeing with one another. The three persons of the Trinity seem more like Homeric (or perhaps Lucianic) gods than the God referred to in the Nicene Creed. But let us consider all that just an instance of lighthearted anthropomorphism.

The punchline is another matter, however. This is not a joke that could be characterized as pro–Roman Catholic or pro-pope, as the Catholic Church has long held itself and its pope to be inspired by the Holy Spirit, the ultimate source of the church's authority and the pope's infallibility. It is, pretty clearly, a Protestant joke.

Whether it is a good joke is a complicated matter. Do you have to agree with what the Holy Spirit says to think it funny? If you are a devout Roman Catholic, you might think it not very funny and in rather bad taste if a Protestant, knowing that you are Catholic, told you this joke. On the other hand, if one Catholic told it to another Catholic, both might laugh, but more because of the incongruities in it—especially the incongruous Holy Spirit saying he'd never been to Rome. If a Catholic told it to a Protestant, the Protestant would laugh both because of the incongruities and because he never thought the Holy Spirit had ever been in Rome. If a Protestant told it to another Protestant, the joke would not only be funny, it would be an implicit way of rejecting the authority of the Catholic Church and, more, of the pope himself. That's what the Reformation was all about. And that, if you keep in mind the strife the Reformation brought to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, makes it a darker sort of humor altogether. In short, whether or not it is a good joke—indeed, just what the joke is—is a deeply situational matter embracing the teller, the audience, their shared beliefs and values, and the propriety of the joke.

The matter of propriety points up one of the intersections between jokes and insults and reminds us of some of the observations we made about situation at the beginning of this book. If the joke were told by a Protestant to a devout Catholic, we would be seeing a misplaced presumption—a violation, perhaps, of the sort of intimacy Cohen writes about—and so also a sort of social gaffe, a faux pas. The joke would probably not work because the Catholic didn't share the Protestant's "sense of humor," and the Catholic's failure to appreciate the joke, much less laugh at it, might be perfectly valid. The Catho-

Limerick Slang: An Illustrated Guide / Hugh McMahon / 2015

dust off their caps after the besiegers have fired their cannons. We shall have to revert to this kind of thing when treating of the agonistic, or even the play, element in war. What interests us at this juncture is the regular "joute de jactance".

It need hardly be said that these practices are closely related to the potlatch. Forms mid-way between boasting-matches and competitions in wealth (or what we might call "squandering-matches"), are to be found in the following, as reported by Malinowski. Foodstuffs, he says, are not valued among the Trobriand Islanders solely on account of their usefulness, but also as a means for parading wealth. Yam-houses are so constructed that one can compute from outside how much they contain, and make a shrewd guess as to the quality of the fruit by looking through the wide interstices between the beams. The best fruits are the most conspicuous, and particularly fine specimens are framed, decorated with paint, and hung up outside the yam-stores. In villages where a high-ranking chieftain resides, the commoners have to cover their store-houses with coconut leaves, so as not to compete with his.[1] In Chinese lore we find an echo of such customs in the tale of the bad King Shou-sin, who caused a mountain of foodstuffs to be piled up on which chariots could be driven, and a pond to be dug full of wine for sailing boats on.[2]

Competition for honour may also take, as in China, an inverted form by turning into a contest in politeness. The special word for this—*jang*—means literally "to yield to another"; hence one demolishes one's adversary by superior manners, making way for him or giving him precedence. The courtesy-match is nowhere as formalized, perhaps, as in China, but it is to be met with all over the world.[3] We might call it an inverted boasting-match, since the reason for this display of civility to others lies in an intense regard for one's own honour.

Formal contests in invective and vituperation were widespread in pre-Islamic Arabia, and their connection with the contests in destruction of property, so prominent a feature of the potlatch, is particularly striking. We have already mentioned the custom called *mu'āqara*, where the competing parties cut the tendons of their camels. The basic form of the verb to which *mu'āqara* belongs

[1] Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, p. 168.
[2] Granet, *Chinese Civilization*, p. 202.
[3] Cf. my *Waning of the Middle Ages*, ch. 2.

in the third degree, means to wound or to mutilate. Now among the significations of *mu'āqara* we also find: "conviciis et dictis satyricis certavit cum aliquo"—to fight with invective and opprobious language; which reminds us of the Egyptian gypsies whose destroying-match bore the name of *vantardise*. But besides the term *mu'āqara* the pre-Islamic Arabs had two other technical terms for the slanging-match and its allied forms, namely, *munāfara* and *mufākhara*. It will be noted that all three words are formed in the same way. They are verbal substantives derived from the so-called third form of the verb, and this is perhaps the most interesting feature of the whole business. For Arabic possesses a special verbal form which can give to any root the sense of *competing in something* or excelling somebody in something. I am almost tempted to call it a kind of *verbal superlative* of the root itself. In addition, the so-called "sixth form", derived from the third, expresses the idea of reciprocal action. Thus the root *hasaba*—to count, to enumerate—becomes *muhāsaba*, a competition in good repute; *kathara*—to excel in numbers, to outnumber—becomes *mukāthara*, a competition in numbers. But to return to our point: *mufākhara* comes from a root meaning "to boast", while *munāfara* comes from the semantic field of "defeat" and "rout".

Honour, virtue, praise and glory are, in Arabic, semantically akin, just as the equivalent ideas in Greek gravitate round ἀρετή.[1] With the Arabs the central idea is *'irḍ*, which can best be translated by "honour", provided that we take it in an extremely concrete sense. The highest demand of a noble life is the obligation to preserve your honour safe and unsullied. Your adversary, on the other hand, is supposed to be animated by a consuming desire to damage and demolish your *'irḍ* with an insult. Here too, as in Greece, any physical, social, or moral excellence constitutes a basis for honour and glory, hence is an element of virtue. The Arab glories in his victories and his courage, he takes an inordinate pride in the numerousness of his clan or his children, in his liberality, his authority, his strength, his eyesight, or the beauty of his hair. All this makes up his *'izz*, *'izza*, i.e. his excellence, superiority over others, hence his authority and prestige.

The abuse and derision of your adversary, which is carried on with particular zeal when you are extolling your own *'izz*, is

[1]Cf. Bichr Farès, *L'Honneur chez les Arabes avant l'Islam, Etude de Sociologie*, Paris, 1933; ed. Encyclopédie de l'Islam, s.v. *mufākhara*.

properly called *hidja'*. Contests for honour, the *mufākhara*, used to be held at fixed times, simultaneously with the yearly fairs and after the pilgrimages. Whole tribes or clans might compete, or simply individuals. Whenever two groups happened to meet they opened the proceedings with a match of honour. There was an official spokesman for each group, the *sha'ir*—poet or orator—who played an important part. The custom clearly had a ritual character. It served to keep alive the powerful social tensions that held the pre-Islamic culture of Arabia together. But the onset of Islam opposed this ancient practice by giving it a new religious trend or reducing it to a courtly game. In pagan times the *mufākhara* frequently ended in murder and tribal war.

The *munāfara* is primarily a form of contest in which the two parties dispute their claims to honour before a judge or arbitrator: the verb from which the word is derived has the connotations of decision and judgement. A stake is set, or a theme for discussion fixed; for instance, who is of the noblest descent?—the prize being a hundred camels.[1] As in a lawsuit the parties stand up and sit down in turns while, to make the proceedings more impressive, each is supported by witnesses acting under oath. Later, in Islamic times, the judges frequently refused to act: the litigious pair were derided as being "two fools desiring evil". Sometimes the *munāfara* were held in rhyme. Clubs were formed for the express purpose first of staging a *mufākhara* (match of honour), then a *munāfara* (mutual vilification) which often ended in the sword.[2]

Greek tradition has numerous traces of ceremonial and festal slanging-matches. The word *iambos* is held by some to have meant originally "derision", with particular reference to the public skits and scurrilous songs which formed part of the feasts of Demeter and Dionysus. The biting satire of Archilochus is supposed to have developed out of this slating in public. Thus, from an immemorial custom of ritual nature, iambic poetry became an instrument of public criticism. Further, at the feasts of Demeter and Apollo, men and women chanted songs of mutual derision, which may have given rise to the literary theme of the diatribe against womankind.

Old Germanic tradition, too, affords a very ancient vestige of

[1] G. W. Freytag, *Einleitung in das Studium der arabischen Sprache bis Mohammed*, p. 184, Bonn, 1861.

[2] *Kitāb al Aghāni*, Cairo, 1905–6, iv, 8; viii, 109 *sq.*; xv, 52, 57.

the slanging-match in the story of Alboin at the Court of the Gepidæ, evidently rescued by Paulus Diaconus from the old epics.[1] The Langobard chieftains have been invited to a royal banquet by Turisind, King of the Gepidæ. When the king falls to lamenting his son Turismond, slain in battle against the Langobards, another of his sons stands up and begins to bait the Langobards with taunts (*iniuriis lacessere coepit*). He calls them white-footed mares, adding that they stink. Whereupon one of the Langobards answers: "Go to the field of Asfeld, there you will surely learn how valiantly those 'mares' of yours can put about them, where your brother's bones lie scattered like an old nag's in the meadow". The king restrains the two from coming to blows, and "then they bring the banquet to a merry end" (*laetis animis convivium peragunt*). These last words clearly reveal the playful character of the altercation. It is undoubtedly a specimen of the slanging-match. Old Norse literature has it in a special form called *mannjafnaðr*—the comparing of men. It is part of the Jul-feast, as is also the competition in swearing vows. The Saga of Orvar Odd gives a detailed example. Orvar Odd is staying incognito at the court of a foreign king and takes on a wager, with his head at stake, to beat two of the king's men at drinking. As each proffers the drinking-horn to his rival, he boasts of some doughty exploit of war at which he, but not the other, was present, because the latter was sitting in shameful peace with the women at the hearth.[2] Sometimes two kings try to outdo one another in boastful language. One of the Edda songs, the *Harbardslojod*, deals with a contest of this kind between Thor and Odin.[3] To the same genre we must also add Loki's disputations with the Ases at a drinking-bout.[4] The ritual nature of all these contests is revealed by the express mention of the fact that the hall where the wassailing and disputing are held is a "great place of peace" (*griðastaðr mikill*), and that in it nobody is allowed to do any violence to another whatever he says. Even if these instances are literary redactions of a theme harking back to a remote past, the ritualistic background is too obvious for them to be passed off as specimens of a later poetic fiction. The Old Erse legends of MacDatho's swine and the Feast of Bricreud have a similar "comparing of men". De Vries has no doubt of the religious origin of the

[1] *Historia Langobardorum* (Mon. Germ. Hist. SS. Langobard.), i, 24.
[2] *Edda* i, Thule i, 1928, No. 29, cf. x, pp. 298, 313.
[3] *Edda* i, Thule ii, No. 9.
[4] No. 8.

Mannjafnaðr.[1] How much weight was attached to obloquy of this kind is clearly illustrated in the case of Harald Gormsson, who wanted to undertake a punitive expedition against Iceland on account of a single lampoon.

Beowulf, in the saga of that name, while staying at the court of the Danish king, is challenged by Unferd with taunts to recount his former exploits. The Old Germanic languages have a special word for this ceremony of mutual bragging and execration, be it the prelude to armed combat in connection with a tournament, or only part of the entertainment at a feast. They call it *gelp, gelpan.* The substantive, in Old English, means glory, pomp, arrogance, etc., and in Middle High German, clamour, mockery, scorn. The English dictionary still gives "to applaud, to praise" as obsolete meanings of "yelp", now reduced to the yapping of dogs; and "vainglory" for the substantive.[2]

Old French has the approximate equivalent of *gelp, gelpan* in *gab, gaber,* of uncertain origin. *Gab* means mockery and derision, particularly as a prelude to combat or as part of a banquet. *Gaber* is considered an art. On their visit to the Emperor at Constantinople, Charlemagne and his twelve paladins find twelve couches made ready after the meal, upon which, at Charlemagne's suggestion, they hold a *gaber* before going to sleep. He himself gives the lead. Next comes Roland, who accepts willingly, saying: "Let king Hugo lend me his horn and I will stand outside the town and blow so hard that the gates will fly off their hinges. And if the king attacks me I will spin him round so fast that his ermine cloak will vanish and his moustache catch fire".[3]

Geoffroi Gaimar's rhymed chronicle of King William Rufus of England shows him indulging in similar braggadocio with Walter Tyrel, shortly before the latter's fatal bow-shot in the New Forest that cost the king his life.[4] Later, in the Middle Ages, this convention of boasting and scoffing seems to have dwindled to an affair between heralds at tournaments. They glorify the feats of arms performed by their masters, praise their ancestry and some-

times mock the ladies. On the whole heralds are a despised tribe, a rabble of braggers and vagabonds.[1] The 16th century still knew the *gaber* as a social diversion, which at bottom it had always been despite its origins in ritual. The Duke of Anjou, it is said, found this game mentioned in *Amadis de Gaule* and decided to play it with his courtiers. But Bussy d'Amboise was loth to answer the Duke back. So a rule was made that all parties should be equal and no word be taken ill (just as in Aegir's hall where Loki starts a slanging-match). Nevertheless the Duke's *gab*-party becomes the occasion of a despicable intrigue through which the perfidious Anjou brings about Bussy's downfall.[2]

Billingsgate
noun
: coarsely abusive language

From the time of the Roman occupation until the early 1980s, Billingsgate was a fish market in London, England, notorious for the crude language that resounded through its stalls. In fact, the fish merchants of Billingsgate were so famous for their swearing that their feats of vulgar language were recorded in British chronicler Raphael Holinshed's 1577 account of King Leir (which was probably Shakespeare's source for King Lear). In Holinshed's volume, a messenger's language is said to be "as bad a tongue … as any oyster-wife at Billingsgate hath." By the middle of the 17th century, billingsgate had become a byword for foul language. *(from Merriam Webster)*

opposed to all that was ready-made and completed, to all pretense at immutability, sought a dynamic expression; it demanded ever changing, playful, undefined forms. All the symbols of the carnival idiom are filled with this pathos of change and renewal, with the sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities. We find here a characteristic logic, the peculiar logic of the "inside out" (*à l'envers*), of the "turnabout," of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings. A second life, a second world of folk culture is thus constructed; it is to a certain extent a parody of the extracarnival life, a "world inside out." We must stress, however, that the carnival is far distant from the negative and formal parody of modern times. Folk humor denies, but it revives and renews at the same time. Bare negation is completely alien to folk culture.

Our introduction has merely touched upon the exceptionally rich and original idiom of carnival forms and symbols. The principal aim of the present work is to understand this half-forgotten idiom, in so many ways obscure to us. For it is precisely this idiom

tical direction and acquired an intrinsic, universal character and depth. In this new form abuse contributed to the creation of the free carnival atmosphere, to the second, droll aspect of the world.

Profanities and oaths (*jurons*) are in many ways similar to abusive language. They too invaded billingsgate speech. Profanities must also be considered a special genre with the same attributes as abuse—isolation from context and intrinsic character. Profanities and oaths were not initially related to laughter, but they were excluded from the sphere of official speech because they broke its norms; they were therefore transferred to the familiar sphere of the marketplace. Here in the carnival atmosphere they acquired the nature of laughter and became ambivalent.

The fate of other patterns of speech, for instance of various indecent expressions, was similar to that of the genres previously discussed. The familiar language of the marketplace became a reservoir in which various speech patterns excluded from official intercourse could freely accumulate. In spite of their genetic differences, all these genres were filled with the carnival spirit, transformed their primitive verbal functions, acquired a general tone of laughter, and became, as it were, so many sparks of the carnival bonfire which renews the world.

We shall later discuss the peculiar verbal forms of the marketplace. Let us here merely stress in conclusion that all these genres and patterns of speech exercised a powerful influence on Rabelais' literary style.

Rabelais and His World / Mikhail Bakhtin / Indiana University Press, 1984

from the one to the other is perfectly legitimate. Praise and abuse are, so to speak, the two sides of the same coin. If the right side is praise, the wrong side is abuse, and vice versa. The billingsgate idiom is a two-faced Janus. The praise, as we have said, is ironic and ambivalent. It is on the brink of abuse; the one leads to the other, and it is impossible to draw the line between them. Though divided in form they belong to the same body, or to the two bodies in one, which abuses while praising and praises while abusing. This is why in familiar billingsgate talk abusive words, especially indecent ones, are used in the affectionate and complimentary sense. (We shall further analyze many examples from Rabelais.) This grotesque language, particularly in its oldest form, was oriented toward the world and toward all the world's phenomena in their condition of unfinished metamorphosis: the passing from night to morning, from winter to spring, from the old to the new, from death to birth. Therefore, this talk showers both compliments and curses. Perhaps our example does not clearly typify this, but its ambivalence raises no doubt. This ambivalence determines the organic and spontaneous character of the change from praise to abuse and back to praise again, as well as the uncertainty as to whom the talk is addressed.[19]

We shall resume this topic of simultaneous praise and abuse in Chapter 6. This phenomenon is reflected in imagery and is extremely important for the understanding of entire periods of the development of thought. This development has not as yet been analyzed, but in a preliminary and rather simplified way we

[19] At close range, this many-faced person is the crowd which surrounds the barker's booth, and also the many-faced reader. Praise and abuse are showered on this person, for some in the audience may be the representatives of the old, dying world and ideology—agelasts, that is, men who do not know how to laugh, hypocrites, slanderers who live in darkness; others are the representatives of a new world, a world of light, laughter, and truth. Together they form one people, dying and renewed, and this people is abused and praised simultaneously. But this interpretation is at the closest range. In the longer view, beyond the crowd, there is the whole world, unfinished, uncompleted, which generates in dying and is born to die.

“Apparently ‘toadstool’ was an accepted term of abuse in the 17th century: William Penn in the hot flush of his then recent religious conversion denounced the Vice-Chancellor of Oxford as 'Thou poor mushroom!’ - a form of address that a Russian would surely misconstrue as a term of endearment.”

-MUSHROOMS, RUSSIA AND HISTORY: VOL. 1 by Valentina Pavlovna Wasson and R. Gordon Wasson

chological hay could be made from how this reflected the changing role of women in society and the work place. These days, most men I know prefer women to have a curvier, reasonably fit body, although most women I know would still prefer to be "too" thin.

But the face has always attracted an admirer's first glances, especially the eyes, which can be so smoldery and eloquent, and throughout the ages people have emphasized their facial features with makeup. Archaeologists have found evidence of Egyptian perfumeries and beauty parlors dating to 4,000 B.C., and makeup paraphernalia going back to 6,000 B.C. The ancient Egyptians preferred green eye shadow topped with a glitter made from crushing the iridescent carapaces of certain beetles; kohl eye liner and mascara; blue-black lipstick; red rouge; and fingers and feet stained with henna. They shaved their eyebrows and drew in false ones. A fashionable Egyptian woman of those days outlined the veins on her breasts in blue and coated her nipples with gold. Her nail polish signaled social status, red indicating the highest. Men also indulged in elaborate potions and beautifiers; and not only for a night out: Tutankhamen's tomb included jars of makeup and beauty creams for his use in the afterlife. Roman men adored cosmetics, and commanders had their hair coiffed and perfumed and their nails lacquered before they went into battle. Cosmetics appealed even more to Roman women, to one of whom Martial wrote in the first century A.D., "While you remain at home, Galla, your hair is at the hairdresser's; you take out your teeth at night and sleep tucked away in a hundred cosmetic boxes—even your face does not sleep with you. Then you wink at men under an eyebrow you took out of a drawer that same morning." A second-century Roman physician invented cold cream, the formula for which has changed little since then. We may remember from the Old Testament that Queen Jezebel painted her face before embarking on her wicked ways, a fashion she learned from the high-toned Phoenicians in about 850 B.C. In the eighteenth century, European women were willing to eat Arsenic Complexion Wafers to make their skin whiter; it poisoned the hemoglobin in the blood so that they developed a fragile, lunar whiteness. Rouges often contained such dangerous metals as lead and mercury, and when used as lip-

A Natural History of the Senses / Diane Ackerman / Vintage, 1990

narian 1, 13, 19, 21, etc.)—or in his repetition of "rhetorical questions" (7, 12, etc.) or exclamations (10). And what of his "eye-witness" details: Antony casting aside his man's toga, throwing up in his own lap the "gobbets of food and drink," the riotous party in Pompey's house? Cicero was, clearly, not there; but this is good stuff!

It is not only collective expectations—of everything from topics to sentence structure—that Cicero exploits, however. He also taps into some of the deeper recesses of the social presumptions held by his listeners: the presumption that social rank is significant, that honor can be attained or lost, that the opinions of others are important and one's reputation matters greatly, that there are bonds of intimacy that are crucial yet fragile, that prestige can be measured by one's family ties, good looks, and financial security; that, in short, dignity and status are at the core of both domestic and public life. These are, of course, a different sort of expectation—not just of what is going to happen, but of how one ought to comport oneself, and why it should matter. And finally, we should bear in mind that Cicero's exploitation of his audience's expectations is calculated, arranged, and performed with consummate skill, and not just a matter of intuition or of guile.

All Those Nauseous Epigrams of Martial

This title is from the end of Byron's *Don Juan*, canto 1, stanza 43 (from 1818), after which (in 44 and 45) he goes on to remark on the absurdity of relegating epigrams by Martial deemed obscene to an appendix or special sequestered section in then available editions. Byron expresses hope that someday

> some less rigid editor shall stoop
> To call them back into their separate cages,
> Instead of standing all together,
> Like garden gods—and not so decent either.

I was struck, when I read these lines years ago, by the thought that things hadn't changed much a century and a half (at the time) later. In widely used Loeb Classical Library editions of such poets as Martial, Catullus, and Juvenal, which printed the Latin text on the left-hand page and a rendering into English on the right-hand page, I and my fellow students often found Latin on both sides—a clear signal that those

were the truly interesting passages. And so only the good Latinists in my college had access to the "lascivious" parts of those poets that we were not allowed—or at least not encouraged—to read. Happily, this is no longer the case; and as the Loeb editors have decided to "tell it like it is," I feel free here to do the same.

Marcus Valerius Martialis was born, in Spain, about a century after Cicero's death (c. 40–104 CE); migrated, like many of his contemporaries (Quintilian, for one) to Rome; and by gaining the support of influential patrons was able to move in upper-class Roman circles and to become a well-known and widely admired poet. Indeed, he was made an honorary member of the Equestrian Order, and, as such, had opportunity to mingle with members of the senate and, on occasion, with courtiers in the imperial court. In the 80s and 90s his poems were recognized by booksellers in Rome as commercially viable, and he was able to publish twelve carefully constructed booklets (*libelli*) of his epigrams for consumption and appreciation by upper-class readers (Pliny the Younger, for one) in and about Rome.

Not all of his epigrams (short—sometimes not so short—verse compositions so called because originally made up to be engraved on various objects) are obscene. Many of them are generic portraits of the simple life of his country of birth, favorite places, and what poets have to endure. However, many of them, not all of them "nauseous," are quite nasty attacks on various figures of Roman society built around the very loci of invective we looked at in Cicero: "embarrassing family origin," for instance, at book 1.81 ("You know that you are slave-born, Sosibianus, and you blandly / admit it when you call your father 'sir.'"); lowly occupations (3.7, 11.14, 4.86 [fishmongers], or 11.5 and 11.6 [pimps]), ugliness (e.g., 1.10, 2.33, 2.35, 3.39, 3.42, and 3.72, etc.); "eccentricity of dress" (5.23, etc.); "squandering one's patrimony" (9.82); gluttony (3.17, 5.70, 7.20, 8.23, etc.), even "oratorical ineptitude" (8.7, for instance). And, of course, there are scores that have to do with drunkenness (see, e.g., 1.87, 2.73, and 11.70) and aberrant sexual behavior (as in, e.g., 1.34, 1.90, 2.51, etc.). We will examine some of these in due course.

More striking, in the present instance, are some that suggest that Martial had in mind the same Cicero as the one we saw before. For instance, book 3.66 (I have used here Shackleton-Bailey's prose translations, with various revisions):

> Antony committed a crime equal to the weapon of Pharos. Both cut off a sacred head. The one, Rome, was yours when you joyfully celebrated laureled triumphs, the other when you spoke. Yet, Antony's case is worse than Pothinus's [who murdered Pompey]: he did the deed for his master, Antony for himself.

Or book 5.69:

> Antony, you have no stone to throw at Pharian Pothinus. Cicero makes you more guilty than your [proscription] lists. Why do you in your madness draw a sword against the mouth of Rome? Not even Catiline would have committed this atrocity. An impious soldier is bribed with accursed gold, and for so great a sum you buy the silence of a single voice. What avails the costly stillness of the sacred tongue? All mankind will begin to speak in Cicero's stead.

And see book 11.20, in which Antony comes together with a lubricious Fulvia; or book 2.89, addressed to one Gaurus:

> You enjoy stretching the evening with overmuch wine. That I forgive: you have the same bad habit as Cato, Gaurus. You write verses without Apollo and the Muses. For this you deserve praise, for that was Cicero's habit. Your vomiting: a habit of Antony. Your extravagance, of Apicius. But your sucking—whose bad habit is that?

While these may give a general idea of the tone and content one finds in Martial, they do not begin to convey the sorts of things Martial was very good at, and, accordingly, why he became so popular in his own day—much less why he has been recognized as a poet for all ages since the Renaissance. For one thing, translations in general, but especially prose translations, miss, when they do not obscure, a great deal. Martial was an accomplished Latin poet, and so the examples of his invective that follow will be provided in Latin as well as in (prose) translation. Only in this way will we be able to see how his epigrams "work."

We can begin with a couple of two-line epigrams from book 1:

> 80
> *Sportula, Cane, tibi suprema nocte petita est.*
> *occidit, puto, te, Cane, quod una fuit.*

[Canus, you looked for a dinner-present the night you died. I think it killed you, Canus, that there was only one.]

83
Os et labra tibi lingit, Manneia, catellus:
non mirror, merdas si libet esse cani.

[Manneia, your little dog licks your mouth and lips. Small wonder, if a dog likes eating turds.]

If I read these correctly, we are seeing here two examples of epigrammatic insult. A *sportula*, evidently, was a little gift of food or even money given to dinner guests ("clients") by their host (the "patron"), and this came to be the term for any gratuity given by patrons to their clients. In this case, Canus died, the poet says, of disappointment at getting only one—after he had a free dinner—and so it was his greediness and, perhaps, his gluttony that were his downfall—loci nos. 7 and 5 in the list we compiled earlier. The lines addressed to Manneia put the phrase "lap dog" in a new light if we understand "*os et labra*" to refer not to her mouth and lips but to parts of the female genitalia. Such an interpretation would be consistent with Martial's expressed distaste for oral sex—cunnilingus in particular—in several other epigrams. Manneia, then, is being charged with "unacceptable sexual conduct," locus no. 10.

An epigram at book 7.20 exhibits something similar. It is rather longer, but deserves full quotation here:

Nihil est miseries neque gulosius Santra.
rectam vocatus cum cucurrit ad cenam,
quam tot diebus noctibusque captavit,
ter poscit apri glandulas, quater lumbum,
et utramque coxam leporis et duos armos,
nec erubescit peierare de turdo
et ostreorum rapere lividos cirros.
buccis placentae sordidam linit mappam;
illic et uvae collocantur ollares
et Punicorum pauca grana malorum
et excavatae pellis indecens vulvae
et lippa ficus deblisque boletus.

sed mappa cum iam mille rumpitur furtis,
rosos tepenti spondylos sinu condit
et devorato capite turturem truncum.
colligere longa turpe nec putat dextra
analecta quidquid et canes reliquerunt.
nec esculenta sufficit gulae praeda:
mixto lagonam replete ad pedes vino.
haec per ducentas cum domum tulit scalas
seque obserata clusit anxius cella
gulosus ille, postero die vendit.

[Santra is the most miserly and the greediest of beings. When he has an invitation and runs off to a formal dinner, for which he has been angling for so many days and nights, he asks for three helpings of boar's sweetmeats, four of loin, both haunches of hare, and two shoulders; nor does he blush to lie about a thrush and snatch the milky beards of oysters. He smears his dirty napkin with mouthfuls of cake. Therein are assembled preserved grapes and a few pomegranate grains, and the ugly skin of a hollowed matrix and an oozy fig and a crippled mushroom. But when the napkin bursts with a thousand thefts, he hides gnawed vertebrae in his warm pocket together with the remains of a pigeon whose head has been devoured. Nor does he think shame to collect with a long arm whatever the sweeper and the dogs have left. Edible plunder is not enough for his gullet. He fills a flagon at his feet with mixed wine. When he has carried all this home up two hundred stairs and anxiously shut himself in his barred chamber, this greedy fellow—sells it all the next day.]

Gluttony again (no. 5)—and even more stupendous gluttony if we translate "*mappa*" in line 13 as "tablecloth" instead of "napkin"; and "*praeda*" at the end of line 18 shows that Martial is thinking also in terms of no. 16, "plunder of private or public property." And clearly, the catalogue of gourmet dishes and goodies at lines 4–15, along with the "*analecta*" left by the cleaners and dogs, is meant to indicate that Santra has a prodigious case of avarice—see no. 7 in our list of loci. But the real power of the epigram stems not from its *accumulatio* but from its punchline, a classic instance of the device the Ancients called *para*

prosdokian—a sudden violation of expectations—that functions as a sort of cap to the whole thing.

Another cluster of loci can be seen in book 9.27:

Cum depilatos, Chreste, coleos portes
et vulturino mentulam parem collo
et prostitutis levius caput culis,
nec vivat ullus in tuo pilus crure
purgentque saevae cana labra vulsellae;
Curios, Camillos, Quintios, Numas, Ancos,
et quidquid usquam legimus pilosorum
loqueris sonasque grandibus minax verbis,
et cum theatris saeculoque rixaris.
occurrit aliquis inter ista si draucus,
iam paedagogo liberatus et cuius
refibulavit turgidum faber penem,
nutu vocatum ducis, et pudet fari
Catoniana, Chreste, quod facis lingua.

[You carry hairless testicles, Chrestus, and a cock like a vulture's neck and a head smoother than prostituted arses; there is not a hair alive on your shins and the cruel tweezers purge your white jowls. But your talk is of Curios, Camillus, Quinctius, Numa, Ancus, and every hairy worthy we ever found in books; you are loud and threatening with big words, and you quarrel with the theatres and the times. If, as this goes on, some young athlete comes your way, now freed from tutelage, whose swollen penis has been unpinned by the smith, you summon him with a nod and lead him off; and I shouldn't like to say, Chrestus, what you do with your Catonian tongue.]

Whatever a "*Catoniana lingua*" might be, it seems clear that Chrestus's sexual activities are to be deemed "unacceptable" (see no. 10 again). What we are shown first, however, is a bald grotesque with bizarre genitals (see no. 3). But Chrestus's real vice is hypocrisy (no. 6): Curio, Camillus, and the rest are (or, rather, were by Martial's time) real people, important figures in the Roman tradition. To these, and the other "hairy worthies," Chrestus gives lip service in public, but when the right young fellow comes along, he gives another sort of "lip ser-

vice" entirely—conduct hardly worthy of a *vir bonus*, much less of a man who loudly proclaims the virtues of Roman manhood. (A *vir bonus*, by the way, is a "good" man not in the sense of his being in the state of grace, but of being "a good man for the job." *Vir*, of course, is the root of "virile" and of "virtue," in the sense of the Italian *virtù*, and so might better be translated as something like *hombre* or *Mensch*.)

The epigram at book 9.57 is aimed at one Hedylus:

Nil est tritius Hedyli lacernis:
non ansae veterum Corinthiorum,
nec crus compende lubricum decenni,
nec ruptae recutita colla mulae,
nec quae Flaminiam secant salebrae,
nec qui litoribus nitent lapilli,
nec Tusca ligo vinae politus,
nec pallens toga mortui tribulis,
nec pigri rota quassa mulionis,
nec rasum cavea latus visontis,
nec dens iam senior ferocis apri.
res una est autem—ipse non negabit—
culus tritior Hedyli lacernis.

[Nothing is worn smoother than Hedylus's cloak: not the handles of old Corinthian bronzes, not a shin polished by a ten-year shackle, not the skinned neck of a ruptured mule, not the ruts that cleave the Flaminian Way, not the pebbles shining on the beaches, not a hoe polished by a Tuscan vineyard, not the yellowing gown of a dead pauper, not the shaken wheel of a lazy muleteer, not a bison's flank shaven by the cage, not the aging tusk of a ferocious boar. One thing, however—and he won't himself deny it—Hedylus's arse is worn smoother than his cloak.]

The pertinent loci here seem to be nos. 3 and 4 ("physical appearance," "eccentricity of dress"), with no. 10 implied by the smoothness of Hedylus's arse. But it is the way this epigram is put together and the path by which Martial gets to the punchline that is of more interest to us here. "Nothing [*nihil*] is worn smoother . . . *except* one thing [*res una . . . tamen*]—his arse," arrived at via ten lines of "nots," is a brilliant use of the old strategy of "not, not . . . *but*." Readers have to work

through a long list of some pretty bizarre examples of smoothness (the *ruptae recutita colla mulae* or the *rasum cavea latus visontis*, for example), with expectation intensified as they anticipate the "but." Notice also the way in which the whole is framed by "*nil est tritius*" at the beginning and "*tritior*" at the end (something Martial also does in 7.20: "*nihil est . . . gulosius*" in the first line, "*gulosus ille*" in the last).

One last example, an then we can begin drawing some conclusions about how Martial's insults "work." Book 1.92:

Saepe mihi quaeritur non siccis Cestos ocellis
tangi se digito, Mamuriane, tuo.
non opus est digito: totum tibi Ceston habeto,
si deest nil aliud, Mamuriane, tibi.
sed si nec focus est nudi nec sponda grabati
nec curtus Chiones Antiopesve calix,
carea si pendet lumbis et scripta lacerna
dimidiasque nates Gallica paeda tegit,
pasceris et nigrae solo nidore culinae
et bibis immundam cum cane pronus aquam:
non culum, neque enim est culus, qui non cacat olim,
sed fodiam digito qui sperest oculum:
nec me zelotypum nec dixeris esse malignum.
denique pedica, Mamuriane, satur.

[Cestus often complains to me with tears in his eyes of being touched by your finger, Mamurianus. No need for the finger; have Cestus complete, Mamurianus, if he is all you lack. But if you have neither fireplace nor bare bedframe, nor a broken cup of Chione or Antiope, if the cloak that hangs from your loins is yellowed and patched and a Gallic jacket covers half of your buttocks; if your only food is the smell of a blackened kitchen and you drink dirty water on your belly with the dog: why, I shall dig my finger into—not your arse, for an arse that never shits is none at all—but your remaining eye. And don't call me jealous or malevolent. In short, Mamurianus, sodomize on a full stomach.]

It is not easy to see what is going on here. The poet seems to be encouraging Mamurianus to persist in his pursuit of Cestus, "if he is all

you lack" (*si deest nil aliud*); and having sex with young boys (which is what Cestus appears to be doing, "*non siccis ocellis*") was not a shameful activity in Martial's Rome. So it is difficult to read this as an insult (in spite of the temptation to see loci nos. 4 and 10 hinted at), although it might be construed as a criticism. What catches the eye, however, is the argument Martial has put together, one influencing the tradition represented by Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" in its "If . . . then" structure: "If he is all you lack [then go ahead]" and "If you are living in pathetic and sordid conditions, then I shall poke you in the eye. [But you are not.] So carry on," *denique pedica . . . satur*—something close, I should say, to the old *modus tollens* form of proof ("If *p*, then *q*. But not *p*, therefore not *q*"). What is important about such an argument structure, however, is not the degree to which it can be rigorous or convincing, but the way in which it plays on the listener's expectations. In this sense, Martial does here the same sort of thing that we saw him do in, e.g., 9.57 and 7.20; and if argument structures are in question, a second look at the Sosibianus and Mammeia couplets will turn up two abbreviated "syllogistic" arguments—enthymemes. One begins to understand why one of his most avid Renaissance readers, Julius Caesar Scaliger, considered the epigram the most "deductive" of poetic forms.

The appeal to loci ("what everybody knows") and the manipulation of expectation and fulfillment (the "conclusion") are, in short, at the heart of the designs behind Martial's epigrams, particularly those whose aim is to insult.

But what of the targets of Martial's insults? Do they deserve such treatment? It should be noted that none of the characters in the particular epigrams we have looked at was a real person. There is no question that there were in Rome people who engaged in the bizarre behaviors Martial describes; but Hedylus, Chrestus, Santra, Mammeia, and the rest are fictions. So Martial has deployed the technical devices at his disposal—from the inventory of stock topics to the small-scale stylistic devices we just glanced at—to compose pungent and devastating insults directed at people who didn't exist! I do not think this was because he was afraid of insulting real people known to his readers. What we are seeing in these short pieces are technical displays on the order of the declamations that were so important in rhetorical training in his day.

This would suggest that one of the main reasons his *libelli* proved

so popular was the virtuosity they exhibited. An audience of sophisticated readers who knew, for instance, the epigrammatic tradition in which he worked showed their appreciation for Martial's literary skills by continuing to purchase his poems and, no doubt, to look forward to the next available booklet. But there is perhaps more to it than that. One recent explanation for his popularity in Rome (as well as in future eras) points to the priapic motif in Martial: Priapus, the ithyphallic god of sexual potency, serves as a symbol of dominance and control, and Martial's criticism of women who are given to "unnatural acts," of effeminate homosexuals, old people, and gluttons all arises from his desire to dominate others. This, then, is why his style is so aggressive and severe—and perhaps snide. This desire, presumably, would be shared by many, if not all, of Martial's sophisticated readers, and such a presumption would indeed make sense in the sort of social and political milieu in which they operated—"patriarchal," some would say, in the extreme. (See "Martial the Moral Jester: Priapic Motifs and the Restoration of Order in the Epigrams," by Eugene O'Connor, in *Toto Notus in Orbe*, ed. Farouk Grewing (Stuttgart, 1998), 187–204.)

It is hard to imagine an appeal more basic than a shared desire for dominance, particularly sexual dominance. But I think this approach overlooks an important element of agreement in its attempt to explain Martial's apparent aggressiveness. While reading Martial, we are, as it were, looking over his shoulder as he points to the disreputable and disgusting Santras and Mammeias around him. We, too, disapprove of their activites, and we, too, are put off by their appearances, their stupidities, and their hypocrisies. We are on Martial's side—or, rather, he is on ours. And he is very good at what he does, much better than any "normal" person could be. What is more, we *want* to be on his side—or rather, to have this master of invective on our side. Now this may be because we, as readers, want also to be sexually dominant, as Martial appears to be. But that is only part of it. Martial speaks of "what everybody knows"; and "everybody knows" that stupidity and hypocrisy are not limited to, or even best symbolized by, sexual activity. Think of the political threats represented by Cicero's Catiline or Antony—or, rather, of how Cicero gets us on his side against them. So Martial's "nauseous" epigrams do pit "us against them"; but they manage to do just that, it appears, by their indirect assertions of communal values, not simply by asserting "mine's bigger than yours."

3 German terms of abuse:

“Sockenbügler”
one who irons their socks

“Hodenkobold”
testicle goblin

“Fickfehler”
fucking mistake

You might say to him, "Well, you'd be better locked up in a phone booth sandpapering a lion's ass (and that's close contact) than fucking with me."

"You'd do better jump in a fire with a gasoline suit on than be jumping on my chest."

They say like, "You'd be better in a lion's den with a motherfucking side of beef on your shoulder, than do any fucking with me."

Might tell a guy something like, "Don't you know I ain't worrying about you 'cause I'll run up your motherfucking throat, jump down your motherfucking lungs, tap dance on your kidneys, remove your motherfucking appendicizes, move out your goddamn intestines, kill your dick and die, your heart stop beating."[14]

With minor variations, all of Kid's gaudily elaborate threats would have fit easily into the traditions Huizinga cites, and suggest some of the many ways the dozens overlapped with other forms of verbal combat and display. Like the insult rhymes, such threats were a prominent feature of African American professional performance long before rap, as when Robert Johnson sang, "I'm gonna upset your backbone, put your kidneys to sleep / I'll do the breakaway on your liver and dare your heart to beat."[15] They were exhibitions of masculine nobility and rhetorical skill, learned, adapted, polished, and appreciated as theater. Kid finished his description by noting that outsiders might miss the formulaic nature of the art:

If people walked past and didn't know you, they'd swear there'd be blows coming. You get used to it. And when somebody say something, you just say something back. . . . Words that just comes naturally; you heard, and heard, and you repeat 'em and repeat 'em. After a guy gets to hanging around so long, he learns them.

Contests of this sort need not involve insults to anyone beyond the players themselves, but often expand to include an opponent's friends, tribe, nation, family, or ancestors. As with the basic form of insult combat, ancestor insulting, and specifically sexual insults involving mothers and other female relatives, are common around the world. The specifics vary from culture to culture—on Ulithi, a small coral atoll in the Pacific Ocean four hundred miles southwest of Guam, a common insult is *fälfúlul silöm*, "Your mother's pubic tattooing"[16]—but the essential themes are often startlingly familiar. In the fifth century BC, the Greek poet Hipponax described a sculptor he disliked as a μητροκοιτης (*mētrokoitēs*: motherfucker) and in a phrase reminiscent

of the cockle/cock etymology accused him of having "despoiled his own mother's sea urchin," a common Greek euphemism for vulva.[17]

Coming even closer to the dozens tradition, two articles from the 1970s explored a Turkish rhyming game that was commonly played by adolescent boys and escalated from simple insults ("You're an ass") through rhymed couplets "casting [a boy] as a submissive anus" to insults directed at an opponent's mother and sisters, and often from there to physical combat.[18] The structure of this game required that each reply be based on the previous insult, and a typical sequence was reported thus:

FIRST BOY: *Ananin ami.* ("Your mother's cunt.")
SECOND BOY: *Babamin killi dami.* ("My father's hairy roof," suggesting, "My father is a virile male who protects my mother.")

The second comment rhymed with the first but was not considered a strong retort and provoked the reply:

Onu öyle demezler
Peynir ekmek yemezler
Ben de seni sikmezsem
Bana Ahmet demezler.

("They don't say it that way / They don't eat bread and cheese / If I don't fuck you / They won't call me Ahmet.")

This was clearly stronger, but since line two was a meaningless non sequitur, the second boy responded:

Uyduramadin yan gitti
Ananin amina kan gitti

("You couldn't fit in the rhyme; your line missed the target / And blood went to your mother's cunt.")

Though the criticism was justified, this couplet used the same word to end both lines. Hence the first boy shot back:

Uyduramadin yanciğina
Bin devenin kanciğina
Anan çamasir yikarken
Sabun kaçmiş amciğina

("You didn't make a very good rhyme / You ride a female camel / While your mother was washing clothes / Soap slipped into her cunt.")[19]

Although few societies combined such insults with rhyming duels, the Turks were far from alone in the focus of their abuse. The linguistic anthropologist Edgar Gregersen wrote that of 103 languages for which he had collected information, sixty-six "consider as their gravest insult and abuse a curse directed at the opponent's mother. . . . Possibly the most frequent set insult in the world is 'Your mother's cunt.' This is found in Arabic, Indonesian, Fijian, Thai, Swahili, Xhosa, Ambo, Wolof, Cuban Spanish, and Serbo-Croatian." A long list of variations on this theme included "I will fuck your mother" (Amharic, Armenian, Bulgarian, Burmese, Dinka, Fulani), "Fucker of your mother's cunt" (Hindi), "Your mother fucks dogs" (Lao), "Fuck your stinking whore of a mother" (Hungarian), and "I fuck you in the ass on your mother" (Romanian).[20]

Gershon Legman provided a dialogue from the ninth-century Arabic rhetorician al-Jahiz in which a prominent man, on being asked, "Can you tell me, I pray you, what this basket contains?" replied, "Your mother's cunt!" He also cited an article from 1913 about "the *Poele* (Gross Insult) among the Mono People, Western Solomon Island . . . modestly translated . . . into Latin as: '*Cum mulieris tuæstercore (de more) cois*,' [roughly, "Fuck your mother's shit (as is your custom)"] and '*Cum matre tua (de more) cois*' ["Fuck your mother (as is your custom)"]."[21]

Such lists could be vastly expanded if one chose to include all the variations of "bastard," which in many societies is also considered a sort of mother insult. The overlap is particularly obvious in the Spanish phrase *hijo de su madre* (son of his mother), which is now commonly considered an expurgation of *hijo de su puta madre* (son of his whore mother), but older dictionaries tended to gloss simply as a reference to having no acknowledged father—an allied but not identical concept. This is a reminder that although cross-cultural parallels may be interesting or amusing, they can also be misleading, since cultures often use similar phrases in disparate ways. Gregerson cited an insult in the Sango language of the Central African Republic, "Your mother's cunt is dry," writing: "I would have classified [this] as a mother insult, but my informant counted it as a father insult . . . because it means that your father is impotent and hence cannot lubricate your mother's vagina."[22]

Gregersen considered this exceptional, noting that only twenty of the languages in his sample included father insults. He found some uses of "your father's prick" and "father fucker," but in general insults to fathers seem to be both less common and less likely to involve sex

than mother abuse. John Krueger wrote that in Mongolian "the worst thing in general that can be said to one's adversary is an imprecation against the interlocutor's mother or father," but although the standard mother insult was *eke-ben oquysan* "one-who-has-had-intercourse with-his-own-mother," the paternal equivalent was *ečige-ben alaysan* "one-who-has-slain his-own-father," or "Father-killer!" He added that "as the insult par excellence, one may . . . make the grand curse of 'I urinate on your father's head and have intercourse with your mother!'"[23]

The tendency to direct sexual insults at female rather than male targets can reach surreal extremes. A Jewish New Yorker recalled his Israeli parents engaging in escalating exchanges beginning with his mother saying to his father, "*Kus ima shelcha*" ("Your mother's cunt," a common Israeli insult), to which his father would respond, forcibly if illogically, "*Kus aba shelcha*" ("Your father's cunt"), and his mother would end with the ultimate: "*Kus saba shelcha*" ("Your grandfather's cunt").[24]

Given the infinite variability of cultural taboos and the linguistic tricks for referencing them, it is often easy to miss or misjudge the meaning of what at first glance seems a familiar or innocent phrase. Graves wrote that "brother-in-law" was a common insult in Urdu, Arabic, and Swahili, carrying the unstated implication "I have been familiar with your sister, ergo, you are my brother-in-law."[25] Similarly, many cultures recognize a simple reference to someone's mother as shorthand for a lexicon of abuse. An online dictionary of Hungarian slang lists *anyád*, (your mother) as a frequent and forcible curse, adding, "To mention [somebody]'s mother in Hungarian is very hurting, avoid, if possible."[26] Mandarin Chinese has the phrase *tāmā de*, which is carefully vague, meaning roughly "your [or his] mother's something," and is used as an all-purpose expletive equivalent to the English "goddamn it." And in Russian the word *mat*, extrapolated from the ubiquitous *yob tvoyu mat'* (fuck your mother), has become a generic term for obscene or uncouth speech.[27]

The prevalence of such customs tempts me to make broad generalizations about the linguistic heritage of patriarchal power relationships or the primal importance of maternal generation and genitalia. But not all cultures have developed mother abuse on a grand scale, and some only adopted it in recent decades. Northern Europe, for example, seems to have been virgin territory for such traditions. English children adopted "your mum" as an insult sometime in the 1960s, apparently from West Indian immigrants. The German use of "deine Mutter" is even more modern, arriving with a fad for "yo' mama" jokes adapted from either the U.S. or France. The French situation is more complicated: In 1995

a comedian named Arthur published *Ta mère*, a counterpart to the American *Snaps* books, with a cover photo of the Philadelphia rap group the Goats and insults on the order of "*Ta mère est tellement snob qu'elle taille des pipes avec une paille*" (Your mother is so stuck-up she sucks dick with a straw).[28] Some researchers have suggested that this book and its sequels were a major influence on French youth styles,[29] but Arthur is a Moroccan-born Jew, and it seems more likely that he grafted the American commercial concept onto an already vibrant movement in the urban immigrant communities that have made France the major center of non-English-language rap. The ethnologist David Lepoutre writes that a new style of *vannes*—intricate insults—arrived with North African immigrants in the 1960s, and its expansion into comic, dozens-style duels followed the wave of immigration from central and western Africa in the 1980s.[30] Indeed, the most common French mother insult (aside from the now-ubiquitous *ta mère*) is a semi-translation of the North African Arabic *nik yemmak* (fuck your mother), *nique ta mère*, which is so popular that it has spawned a new copulative verb, *niquer*, and provided the name of the country's seminal hardcore rap group, Suprême NTM.[31]

In an argument echoing the attempts of some U.S. scholars to find a Euro-American source for the dozens, some French writers have argued that *nique* is derived from *forniquer* (fornicate) or an expression, *faire la nique*, used in the fourteenth century to mean a disparaging gesture.[32] These linguistic convergences may have helped the word gain currency, but it clearly came into modern usage as North African slang. An accompanying phrase, *nique ta race* (fuck your race), often shortened to *ta race* or the undirected expletive *sa race* (his/her/its race) provides an even more striking example of convergence, since it fits the tense racial climate of modern France, but derives from the Arabic word *ras* (head), common in North African cursing.[33] And just as white kids in the United States often say "yo' mama" rather than "your mother" when exchanging dozens lines, the sociolinguist Dominique Caubet notes that when French kids use *mère* as an insult or expletive they often pronounce it with "an 'r' that is at once velar and vibrated . . . [showing] a strong influence of North African Arabic."[34]

Morocco and Algeria have long been fertile ground for verbal dueling, with traditions similar to rap freestyle battles, in which public poets would engage in "a two-poet competition, each trying to outflourish and out-insult the other until the weight of applause and derision from the audience makes it clear who has won."[35] The Moroccan poet and novelist Tahar Ben Jelloun has likewise written of the

STOVI KAIP MIETĄ PRARIJĘS

JANKS ARCHIVE number 011016023
collected: Kaunas, Lithuania (01-10-2016)
translation: You stand like you swallowed a stake
origin: Old Lithuanian saying. “Mietas” is an old word meaning a stake used for hammering animals chain to a ground, when you change their place in a field to get fresh grass.

HEY MY YUTE, YOUR HEAD IS AS BIG AS BOB MARLEY'S FUNERAL

JANKS ARCHIVE number 051416011
collected: Jamaica, Queens (05-14-2016)
origin: common expression from Jamaica, used to describe something literally or figuratively large. (Variant: "hey girl, your hips are as big as Bob Marley's funeral"). Bob Marley's funeral was the biggest funeral ever to happen in Jamaica. "Hey my yute" is Jamaica slang for "hey my friend" or "hey bro."

SINUN NAAMASI ON NIINKUIN PETOLINNUN PERSE

JANKS ARCHIVE number 122215004
collected: Vaasa, Finland (12-22-2015)
translation: Your face is like the ass of a bird of prey
origin: common Finnish expression. Might have heard it from her Grandmother

خنفسه شافت

عيالها على

الحيط قالت

ده لولى

ملضم فى

خيط

JANKS ARCHIVE number 010816024
collected: Riga, Latvia (08-01-2016)
translation: Your mother is like a cockroach who saw her children on the wall but mistook them for beautiful pearls
origin: Egyptian insult joke, in Arabic. Usually said by grandmothers as a way to call someone ugly. The (very) literal translation is: “A beetle saw her kids on the wall and said pearls connected by a string.”

prevalence of dozens-style terms of abuse: "Kidding and insults have always drawn on sex: your mother's vagina, your aunt's open book, the religion of your sister's ass, the giver or seller of his ass."[36] A survey of North African cursing, while listing many phrases that have no hint of sex or parent references, notes that "May God curse your mother's vagina" has evolved into a generalized expletive, and when one person has thoroughly insulted another it is common to say, "He has not let any of his ancestors sleep peacefully in the tomb." It also includes such colorful phrases as "licker of her mother-in-law and of the daughters of her sister-in-law," and "Cursed be she who shit you, and she who aided your entry to the world, and she who brought the news of your birth."[37]

Given these traditions, it is no surprise that the one region of Europe with a deep history of dozens analogues is southern Spain, which for eight centuries was under North African rule. Luis Romero y Espinosa wrote in the 1880s that "here in Andalusia . . . the *mentar la madre* [literally "mentioning the mother"], despite the frequency with which it occurs, constitutes a motive of lasting hatred among men, and among boys settles the moment of doubt that precedes a fight."[38] A book of Spanish folksongs from the same period includes a vignette of two Andalusian boys quarreling, one saying, "*Er coño e tu madre*," and the other replying "*Er de la tuya, que son iguales*" ("Yo' mother's cunt," "Yo' mother's, they're the same").[39] Then there is the phrase best known to Americans through Ernest Hemingway's absurdly censored variant, "I obscenity in the milk of your fathers," and more elegantly displayed in a quotation from an elderly native of Cádiz: "*Me cago en la leche de tu pa're y me cago en tu ma're y me cago en to' tus muertos.*" ("I shit in the milk of your father and I shit in your mother and I shit in all your dead.")[40]

These Spanish traditions were continued and expanded in the Americas, in some cases becoming so common that they lost their original force. A nineteenth-century book of Peruvian folklore quotes the friendly advice to a bullfighter, "You had best be on your guard that you don't have a mishap and go to hell to tell stories to your pig of a mother."[41] A study of Mexican slang from the same period warns that "*Mentar la madre* is the greatest insult one can make to a Mexican. There one must not ask anyone about their *madre*, but only about their *mamá*."[42] But in present-day Mexico, *mentar la madre* is a generic term for giving someone hell and no longer implies that a mother has even been mentioned. Mexicans continue to insult mothers with notable frequency—*chinga tu madre* (fuck your mother) and variations such as

hijo de su chingada madre (son of his fucked mother) are as common in Mexican speech as "motherfucker" in the United States—but they also routinely use *madre* as an expletive in situations where no maternal connection exists: the equivalent of "to fuck someone up" is *darle en la madre* (give it to him in the mother), and the equivalent of "no fucking way" is *ni madres* (nor mothers).

Variations of these traditions remain vibrant throughout Latin America. A book on the cocaine trade quotes an escalating interchange that formed part of a bargaining process on the Venezuelan-Colombian border:

> "*Hijo de puta.*" (Whoreson.)
> "*Coño de tu madre.*" (Cunt of your mother.)
> "*Recoño de tu abuela puta.*" (Double cunt of your whore grandmother.)
> "*Maldita sea la reverga de tu hijo.*" (Cursed be the double prick of your son.)[43]

Bruce Jackson wrote of a Venezuelan boys' game somewhat similar to the dozens, in which an exchange—insult, counter-insult, and rhyming response—might go:

> A: *El coño de tu madre.*
> B: *El coño de la tuya.*
> A: *La tiro p'arriba y la ensarto en mi puya.*[44]
>
> (The cunt of your mother. / The cunt of yours. / I throw her up and catch her on my spike.)

There has been little systematic research in this field, so I cannot judge how representative these examples may be, but a verse from one of the most famous Colombian *vallenato* songs suggests a deep tradition of dozens-style insults. "La gota fría" ("The Cold Drop") was composed as part of a musical battle in the 1930s between the singer-accordionists Emiliano Zuleta and Lorenzo Morales, and in one verse Zuleta sang:

> *Morales me mentó a mi madre, solamente pa' ofender.*
> *Para que él también se ofenda, le voy a mentar la de él.*[45]
> (Morales mentioned my mother to me, just to give offense. / So that he also takes offense, I am going to mention his.)

The song contains no further reference to the mother of either musician, indicating that, as in Mexico and Andalusia, mother insulting was so common in Colombia that it had become proverbial. However,

I should add that Morales was Afro-Colombian—indeed, he has a verse in which he counters Zuleta's charge that he is *negro* with the reply that Zuleta is himself a discolored white guy.[46] So although I have arrived at this tradition by way of Spain, North Africa, and the Arabic-speaking world, it may have traveled to Colombia by a more direct route via the African diaspora, and thus be an even closer cousin to the dozens.

The breadth of African insult traditions deserves its own chapter. But the impossibility of determining whether Zuleta was drawing on an inheritance from Spanish or African forebears—and the meaninglessness of that question, since in either case those forebears could have been linked by Muslim and pre-Muslim trade routes before crossing the Atlantic—is a reminder that although Africa is of unique importance in this story, it was always part of a larger world. The dozens is not a universal language, but similar themes and customs are found on every continent inhabited by humans. Presumably they arose independently in different regions, perhaps for different reasons. But over centuries and millennia, as unfamiliar groups of people met and tested each other with their various forms of rough humor, they must sometimes have felt the shock of recognition: "You do that, too? I guess we're not so different after all."

"To create an atmosphere in such a way that these [insulting] jokes function as that little bit of obscene contact which establishes true proximity between us. [...] Shared obscene solidarity."

-Slavoj Žižek

12

"IF I'M LYIN, I'M FLYIN": THE GAME OF INSULT IN BLACK LANGUAGE [1995]

I BET YOU a fat man against the hole in a doughnut that Hip Hoppers think they invented "yo momma" jokes. Well, yall better ask somebody cause the game has been around in the Black Oral Tradition for generations, even long before Sista Zora included this little "yo mamma" rhyme in her 1937 novel. "Oral Tradition" – which is also a part of the cultural experience of other groups such as Native Americans – refers to verbal games, stories, proverbs, jokes, and other cultural productions that have been passed on from one generation to the next by word of mouth. In Black America, this tradition preserves and celebrates African culture, which was adapted to a new way of life in America. Because Africans in America play with and on the Word, good talkers become heroes and she-roes. Bloods who can talk and testify, preach and prophesy, lie and signify, get much props. Enter Double Snaps and the aesthetics of the dis.

> Yo' mama don't wear no draws
> Ah seen her when she took 'em off
> She soaked 'em in alcohol
> She sold 'em tuh de Santy Claus
> He told her 'twas against de law
> To wear dem dirty draws.
>
> (Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937)[1]

Literally speaking, when you "dis" someone, you discount, discredit, disrespect that person – a dis is an insult. In the Black Oral Tradition, however, a dis also constitutes a verbal game, played with ritualized insults. The disses are purely ceremonial, which creates a safety zone. Like it's not personal, it's business – in this case, the business of playing on and with the Word.

There are two kinds of disses. One type is leveled at a person's mother (and sometimes at other relatives). Traditionally, this was referred to as "the dozens" (or "playin the dozens"). The other kind of dissin is aimed at a person or a thing, either just for fun, or

Talkin That Talk: Language, Culture, and Education in African America / Geneva Smitherman / Routlege, 1999

to criticize that person or thing. This was referred to as "signifyin." Today, the two types of dissin are being conflated under a more general form of play, which we may refer to as "snaps," an emerging term for the game. (Other older terms for this ritualized insult tradition are "joanin," "cappin," "soundin," and "droppin lugs.")

Back in the day, virtually everybody in the Black community would, from time to time, engage in signifyin. But if you tried to go to "yo momma," some folk would tell you quick, "I laugh and kid, but I don't play" (meaning, "I don't play the dozens"). Perhaps, as 1960s political activist Hubert ("Rap") Brown wrote: "Signifying is more humane. Instead of coming down on somebody's mother, you come down on them" (1969, p. 27). That, of course, was another era, when women were put on pedestals and mothers were considered sacred. Today, the role of women has undergone a fundamental change, which helps to explain why the traditional distinction between "signifyin" and "the dozens" is blurring. However, let us here sing no sad songs for the demise of that old-timey image of women; it was false and oppressive. As a woman and as a mother, I'm wit the change. So in the game of snappin, if you play, either you or yo momma got to pay.

Generally, the dozens involves insults of mothers, but on occasion, players will bring in fathers, grandmothers, and other kinfolk. Sista Zora once referred to the dozens as "low-rating the ancestors of your opponent" (1942, p. 96). Richard Wright's 1963 novel, *Lawd Today*, portrays one of the funniest dozens contests I've ever read or heard. Al, Jake, and two of their partners are playin the dozens during a card game. Al reaches back five generations to Jake's "greatgreatgreat*great* grandma . . . a Zulu queen in Africa. She was setting at the table and she said to the waiter: 'Say waiter, be sure and fetch me some of them missionary chitterlings . . .'" (1963, p. 81). But, like Langston Hughes's folk character Jess B. Simple said, "Most Black folk don't play the Dozens that far back."

The game was and is played by all ages and by males and females. One-upmanship is the goal of this oral contest, best played in a group of appreciative onlookers, who are secondary participants in the game. They provide a kind of running commentary, repeating a really clever dis or interjecting responses like "Did yall hear that?," "Oh, shit!," "Oooooweee!," etc. The audience, with its laughter, high fives, and other responses, pushes the verbal duel to greater and greater heights of oratorical fantasy.

So, whassup with this game? Ain it kinda weird to be talkin bout "yo momma" this and "his momma" that – for fun?

For a people trying to survive under an oppressive racist yoke, the dozens provided a way, to borrow from Ralph Ellison, to

"change the joke."[2] The game functioned as an outlet for what countless blues people and Jess B. Simple[3] folk called "laughing to keep from crying." It was a form of release for the suppressed rage and frustrations that were the result of being a Black man or woman trapped in White America. Despite economic discrimination and racist assaults against your personhood, you could ill afford to be hot; the dozens taught you how to chill. As well, the game taught discipline and self-control; it was a lesson in how to survive by verbal wit and cunning rhetoric, rather than physical violence. Ultimately, though, somebody got to lose. What then? Well, the dozens possesses the kind of humor that makes you laugh so hard you cry. A loser is thus provided with a face-saving way out – blending right on in with the loud laughter of the group. Today, the dozens, with its infusion into other cultures, still serves as a release from the pressures of daily existence, a safe, nonviolent method of venting hostility and suppressed rage within acceptable confines. Surely a healthier alternative than the rat-tat-tat-tat of glocks, domestic abuse, and other kinds of violence ranging throughout *all* communities today.

The origin of the dozens, both the term and the game itself, remains debatable. (Readers interested in the intricacies of these various theories should consult Harris (1974); Smitherman ([1977] 1986); Dollard (1939); Abrahams (1964); Herskovits (1949); Dalby (1972); Holloway and Vass (1993); Kidd (1906); Mayer (1951); Simmons (1963); Elton (1950); Schechter (1970).[4] Here I shall briefly discuss the most plausible theory, which relocates the game to the several cultures of Africa from which Black Americans came. For example in a Bantu group in East Africa, described in a 1951 account, joking insults, such as "Eat your mother's anus," were observed among friends, and the Efik in Nigeria used ritualized insults such as "child of mixed sperm" (that is, you have more than one father, in other words, yo momma a ho). This theory about the dozens, which was advanced by Melville Herskovits and others, is consistent with what we know about the history of African people in the so-called "New World." Since culture is not only artefacts, but also the way people behave and think, it is logical that Africans in enslavement would tap into remembered cultural practices and verbal rituals from home and adapt them to life in a strange land. From Giddayup, the insult game would have been played in the slave communities, eventually taking on the English name, "the dozens."

The dozens existed literally in the *Oral* Tradition until the first-known written documentation in 1891. In a folk song collected in Texas, there are these lines:

Talk about one thing, talk about another;
But ef you talk about me, I'm gwain to talk about your mother.
(Thomas, 1926)

Clearly, the dozens was widespread in early-twentieth-century Black culture. For example, John Dollard's 1930s research among young Black males in the rural and urban South reports snaps like: "Your ma behind is like a rumble seat. It hang from her back down to her feet," and "Nigger, if I was as ugly as you I would kill myself."

The dozens shows up in popular songs recorded by early bluesmen and -women. In 1929, Speckled Red (Rufus Perryman) made the first recording, which he called "The Dirty Dozen."[5] It became a big hit and was followed by virtually identical recordings by Tampa Red, Leroy Carr, Ben Curry, and other blues artists. World-renowned Leadbelly (Huddie Ledbetter), in his 1935 recording "Kansas City Papa," incorporated a few lines of the dozens. In the song, the game is played by two women who are "jiving one another."[6] Finally, female blues singer Memphis Minnie (Minnie McCoy) showed that women had skills in her 1930 recording "New Dirty Dozen," in which she rocked the house with such lines as:

I know all about yo pappy and yo mammy,
Your big fat sister and your little brother Sammy,
Your aunt and your uncle and your ma's and pa's,
They all got drunk and showed they Santy Claus.
Now they all drunken mistreaters, robbers and cheaters
Slip you in the Dozens, yo poppa is yo cousin
Yo momma do the Lawdy, Lawd.[7]

Like other games, the dozens has its rules and stock conventions. The simplest form is the verbal retort: "Yo momma," or "Ask yo momma," casually invoked in passing conversation. Check out this recent exchange between two thirty-something Sistas:

LINDA: Girl, what up with that head? [*referring to her friend's hairstyle*]
BETTY: Ask yo momma.

Betty's rejoinder can be shrugged off or taken as slipping into the dozens. Linda takes the latter course of action.

LINDA: Oh, so you going there, huh? Well,
I did ask my momma, and she said,
"Can't you see that Betty look
like her momma spit her out?"

Once again, it's on.

Another stock formula, both in the "yo momma" variety and in disses on the person, is the pattern "Yo momma is so *X* that *Y*," or "You are so *X* that *Y*."[8] For example:

> Your mother is so old, she went to the Virgin Mary's baby shower.
>
> (Percelay *et al.*, 1995)

> Your mother's teeth are so big, she bit into a sandwich and clipped her toenails.
>
> (Percelay *et al.*, 1995)

> Yo momma so slow, it take her an hour to cook Minute Rice, two days to watch *60 Minutes*, and a year to watch *48 Hours*.[9]

The dozens has some fairly sophisticated rules. A fundamental one is that players should be known to each other. Or if not familiar associates, they should at least share membership in and knowledge of the Black cultural context. On this latter point, however, John Baugh contends that the dozens should be restricted to familiar participants because "there is no reliable way to determine the reactions of unfamiliars" (1983, p. 26).

Within the hood, perhaps it would be wise to heed Baugh's advice. Traditionally, males and females only played in same-sex, intimate settings, without outsiders present (or if there were outsiders, the kind who had sense enough not to impose themselves into the game and to follow the cues of the insiders). However, outside the hood, as the game crosses over today, this rule is bending, allowing for public play in front of outsiders and allowing for play by people who may not be intimately known to one another but who are true to the game. Dynamic examples can be heard on television programs like *Def Comedy Jam*, *Martin*, *Living Single*, and *Fresh Prince*, and in films like *White Men Can't Jump*.

To be good in the game, your snaps must meet several criteria. First, they must be exaggerated, the wilder, the better, like: "Your mother's mouth is so big, when she inhales, her sneakers get untied" (Percelay *et al.*, 1995). Second, they must employ creative figures of speech, like: "I spoke to your mother today and she said the dentist refuses to give her braces because yellow and silver don't match" (Percelay *et al.*, 1995). Third, the timing of the snap is critical; it must be delivered immediately and spontaneously. This art form is about what Rap artists call "freestyling"; it does not allow for lengthy deliberation.

Back in the day, those who aimed for the highest level of mastery of the game insisted on a fourth criterion: rhyming. If you could construct insults that were creatively exaggerated and were

expressed in metaphorical language, on time, and with rhyme, you were in the top ten.

Despite the emotionally charged subject matter, snappin works as a game because it is located within the realm of play. Thus the rule that is most crucial to the game is that the snap must not be literally true. For instance, despite all the sexual references in the dozens, nobody has actually gone to bed with anybody's mother. However, if you take snappin out of the realm of play, you enter the real world, where ain nobody playin. Occasionally, though, players will go there, especially when they run out of clever snaps.

As for Black women snappin, the Sistas are on it like a honet, especially when there are no outsiders around. Recently, I asked three professional African American women if they knew how to play the dozens. The women were my middle-aged contemporaries, but I am not part of their intimate circle, and so, as I had anticipated, there was instant denial. I broke the ice by coming out with the opening lines of something called "yo momma's signifyin monkey," which I had heard while hanging out back in the fast days of my youth:

> Down in the jungle where the coconut grows
> Lived yo old-ass momma who was a stomp-down ho.

They laughed, and although one of them continued to deny knowledge of the dozens, after a couple of minutes, all three got all the way up on it.

ARLENE: No, un-unh, I don't think I know any of that stuff.
RENEE: I remember something like, uh, I don't play the dozens cause the dozens is bad –
BARBARA: But, Arlene, I can tell you how many dicks yo' mama had.
ARLENE: Well, I hate to talk about yo momma, Barbara, cause she's a good old soul –
RENEE: Aw, naw, heifer, thought you didn't know any of that stuff.
ARLENE: She got a two-ton pussy and a rubber ass hole.
BARBARA: Hey, wait a minute; that ain't right.

We then got off into a debate about authenticity, Barbara remembering that the phrasing was a "*ten*-ton pussy," and Renee arguing that it was "bad-ass hole." Arlene ended up recounting how, as a teenager, she and her girls would, in effect, call somebody's momma a ho with this snap: "All yo momma's children are step."[10]

In her autobiography, *Gemini* depicting her childhood in the South, poet Nikki Giovanni, active in the 1960s Black Arts Movement, relates a story about her sister, Gary, doin the "yo

momma" thang. Nikki and Gary were confronted by Peggy and her gang on the streets of Knoxville, Tennessee.

> "Hey, old stuck-up. What you gonna do when your sister's tired of fighting for you?" "I'll beat you up myself. That's what." ... "You and what army, 'ho'?" "Me and yo' mama's army," Gary answered with precision and dignity. "You talking 'bout my mama?" "I would but the whole town is so I can't add nothing." ... "You take it back, Gary." Deadly quiet. "Yo' mama's so ugly she went to the zoo and the gorilla paid to see her." "You take that back!" "Yo' mama's such a 'ho' she went to visit a farm and they dug a whole field before they knew it was her."
>
> (1971, p. 17)

Then there's Presidential inaugural poet Maya Angelou, who is so bad that she once played the *thirteens* in a pair of poems in which she dropped snaps on Blacks and whites to tell each group about their untogetha actions (1971, pp. 46–7).

The Sistas are deep off into the signifyin dis as well as "yo momma" snaps. The signifyin is generally delivered with a definite purpose in mind, as was noted by Claudia Mitchell-Kernan in her classic 1960s study of signifyin. Not that Sistas don't have fun with the Word, but the dissin game becomes a vehicle for social commentary. Like the Sista retirees I heard talking about being members of the "packer's club," a snap referring to men who had had so many women in their youth that now, in their mature years, all they could do during sex was "pack chitlins," i.e., they could not maintain a firm erection (Smitherman, 1994, p. 176). And especially like my girl, Janie, in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Janie and her husband, Jody, are snappin in front of the group that always hangs out in their store to lie[11] and signify:

> [JODY] A woman stay round uh store till she get old as Methusalem and still can't cut a little thing like a plug of tobacco! Don't stand dere rollin yo pop eyes at me wid yo rump hanging nearly to yo knees!
>
> [JANIE] Stop mixin up mah doings wid mah looks, Jody. When you git through tellin me how tuh cut uh plug uh tobacco, then you kin tell me whether mah behind is on straight or not.
>
> [JODY] You must be out yo head ... talkin any such language as dat.
>
> [JANIE] You de one started talkin under people's clothes. Not me.
>
> [JODY] Whut's de matter wid you, nohow? You ain't no young girl to be getting all insulted bout yo looks. You ain't no young courtin' gal. You'se uh ole woman, nearly forty.
>
> [JANIE] Yeah, ah'm nearly forty and you'se already fifty. ... Talkin bout *me* lookin old! When you pull down yo britches, you look lak de change uh life.
>
> (1937, pp. 74–5)

Like I said, the Sistas be all over signifyin. Excellent examples in the 1990s are the women's "war council" in Spike Lee's film *Jungle Fever* and the birthday celebration in Terry McMillan's novel *Waiting to Exhale*.

Today's snaps seem less reliant on the standard formulas and stock phrases that characterized old-school snaps. You don't hear too much of the "I hate to talk bout yo momma/She's a good old soul" rhyming style of the dozens. Still it's obvious that 1990s snaps are grounded in the African American Oral Tradition. As a linguist with an unabashed love and respect for the power of language, I can't wait to see how future generations will stamp their imprint upon the game. Like, don't you think that it would be fascinating to hear the snaps of, say, a hundred years from now? I'll be there to write about it. If I'm lyin, I'm flyin.

"Painter: You're a dog.
Apemantus: Thy mother's of my
generation. What's she, if I be a dog?"
-Shakespeare, Timon of Athens
[1, i, 204-205] circa 1595

for it presents plantation culture with a lethal anomaly, the articulate black voice. In these several ways the *Narrative* is the work of *artus* of Douglass's trickster moment. Like Loki's mistletoe, it wounds the old purities; like the Promethean carver or Plato's clumsy butcher, it reslices the plentiful universe into new portions for a new world; like the "sign of youthful theft," it is hung out for the world to see, a new boundary marker in reference to which African-Americans must be read as self-possessed free agents, not slaves, as Hermes must be read as a god, not an illegitimate cave child. If the book still engages an audience today it must partly be that the drama of rearticulation it envisioned continues to be enacted. It was never a work to enliven with mischief, but one that raised more substantial questions about the living and the dead, saying, in effect, that "America" cannot be a vital collective unless it can incorporate (unless its body can contain) works of *artus* such as itself.

A CORRIDOR OF HUMOR

When I said just now that Frederick Douglass took his sense of manliness from his oppressors I was thinking especially of his description of a physical fight he once had with a cruel overseer named Edward Covey, and how he took considerable pride in having bloodied the white man ("He had drawn no blood from me, but I had from him"). In his *Narrative*, before he tells of this fight, Douglass makes blood the mark of slavery itself: his Aunt Hester had been whipped with a "blood-clotted cowskin," and the sight of her beating was, for Douglass, "the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery." To juxtapose the two moments is to see that when Douglass draws Covey's blood he reverses the system but he doesn't escape it. He becomes a man on terms that slavery itself has set. Doing so engages in a kind of contradiction, to be sure, but in this case we can see that contradiction, as long as it is simply the negation of a positive, is only the beginning of rearticulation. It doesn't reshape things deeply enough. If it only mirrors the thing it opposes, it discovers no secret passage into new worlds.

If we turn, at this point, to a story about one of black America's actual folk trickster figures, we will not only find a model for slipping free of the limits of contradiction, we can at the same time turn from the human and historical Douglass back to the way that mythological trickster intelligence works in regard to traps of culture. Down to the present day,

African-American vernacular culture retains a story about a Lion, an Elephant, and a trickster Monkey who is the master of "signifying," that is, of all the thousand figurative tricks that can be performed with language. In the typical plot, this Signifying Monkey works the Lion into a blind rage at the Elephant by reporting with relish things the Elephant supposedly said about the Lion's family.

> *"He talked about yo' people till my hair turned gray.*
> *He say yo' daddy's a freak and yo' mama's a whore,*
> *He say he saw yo' brother going through the jungle selling*
> *assholes from door to door."*

Et cetera. The Lion eventually gets so mad he dashes off to attack the Elephant, whereupon the Elephant beats the Lion to a bloody pulp. In some versions, the Monkey subsequently gets so carried away teasing the beaten Lion that he slips and falls from his tree. The Lion pounces on him and is about to tear him to shreds when the Monkey quickly suggests they should start over and have a fair fight (after all, he slipped and fell). The Lion agrees, but of course the Monkey dashes back into his tree as soon as he's released. Sometimes the beaten Lion wounds the cocky Monkey, but usually the Monkey sits safely up on his branch at the end.

> *In the distance you could hear the monkey say,*
> *"As long as these weeds and green grass grow,*
> *I'm going to be around to signify some more."*

Built into this story is a sort of one-sided game of the dozens, a kind of verbal dueling in which antagonists publicly insult one another with elaborate rhyming couplets.* The winner is the player who improvises quickly, who most deftly turns the other's rhymes around, who always responds to wit with greater wit, and who in all this outlasts the other and most delights the gathered audience, for the game is always played to a crowd. The loser is the player who breaks the form and starts a physical fight. The point of the game is to play with language, not to take it seriously, or better, to stay in *balance* on the line between the playful

* Loki plays the dozens in the Norse poem called the "Lokasenna": he engages the gathered gods and goddesses in a *senna* or *flyting*, a running dialogue of vituperation.

and the serious while trying to tip one's opponent *off* that balance, dizzied with a whirl of words. The word "dozen" in fact has nothing to do with the number twelve; it is a modern survival of an English verb—"to dozen"—dating back at least to the fourteenth century and meaning "to stun, stupefy, daze" or "to make insensible, torpid, or powerless." The object of the game is to stupefy and daze with swift and skillful speech. The loser who starts a fight has been "put in the dozens," lured into a kind of unconsciousness in which he or she grows deaf to the figurative portion of language and takes everything at face value. The winner is a Signifying Monkey, a polytropic language master whose method with the Lion is (the joke goes) to "trope a dope," stupefying with swift circles of signifying. To be dozened is to be dazed into a kind of simplemindedness, a loss of language in which one stops being a signifying creature and turns into a muscle-bound beast that hasn't a clue about lying or metaphors, a beast that could be a carnivore or a herbivore but never a mediator.

A game of the dozens is built on insults to family, and to mothers especially. The Signifying Monkey story must come, then, from a world in which these things are taken seriously, where a child is admonished to "defend your family," to "respect your Mamma," and where these injunctions, even as they shape and secure the child's world, must confine in some way. Why play the game if there is no ambivalence about the rules it toys with? That the game exists at all indicates that the rules sometimes deaden and constrain rather than enable and enliven. Where the trap of such constraints is felt, the Signifying Monkey's antics point to a way out: wake up, they say, to the symbolic portion of all cultural mandates and by that consciousness stop taking them so seriously. The Monkey of the Mind wakes us to the web of mutable signs that shapes and toys with us until we get the wit to shape and toy with it. To climb into the Monkey's tree is to detach from the bedrock categories of one's own culture and "signify" with them, and that means to recognize that they are serious (there's no insult if this isn't serious) but that their seriousness can be infused with humor (the game demands wit and more wit, not the Lion's muscular response).

The antagonists in a game of dozens play with the difference between meaning something and just saying it, between fact and fiction, between love of family and disregard, between the sacred and the profane, between yo' mamma in fact and yo' mamma in a rhyme. The game requires equilibrium in the force field where all these things join one

another. It demands poise in the joints, as it were, balance at the threshold. The loser, the person whose poise fails and who commits himself to the culturally approved side of this string of dualities, slips from the signifying mind with its speed and lightness and falls into the body. The loser is overcome with gravity; he gets serious, attached, defensive of his mamma in fact; his sense of humor evaporates, while the light-bodied winner stays perched in his tree, his humor intact.

Where there is real ambivalence, then, where one can truthfully say both "I *am* attached to my mamma" and "I am *not* attached to my mamma," the loser is that person who chooses a single side of the contradiction. The sign of such singlemindedness is contradiction without humor rather than contradiction with a smile. Here it may help to resurrect the old meaning of "humor": the word once referred to fluids (thus the bodily "humors") and comes ultimately from a Latin root (*umor*) having to do with moisture, liquid, dampness. To treat ambivalence with humor is to keep it loose; humor oils the joint where contradictions meet. If humor evaporates, then ambiguity becomes polarized and conflict follows. We saw this in the story of Eshu and the two friends; the friends will take their sides seriously and fight *unless* they recognize Eshu, unless they honor and welcome the smiling light-bodied figure on the road that both does and does not divide their fields.

A remark by Marcel Duchamp provides a wonderful image for the balance I'm trying to describe, and its creative consequence. Once, in talking about the history of the art movements he and his painter friend Francis Picabia had been involved in, Duchamp noted that laughter adds something useful to contradiction: "While Dada was a movement of negation and, by the very fact of its negation, turned itself into an appendage of the exact thing it was negating, Picabia and I wanted to open up a corridor of humor that once led into dream-imagery and, consequently, into Surrealism." The idea, I think, is that Dada worked *against* French bourgeois culture, but, just as Douglass derives his "manliness" from his oppressors and so does not escape them, in its very opposition Dada could never be more than a response to terms set elsewhere. The escape from this trap of mere opposition is some third thing (bait thief, carrion eater), here called a "corridor of humor," a pore through which fluid may move into new areas. And it should be added that once Duchamp got himself through that corridor of humor and into surrealism he soon began looking for the corridor out. Surrealism itself became programmatic very quickly.

André Breton was angry at Duchamp for years because Duchamp abandoned surrealism and started playing chess; the Pope of Surrealism wanted no fully polytropic artists slipping free of his dream world, but Duchamp was a man always looking for the door.*

A touch of humor or levity, then, is one mark by which we know that a creative spirit working in the force field of contradictions has kept his poise, has not fallen from his tree, and so might actually move beyond the enclosing oppositions. To take another example, consider a line like the one with which Allen Ginsberg ended his early poem "America": "America I'm putting my queer shoulder to the wheel." This voice does not oppose "America" and does not oppose "queer," but settles directly in the joint. It is the utterance of a patriot/ex-patriot, an insider/outsider who doesn't want to get caught at either pole. This balancing act was part of Ginsberg's talent, appeal, and art. In politics he managed to be one of the few modern artists to unsettle Communists and capitalists alike. The FBI and the CIA kept large files on him, but police agents expelled him from Cuba and Czechoslovakia as well. In the United States, the Federal Bureau of Narcotics once framed an attack on Ginsberg by borrowing language from an attack printed in Czechoslovakia (both sides declared Ginsberg had "manners . . . which a normal man—sorry to say—spits upon"), a rare collaboration of cold-war enemies united in their fear of anomaly.

The point is that when we hear Duchamp speak of this "corridor of humor" or hear Ginsberg play the patriot-queer we hear the voice of the light-bodied Monkey who hopes to stay poised at the joint, not fall into sober negation and thus end up contained in the very thing being opposed. It isn't that there can't be contradiction, but that contradiction cannot nourish without the waters of laughter. "Contradiction is a lever of transcendence," Simone Weil once wrote, but that lever will not work unless accompanied by some oil to keep it loose, a fluid we call "humor," the smile of early surrealism, the laughter of Apollo listening to Hermes lie, the smile of Yasoda listening to Krishna, the smile of Athena meeting

* Duchamp maintained his style to the end, here described by Francis Naumann: "Almost every evening before retiring . . . [Mme Duchamp] and her husband were in the habit of reading funny stories aloud to each other. The joke would leave both of them laughing just before going to bed. On the evening of Oct. 2, 1968, it was his turn to read and, as usual, when the punch line came, they both laughed exuberantly. But on this particular evening, while laughing, Duchamp quietly closed his eyes and expired."

Odysseus on the beach, the smile of that naturalist cited early on who says, "It is difficult to escape the conclusion that coyotes . . . have a sense of humor," when the hunter finds his trap has caught nothing but the varmint's smelly calling card. The rapper who perfects a Signifying Monkey story, the blues singer who calls himself the Seventh Son, Duchamp opening a corridor of humor, Ginsberg slipping through the humorless corridors of police bureaucracy—these are not the Lions of History, they are the Monkey *artus*-workers who keep the articulated world lively, at the very least, and who sometimes pull off the more complicated trick of stealing the boundary markers so that new worlds might appear from the plenitude that particular worlds necessarily hide.

In the first part of this book I interpreted a story in which other animals keep saying "That's my way, Coyote, not your way," as being about an intelligence stripped of, or escaped from, any instinctual way of living in the world, and left to weave its own "way" by imitating others and making up creative lies/fictions. In the Signifying Monkey story the Lion has a "way," and that is part of his problem. He's attached to a code by which fights are held, for example, and a code of honor about his family, and he hasn't the Monkey wit to think of these as invented and mutable.

In another kind of story, the Lion's dedication to his "way" would be a virtue, of course, as such dedication was Frederick Douglass's virtue. When Douglass was not the agile signifying rhetoric master (changing his surname three or four times, calling himself an Indian, disenchanting the white man's code of honor) he was the muscular Lion insisting that the code of the Christian Church be honored and telling the world that his "sable" mamma was as beautiful as a pharaoh and bookish to boot. He became an actor in history and, like the Lion, he got beat up for his troubles. There's a poem by Ishmael Reed about Ralph Ellison that could as well be about Douglass:

i am outside of
history, i wish
i had some peanuts; it
looks hungry there in
its cage.

i am inside of
history, its
hungrier than i
thot.

It's as if they said to the man, "Frederick, you wouldn't believe what America's been sayin' about yo' people! Frederick, you can't imagine the tales they're tellin' about yo' mamma!" It made him mad; he went after the beast, and broke himself against it. History ate him. To juxtapose the Signifying Monkey story and the Frederick Douglass story is to come back to the image I took from Lévi-Strauss two chapters ago: once the bothersome Douglass has made his way to the center of things, he is *not* expelled, *not* vomited out, but incorporated, eaten. He's inside "America" now. He got his picture on the postage stamps. After toying with the white man's rhetoric, he promulgated a rhetoric of his own with which he identified, and with that identification the Monkey turns into the Lion, a beast willing to act and suffer in the carnal world.

But to follow the plot in which a real human moves from liminality to action takes us away from the Monkey at hand, and his critique of the Lions of History. To the Signifying Monkey the Lion has foolishly let himself become ensnared in his own cultural code. To the Lion it probably isn't "code" at all, it's The Way Things Are, and the Monkey, for whom that is not the case, can therefore toy with the Lion by toying with words. The Lion is like the fish that does not see the layers of meaning in a baited hook and so ends up as someone else's dinner. Monkey can stampede him into a fight with mere images, just as Coyote can stampede buffalo over a cliff with straw men, trapping them with their own instinctual defenses, their ingrained way.

Better to operate with detachment, then; better to have a way but infuse it with a little humor; best, perhaps, to have no way at all but to have instead the wit constantly to make one's way anew from the materials at hand. Such wit is, in fact, the gift African-Americans attribute to their trickster figures, an unusual talent for making "a way out of no-way," as the saying goes. Brer Rabbit, says Robert Hemenway, is "the brier-patch representative of a people living by their wits to make a way out of no-way." Another African-American trickster, High John de Conquer, does the same, according to Zora Neale Hurston: "Old Massa and Old Miss and their young ones laughed with and at Brer Rabbit . . . and all the

time there was High John de Conquer playing his tricks of making a way out of no-way." I once heard Eugene Redmond, poet laureate of east Saint Louis, say that diasporic blacks, those who have been scattered and whose traditions have been frayed, tell their children, "You have to make a way out of no-way."

There could easily be an internal debate in the African-American community about how seriously to take such advice, an argument between those who labor to discover and recuperate tradition and those who find fruitful free play in this black take on the American ability to thrive in the context of no context. In any such debate, the Signifying Monkey story falls on the side of free play. It implies, for one thing, that following the way of no-way will be of particular use to black men and women in a racist world. When every available way of life has a hierarchy of color woven into it, where "black" can literally mean "powerless" or "unemployed," people of color might well teach their children the freedom of the figurative. Knowing that those who take language literally must suffer bondage to its artifices, they might well tell the story of the Signifying Monkey as a primer in rhetoric, a teaching tale to cut open the third ear that hears the multiple meanings in every utterance.

But to read this as a story about race alone is to fall into the very trap it warns against. It's a story about reading the world, a useful skill no matter your skin color. The inexorable and punishing Elephant that the Lion runs into might be white folks, of course, but it might also be the violence of anyone who fails to read the world deeply enough, no matter the racial situation. African-American trickster stories, in one context, are about a particular oppressed people's refusal to be marginalized; in another context, they are about the freedom of the awakened human mind, a freedom those in power have not necessarily acquired. The Monkey is like a martial-arts master who uses the brutishness of the Lion's fundamentalism to flip him, to show him with what cruelty his own flat readings contain him. This is a teaching story, then, meant to remind its audience that the symbolic world into which each of us is born and which, in one sense, has created us, is, in another sense, our own creation. Just as linguists say that individual words derive their meaning from the context of the whole language but that the whole language derives its meaning from the words it contains, so human beings are created by their culture and yet that culture is also their creation. The way we live exists apart from us, but it does not exist unless we live it. We always inhabit a story

that others have shaped, but we also always participate in the shaping. Great poets have come before us, but we can still be the poets of individual lives. The gods are above us, but they need us to protect them from hunger.

When we have forgotten the latter portion of these paradoxes, when the way we live closes in around us, feeling like a web woven by strangers, a deadening pattern and not an enlivening one, then, if we are lucky, the Monkey of the Mind will begin his mischievous chatter to wake us from our torpor. For those who are particularly thickheaded he will begin with the trope-a-dope routine, showing them how taking the code too seriously leads them again and again into a kind of self-torture (whose pain will leave as soon as they see that the code itself is theirs to play with).

In an essay on the similarly disruptive young Krishna, John Stratton Hawley asks at one point why any community might actually make these unruly characters into gods and culture heroes. To find the answer, he suggests we turn the question around: maybe it is not the trickster who is unruly; maybe our own rules and need for order are the true authors of misrule and cruelty.

> We live in an era of savage order. We have seen bureaucratic finesse used to cause and at the same time justify unimaginable extremes of human suffering, and we are daily aware that with every further winding of the technological clock the possibility of our total destruction draws nearer. These realities, though especially terrifying in their twentieth-century form, have deep roots in history and are as endemic to India's society as our own.
>
> But India's longer experience with the structural oppression of society has produced a notion of God that is peculiarly liberating. To perceive God as the sort of being who roams about outside our walls of reason and discretion, looking for a chance to make a raid, is to question the ultimate sense and authority of the structures we erect in such glorious and proud detail. These machines of the mind, these boundaries and perimeters, often cost us dear; hence it seems little wonder that as we watch them crumble in the mythology of Krishna, we register a certain glee.

In this model, when human culture turns against human beings themselves the trickster appears as a kind of savior. When we have forgotten

that we participate in the shaping of this world and become enslaved to shapings left us by the dead, then a cunning *artus*-worker may appear, sometimes erasing the old boundaries so fully that only no-way remains and creation must start as if from scratch, and sometimes just loosening up the old divisions, greasing the joints so they may shift in respect to one another, or opening them so commerce will spring up where "the rules" forbid it. In short, when the shape of culture itself becomes a trap, the spirit of the trickster will lead us into deep shape-shifting. If the old Chinese village code of appropriate silence no longer serves, then a shameless Monkey (this one called Sun Wu-K'ung, "Awake to No-Way") will appear to the children of immigrants and help them articulate their new world. If the Bible's story of Ham has been used to justify human chattel slavery, then a Frederick Douglass will appear with the cunning reversal that shows how, by its own internal logic, slavery itself "must soon become unscriptural." If for some reason the otherwise venerable injunction to honor your mother begins to deaden rather than empower, the Signifying Monkey will appear to transmute Yo' Mamma the Pure into "yo' mamma" the piece of code, in whose presence you need no longer react with unconscious reflex as if you were foolish Coyote diving after berries in a stream. The Monkey of the Mind knows that human beings had a hand in articulating the world they inhabit and so knows that human beings can remake it when they need to. To wake that Monkey is to wake the possibility of playing with the joints of creation, the possibility of art.

Yiddish	How You Say It	English
A rud zol dir ariber iber dee gehirn.	A *rud* zol dir a-*rib*-er i-*ber* dee ge-hirn.	May a wheel run over your skull.
A ruech in dayn ganvishn tatn arayn.	*A ru*-ech in dayn gan*vish*-en *tat*-en a-*rhine*.	May the devil take your thieving father.
A ruech in dayn tatn arayn.	*A ru*-ech in dayn *tat*-en a-*rhine*.	May your father be possessed by a demon.
A ruech in dayn tatns tatn arayn.	A *ru*-ech in dayn *tat*-ens tatn a-*rhine*.	May a demon take your father's father.
A ruech in dayn zeydn arayn.	A *ru*-ech in dayn *zeyd*-en a-*rhine*.	May your grandfather be possessed by a demon.
A shnaydenish dir in boyd.	A *shnay*-de-nish dir in boyd.	A stabbing pain in your stomach.
A shtrek dir oyfn haldz.	A *shtrek* dir *oyf*-en haldz.	A rope around your neck.
A shvartz yor.	A *shvartz* yor.	A black year.
A soyve zol id dir machn.	A *soyv*-eh zol id dir *mach*-en.	May I have the privilege of sewing your shroud.
A vecher balkon dir in kop.	A *vech*-er *bal*-kon dir in kop.	May a soft balcony fall on your head.
A zisn toyt zolstu hobn a trok mit tsuker zoldid iberforn.	A *zis*-en *toyt zols*-tu *hob*-en a trok mit *tsuk*-er *zol*-did i-ber-forn.	I wish you a sweet death: a truck full of sugar should run over you.

Freud relished anecdotes and jokes, particularly Jewish jokes, because they were so pregnant with unconscious meanings. Like metaphors, jokes suggest rather than announce their meaning, and they invite the initiated to speculate about their unconscious origin. Freud devoted one of his

major works to showing how cleverly, concisely, and amusingly jokes allow us deep insights into man's unconscious, and he used jokes for this purpose elsewhere in his writings. (Many of the Jewish jokes that were very popular with the Viennese intelligentsia in Freud's day asserted their cleverness while at the same time making fun of it, thus blunting the effect of their claim to superiority. The anti-Semitism that was rampant in Vienna aroused strong feelings among the Jewish population, feelings it may have been unwise to show openly, and Jewish jokes often permitted the ventilation of these feelings; they were often metaphors for the true feelings of Viennese Jews.)

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ON JOKING RELATIONSHIPS

A. R. RADCLIFFE-BROWN

THE publication of Mr. F. J. Pedler's note[1] on what are called 'joking relationships', following on two other papers on the same subject by Professor Henri Labouret[2] and Mademoiselle Denise Paulme,[3] suggests that some general theoretical discussion of the nature of these relationships may be of interest to readers of *Africa*.[4]

What is meant by the term 'joking relationship' is a relation between two persons in which one is by custom permitted, and in some instances required, to tease or make fun of the other, who in turn is required to take no offence. It is important to distinguish two main varieties. In one the relation is symmetrical; each of the two persons teases or makes fun of the other. In the other variety the relation is asymmetrical; A jokes at the expense of B and B accepts the teasing good humouredly but without retaliating; or A teases B as much as he pleases and B in return teases A only a little. There are many varieties in the form of this relationship in different societies. In some instances the joking or teasing is only verbal, in others it includes horse-play; in some the joking includes elements of obscenity, in others not.

Standardized social relationships of this kind are extremely widespread, not only in Africa but also in Asia, Oceania and North America. To arrive at a scientific understanding of the phenomenon it is necessary to make a wide comparative study. Some material for this now exists in anthropological literature, though by no means all that could be desired, since it is unfortunately still only rarely that such relationships are observed and described as exactly as they might be.

[1] 'Joking Relationships in East Africa', *Africa*, vol. xiii, p. 170.

[2] 'La Parenté à Plaisanteries en Afrique Occidentale', *Africa*, vol. ii, p. 244.

[3] 'Parenté à Plaisanteries et Alliance par le Sang en Afrique Occidentale', *Africa*, vol. xii, p. 433.

[4] Professor Marcel Mauss has published a brief theoretical discussion of the subject in the *Annuaire de l'École Pratique des Hautes Études, Section des Sciences religieuses*, 1927–8. It is also dealt with by Dr. F. Eggan in *Social Anthropology of North American Tribes*, 1937, pp. 75–81.

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The joking relationship is a peculiar combination of friendliness and antagonism. The behaviour is such that in any other social context it would express and arouse hostility; but it is not meant seriously and must not be taken seriously. There is a pretence of hostility and a real friendliness. To put it in another way, the relationship is one of permitted disrespect. Thus any complete theory of it must be part of, or consistent with, a theory of the place of respect in social relations and in social life generally. But this is a very wide and very important sociological problem; for it is evident that the whole maintenance of a social order depends upon the appropriate kind and degree of respect being shown towards certain persons, things and ideas or symbols.

Examples of joking relationships between relatives by marriage are very commonly found in Africa and in other parts of the world. Thus Mademoiselle Paulme[1] records that among the Dogon a man stands in a joking relationship to his wife's sisters and their daughters. Frequently the relationship holds between a man and both the brothers and sisters of his wife. But in some instances there is a distinction whereby a man is on joking terms with his wife's younger brothers and sisters but not with those who are older than she is. This joking with the wife's brothers and sisters is usually associated with a custom requiring extreme respect, often partial or complete avoidance, between a son-in-law and his wife's parents.[2]

The kind of structural situation in which the associated customs of joking and avoidance are found may be described as follows. A marriage involves a readjustment of the social structure whereby the woman's relations with her family are greatly modified and she enters into a new and very close relation with her husband. The latter is at the same time brought into a special relation with his wife's family, to which, however, he is an outsider. For the sake of brevity though at the risk of over-simplification, we will consider only the husband's relation to his wife's family. The relation can be described as involv-

[1] *Africa*, vol. xii, p. 438.

[2] Those who are not familiar with these widespread customs will find descriptions in Junod, *Life of a South African Tribe*, Neuchâtel, vol. i, pp. 229–37, and in *Social Anthropology of North American Tribes*, edited by F. Eggan, Chicago, 1937, pp. 55–7.

ing both attachment and separation, both social conjunction and social disjunction, if I may use the terms. The man has his own definite position in the social structure, determined for him by his birth into a certain family, lineage or clan. The great body of his rights and duties and the interests and activities that he shares with others are the result of his position. Before the marriage his wife's family are outsiders for him as he is an outsider for them. This constitutes a social disjunction which is not destroyed by the marriage. The social conjunction results from the continuance, though in altered form, of the wife's relation to her family, their continued interest in her and in her children. If the wife were really bought and paid for, as ignorant persons say that she is in Africa, there would be no place for any permanent close relation of a man with his wife's family. But though slaves can be bought, wives cannot.

Social disjunction implies divergence of interests and therefore the possibility of conflict and hostility, while conjunction requires the avoidance of strife. How can a relation which combines the two be given a stable, ordered form? There are two ways of doing this. One is to maintain between two persons so related an extreme mutual respect and a limitation of direct personal contact. This is exhibited in the very formal relations that are, in so many societies, characteristic of the behaviour of a son-in-law on the one side and his wife's father and mother on the other. In its most extreme form there is complete avoidance of any social contact between a man and his mother-in-law.

This avoidance must not be mistaken for a sign of hostility. One does, of course, if one is wise, avoid having too much to do with one's enemies, but that is quite a different matter. I once asked an Australian native why he had to avoid his mother-in-law, and his reply was 'Because she is my best friend in the world; she has given me my wife'. The mutual respect between son-in-law and parents-in-law is a mode of friendship. It prevents conflict that might arise through divergence of interest.

The alternative to this relation of extreme mutual respect and restraint is the joking relationship, one, that is, of mutual disrespect and licence. Any serious hostility is prevented by the playful antagonism of teasing, and this in its regular repetition is a constant expression or reminder of that social disjunction which is one of the essential

components of the relation, while the social conjunction is maintained by the friendliness that takes no offence at insult.

The discrimination within the wife's family between those who have to be treated with extreme respect and those with whom it is a duty to be disrespectful is made on the basis of generation and sometimes of seniority within the generation. The usual respected relatives are those of the first ascending generation, the wife's mother and her sisters, the wife's father and his brothers, sometimes the wife's mother's brother. The joking relatives are those of a person's own generation; but very frequently a distinction of seniority within the generation is made; a wife's older sister or brother may be respected while those younger will be teased.

In certain societies a man may be said to have relatives by marriage long before he marries and indeed as soon as he is born into the world. This is provided by the institution of the required or preferential marriage. We will, for the sake of brevity, consider only one kind of such organizations. In many societies it is regarded as preferable that a man should marry the daughter of his mother's brother; this is a form of the custom known as cross-cousin marriage. Thus his female cousins of this kind, or all those women whom by the classificatory system he classifies as such, are potential wives for him, and their brothers are his potential brothers-in-law. Among the Ojibwa Indians of North America, the Chiga of Uganda, and in Fiji and New Caledonia, as well as elsewhere, this form of marriage is found and is accompanied by a joking relationship between a man and the sons and daughters of his mother's brother. To quote one instance of these, the following is recorded for the Ojibwa. 'When cross-cousins meet they must try to embarrass one another. They "joke" one another, making the most vulgar allegations, by their standards as well as ours. But being "kind" relations, no one can take offence. Cross-cousins who do not joke in this way are considered boorish, as not playing the social game.'[1]

The joking relationship here is of fundamentally the same kind as that already discussed. It is established before marriage and is continued, after marriage, with the brothers- and sisters-in-law.

[1] Ruth Landes in Mead, *Co-operation and Competition among Primitive Peoples*, 1937, p. 103.

In some parts of Africa there are joking relationships that have nothing to do with marriage. Mr. Pedler's note, mentioned above, refers to a joking relationship between two distinct tribes, the Sukuma and the Zaramu, and in the evidence it was stated that there was a similar relation between the Sukuma and the Zigua and between the Ngoni and the Bemba. The woman's evidence suggests that this custom of rough teasing exists in the Sukuma tribe between persons related by marriage, as it does in so many other African tribes.[1]

While a joking relationship between two tribes is apparently rare, and certainly deserves, as Mr. Pedler suggests, to be carefully investigated, a similar relationship between clans has been observed in other parts of Africa. It is described by Professor Labouret and Mademoiselle Paulme in the articles previously mentioned, and amongst the Tallensi it has been studied by Dr. Fortes, who will deal with it in a forthcoming publication.

The two clans are not, in these instances, specially connected by intermarriage. The relation between them is an alliance involving real friendliness and mutual aid combined with an appearance of hostility.

The general structural situation in these instances seems to be as follows. The individual is a member of a certain defined group, a clan, for example, within which his relations to others are defined by a complex set of rights and duties, referring to all the major aspects of social life, and supported by definite sanctions. There may be another group outside his own which is so linked with his as to be the field of extension of jural and moral relations of the same general kind. Thus, in East Africa, as we learn from Mr. Pedler's note, the Zigua and the Zaramu do not joke with one another because a yet closer

[1] Incidentally it may be said that it was hardly satisfactory for the magistrate to establish a precedent whereby the man, who was observing what was a permitted and may even have been an obligatory custom, was declared guilty of common assault, even with extenuating circumstances. It seems quite possible that the man may have committed a breach of etiquette in teasing the woman in the presence of her mother's brother, for in many parts of the world it is regarded as improper for two persons in a joking relationship to tease one another (particularly if any obscenity is involved) in the presence of certain relatives of either of them. But the breach of etiquette would still not make it an assault. A little knowledge of anthropology would have enabled the magistrate, by putting the appropriate questions to the witnesses, to have obtained a fuller understanding of the case and all that was involved in it.

bond exists between them since they are *ndugu* (brothers). But beyond the field within which social relations are thus defined there lie other groups with which, since they are outsiders to the individual's own group, the relation involves possible or actual hostility. In any fixed relations between the members of two such groups the separateness of the groups must be recognized. It is precisely this separateness which is not merely recognized but emphasized when a joking relationship is established. The show of hostility, the perpetual disrespect, is a continual expression of that social disjunction which is an essential part of the whole structural situation, but over which, without destroying or even weakening it, there is provided the social conjunction of friendliness and mutual aid.

The theory that is here put forward, therefore, is that both the joking relationship which constitutes an alliance between clans or tribes, and that between relatives by marriage, are modes of organizing a definite and stable system of social behaviour in which conjunctive and disjunctive components, as I have called them, are maintained and combined.

To provide the full evidence for this theory by following out its implications and examining in detail its application to different instances would take a book rather than a short article. But some confirmation can perhaps be offered by a consideration of the way in which respect and disrespect appear in various kinship relations, even though nothing more can be attempted than a very brief indication of a few significant points.

In studying a kinship system it is possible to distinguish the different relatives by reference to the kind and degree of respect that is paid to them.[1] Although kinship systems vary very much in their details there are certain principles which are found to be very widespread. One of them is that by which a person is required to show a marked respect to relatives belonging to the generation immediately preceding his own. In a majority of societies the father is a relative to whom marked respect must be shown. This is so even in many so-called

[1] See, for example, the kinship systems described in *Social Anthropology of North American Tribes*, edited by Fred Eggan, University of Chicago Press, 1937; and Margaret Mead, 'Kinship in the Admiralty Islands', *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*, vol. xxxiv, pp. 243–56.

matrilineal societies, i.e. those which are organized into matrilineal clans or lineages. One can very frequently observe a tendency to extend this attitude of respect to all relatives of the first ascending generation and, further, to persons who are not relatives. Thus in those tribes of East Africa that are organized into age-sets a man is required to show special respect to all men of his father's age-set and to their wives.

The social function of this is obvious. The social tradition is handed down from one generation to the next. For the tradition to be maintained it must have authority behind it. The authority is therefore normally recognized as possessed by members of the preceding generation and it is they who exercise discipline. As a result of this the relation between persons of the two generations usually contains an element of inequality, the parents and those of their generation being in a position of superiority over the children who are subordinate to them. The unequal relation between a father and his son is maintained by requiring the latter to show respect to the former. The relation is asymmetrical.

When we turn to the relation of an individual to his grandparents and their brothers and sisters we find that in the majority of human societies relatives of the second ascending generation are treated with very much less respect than those of the first ascending generation, and instead of a marked inequality there is a tendency to approximate to a friendly equality.

Considerations of space forbid any full discussion of this feature of social structure, which is one of very great importance. There are many instances in which the grandparents and their grandchildren are grouped together in the social structure in opposition to their children and parents. An important clue to the understanding of the subject is the fact that in the flow of social life through time, in which men are born, become mature, and die, the grandchildren replace their grandparents.

In many societies there is an actual joking relationship, usually of a relatively mild kind, between relatives of alternate generations. Grandchildren make fun of their grandparents and of those who are called grandfather and grandmother by the classificatory system of terminology, and these reply in kind.

Grandparents and grandchildren are united by kinship; they are separated by age and by the social difference that results from the fact that as the grandchildren are in process of entering into full participation in the social life of the community the grandparents are gradually retiring from it. Important duties towards his relatives in his own and even more in his parents' generation impose upon an individual many restraints; but with those of the second ascending generation, his grandparents and collateral relatives, there can be, and usually is, established a relationship of simple friendliness relatively free from restraint. In this instance also, it is suggested, the joking relationship is a method of ordering a relation which combines social conjunction and disjunction.

This thesis could, I believe, be strongly supported if not demonstrated by considering the details of these relationships. There is space for only one illustrative point. A very common form of joke in this connexion is for the grandchild to pretend that he wishes to marry the grandfather's wife, or that he intends to do so when his grandfather dies, or to treat her as already being his wife. Alternatively the grandfather may pretend that the wife of his grandchild is, or might be, his wife.[1] The point of the joke is the pretence at ignoring the difference of age between the grandparent and the grandchild.

In various parts of the world there are societies in which a sister's son teases and otherwise behaves disrespectfully towards his mother's brother. In these instances the joking relationship seems generally to be asymmetrical. For example the nephew may take his uncle's property but not vice versa; or, as amongst the Nama Hottentots, the nephew may take a fine beast from his uncle's herd and the uncle in return takes a wretched beast from that of the nephew.[2]

The kind of social structure in which this custom of privileged disrespect to the mother's brother occurs in its most marked forms, for example the Thonga of south-east Africa, Fiji and Tonga in the Pacific, and the Central Siouan tribes of North America, is characterized by emphasis on patrilineal lineage and a marked distinction

[1] For examples see Labouret, *Les Tribus du Rameau Lobi*, 1931, p. 248, and Sarat Chandra Roy, *The Oraons of Chota Nagpur*, Ranchi, 1915, pp. 352–4.

[2] A. Winifred Hoernlé, 'Social Organization of the Nama Hottentot; *American Anthropologist*, N.S., vol. xxvii, 1925, pp. 1–24.

between relatives through the father and relatives through the mother.

In a former publication[1] I offered an interpretation of this custom of privileged familiarity towards the mother's brother. Briefly it is as follows. For the continuance of a social system children require to be cared for and to be trained. Their care demands affectionate and unselfish devotion; their training requires that they shall be subjected to discipline. In the societies with which we are concerned there is something of a division of function between the parents and other relatives on the two sides. The control and discipline are exercised chiefly by the father and his brothers and generally also by his sisters; these are relatives who must be respected and obeyed. It is the mother who is primarily responsible for the affectionate care; the mother and her brothers and sisters are therefore relatives who can be looked to for assistance and indulgence. The mother's brother is called 'male mother' in Tonga and in some South African tribes.

I believe that this interpretation of the special position of the mother's brother in these societies has been confirmed by further field work since I wrote the article referred to. But I was quite aware at the time it was written that the discussion and interpretation needed to be supplemented so as to bring them into line with a general theory of the social functions of respect and disrespect.

The joking relationship with the mother's brother seems to fit well with the general theory of such relationships here outlined. A person's most important duties and rights attach him to his paternal relatives, living and dead. It is to his patrilineal lineage or clan that he belongs. For the members of his mother's lineage he is an outsider, though one in whom they have a very special and tender interest. Thus here again there is a relation in which there is both attachment, or conjunction, and separation, or disjunction, between the two persons concerned.

But let us remember that in this instance the relation is asymmetrical.[2]

[1] 'The Mother's Brother in South Africa', *South African Journal of Science*, vol. xxi, 1924.

[2] There are some societies in which the relation between a mother's brother and a sister's son is approximately symmetrical, and therefore one of equality. This seems to be so in the Western Islands of Torres Straits, but we have no information

The nephew is disrespectful, and the uncle accepts the disrespect. There is inequality and the nephew is the superior. This is recognized by the natives themselves. Thus in Tonga it is said that the sister's son is a 'chief' (*eiki*) to his mother's brother, and Junod[1] quotes a Thonga native as saying 'The uterine nephew is a chief! He takes any liberty he likes with his maternal uncle.' Thus the joking relationship with the uncle does not merely annul the usual relation between the two generations, it reverses it. But while the superiority of the father and the father's sister is exhibited in the respect that is shown to them, the nephew's superiority to his mother's brother takes the opposite form of permitted disrespect.

It has been mentioned that there is a widespread tendency to feel that a man should show respect towards, and treat as social superiors, his relatives in the generation preceding his own, and the custom of joking with, and at the expense of, the maternal uncle clearly conflicts with this tendency. This conflict between principles of behaviour helps us to understand what seems at first sight a very extraordinary feature of the kinship terminology of the Thonga tribe and the VaNdau tribe in south-east Africa. Amongst the Thonga, although there is a term *malume* (= male mother) for the mother's brother, this relative is also, and perhaps more frequently, referred to as a grandfather (*kokwana*) and he refers to his sister's son as his grandchild (*ntukulu*). In the VaNdau tribe the mother's brother and also the mother's brother's son are called 'grandfather' (*tetekulu*, literally 'great father') and their wives are called 'grandmother' (*mbiya*), while the sister's son and the father's sister's son are called 'grandchild' (*muzukulu*).

This apparently fantastic way of classifying relatives can be interpreted as a sort of legal fiction whereby the male relatives of the mother's lineage are grouped together as all standing towards an individual in the same general relation. Since this relation is one of privileged familiarity on the one side, and solicitude and indulgence on the other, it is conceived as being basically the one appropriate for a grandchild and a grandfather. This is indeed in the majority of human societies the relationship in which this pattern of behaviour most

as to any teasing or joking, though it is said that each of the two relatives may take the property of the other.

[1] *Life of a South African Tribe*, vol. i, p. 255.

frequently occurs. By this legal fiction the mother's brother ceases to belong to the first ascending generation, of which it is felt that the members ought to be respected.

It may be worth while to justify this interpretation by considering another of the legal fictions of the VaNdau terminology. In all these south-eastern Bantu tribes both the father's sister and the sister, particularly the elder sister, are persons who must be treated with great respect. They are also both of them members of a man's own patrilineal lineage. Amongst the Va Ndau the father's sister is called 'female father' (*tetadji*) and so also is the sister.[1] Thus by the fiction of terminological classification the sister is placed in the father's generation, the one that appropriately includes persons to whom one must exhibit marked respect.

In the south-eastern Bantu tribes there is assimilation of two kinds of joking relatives, the grandfather and the mother's brother. It may help our understanding of this to consider an example in which the grandfather and the brother-in-law are similarly grouped together. The Cherokee Indians of North America, probably numbering at one time about 20,000, were divided into seven matrilineal clans.[2] A man could not marry a woman of his own clan or of his father's clan. Common membership of the same clan connects him with his brothers and his mother's brothers. Towards his father and all his relatives in his father's clan of his own or his father's generation he is required by custom to show a marked respect. He applies the kinship term for 'father' not only to his father's brothers but also to the sons of his father's sisters. Here is another example of the same kind of fiction as described above; the relatives of his own generation whom he is required to respect and who belong to his father's matrilineal lineage are spoken of as though they belonged to the generation of his parents. The body of his immediate kindred is included in these two clans, that of his mother and his father. To the other clans of the tribe he is in a sense an outsider. But with two of them he is connected, namely with the clans of his two grandfathers, his father's

[1] For the kinship terminology of the VaNdau see Boas, 'Das Verwandtschaftssystem der Vandau', in *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, 1922, pp. 41–51.

[2] For an account of the Cherokee see Gilbert, in *Social Anthropology of North American Tribes*, pp. 285–338.

father and his mother's father. He speaks of all the members of these two clans, of whatever age, as ' grandfathers ' and ' grandmothers '. He stands in a joking relationship with all of them. When a man marries he must respect his wife's parents but jokes with her brothers and sisters.

The interesting and critical feature is that it is regarded as particularly appropriate that a man should marry a woman whom he calls ' grandmother ', i.e. a member of his father's father's clan or his mother's father's clan. If this happens his wife's brothers and sisters, whom he continues to tease, are amongst those whom he previously teased as his ' grandfathers ' and ' grandmothers '. This is analogous to the widely spread organization in which a man has a joking relationship with the children of his mother's brother and is expected to marry one of the daughters.

It ought perhaps to be mentioned that the Cherokee also have a one-sided joking relationship in which a man teases his father's sister's husband. The same custom is found in Mota of the Bank Islands. In both instances we have a society organized on a matrilineal basis in which the mother's brother is respected, the father's sister's son is called ' father ' (so that the father's sister's husband is the father of a ' father '), and there is a special term for the father's sister's husband. Further observation of the societies in which this custom occurs is required before we can be sure of its interpretation. I do not remember that it has been reported from any part of Africa.

What has been attempted in this paper is to define in the most general and abstract terms the kind of structural situation in which we may expect to find well-marked joking relationships. We have been dealing with societies in which the basic social structure is provided by kinship. By reason of his birth or adoption into a certain position in the social structure an individual is connected with a large number of other persons. With some of them he finds himself in a definite and specific jural relation, i.e. one which can be defined in terms of rights and duties. Who these persons will be and what will be the rights and duties depend on the form taken by the social structure. As an example of such a specific jural relation we may take that which normally exists between a father and son, or an elder brother and a younger brother. Relations of the same general type

may be extended over a considerable range to all the members of a lineage or a clan or an age-set. Besides these specific jural relations which are defined not only negatively but also positively, i.e. in terms of things that must be done as well as things that must not, there are general jural relations which are expressed almost entirely in terms of prohibitions and which extend throughout the whole political society. It is forbidden to kill or wound other persons or to take or destroy their property. Besides these two classes of social relations there is another, including many very diverse varieties, which can perhaps be called relations of alliance or consociation. For example, there is a form of alliance of very great importance in many societies, in which two persons or two groups are connected by an exchange of gifts or services.[1] Another example is provided by the institution of blood-brotherhood which is so widespread in Africa.

The argument of this paper has been intended to show that the joking relationship is one special form of alliance in this sense. An alliance by exchange of goods or services may be associated with a joking relationship, as in the instance recorded by Professor Labouret.[2] Or it may be combined with the custom of avoidance. Thus in the Andaman Islands the parents of a man and the parents of his wife avoid all contact with each other and do not speak; at the same time it is the custom that they should frequently exchange presents through the medium of the younger married couple. But the exchange of gifts may also exist without either joking or avoidance, as in Samoa, in the exchange of gifts between the family of a man and the family of the woman he marries or the very similar exchange between a chief and his 'talking chief'.

So also in an alliance by blood-brotherhood there may be a joking relationship as amongst the Zande;[3] and in the somewhat similar alliance formed by exchange of names there may also be mutual teasing. But in alliances of this kind there may be a relation of extreme respect and even of avoidance. Thus in the Yaralde and

[1] See Mauss, 'Essai sur le Don', *Année Sociologique*, Nouvelle Série, tome i, pp. 30–186.

[2] *Africa*, vol. ii, p. 245.

[3] Evans-Pritchard, 'Zande Blood-brotherhood', *Africa*, vol. vi, 1933, pp. 369–401.

neighbouring tribes of South Australia two boys belonging to communities distant from one another, and therefore more or less hostile, are brought into an alliance by the exchange of their respective umbilical cords. The relationship thus established is a sacred one; the two boys may never speak to one another. But when they grow up they enter upon a regular exchange of gifts, which provides the machinery for a sort of commerce between the two groups to which they belong.

Thus the four modes of alliance or consociation, (1) through intermarriage, (2) by exchange of goods or services, (3) by blood-brotherhood or exchange of names or sacra, and (4) by the joking relationship, may exist separately or combined in several different ways. The comparative study of these combinations presents a number of interesting but complex problems. The facts recorded from West Africa by Professor Labouret and Mademoiselle Paulme afford us valuable material. But a good deal more intensive field research is needed before these problems of social structure can be satisfactorily dealt with.

What I have called relations by alliance need to be compared with true contractual relations. The latter are specific jural relations entered into by two persons or two groups, in which either party has definite positive obligations towards the other, and failure to carry out the obligations is subject to a legal sanction. In an alliance by blood-brotherhood there are general obligations of mutual aid, and the sanction for the carrying out of these, as shown by Dr. Evans-Pritchard, is of a kind that can be called magical or ritual. In the alliance by exchange of gifts failure to fulfil the obligation to make an equivalent return for a gift received breaks the alliance and substitutes a state of hostility and may also cause a loss of prestige for the defaulting party. Professor Mauss[1] has argued that in this kind of alliance also there is a magical sanction, but it is very doubtful if such is always present, and even when it is it may often be of secondary importance.

The joking relationship is in some ways the exact opposite of a contractual relation. Instead of specific duties to be fulfilled there is privileged disrespect and freedom or even licence, and the only obligation is not to take offence at the disrespect so long as it is kept within

[1] 'Essai sur le Don'.

certain bounds defined by custom, and not to go beyond those bounds. Any default in the relationship is like a breach of the rules of etiquette; the person concerned is regarded as not knowing how to behave himself.

In a true contractual relationship the two parties are conjoined by a definite common interest in reference to which each of them accepts specific obligations. It makes no difference that in other matters their interests may be divergent. In the joking relationship and in some avoidance relationships, such as that between a man and his wife's mother, one basic determinant is that the social structure separates them in such a way as to make many of their interests divergent, so that conflict or hostility might result. The alliance by extreme respect, by partial or complete avoidance, prevents such conflict but keeps the parties conjoined. The alliance by joking does the same thing in a different way.

All that has been, or could be, attempted in this paper is to show the place of the joking relationship in a general comparative study of social structure. What I have called, provisionally, relations of consociation or alliance are distinguished from the relations set up by common membership of a political society which are defined in terms of general obligations, of etiquette, or morals, or of law. They are distinguished also from true contractual relations, defined by some specific obligation for each contracting party, into which the individual enters of his own volition. They are further to be distinguished from the relations set up by common membership of a domestic group, a lineage or a clan, each of which has to be defined in terms of a whole set of socially recognized rights and duties. Relations of consociation can only exist between individuals or groups which are in some way socially separated.

This paper deals only with formalized or standardized joking relations. Teasing or making fun of other persons is of course a common mode of behaviour in any human society. It tends to occur in certain kinds of social situations. Thus I have observed in certain classes in English-speaking countries the occurrence of horse-play between young men and women as a preliminary to courtship, very similar to the way in which a Cherokee Indian jokes with his 'grandmothers'. Certainly these unformalized modes of behaviour need to be studied

by the sociologist. For the purpose of this paper it is sufficient to note that teasing is always a compound of friendliness and antagonism.

The scientific explanation of the institution in the particular form in which it occurs in a given society can only be reached by an intensive study which enables us to see it as a particular example of a widespread phenomenon of a definite class. This means that the whole social structure has to be thoroughly examined in order that the particular form and incidence of joking relationships can be understood as part of a consistent system. It if be asked why that society has the structure that it does have, the only possible answer would lie in its history. When the history is unrecorded, as it is for the native societies of Africa, we can only indulge in conjecture, and conjecture gives us neither scientific nor historical knowledge.[1]

A. R. RADCLIFFE-BROWN.

Résumé

LA PARENTÉ À PLAISANTERIES

ON constate chez plusieurs tribus africaines l'existence des rapports sociaux coutumiers tels que les interéssés ont le droit, et même le devoir, de s'injurier. Ce sont les parentés ou les alliances à plaisanteries. Le but de cette article est d'indiquer les conditions générales dans lesquelles ces usages se trouvent. C'est quand la structure sociale est telle qu'entre deux personnes il y a à la fois liaison et séparation que l'on trouve ou des relations de respect exagéré et de pudeur, ou leurs contraires, des relations de sans-gêne ou d'irrespect, de raillerie ou de badinage grossier, voire même obscène. Ce sont deux moyens alternatifs d'établir une alliance qui peut s'appeler extra-juridique.

[1] The general theory outlined in this paper is one that I have presented in lectures at various universities since 1909 as part of the general study of the forms of social structure. In arriving at the present formulation of it I have been helped by discussions with Dr. Meyer Fortes.

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