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# **Laughing at Power and the Power of Laughing in Cashinahua Narrative and Performance**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

There is a curious phenomenon, full of epistemological consequences, which occupied Joanna Overing's attention in recent years. In monographs on Amerindian cosmologies there seems to be a high level of ambiguity in the representation by Amerindians of their "gods." The more power they have attributed to them, the more grotesque they seem to become. The narrative about Kuemoi, the most powerful among the Piaroa gods—who, as analyzed by Overing (1986), transforms himself into a grotesque creature and whose tragic story results in the end of the existence of the gods on earth—is an example of the argument I intend to develop in this essay.

The attitude that accompanies the sphere of the sacred among Amerindians does not exclude humor. To the contrary, the grotesque itself is part of the image of the divine as well as of the human. Power produces laughter and laughter has power. Ludicrous aspects of creation are marked by times of sudden changes, conquests, and destructions, in contrast to the present time of the Piaroa, where such destabilization in their life is conquered through community life and where the dangers of divine excesses are avoided. The art of living for the Piaroa is to be found in the proper dosage of productive knowledge, since one knows that excess of knowledge can poison the life of the senses (see Overing 1992).

There are numerous examples of these imperfect gods of the Amerindians, whose acts affect their own appearance, transfiguring and caricaturing them. My central argument is that the use of humor, to express the imperfection of the gods, communicates something very important towards a native theory of knowledge.<sup>1</sup> For some Amerindians, all thought produces effects in the world. Therefore, aesthetics and cognition are intimately related. I will concentrate on the link between grotesque

humor and moral or cosmological imagination among the Cashinahua,<sup>2</sup> since different attitudes towards humoristic genres vary according to the value system and epistemological questions privileged by a people. I start by considering the treatment of laughter in Western thought, in order to situate an anthropological approach to this theme.

## THINKING ABOUT LAUGHTER

In thinking about the place of laughter in Western thought in general, and in the social sciences in particular, one is confronted with a paradox. In academic presentations there exists a historical lack of a sense of humor. Academic presentations have difficulties dealing with laughter and the humorous as relevant themes in “serious” analyses of social, political, and cosmological systems. Is anthropology, in addition to being constitutionally anti-art (Gell 1992), also essentially antihumor? Laughter and art appear in this paradox as related topics, considering both the fascination they hold for modern thought and philosophy, and the difficulty in writing something anthropologically “new” or “right” about them.

Gregory Bateson (1972) proposes an approximation of play and art, showing how both work with a common communicative code, the “iconic code,” which differs from the grammatical code of spoken languages. In the iconic code (which is active also in dreams and mimicry) that which will be negated is first staged. And so, negation, temporality, and the hypothetical character of the affirmation are not expressible. Only the possibilities of relation are presented. The temporal and modal character of the theme has to be inferred by means of the unfolding scene. The object of communication using this code is the relations between subject and others, and between subject and environment. More important than the information received is the confirmation of the correctness of our perception of human relation with others and with the world.

This approach ties together art, humor, and play in an experimental dialectic that plays with mimesis and alterity. Mimesis, following Taussig (1993), is a way to become temporarily “Other.” This theme is especially relevant for the Cashinahua—who share with their Panoan relatives a particular obsession with mimesis as play—as a means of experimenting with the point of view of the Other. This can be seen in their play with gender role inversion and in their sketches in which they mime the behavior of white people. The carnivalesque humor of many of their rites revolves around this same theme of playfully and temporarily becoming Other.

Verena Alberti, citing Warning, suggests that carnivalesque humor

“brings laughter and the risorial close to the world of fiction and poetics, as forms of revealing other possibilities, beyond the closed systems of meaning” (2002:31).<sup>3</sup> Huizinga, author of *Homo Ludens*, who, in 1938, called attention to this relation in the case of play, showed how play and art are based on the manipulation of a particular imagination of reality and its transformation in images. Gadamer poses the question: “What is the anthropological basis of our experience of art? I should like to develop this question with the help of the concepts of play, symbol, and festival” (1995:22). Play and festival do not permit the classical distance between onlookers and participants, because play is “*a form of nonpurposive activity*” (1995:23, italics in original). The mental attitudes produced through play and festivals equate the extreme seriousness of children’s play with the extreme seriousness of play in modern art. To understand this art one must understand the profound reasoning of Gadamer’s notion of “The Play of Art”:

Play and seriousness, the exuberance and superabundance of life, on the one hand, and the tense power of vital energy on the other, are profoundly interwoven. They interact with one another, and those who have looked deeply into human nature have recognized that our capacity for play is an expression of the highest seriousness. For we read in Nietzsche, “Mature manhood: that means to have found again the seriousness one had as a child—in play” (Nietzsche, 1966:83). Nietzsche also knew the reverse of this as well, and celebrated the creative power of life—and of art—in the divine ease of play (Gadamer 1995:130).

Contrary to those who affirm that laughter has not been sufficiently studied, Alberti discusses “a tendency today to confer to laughter a privileged place in the comprehension of the world” (2002:7), especially in philosophy. Since the work of Nietzsche, and for Bataille, laughter came to occupy the imperative of going beyond the comprehensible (the limits established by reason; the critical and ironical laughter at the successive deaths of God, Man, Art and the Truths). We are dealing with a provocative, liberating, and divine laughter as promoted by Nietzsche, a laughter that will become progressively more melancholic. It is a humanistic and nihilistic laughter—banal and subtle. Alberti (2002:25) quoting Ritter (1940) suggests that: “It has been said that to think about laughter makes one melancholic.”

Philosophers show the links not only between laughter and happiness, autonomy and sovereignty, but also between laughter and social control, exclusion and aggressiveness, and between laughter, pain, and death. Following Aristotle, laughter is most characteristic of the human condition. Anyone who has observed the intellectual and emotional effort of a two or

three-year old child trying to understand the meanings of laughter, i.e., the difference between “to laugh with” and “to laugh at,” along with the subtle gradations existing between these two poles, will have no doubt about its complexity. There may also be the opportunity to untangle the significance of this distinction with respect to the quality of human relationships over the informative content of the communication, as suggested by Bateson (1972). It can thus be concluded that there exist as many kinds of laughter, smiles, and guffaws as there are diverse psychosocial situations.

In an article about the efficacy of laughter among the Piaroa, Overing (2000) calls attention to a real epistemology of laughter, showing that it is crucial to ask why Piaroa myths emphasize the humorous, erotic, and obscene, and why they pay so much attention to the hilarious and eschatological side of divine behavior. The biggest obscenities can be found in the most sacred chants of their shamans, because these expressions are powerful and their use is orchestrated with care. A political philosophy is hidden in this aesthetic of the grotesque. Such discourse finds its principal significance in a moral politics that promotes tranquil and productive intersubjective relations. The ambiguity and absurdity at the root of the human condition contain latent forces of disruption that lurk behind the constant but fragile efforts of human beings to create a social existence. This is the reason why a permanent sense of humor is so central to the egalitarian political philosophy of the Piaroa. The central point here, and in any reflection on humor and laughter in modern philosophy, is to consider the ways in which a certain kind of humor relates to a specific philosophy of life.

Though this relationship has received significant study in the discipline of philosophy, it has received less attention from anthropologists, as noted by Overing.<sup>4</sup> There are the classic studies of Mauss (1969), Radcliffe-Brown (1952) and other Africanists about joking relationships in which the social function is relief through controlled inversion and its relation to social structure. Only certain persons are allowed to play in defined contexts. Carneiro da Cunha turns to this classic theme in her analysis of formal friendships and the notion of personhood among the Krahó, where she highlights the importance of alterity and the distance produced by a joking relationship (1978). Avoidance behavior would have the same structural effect as laughing at someone who is not allowed to respond. It marks alterity and helps to define identity.

Scholars have addressed the social use and control of jokes and laughing but rarely have asked the question: “What makes the Indians laugh?” Clastres concludes that the Chulupi “have a secret passion of laughing at what they fear” (2003:163), e.g., their shamans and jaguars, which are both

feared beings not ordinarily considered sources of amusement. In other words, the Chulupi laugh at their own fears and at that which represents their concept of power. Surrallés affirms that “That which makes one laugh at humor is frequently nothing other than the verification of the possibility only accorded to humor to say that which would be impossible to be said in another way” (2003:100).

In the *Mythologiques*, Lévi-Strauss (1991:110–132) offers the first systematic reflection on the topic. He shows how laughter is associated with an excess of openness that can be dangerous for the laughing person. The opening of one of the orifices of the body can correspond structurally to the openness of others. Overing (2000:71) shows how this logic can be applied to a Piaroa myth about an illness, called “madness,” which consists of uncontrollable laughter. The same illness can manifest itself through two other symptoms: sexual promiscuity and diarrhea.

Beudet analyzes the aesthetic and sonorous aspect of different types of laughter among the Waiāpi, where each type of laughter expresses distinct attitudes and sentiments. Women laugh in a different way than do men. They hold their hand in front of their mouth, in a gesture evocative of the structural association proposed by Lévi-Strauss (Beudet 1996:93). Beudet calls attention to the socially constructed character of this sonorous expression, which, in some cases, as with crying, can come close to chanting and to certain forms of speech.

In Overing’s work, however, there is a more epistemological preoccupation relating laughter to a way of thinking about oneself and the world. She is not only interested in knowing who is allowed to laugh—when and at whom—but how laughter is related to a certain cosmology and moral imagination. The importance of laughter is also clear in studies of performance and popular festivals. The work of Bakhtin has been influential in illuminating the cosmological basis of the grotesque in popular culture. This is exactly what Overing proposes for Amerindian cultures.

Susan Steward affirms the centrality of the grotesque body in the Bakhtian carnival rituals: “The body presents a paradox of contained and container at once. Thus our attention is continually focused upon the boundaries or limits of the body” (1993:104). The fluids crossing these boundaries gain, in this way, a focus of cultural attention. Classical anthropology did not forget the taboos related to contact with substances entering and leaving the body (semen, spit, urine, and blood), for example, see Leach (1972); Douglas (1966); Seeger, da Matta and Viveiros de Castro (1979). Grotesque humor deals with the same raw material. Thus, Bakhtin (in Steward 1993:105) characterized the grotesque body as “a

body in the process of becoming.” The grotesque body suffers a hyperbolic increase of intestines, sexual organs, mouth, and anus.

All these convexities and orifices have a common characteristic: it is within them that the confines between bodies and between the body and the world are overcome: there is an interchange and an interorientation ... The grotesque body, as a form of the gigantic, is a body of parts. Those productive and reproductive organs which are its focus come to live an independent life of their own. The parading of the grotesque is often the isolation and display of the exaggerated part (Bakhtin, in Steward 1993:105).

Steward contrasts this grotesque exhibition of medieval carnival with the freak shows of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, where the grotesque in exhibition is a whole body (e.g., of a dwarf or Siamese twins) and serves not to unite and mingle those involved in a carnival, but to separate the public in its normality from the grotesque figure in exhibition.

A lot of what Bakhtin detected in the cosmology of the carnival grotesque can be applied to the significance of the grotesque for the Amerindians. As highlighted by Steward, we are dealing with a reflection on productive and reproductive processes, that are amplified into cosmic themes and detached from individualized and indivisible bodies. The festive bodies participate in a larger body and are themselves “dividuals” instead of individuals. They are permeable and dividable bodies. The relations between bodies, and the relation between the body and the world, are emphasized.

The formula encountered in Bakhtin and Bateson dealing respectively with play and grotesque humor focuses the relationship between persons or bodies, and between persons/bodies and the world. The recurrence of these two metacommunicative themes—the quality of relations between persons and of the relation between persons and their world—will be the organizing axis of my presentation of Cashinahua humor in narrative and play.

Before continuing, the superposition of person and body needs to be clarified. The Cashinahua speak of a “thinking body” when referring to a living person. Thought is embodied in a thinking body because only when the body is at rest or fragile will independent souls be detached from it. Thought lives in the body and is put into practice through it (Kensinger 1995; Lagrou 1998, 2000; McCallum 2001). For this reason, when approaching Cashinahua cosmology we deal with relations between bodies/persons, on one hand, and between a body/person and the world on the other.



One issue refers to a specific conception of the relation between similarity and difference, that is, the capacity to act on and incorporate the Other (the other gender, or the stranger). A second issue deals with the relation between human and nonhuman beings that inhabit an environment. The relational issue is the same. A human must know how to seduce others, to enhance their animus, and to provoke their willingness to be captured. Human fertility is associated with the fertility of plants and animals and all other beings of the forest. To increase one or the other, it is necessary to have the knowledge of how to act on the animus and productive forces of these beings. The ritual performance of knowledge involves both pure festive humor, where songs and dances intend to “make happy” (*benimai*) the keepers of the species, and grotesque humor, where the parts of the body and elements related to production and reproduction gain an amplified life of their own.

### NAWA PAKETAWĀ AND THE POWERS OF SEDUCTION

The following myth introduces the theme of grotesque humor related to the theme of excessive libidinous behavior in mythical times:

When they were big enough to walk, *Nete* told her children they had an uncle, *Nawa Paketawā*, who left long ago, before the flood. *Paketawā* was *Nete*’s brother. His wife died young and he stayed alone, crying because there was nobody who would plant and harvest vegetables for him. His brother-in-law had a wife, his parallel cousin. Each time she sat down, she showed him see her vagina. When she was weaving baskets, she showed her vagina. Then she climbed in her hammock and called him to make love to her. He did and asked her to marry him. In the meantime, her husband had come home and people told him what had happened.

Nawa Paketawā and his lover left the village of *Nete* and travelled downstream. The river they were following ran into a river of white water, and that one flowed into another with red water. The red river ran into a yellow one, and finally they arrived at a huge river with white foam. They had arrived at the root of the sky. At each new river they crossed, their legs became marked with a new color and at every new river they came to, they repeated the same ritual. Nawa Paketawā prepared the *puikama* (fish poison) and, after throwing it in the river, sat down to look at the pubic hair of his wife, as she took off her short skirt and jumped naked into the river, to swim and catch fish.

Several versions of this story emphasize her short skirt.<sup>5</sup> This detail is important because Cashinahua custom prescribes a skirt that touches the



knees. Another significant detail of the scene described above is the fact that he sits down and looks at his wife, while she fishes and swims alone. Normally, *puikama* fishing is a collective activity where men, children, and women swim and catch fish together. To further clarify the meaning of the details describing the couple's behavior, it is useful to keep in mind the extremely discrete way in which Cashinahua women sit to wash and even fish, thus avoiding, through carefully controlled bodily gestures, any exposure of the genital area. One version of the myth goes on to describe how the sight of his wife's pubic hair makes him "very cheerful," and that the fact that he alone sees her this way provokes in him a strong desire (*kemu-aya*: "leaves him with saliva").

This is not the only myth that uses the theme of *puikama* fishing expeditions to evoke the image of strong sexual desire, a desire usually linked to extramarital affairs. The myth of Bane, which I heard twice as it was told on the eve of a collective fishing expedition, links the hero's extramarital affair with the wife of his brother to his ensuing abundant catch of fish. He stays behind and does not fish with the community because he is making love to his mistress. People return from the fishing expedition, having no idea where Bane or his brother's wife might be. Then, the gossip begins that the couple will come back empty-handed. After satisfying their desires, however, Bane catches, in a fraction of the time, much more fish than the whole group did, and returns triumphantly to the village.

If hunting expeditions require precautions with respect to sexual smells, fishing expeditions, to the contrary, seem to combine well with femininity and sexuality. The link between smell and success in hunting and fishing is evident to the Cashinahua, who consider success in an expedition to be linked more with the power of attraction and seduction (through imitation and disguise) than with force and attack. Fish are attracted by (related to) the smell of sex and female secretion, while the same smell betrays the hunter and drives his game away.

The role of attraction in successful hunting explains why the snake is consulted for hunting magic and not the strong and athletic jaguar (*inu keneya*) who seems to be better off, in myth, as gardener and herbal healer than as hunter. His brother, the red jaguar representing the *dua* moiety, however, is said to be a good hunter. After his successful expeditions (and not before, as happens with *Bane*) he conquers the wife of his brother. One of the reasons for the spotted jaguar's failure as a hunter has to do with his jealousy. He is so preoccupied with a potential betrayal by his wife, that he does not go far, but keeps circling around the house to control her. Thus, he comes back without game, while at the same time he is

unable to prevent the betrayal he suspected. All these stories deal with sexual morality and the administration of emotions. All these stories are considered hilarious.

But let us come back to the character of Nawa Paketawā, a figure of absolute sexual desire, so strong and uncompromising that it becomes a force, destructive of sociality, yet, simultaneously, as we will see further on, productive of cultural knowledge and power. Paketawā desires all that is socially forbidden. To begin with, the woman he desires is already married. Not only does he seduce her but he also takes her away from her husband and kin to go and live alone with him, far away in the land of strangers. Next, she belongs to an unmarriageable category. She is his parallel cousin. Finally, the kind of daily rituals performed do not represent legitimate, marital, and productive sex, which is performed in the hammock at home or hidden in the gardens. Theirs is provocative and adventurous sex. With her short skirt, she sits with her legs open to provoke him. In the river, she swims naked while he looks at her.

Yet Paketawā's sexual exploits do not stop here. As soon as he leaves the village of his kin in the company of his new wife, he travels in the direction of the Inka people, where he offers his sexual favours to all the Inka women. At this point, the narrator imitates, in an onomatopoeic way, the noise of his huge testicles knocking on the ground. The enormous size of his testicles signals the high investment in his bodily knowledge of that part of the body, a part that will be, as we will see at the end of the myth, his Achilles' heel.

Nawa Paketawā displays behavior that, from the beginning to the end of the myth, is declared untenable. On the one hand, he marries a relative who is too close, thus committing a mild version of incest. On the other hand, he engages with those who are too different, the Inka people, who serve as emblems of "Otherness." The result is that a person who was once a brother becomes a stranger to Nete. It will be in the form of what she considers to be her long-lost kin that Nete will have to face the danger of an encounter with the enemy. Paketawā, as Nete will discover too late, has become through intercourse, sharing, and peaceful coexistence with the Inka, an Inka himself. To see what became of her brother, Nete will undertake the long journey upriver, following the paths and rivers of different colors he once crossed to arrive at the high cliff, *marwa* (cliff or death), where he built his house close to the houses of the Inka.

Through the detailed descriptions of transgressive love presented in this myth, we learn a lot about Cashinahua moral etiquette and about specific situations associated to particular amorous associations. The licentious adventures of Paketawā and Bane can be counterproductive in

terms of normative social exchange, but these adventures allow for efficacy and productivity in the domain of catching fish (a much appreciated food) and in the field of shamanic knowledge. In other words, that which produces internal problems with respect to the relation between persons/bodies can signify success with respect to a productive relationship with the aquatic world, the residents of which like the smell of sex. Myths and gossip suggest that a certain tolerance with respect to extramarital liaisons exists. But these should never become public or a source of suffering for the partner, lest they instigate migrations and separations of the sort we saw above.

The figure of the excessively jealous husband, represented by the jaguar, also provokes laughter. Too much jealousy implies the risk of becoming paralyzed. The possessive and insecure husband does not go hunting anymore because he is too busy controlling his wife. The laughter generated by this myth comes from the nuances in the delicate equilibrium related to carnal intercourse and affective relations. Humor enters the purview of relational knowledge—the basis of all knowledge about acting upon and constructing the world—and guarantees the possibility of dealing with delicate topics without offending anyone or losing face. Here the importance of the iconic language that presents possible modes of being, without requiring denotative or accusatory modes, is important. Laughter creates space for the moral imagination, where everyone can determine the terms of relationships and the possibilities of action invoked in myth and performance. Not only are daring lovers or jealous husbands targets of collective laughter, but so is Neabu, an even funnier figure who is a man who refuses any kind of social interaction.

### NEABU AND THE PATH OF BEADS

This myth deals with the conflicting desires of a married couple. He wants teeth and she wants beads. The couple is walking in the forest, and at a crossroads, the man takes the path in the direction of the sources of the river, where his *kukabu* (maternal uncles who are potential fathers-in-law), the Yaminahua live. Meanwhile, the woman follows the path downstream. The wife is extremely beautiful. They argue along the way. “Let’s go in the direction of the teeth!” he insists. “No,” she replies, “Let’s go in the direction of the beads!” Thus it went, both calling to each other, each trying to convince the other to change their mind and to follow. But it was to no avail. Suddenly, Neabu realizes that he does not hear the voice of his wife anymore. He climbs in despair to the top of the highest tree he

can find and calls her. No answer. She is so far away that she cannot hear him anymore. Distressed, Neabu falls from the tree and when he gets to his feet again, he has become crazy. The only thing he says is, “my wife, my wife, my wife!” [This sentence provoked a lot of laughter.]

Nevertheless, Neabu continues his journey, looking for his uncles, the *basabu keneya*, a group of Yaminahua living at the headwaters. On his path, he encounters two sisters on their way to marry Inka men. When they see Neabu, the sisters call to him. They invite him to eat with them, but he does not say a word. He just sits there on the ground, with his head hanging, slumped against a tree. When the sisters go to sleep, they invite him to sleep with them in their hammocks, but Neabu does not react. While they are sleeping, he scrambles for the bones left over from their meal and chews on them like a dog. He then curls up on the ground to sleep. The next day, when they pack their gear and resume their journey, he follows them, hiding behind the trees. Yet [and the storyteller smiles], when they finally encounter their Inka husbands, Neabu screams, “They are my wives! My wives!” [Everybody laughs, including the narrator himself.]

While the separation transformed Neabu into a silly, crazy creature, his wife is on her way to becoming a stranger. No one sees her again, for she has gone, never to return. Her fascination with beads, so strong that it caused her to travel alone and to abandon her husband, was explained to me by the fact that her father had been among those who succeeded in crossing the cayman’s bridge and thus he was transformed into a white person (whites are the “owners of the beads”). The real reason for her longing for beads was that she wanted to see her lost relatives. Yet, another time Augusto’s explanation was different. “You see?” he said with an ironic smile, “this explains why women like beads so much, it explains why all of them want you to bring lots of beads to make them happy (*benimai*). They want to be beautiful, as beautiful as the Shipibo, who have big and heavy strings crossed around their chests, like this, full of beads. We men, on the other hand, we want you to bring a lot of bullets for hunting and to make necklaces of monkey teeth.”

The goods of the Inka and the goods of the *narwa* (the enemy), need to be conquered, or else, to be paid for at the price of being transformed into a stranger, as with Neabu’s wife. Yet, the goods one wants from the stranger constitute a foundation of social life and of the body. This knowledge of the constitutive presence of “Otherness” in the most interior of self is a recurrent theme in myth and ritual song. In these songs, the bones are made of Inkan *mane* (beads, metal of the Inka), and of *xeki bedu* (the eyes, seeds of maize), which is the food of Inka. Maize comes from the Inka,

and semen is made from maize beer. The bones of the child are made from semen. Fire, too, was stolen from the Inka, and with fire, culture was created and humanity born.

Inka, the supreme alterity, is also a person's destiny. At death a person's "eye soul" will become Inka kuin, the real Inka. This process constitutes a "self-becoming" as much as an "other-becoming" through death. In Cashinahua eschatology, the Inka village of the dead is described as a village in the style of the ancestors (*xenipabu*). The ancestors are the apotheosis of proper being, that is, they are totally adorned, having accumulated all the possible *dau* (ornaments, medicine) one might acquire in a lifetime. They are covered in the woven cloth with design (*tadi keneya*), wear macaw feathers in their nostrils, and wear round earrings of river shells in their ears. Inka comes to receive the newcomer in full regalia. As the dead woman's new husband, he receives his wife with an instrument, the flute, which is only used in the context of sexual seduction. The Inka of death, therefore, is *huni kuin* (the most self of Selfness).

In myth, the causes of separation and of difference are revealed. The Inka and *naŋwa* are owners of goods belonging to urban civilization. In myth, they possess fire and cultivated plants. In the history of contact, they possess metal, guns, machines. Their behavior is marked by cruelty, a lack of reciprocity, and stinginess. But this is not their intrinsic character. Rather, it is a relational quality associated with excessive alterity, because both *Inka* and *naŋwa* (the white), can be transformed into "human beings like us" (*huni kuin*, the name by which the Cashinahua refer to themselves) by means of a kind of domestication usually applied to wild animals. The stranger's body/mind gets used to the new environment through a process called *yudawa* (to make the body). This process is accomplished through sharing memories and substances that make them strangers look more and more similar, as happens with husband and wife who, after a time of living together, start to resemble each other.

The *damiwa* performances deal with the same theme. They laugh at those powerful Others who can be disarmed by means of this laughter and become like kin. The ambiguity of the Inka concept, simultaneously the most self or proper (*kuin*) and the most "other" (*naŋwa*) of beings, supplies a message about the potential for sameness in difference and opposition. In other contexts this idea recurs. Young and old, the colors white and black, male and female, are all conceived of as interdependent pairs, possible points of view, and positions to be occupied by any living being at some point in its existence. A specific type of this "play with inversions" is *damiain* (that is, to play at being a white man).

**DAMIAIN, TO PLAY THE WHITE MAN**

*Dami* is a key to the conceptual framework that organizes Cashinahua perception of the world. It is the link that connects distinct phenomena that refer to the relation between an object and its image, which can be a relation of transformation, approximate representation, evocation, or “presentification.” *Dami* is foremost a processual concept, indicating a becoming, or a “doing as if” (see Lagrou 1998). It is this last meaning of the concept that interests us here. In the case of *damiain* we are dealing with an exercise of “becoming other” to better “become oneself.” *Damiain* is translated as “playing at white man.” In these sketches, little comic presentations, the performers are dressed as white people. The scene I witnessed was very short, and represented drunken and clumsy rubber-tappers. The hilarious effect was due to a combination of aggressive intentions with the incompetent behavior of drunkenness.

One interpretation could be that one laughs at the figure of power. The Cashinahua told McCallum that they used to represent the Inka people in masked festivals they called *damiain*. *Damiain* would be a comic sketch transforming the fear of the Inka in laughter. However, in the clownish sketch witnessed by McCallum in 1990 (2000:384–386), the Inka had been replaced by *cariú* (the white people).

To laugh with and ridicule the figure of power is a well-known phenomenon. This subversive laughter can be found in the parodies of colonialism, as well as in the popular laughter analyzed by Bakhtin. When, however, we apply the logic, used above on the Inka, to the rubber tapper our interpretation achieves another dimension. We discover that the Other always represents a latent possibility of being, present within ourselves, a possibility derived from a relational theory of identity, where the Other can become like us and we can become like the Other. The drunkard’s becoming violent and clumsy at the same time, for example, is not at all unknown in the Cashinahua experience (although it is relatively uncommon). A scene of this type is associated with the presence of white people, but does not depict a behavior exclusive to whites. The Cashinahua and other natives like to experiment with this altered state. Strong alcoholic drink is one of the products whites offer in exchange, and some Cashinahua desire it for use in specific contexts.

Traditional rituals based on the consumption of manioc beer are very common in the region and show a clear intention, which is to get everybody drunk while dancing and celebrating. These drinks, however, are much less concentrated than those made from sugar cane, and their use is more accurately compared with the festive use of beer in other



cultures. The use of sugar cane liquor is similar to the ritually controlled use of specific hallucinogens, as in the case of the Pirahã as described by Gonçalves (1997). The Pirahã customarily sniffed the powder of *pariká* to “become transformed into others,” that is, to become as brave as jaguars or whites. For this reason, they would allow only one person at a time to sniff the powder, while the others present would prevent him from hurting his kin, who he would no longer recognize as kin. Today, the Pirahã perform the same ritual, using sugar cane liquor instead of *pariká*.

The Cashinahua recognize several ritual contexts in which people experiment with the possibility of becoming Other. The *damiain* are only one example and are less exceptional than might appear at first glance. Thus, in a film, *Nawa Huni* (1986), produced by Deshayes and Keifenheim in Peru, Cashinahua discuss their impressions of the lives of whites:

We also celebrate the parties of the white. Our ancestors already did. We play their parties to imitate the white. Thus we teach our children how they are, the others. We act as if we were white. We imitate them, gesticulating as they do. We dance with knives and guns to imitate their police and their soldiers. We hold our wives strong in dance, as do the white. All these are not our customs. We only imitate them in front of our children (transcription by Weber 1998).

Weber continues describing what she sees in the film: “They start to dance on the sound of a kind of *cumbia*, in a grotesque way, covered in ragged cloth, sword at the waist and mask on their heads.”

Today, dancing in *forró*-style has been incorporated into the festive rhythm of the village. During the parties I witnessed in the 1990s, the burlesque clowning had been replaced by an extremely serious attitude and an elaborate esthetic preparation. Holding a women close in public, as part of the dancing technique of *forró*, was still experienced as a transgression of indigenous etiquette, thus causing more frission than joking. As the party warmed up, people relaxed, but there was no sign of the merriment we expect from the carnivalesque moments of “increase rituals.” One of the reasons for the tension provoked by the *forró* dance is the possibility of the eruption of jealousy.

Another instance of playing with mimesis that I observed centered on the use of money. Inflation was high in Brazil and people collected the now worthless money to play at buying and selling in the village. When the women would come back with fruit from the forest, the men in the village gathered to organize a small fair where everybody could come to buy fruit with the “fake” money. Only extra products were put into circulation in this way, never real staple food. Ingrid Weber observed, during a visit



to the indigenous school, a much more elaborate version of this kind of mimicry, called “the play of money”:

The “paper-money” is a piece of mimeographed paper, with the title: “Central Bank of the Indian.” Different kinds are illustrated with a different animal. The president of the Bank of the village is Manuel Sampaio himself (the young village head), but other dignitaries have been elected, all of them belonging to the principal political parties PFL, PT etc., represented by a mayor, his substitute, a depute, senator etc ... All these authorities receive their salary in money from the Central Bank of the Indian ... To receive their salary, they need an identity card etc., also produced in loco (1998:10)

At first, the teachers of the NGO (CPI-Acre), visiting the village to evaluate the results of the village school, were worried about the degree of precision present in the staged mimesis. They could not have been, in fact, more welcome. Nor could the Cashinahua have shown them more clearly that the ways of appropriation and transformation of alterity are multiple and that “The capacity to mime, and mime well ... is the capacity to Other” (Benjamin in Taussig 1993:19).

This “altering” is a way of becoming Self instead of Other, and is a game the Panoans know how to play very well. The activity consists of experimenting with the point of view of the Other and of incorporating this Other without annihilating him or abandoning one’s own identity. The Cashinahua are definitely convinced that it is through play that one learns. On the one hand, the laughter evoked by the grotesque character of the Other that one imitates, and, on the other hand, the imagistic mimesis, that is, the appropriation of the image of the Other (or entering into it, as in visionary experience), are ways not of neutralizing the powerful Other, but of appropriating part of its agency, thus enhancing the subjectivity of the player. Thus, the secret power of humor is to capture the modes of knowledge and agency of the Other without becoming encompassed by this same Otherness.

### **“OUR CARNIVAL”: THE GROTESQUE IN THE GESTURAL MIMICRY OF THE “WAR OF THE SEXES”**

Humor has an important role to play in the performance of narratives that recount the vicissitudes and exploits of a hunting expedition, and in the telling of myths. A special dominion of expression is required to exploit audience sensibility of the grotesque, and for the funny or ridiculous situations experienced by the characters of the story. Humor is essential for a

successful telling of narratives and is indicated by an audience's responding with laughter and comments. The event is intensely interactive. Myths, which are different from hunting stories, have a fixed plot. One version of a myth does not replicate another. Performers are free to include or exclude specific details or parts related to the story, and the audience can request the inclusion of omitted parts, inciting the storyteller to get to the more exciting parts of the plot.

Humor is also present during the ritual of increase in the form of song poetics. This is the most frequently celebrated ritual among the Cashinahua since its performance is independent from calendar events. The ritual can be performed with men or women as principal actors or initiators. A role inversion also occurs, where women play men invading the village, dressed in palm leaves while being received by another group of women holding up the guns. Men play women by waiting inside the house with the children on their lap, wearing their wives' dresses and necklaces made of beads. "This is our carnival," explains the head of the village. In this female-initiated version of the *Katxanarwa*, it will also be the women who start the dance around the hollow trunk of the *katxa* tree. The men soon join in, and through improvised songs mutual provocation begins. These provocative songs are called *xebi itxa* and *hina itxa*, which are insulting of both male and female sexual organs. As an example, I quote a song of the young village head, composed in 1995. This song was very popular during the women's *Katxanarwa* I attended, and was repeated over and over by the male chorus. The women in turn attacked the men vehemently, trying to break up the circle of dancers:

Hem, hem, vagina, vagina, the vagina is hairy, hem, hem  
(*Hem hem hita hita tapa tapadania hem hem*); [repeat two times]

It is smooth, it is smooth, it is very smooth  
(*ha bixtun ha bixtun ha bixtun ha bixtun*);

Hem, hem, vagina, vagina, the vagina is hairy, hem, hem;  
It is smooth, it is smooth, it is very smooth;  
Its edge is smooth, its edge is smooth  
(*kebixtun kebixtun kebixtun kebixtun*);  
It is smooth, it is smooth, it is very smooth;  
Hem, hem, vagina, vagina, the vagina is hairy, hem, hem;  
Pass on the smoothness to her anus,  
Pass on the smoothness to her anus, pass on the smoothness to her anus  
(*txibixtun txibixtun*); [repeat six times]

Hem, hem, vagina, vagina, the vagina is hairy, hem, hem.

This is an example of poetic conquest in which the most inventive insulting tropes, metaphors, or provocative poetic descriptions are met with screams of both approval and indignation. Although members of one gender open the dance, the dancing becomes animated only when the other joins in and starts to sing/shout its “insults” as a collective response. The “offenses,” such as “vampire bat” (for vagina) or “Tortoise Neck” (for penis), are never directed towards individual targets, but rather they collectively celebrate the antagonistic aspects of the attraction between the sexes (McCallum 1989). People seem to be much more at ease in provoking others and in demonstrating boldness in this kind of ritual than they are in the context of the *forró* dance, which is performed as couple, without exchanging a word, and while having every movement carefully observed by others.

The rite of passage also contains recurrent episodes of ritualized gender antagonism. *Puinkimeí*, the male display of their buttocks to the women, is a recurrent event during the whole *nixpu* sequence. The daring of the men in their theatrical imitation of female fertility rises to a crescendo during the ritual sequence. The possible culmination is painting the buttocks red, as witnessed by Kensinger (field notes) in Peru (personal communication). Kensinger notes that the *achiote* represents “birth blood” according to the men, and “menstrual blood” according to the women. This performance of male menstruation is only one of the contexts in which men imitate women and women imitate men.

Another example of a humorous, collective display of antagonism—this time pertaining to the attraction of opposites—is the display through gestures of images referring to the sexual act from both a female and male point of view. It is forbidden for children to view this part of the ritual, which is carnivalesque in tone. The women hold ears of corn, one in each hand, with the husk pulled back. While singing the *taku taku* song, they wave the corn up and down. On the other side of the square, the men prepare their miniature bows and arrows for shooting at the women. The women start the attack, running towards their cross-cousins with their maize cobs. The men run away, trying to get enough distance to shoot their attackers in their skirts. In the end the “fighting” involves the majority of men and women of the village. Everyone, shouts, laughs, and has fun. Finally, the women shell kernels of the cob and toss them on the ground, imitating ejaculation. Again, men counterattack with arrows.

Men and women confront each other again at the end of a session of songs intended to “make happy” the owners of substances and beings called to participate in the rite of passage. Now men and women adopt

the behavior of different kinds of animals, jumping and yelling as they do so. The sight of the apothecotic end is again forbidden to the children, who nevertheless can hear the adults' merriment as they play with clay. Women throw clay on the men and vice versa and the men react, again, showing their buttocks to the women. The playing only ends when everybody is totally covered in clay.

The Cashinahua believe that the efficacy of ritual is enhanced by high moral and purposeful behavior. Only when the song in a ritual has been well performed—sung in a strong, loud, and happy voice—will the owner (or keeper) of a substance be present during the application of his product, leaving the substance imbued with agency, vitality, and intentionality. The power of song is needed to involve the invisible owners of the species, to make them present and happy, to make them listen and understand. Without the power of song, the ritual will lack efficacy, since the semantic aspect of poetic language is inseparable from its elocutionary force. The same logic applies to the ritual efficacy of the grotesque, the “carnavalesque” side of the ritual, with its mimesis, inversion, parody, and play. All these “games” (*brincadeiras*), so recurrent in Cashinahua ritual,<sup>5</sup> serve to create the notion of the “high moral,” the secret of affluent societies in Amazonia (Goldman 1963; Overing 1988, 1989, 1992; Clastres 2003). The head of a village, who operates without the power of coercion, only succeeds (among the Cashinahua and other Amazonian peoples) in engaging people in collective work by creating a festive atmosphere that encourages people to join in freely.

The Cashinahua extend this logic to their negotiation with the surrounding nonhuman world, which is inhabited by beings with their own intentions and who need to be “made happy” (*benimai*) in order to collaborate with the enterprise of bringing fertility and affluence to humans, plants, and animals. Thus, the purpose of these songs is, simply, “to make the stars happy” (*bixi benimai*), and, in turn, to make happy all the owners of the beings of the forest, the waters, and the sky. Cashinahua attitudes about the ritual efficacy of the songs performed in these rituals discussed above seem to act in a way that support Austin's speech act theory, in which words do not only inform, but act upon, the world in far-reaching ways (see Austin 1989; Tambiah 1979:119). Thus, one of the songs of the *kaxanawa* is called *bake kenaki* (“to call the baby”) and states in poetic terms that vegetable food is transformed into semen. The song starts with corn and goes on to describe the soups made of all kinds of plants (banana, sweet manioc, papaya, potato, sugar cane, achiote, cotton, chili, palm, and tobacco). The soups are actually made of manioc, sweet banana, or corn, and sometimes mixed with roasted and ground peanuts. The invocation of

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other imaginary soups is intended to explicitly link human and vegetable fertility. Each invocation of a plant is followed by the phrase “put it into her belly.” A partial transcription of the song goes like this:

Ho ho ho ho; [repeat three times]  
 putting it in her belly;  
 ho ho ho ho;  
*Banu* (name for women of the *dua* moiety) is making corn soup for *inu* (name  
 for men of the other *inu* moiety);  
 ho ho ho ho;  
 we are filling her up, inside;  
 ho ho ho ho;  
 corn soup;  
 ho ho ho ho;  
 filling her up, it's already turning into a baby;  
 ho ho ho ho;  
 fornicating, putting it way inside;  
 ho ho ho ho; soup of peanuts;  
 ho ho ho ho; putting it into her belly...  
 (as sung by Milton Maia Kaxinawa)

Women who listen to this song are expected to become pregnant soon. This song is performed by young and middle-aged men as they dance in a circle around the hollow tree. The rhythm of the dance gradually grows faster, and the sound grows louder, as the singers become more aroused (usually with the help of alcoholic drink made of sugar cane). This song makes explicit the link between the production of semen and the drinking of corn soup, which is offered by the potential wives to their potential husbands, who are cross-cousins. The song operates in a humorous vein. People laugh because something is revealed that would, under sober conditions, never be revealed.

To show how much importance is given to the evocative power of this song, it is worth mentioning the context in which the song was taped. Because of the noise and general hilarity, it was impossible to understand the song taped during the ritual. Milton agreed to sing the song for me, but not without explicitly redefining the frame of performance: “It’s all right, I will sing it again. You want to listen to “call a baby.” I do not really know how to sing it, you know, but I will sing it to you in the form of a lie.” Milton performed the song in a very low voice, so as to avoid making it operational. He did not want to unintentionally invoke the wish or the power expressed by the song.

It is only during the regularly held fertility rituals that teasing, sexual insults (disguised invitations), and playful fights between men and women

of opposite moieties are the norm. All members of the community behave like young couples, jokingly and openly arousing sexual desire and invoking the *yuxin* powers of fertility. "When we ask for the fertility of plants and for abundance in our gardens," Milton Maia explained to me, "at the same time we are asking for the fertility of our people. A happy village is a village where many babies are born."

Burlesque humor, however, is not absent in daily life. Omnipresent in the joking relationship between brothers-in-law, it reappears in the relationship between a young husband and wife. The young couple will often be seen playing, that is, sexually teasing each other in public. They regularly disappear together to the garden or forest without much subterfuge or explanation other than to "work" at the child. People make jokes to cheer on, rather than to control, the licentious couple. This situation differs from other, younger or older, couples who are so discrete that they are never seen to touch each other in public, the former because their *liaison* is secret, the latter because they themselves and others are already so used to the relationship that ostentation has become inappropriate. Overt affection becomes reserved for their small children.

## CONCLUSION

It has been the intention of this essay to demonstrate how the grotesque humor of pantomime and myth, the festive humor of play, and the humor used to criticize excesses in narrative, myth, and in the *damiaín* sketches, can all be read as modes of native knowledge of the world and of the relationships holding this world together. Native exegesis of the humorous imagery used in narrative, song, and pantomime reveals crucial values related to Cashinahua concepts of sociality, conviviality, and personhood. These are iconic discourses about the quality of relationships between people, and between people and the animated world, a world which is inhabited by beings who need to be seduced into collaboration and cooperation. The humor of the grotesque body—composed of parts of the body acting as autonomous forces (as in the fight of maize cobs with bow and arrow), as well as the festive humor enveloping the owners of substances—has ritual efficacy that makes cosmic powers act in favor of humanity.

What kind of knowledge is expressed in humor? Festive humor and grotesque humor express a knowledge of how to act on the world, a knowledge lacking in the protagonists of mythic time. In myth, the powerful owners (or keepers) of knowledge crucial to life were conquered

and killed, as happened to the Inka and Paketawā. In ritual, these same beings are “made happy” and seduced. Grotesque pantomimes and mimicry are performed to provoke their powerful and creative laughter. The use of productive and cheerful images in ritual subverts the mythical time of conflict to produce historical time, a time in which bodies and persons are produced out of the constructive qualities of powerful beings known for their predatory capacities. Thus, ritual seduces enemies into collaboration by means of the poetic efficacy of its beautiful images and the disarming efficacy of festive laughter. It creates the high moral nature of the feast, which is characterized by exaggeration, the grotesque, and the burlesque.

## NOTES

1. Gonçalves (2002) and Belaunde (2001:60–62) give us eloquent illustrations of imperfect and risorial gods among the Pirahã and of the trickster god among the Airo-Pai, respectively. Plenty of other examples exist in the literature.
2. I conducted fieldwork among the Cashinahua of the Indigenous Area of the Alto Purus, State of Acre (Brazil, frontier with Peru) for a period of 18 months (between 1989 and 1995). Cashinahua population is estimated to total approximately 7,000 people.
3. All translations mine.
4. Several ethnographies mention the importance of humor in indigenous rituals: Erikson (1996); Carid (1999); McCallum (1989, 2002) and Kensinger (1995) for the Panoans; Mello (2005) and Basso (1987) for the Xingu region.
5. CPI (1996); D’Ans (1975); Agostinho Manduca (version collected by myself).

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